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**MASTER'S THESIS**

**Hunger:**

***The Process of a Work in Progress***

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## **D e c l a r a t i o n**

I declare that I have prepared my Master's Thesis independently on the following topic:

<h3><b>Authorial Creation</b></h3>
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under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

Prague, date: .....

.....

Signature of the candidate

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**Abstract:**

In this master's thesis, I recount and reflect on the process of inspiration, growth, and creation of my final authorial presentation, *Hunger*. Despite my early interest in pursuing medicine, my experiences at the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy (KATaP) at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague's Theatre Faculty (DAMU) proved instrumental on my current journey to becoming an actor, as well as in the realization of *Hunger*. Along with my outside work with a psychotherapist, my coursework in KATaP significantly contributed to my personal growth as an actor and as a person.

The first part of this thesis examines the origin of the text *Hunger* is based off of, a semi-autographical wolf story originally presented for an Authorial Reading (AR) class. I reflect on my use of animals as protagonists, my use of the analogy of love as flesh, and the implications of using such a personal text as the subject material for a public performance. I then contemplate the relationship of "art" and "therapy" in terms of my experiences in my courses at KATaP, including Authorial Acting (AA), Dialogical Acting (DJ), and movement classes, as well as my work with therapy. I describe my struggle with PTSD and clinical depression, presenting psychological context for my struggle connecting my mind and body and the importance of doing so, both in the classroom and out. I discuss how a therapy session and DJ combined to allow me to discover the main character of my final authorial presentation, WW, the wise woman, the white wolf.

The second part addresses my procrastination as a constant source of struggle, provides possible context for it, and my attempts to resolve it. I go on to describe my first performance attempt of *Hunger* and how it resembled a Speech presentation more than a storytelling performance. I outline my experience and growth in Speech class and compare it to traditional Native American storytelling, reflecting on the differences between the two and what I took from each to use in *Hunger*.

I continue to describe the inspiration and realization of WW, the main character in *Hunger*. Reflecting on my most recent AP attempt at Open Sunday, I uncover the parts that worked and those that didn't, list the changes I've made since then, and discuss the hopes I have for *Hunger* in the future.

I conclude this master's thesis, purposefully written to be more like a story than an academic paper, by recounting my journey with the psychosomatic disciplines of KATaP, therapy, and my creation of *Hunger*, and by describing how deeply it has affected me in my life as an actor and as a person. I hope this master's thesis could prove useful for anyone struggling to tell their story, coping with their mental health, or simply curious about this particular authorial process.

**Keywords:** Authorial Creation, Storytelling, PTSD, Dialogical Acting, Therapy, Writing Process, Creative Process, Actor Training

## **Abstrakt:**

V této diplomové práci pojednávám a reflektuji proces inspirace, růstu a tvorby mé finální autorské prezentace *Hlad*. Navzdory mému ranému zájmu o medicínu, mé zkušenosti získané na Katedře autorské kreativity a pedagogiky (KATaP) na pražské Divadelní fakultě Akademie múzických umění (DAMU) se ukázaly být instrumentální na mé současné cestě stát se hercem, a rovněž v realizaci práce *Hlad*. Spolu s mojí externí prací s psychoterapeutem, moje práce v KATaP významně přispěla k mému osobnímu růstu jako herce i jako člověka.

První část této práce se zabývá původem textu, na němž je *Hlad*, semi-autobiografický vlčí příběh původně představený pro kurz autorského čtení (AR), založen. Přemýšlím o tom, jak používám zvířata jako protagonisty, jak používám analogii lásky jako masa a důsledky používání takového osobního textu jako materiálu pro veřejné představení. Poté uvažuji nad vztahem „umění“ a „terapie“, pokud jde o mé zkušenosti z mých kurzů v KATaP, včetně autorského herectví (AA), dialogického hraní (DJ) a pohybových kurzů, jakož i mé práce s terapií. Popisuji svůj boj s PTSP a klinickou depresí, představuji psychologické souvislosti pro svůj boj spojující mou mysl a tělo a důležitost této činnosti, ať už ve třídě nebo mimo ni. Diskutuji o tom, jak se terapeutické sezení a DJ spojily, aby mi umožnily objevit hlavní postavu mé poslední autorské prezentace, WW, moudrou ženu, bílého vlka.

Druhá část pojednává o mé prokrastinaci jako neustálém zdroji boje, poskytuje pro ni možný kontext a mé pokusy o její vyřešení. Dále popisuji svůj první pokus představení *Hladu* a to, že více připomínal prezentaci řeči než představení příběhu. Nastíním své zkušenosti a růst v kurzu Řeči a porovnám je s tradičním příběhem domorodého Američana, přemýšlím o rozdílech mezi těmito dvěma a o tom, co jsem si vzala od každého, abych ho použila v *Hladu*.

Pokračuji v popisu inspirace a realizace WW, hlavní postavy *Hladu*. Když přemýšlím o mém posledním pokusu o AP na Open Sunday, odhalím části, které fungovaly a které ne, uvedu seznam změn, které jsem od té doby učinila, a zmíním naděje, které do *Hladu* vkládám do budoucna.

Na závěr této diplomové práce, která je záměrně napsána tak, aby spíše připomínala příběh než akademickou práci, líčím svou cestu s psychosomatickými disciplínami KATaP, terapií a tvorbou *Hladu* a popisem, jak hluboce to ovlivnilo můj život jako herce a jako člověka. Doufám, že by se tato diplomová práce mohla ukázat jako užitečná pro kohokoli, kdo se snaží vyprávět svůj příběh, vyrovnat se se svým duševním zdravím nebo pro toho, koho zaujal tento konkrétní autorský proces.

**Klíčová slova:** Autorská tvorba, Vyprávění příběhů, PTSP, Posttraumatická Stresová Porucha, Dialogické herectví, Terapie, Proces psaní, Kreativní proces, Školení herců

## Dedication

*For Mama,*

*For Monnom,*

*For Me:*

*Thank you for all the stories.  
I promise to keep telling them.*

## **Acknowledgements**

To all those who've stayed by my side throughout this journey:

To all those who I've loved and lost along the way:

Thank you for being a part of my story.

Thank you for helping me tell it.



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## Operational Definitions

**Authorial Acting (AA):** one of the core disciplines at KATaP, revolving around the discovery and use of your individual behavior and themes as a means of creation

**Authorial Presentation (AP):** a one (wo)man show created in light of the psychosomatic principles of KATaP, preferably without props or costumes, revolving around the unique expression of one's personal theme or topic

**Authorial Reading (AR):** class at KATaP where individual texts are delivered, received, and given feedback in a particular manner with the intention to workshop authorial texts as possible subject material for future performances

**Body in Motion (BIM):** movement class taught at KATaP

**DAMU:** abbreviation (in Czech) for the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague Theatre Faculty

**Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner (DJ):** core discipline at KATaP that involves the cultivation of an active dialogue with one's inner partners in a public space, but as if one were alone

**Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy (KATaP):** abbreviation (in Czech) for the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy at DAMU

**Speech as Active Communication (Speech):** class at KATaP concerning the active communication of and with a text when delivered to an audience

## Introduction

When I graduated from Westminster High School in June of 2012, I knew without the shadow of a doubt what I wanted to be. I was going to be a pediatric surgeon, and I was going to save the world one sick baby at a time. You see, my mom had wanted to be a doctor, to save lives. After she finished high school, she decided to work for a year before starting university and... *Surprise!* Baby Kierstan came along, a most unexpected little ginger creature, and then everything changed. My mama changed her mind, choosing to be a mother before anything else. All my life she has told me, "My purpose is *you*."

The strongest and most hard-working person I have will ever know, my mother fought to give me the best life she could. We moved often, and for the majority of my childhood, the only constant was her. It was always her and me against the world, and together, we were unstoppable. No matter what life threw at us, we would overcome. We're also eerily similar, in manner and appearance. Most people can't differentiate our voices on the phone or discern who is who in family photos. The older I get, the more I hear her voice come from my lips, the more I see her in the mirror. I've always said, "Everything I am is because of you, Mama," and I've always been vehemently proud of that conviction.

For undergrad, I chose a private college with an excellent Biology program, though I ended up double majoring in Health Sciences and Theatre Arts, a combination that always awarded me curious looks when I would tell someone about it. I'd had my first taste of theatre when I was five years old, playing a lamb in a bible story at the Lutheran school where I attended kindergarten, and I've been in love ever since. I figured I would be too busy being a surgeon after undergrad to be an actor, so I might as well enjoy it while I still could.

Halfway through my undergraduate career, my mental health took a turn for the worse. I had to take a mandatory medical leave, and when I returned, I had changed my mind, too. I dropped my Health Science

major; I wanted to pursue theatre instead. I told everyone I wanted to be a university professor and teach acting or playwrighting, but that wasn't the whole truth. I wasn't brave enough to admit it then, the secret passion that had always burned inside me. I wanted to tell stories. I wanted to be an actor.

The summer semester of my third year of undergrad, I decided to study abroad in the Czech Republic. There was a physical theatre course that I was interested in, and that course was taught by Michaela Raisová, who told me about a new master's program in English at a renowned theatre school in Prague. She was a professor there, and she was heavily involved in the program's development. The program was taught at the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague's Theatre Faculty, where students are encouraged to essentially write, direct, and perform their own pieces, no props, no costumes — a one (wo)man show. I attended one of Mish's movement classes, and that was it. I knew KATaP was the place for me. Despite everyone's skepticism, I knew I would come back to DAMU.

It took me two years to finally do so, and when I did arrive in January 2018, I was a semester late. I was the "missing American," and boy was I happy to finally be there. My colleagues and I immediately clicked, and we became a family, rather than just an English program. Our close bond created a special kind of air, a safe space to explore and investigate and discover. Our program revolved around authorial acting, the core of which calls for the unearthing and investigation of one's unique personal topic and the form in which to express it. We worked together and, with the help of our pedagogues, trudged through the muck of bad habits, nervous ticks, and inflated egos. All of our courses intertwined and collaborated, not to produce "actors" in the classical sense, but *authorial* actors, psychosomatically fit and in active communication with the inner processes of their minds and bodies.

Through this process, in combination with outside work with a psychotherapist, my final authorial presentation, *Hunger*, was born.

Outlining the transformation of an autobiographical wolf story to a storytelling session with a wise woman, this master's thesis aims to tell the story of the inspiration behind, realization of, and the personal journey required to create this final performance, a story I've been waiting to tell my whole life. This is the story of an aspiring (authorial) actor and her process. This is the story of a survivor's attempt to rediscover and redefine her body and her relationship with it. This is the story of a student trying to graduate. This is the story of how a woman learned how to be a wolf (again).

# An Autobiographical Wolf Story

## The Origin

One day when I was three years old, I suddenly stopped playing and turned to my mother. "I used to be a wolf, Mommy," I told her nonchalantly, before returning to my stuffed animals. Caught off-guard, she responded with a very hesitant, "Okay..." and waited to see what would happen next. I proceeded to describe my previous life, including the names and detailed descriptions of each of my pack members, all the while continuing to play with my toys. I have no memory of this, but I can clearly imagine myself, a tiny little pumpkin baby, complete with a mop of orange curls and dark brown, almond-shaped eyes (referred to by my family as the "Crowley slants"<sup>1</sup> the only characteristic mark of my Native American heritage aside from my high cheekbones). I can see my mother's face, startled and bemused by her young daughter's spontaneous confession, unprompted and matter of fact as it was. From the moment I could speak, I've been telling stories, extravagant and fantastical and almost always about animals. Uninhibited by ego or self-doubt (those came later), Baby Kierstan could give you a story any time of day, and these stories could go on for hours and hours and days and weeks and years and eternities. You'd have more trouble getting her to *stop* telling you stories than getting her to come up with one (or ten, or a hundred, or a thousand). She would write them down too, on any and every surface she could find — paper napkins at diner booths, notebooks with kittens on the front cover, important legal documents, even her own skin served as just another empty page, waiting to be filled.

But this was different. It wasn't just a story; it was a fact. I used to be a wolf. And like any good mother would do, my mama marveled at the being she created and tucked the memory away with all the others so that

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<sup>1</sup> This is a family name, Irish in origin.

one day she could share them again with me (or with anyone willing to listen to them).

On my most recent visit home, in January 2020, my mother and I were lounging in my bed, musing about the past and dreaming of the future. I asked her to tell me some of the things she remembered. She didn't know it then, but I was on the hunt for material, on the hunt for stories. She told me this story again, of the wild wolf pup in a human child's body, and I cuddled up to her, enraptured. I gobbled up the story, fully intent on using it in my final authorial presentation. My mother didn't know it then, but I had already started writing my wolf story, *Hunger*, and she was in it, too.

*Hunger* began with an analogy about cups. My dear friend and colleague, Meghana Telung, and I were having a conversation in the KATaP kitchen, awaiting the arrival of one of our professors. I believe it was in the early spring of 2018. I remember it distinctly: I was standing next to the printer, facing the door of room 312, the classroom where many of our lessons were held and rehearsals were carried out. Meghana was standing in front of me, facing the spiral steps that led up to room 407, the raftered attic space where one of my favorite courses, Authorial Reading, took place. I was having an emotional crisis. I was overwhelmed, overstimulated, and quite exhausted. She said something to me then that has stuck with me ever since.

Meghana told me to imagine that I have a cup of water. Friend A also has a cup, but his is nearly empty. As any good friend would, this imagined "me" pours some of her water into Friend A's cup. Then comes along Friend B. Friend B also needs some water, so I pour water into her cup too. The same happens with Friend C, but Friend C comes back again and again to ask for more and more water. Now I see my cup is nearly empty, so I ask Friend A to pour me some water. Friend A says that he is still low, but that he can help me a little and pours me a few drops of water. Then I go to Friend B to ask for water. She tells me that she is

grateful for the water I gave her before but confesses that she is just not able to help me this time. Her cup is too low. Then I go to Friend C, who now has a nearly full cup of water. However, Friend C refuses to give me any, instead asking for more water for herself. I fill her cup, emptying mine. Meghana then asked me to imagine that my mother is there, and she also has a cup. Without question, Mama fills my cup, nearly emptying hers in the process (for this is the way of mothers).

An empty cup cannot fill another's. An empty cup cannot sustain one's self. An empty cup is just that, an empty cup. I believe Meghana was trying to assure me that it is okay to save some "water" for myself while encouraging me to stop filling "cups" that never help to fill mine. Teary-eyed and mildly comforted, I hugged her and thanked her, but something else had started within me. I began to reevaluate all of my relationships through the lens of this rather simple analogy. Whose cups had I filled? Whose cups had filled mine? Whose cups always demanded more water, never once helping to replenish mine? My mind immediately went to my mother, who had been the very first to put water in my cup, who had always filled it when I found myself running low, who had never asked me to help her fill her own. I realized that even though I had never been prompted to, I had always poured some of my water into her cup whenever I noticed she needed it. This I had done subconsciously, automatically, because in securing and perpetuating this symbiosis, I had guaranteed my own survival, my own unending spring of water, available whenever to me I might need it.

To further clarify and contextualize this new contemplation of relationships, my mind turned to an all-familiar motif — animals. What if, instead of friends with cups, these people I had relationships with were animals? What animals would each of the major characters be? There was another thing to consider; animals do not give each other water. Animals almost always operate through one currency: flesh.

I knew what I was (remember, "I used to be a wolf"). I also knew that if I was a wolf, my mother was too. On the other hand, I knew my



father was a bear. My ex-fiancée, a deer. An old flame and a new one, together, a fox. I didn't match these people and these animals based on archetypes, physical appearances, or behaviors. It was something else that guided me, an intuitive inner knowing that needed no reason nor explanation. I could somehow sense that these designations just were, and they were true, at least for me. In retrospect, I could guess at the possible psychological or cultural origins for these assumptions, but I am neither a psychologist or an anthropologist. Rather than waste time on the *why*, for now I'd rather focus on the *what*.

What would the cup analogy look like with these new characters, who traded in flesh and blood instead of water? What would these memories and relationships look like through a National Geographic lens? Suddenly, I had to write. I sat in Kafé DAMU, at a table full of my friends and classmates. Deaf to the din that surrounded me, I wrote frantically without pause, ignoring my aching hand, which was slick with sweat. From time to time, someone would try to address me, include me in the conversation, or tease me about my sudden authorial fervor. I ignored them all, and eventually, they ignored me too, leaving me to scribble haphazardly in my notebook. I could hardly write fast enough, often leaving the ends off of words or forgetting to use punctuation. Somewhere far off, a wolf was howling, and I *had* to write it down. Two hours later, I had the first two sections of my wolf story.

Part fable, part David Attenborough<sup>2</sup> documentary, *Hunger* follows the journey of a young wolf as she sets out in search of a home and a pack of her own. Along the way she encounters several different characters, each a different animal, each teaching her a different lesson. Exactly what these lessons are is up to the interpretation of the audience (at least, that was my intention). Some animals reappear, others don't, and some encounters are broken up into several sections. A brutal fable

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<sup>2</sup> Sir David Frederick Attenborough is an award-winning English broadcaster and natural historian renowned for his work writing and narrating *The Life Collection*, a series of nine natural history documentaries released between 1979 and 2008. He has won numerous awards, including an Emmy for his narration of *Blue Planet II* in 2017.

for all ages, *Hunger* is written with a mix of accurate biological information/descriptions of the species included in the narrative and anthropomorphic thought patterns, emotions, and consequences. My childhood revolved around the creation, discovery, and telling of stories, a world of play and make-believe. Unlike most of my peers, however, I was completely obsessed with the natural world around me, often preferring the company of animals to people and wildlife documentaries to cartoons. I wanted animal stories, and I wanted real ones. Baby Kierstan's developing mind soaked up animal facts like a sponge and kept them there. To this day, I can still tell you about the mating rituals and pride politics of lions; the life cycle of salmon and how their mass migration, reproduction, and subsequent deaths support the Alaskan ecosystem; or the odd evolutionary fingers of the aye-aye.

Naturally, this predisposition toward anatomical or behavioral "correctness" colored my own wolf story. The animal characters may speak, think, feel, or reason in a manner that mirrors what we could easily recognize as "human," but the wolves grin in submission to their alphas, the deer stamp their hooves to signal danger, and the bears rise to their full height, standing on their hind legs to intimidate and huff the scent of their fellow creatures. I did not research these facts; I had already done so in the days of my youth. This information had been internalized, and it flowed and blended effortlessly into this myth-like story of a young wolf and her persistent hunger.

Hungry for what, though? Physiologically, every living creature has a set of basic needs for survival. These are simple and universal: air, food, water, sex, sleep, homeostasis<sup>3</sup>, and excretion. A creature's motivation and behavior will change according to what needs have to be met. In

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<sup>3</sup> Dictionary.com defines homeostasis as "the tendency of a system, especially the physiological system of higher animals, to maintain internal stability, owing to the coordinated response of its parts to any situation or stimulus that would tend to disturb its normal condition or function."

1943, American psychologist Abraham Maslow<sup>4</sup> suggested a human “hierarchy of needs” that spans a range of motivations for human behavior.<sup>5</sup> Constructed of several tiers (see *Figure 1.* below), Maslow’s hierarchy was based on the idea that when a person’s most basic needs are met, they then become free to pursue the higher-tier needs, until they might eventually approach and reach self-actualization.



Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Source: Mcleod, 20th March 2020, accessed from:  
<[www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html)>

For example, if you are starving to death, finding food becomes your sole focus. You need to eat, or you will not survive. Once you have satisfied that hunger, other (higher tier) needs may make themselves apparent, like the need for self-esteem or creative expression (which is classified in the top tier, or self-actualization tier, of the hierarchical pyramid).

Maslow refined his theory over the course of many years, eventually proposing that the hierarchy of the pyramid is not as set-in stone as he

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<sup>4</sup> Frustrated with Freudian psychoanalysis and behavioral psychology, Maslow preferred a more humanistic approach on psychology, focusing on the healthy/positive aspects of human psychology rather than what was sick/wrong with it. He also felt behaviorism did not focus enough on how the animals used in these studies differed from people, whom he believed to be more than just a “sum of their parts.” (Selva 2020)

<sup>5</sup> Saul Mcleod. “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.” *Simply Psychology*, Simply Psychology, 20 Mar. 2020, 1 Dec. 2020, <[www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html)>.

previously believed. In his article "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," psychologist Saul Mcleod states:

"Maslow noted that the order of needs might be flexible based on external circumstances or individual differences. For example, he notes that for some individuals, the need for self-esteem is more important than the need for love. For others, the need for creative fulfillment may supersede even the most basic needs."<sup>6</sup>

A humanistic psychologist<sup>7</sup>, Maslow also believed that there were fundamental differences between humans and animals.<sup>8</sup>

But what if the line between "human" and "animal" were not so distinct?

One cannot deny that animals think, feel, and respond to stimuli, but the extent to and/or complexity with which they do so is difficult to determine for one cannot simply ask a cat whether or not she understands the concept of self-esteem or self-actualization. We humans can effectively guess, through scientific experimentation and cognitive brain scanning and comparison, that animals do in fact think and feel differently than we do, but perhaps the gap that separates us is not as huge as we might at first believe. The great minds of our species have debated this subject for as long as we can remember. Where Aristotle and Descartes believed humans were the only creatures capable of higher cognition, Darwin and Voltaire argued that animals were just as capable of thought and reason as mankind.<sup>9</sup>

As for me, I have never doubted that humans are animals too, just as I have never doubted that animals, like humans, have souls (perhaps not in the Biblical sense, as I am not very religious, but in the sense that they

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<sup>6</sup> S. Mcleod, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs."

<sup>7</sup> The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines humanistic psychology as "a movement in psychology supporting the belief that humans, as individuals, are unique beings and should be recognized and treated as such by psychologists and psychiatrists." Becoming popular during the 1960s "human potential" movement in the United States, humanistic psychology is concerned primarily with "the fullest growth of the individual in the areas of love, fulfillment, self-worth, and autonomy."

<sup>8</sup> Joaquín Selva. "Abraham Maslow, His Theory & Contribution to Society." *PositivePsychology.com*, PositivePsychology.com, 30 Oct. 2020, 1 Dec. 2020 <positivepsychology.com/abraham-maslow/>.

<sup>9</sup> Alexandra Michel. "Humans Are Animals, Too: A Whirlwind Tour of Cognitive Biology," *Association for Psychological Science – APS*, Association for Psychological Science, 28 Apr. 2017, 1 Dec. 2020 <www.psychologicalscienc.org/humans-are-animals-too-a-whirlwind-tour-of-cognitive-biology>.

too have a “self” or “spirit” that drives them, makes them individuals, and leaves their corporeal bodies when they die). I believe that embracing this lack of distinction can, conversely, make us more human. For example, in his book *Narratology Beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life*, David Herman<sup>10</sup> states (in regard to therapeutic interventions with children) that “animals can be used as a means for describing and making sense of human traits — whether that involves projecting disfavored characteristics onto other species or embracing the admired qualities of other kinds of beings.” By looking at animals, we can better identify and understand ourselves. I would like to share a small excerpt from the Native American tale “Which One Do You Feed?”<sup>11</sup> to further qualify this possibility.

*Here the boy's anger returned, "I hate them, I hate them all!"*

*The Grandfather, with eyes that had seen too much, lifted his grandson's face so his eyes looked into the boy's. Grandfather said, "Let me tell you a story."*

*"I too, at times, have felt a great hate for those that have taken so much, with no sorrow for what they do.*

*But hate wears you down and does not hurt your enemy. It is like taking poison and wishing your enemy would die. I have struggled with these feelings many times. It is as if there are two wolves inside me, one is white, and one is black. The White Wolf is good and does no harm. He lives in harmony with all around him and does not take offense when no offense was intended. He will only fight when it is right to do so, and in the right way.*

*But the Black Wolf is full of anger. The littlest thing will set him into a fit of temper. He fights everyone, all the time, for no reason. He cannot think because his anger and hate are so great. It is helpless anger, for his anger will change nothing. Sometimes it is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, for both of them seek to dominate my spirit."*

*The boy looked intently into his Grandfather's eyes and asked, "Which one wins Grandfather?"*

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<sup>10</sup> David Herman. *Narratology Beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life*, (Oxford University Press. 2018) 53.

<sup>11</sup> Unknown Author. “Which One Do You Feed?” Lenni Lenape Phoenix, 1991. 5 Oct. 2020 <<http://www.nativeamericanembassy.net/www.lenni-lenape.com/www/html/LenapeArchives/LenapeSet-01/feedwich.html>>.

*The Grandfather smiled and said, "The one I feed."*

The Grandfather in this story uses a simple analogy to explain something that the boy otherwise might not have understood. He could have told the boy to let it go, to get over it, that it's all a part of life, but instead the Grandfather planted a seed of wisdom in the boy's head that has the potential to grow into a great and mighty tree, which one day could plant a similar seed in the minds of others. He never told the boy what to think or what to do. Rather, he told a story of two wolves, two real, relatable creatures, fighting for dominion. One white and one black, each represents a facet of the human psyche, a possibility of being. The solution is simple and universally understood. Wolves must eat, so the one you choose to feed is the one who wins. By taking this hatred, displacing it (moving it outside of the human mind and into the body of an animal), and balancing it with its opposite, the Grandfather created a space for the boy to examine his (human) emotions from a distance, allowing him to better understand and integrate his "self." We don't know what the boy chose to do, but we can hope that he chose the right wolf to feed.

What is my point in all this? What did the water from our first analogy really stand for? I believe Meghana intended for it to allude to emotional energy, but for me, it meant something else, something broader, more complex, and yet somehow, simpler. According to Maslow's later musings, some individual needs outweigh others, sometimes even trumping the most basic needs for survival. When I think about my life and what I have consistently hungered for, one thing supersedes all others: love. For me, the water in my cup was love. For the young wolf, the flesh given and taken, freely or otherwise, is only love, in its most basic and primitive form. If we look at "Which One Do You Feed?" we see two polarized entities: the light and the dark, the good and the evil, two halves of one whole. Although it proves an effective tool in the aforementioned tale, I believe it is an unrealistic depiction of life, self, or human emotion. Nothing is ever so black or white.

Even my most vicious inner partners are not wholly bad nor are my most innocent (like Baby Kierstan) wholly good. Life is more ambiguous than that. We humans are complex creatures, and even if I were to assert that we exist in duality, I feel that even the good and bad halves can be split again and again, a hundred times over, into more and more pieces. The hungry young wolf is an example of this, and despite the fact that she is the protagonist, she never professes to be wholly good nor evil. She is loving, prideful, selfish, giving, egoistic, selfless, conceited, and naïve. The narrator of the story has no opinions, instead just unravelling the series of events as they unfold. She makes no conclusions — all is left open to (the audience's) interpretation.

When I first began to write *Hunger*, it was if it were coming from somewhere else, and I was more of a conduit than a creator. I knew intuitively what would happen in each story. The young wolf would feed her starving mother with her own flesh. The fox would keep the young wolf company through the long, cold winters, but he would also systematically eat away at her, piece by piece, slowly weakening her and never feeding her anything in return. The young wolf would meet the doe, fall in love with her, and starve herself in the process, only to end up devouring the doe in the end. The bear would demand that the young wolf give up her tail, an integral part of her being (her means of expression), with the promise of respect akin to his own, only to reward her with a near deadly swipe of his claws, scarring her for life. It was written in a very specific language, a fable full of descriptive passages and biological details, making it more suitable for a literary context than a performative one. Though I knew what would happen in each encounter, I sometimes had to wait months, at one point even an entire year, before the words for a specific section would come to me. After the first fervent rush that birthed the beginning, the young wolf and her mother, and the first encounter with the fox, I had to patiently await the howl to make any further progress. In all honesty, I'm still waiting for it now. Currently, *Hunger* has five sections, but I know it is far from complete. I have the

feeling that I'll be writing it for the rest of my life. Consider it a work in progress, if you will.

I didn't really analyze my wolf story until I decided to turn it into a performance, rather, my final authorial presentation, the culmination of all my master's studies. Where previously *Hunger* had been only for me, written by me for me,<sup>12</sup> because I had no other choice but to do so, the idea of making it my final AP changed its context. What would the story bring to an audience? How would its meaning change? How would I have to adapt and reevaluate the text to make it better suited for the stage? Is it art or is it therapy?<sup>13</sup> Which wolf do I feed?

### **Is It Art or Is It Therapy?**

Art is a difficult thing to define. For centuries, philosophers have debated what art is and, perhaps more importantly, how we can (and should) determine what is defined as art. However, these are dangerous waters to tread. By trying to define art, are we effectively diminishing or limiting it? Doesn't that defeat the purpose of art in the first place?

At its most basic etymology, the word "art" comes from the Latin word "ars," typically referring to skill or craft.<sup>14</sup> According to Lisa Marder in her article, "Ways of Defining Art," the definition of art has typically fallen into three categories: representation/mimesis,<sup>15</sup> expression,<sup>16</sup> and form.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Yes, I had written the text in a manic rush of inspiration, but it would be worth mentioning that I wrote the first two sections within two hours of an Authorial Reading class, in which I was supposed to read (and also for which I had not yet written a text). Please refer to the section, "On Procrastination" for more context in this matter.

<sup>13</sup> Because my text was originally written to help me process the cup analogy in the context of my "animal" life, I was unsure whether my final authorial presentation would be classified more as an attempt at "therapy" rather than an attempt to create "art." As a performer, I think this outcome is a risky one, and an unethical one at that.

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Marder. "Ways of Defining Art?" 26 Jul. 2019, 4 Dec 2020 <[www.thoughtco.com/what-is-the-definition-of-art-182707](http://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-the-definition-of-art-182707)>.

<sup>15</sup> Plato was the first to develop the idea of art as mimesis, a mirroring/copying of life. Good art (for centuries) was considered to be that which was beautiful and/or meaningful, and later, what was the most life-like representation of its subject.

<sup>16</sup> Expression here refers art that is a vehicle for emotional content; good art was meant to elicit an emotional response from the audience. Though this notion first gained popularity in the Romantic movement, it is still relevant today.

<sup>17</sup> According to the beliefs of theorist Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), art shouldn't be defined by its content, but rather by its form. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century this became particularly important as art became more abstract, and the principles of harmony, balance, unity, and rhythm were used to evaluate art.



However, she goes on to say that there “are as many ways to define art as there are people in the universe,” and “each definition is influenced by the unique perspective of that person, as well as by their own personality and character.”<sup>18</sup> Essentially, the definition of art is as highly subjective as it is individual.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines therapy as “a treatment that helps someone feel better, grow stronger, etc., especially after an illness.”<sup>19</sup> I find most often that when people encounter the word “therapy,” their immediate association is psychotherapy. I have to admit that I too am one of those people. Even so, I believe that there are endless possibilities for what can be therapeutic, from lighting a candle to writing a reflection of a class or workshop to holding a purring cat. Just as art is subjective, I feel that therapy (or what could be therapeutic) is just as highly individual, just as deeply personal, and intrinsically dependent on the specific external and internal factors that make each person unique. For example, I find the act of burning sage to be highly therapeutic. Doing so helps me cleanse myself of accumulated negative energies and effectively “reset” my state of being so that I might perform, or at the very least feel, better. On the contrary, my grandmother, Meme, can’t stand the smell, and whenever she encounters it, complains openly that it makes her feel sick and that she despises it. Though a rather simple exemplification of the variances in therapeutic phenomena, I think this burning of sage expresses the highly personalized nature of what might serve as therapy, or not.

For me, what is “art” and what is “therapy” can be synonymous. In the midst of that first COVID lockdown here in the Czech Republic last March, I spent one evening sketching a witchy cottage in charcoal, a dilapidated hovel in the middle of the woods, the only presence in the huge expanse of white left on the page. It was isolated. It was falling apart. It was beautiful, and there were candles in the cracked windows.

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<sup>18</sup> “Ways of Defining Art.”

<sup>19</sup> “Therapy,” *Cambridge Dictionary*, 3 Dec 2020 <[www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/therapy](http://www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/therapy)>.

There was still light inside, despite the desolation, despite the destruction. A few weeks later, I looked at this sketch and recognized something in myself. I had not drawn this cottage to release some pent-up emotion; I had drawn it because I looked at a piece of paper and felt the urge to doodle. Yet when I look back at it, it did release something. I put the sketch up on my wall, and I suddenly felt a little less alone. I felt a little less "dilapidated."

Theatre is like that for me too. I don't go into a piece or a project with the intention to "therapize" myself, but more often than not, I find myself changed by the process, compelled to adapt and learn accordingly. Especially given the nature of our program, I feel formal definitions can be an injustice, limiting the possibilities rather than deepening understanding. As the subject of each authorial presentation is as widely varied as the unique experiences of the person who created it, so too are the possible interpretations of what we can say is "art" or "therapy."

Seemingly contrary to the inherently personal nature of Authorial Acting, my classmates and I were discouraged from "making it therapy." I have the tendency to choose topics that are quite dark or heavy, often using my trauma as dramatic material. During one of our AA classes (that's Authorial Acting, not Alcoholics Anonymous) at the beginning of my studies at DAMU, I was attempting to perform a highly emotional monologue, a recreation of the moment I faced the man who sexually assaulted me. This was during the subsequent trial, when I was on the stand in the courtroom the first time. During the monologue, I described how afraid I was to look at him, how afraid I was that once I saw his face, it would forever be transcribed in my memory. I described the judge that presided over my case, who for two days of deliberation looked as if he were watching paint dry and never learned to properly pronounce my name. I described the moment I finally did look at *him*, how the moment our eyes met, his gaze fell to the floor, and how for the entirety of my two hours on the stand, refusing to look anywhere else, my eyes bored holes into my rapist's skull. It was no easy task, and throughout the entire

process I was fighting a wave of emotion that threatened to overcome me at any moment. Tears welled up in my eyes. When I had finished, I left the stage, trembling. My classmates were moved, several of them in tears. I sat among them, feeling triumphant, albeit a bit fragile. I had made them feel things! I had told my story and it had elicited the desired effects, or so I thought.

When it came time for feedback, my peers praised my bravery in sharing such a deeply personal tale. Of course, there were a few technical issues that would need to be addressed for further development (i.e., repetitive text, specific blocking, inconsistent rhythm), but, in my mind, it was not bad for a first attempt. Eventually came the time for our professor, Kateřina Daňková,<sup>20</sup> to speak. Though she too commended my bravery, she cautioned me against using such material, claiming that I was on the verge of being swept away within it and that more distance was necessary in order to work with such a topic.

In all honesty, I was furious. I needed more distance? That trial had happened more than five years ago! It wasn't like I was sobbing on the stage. Here we were, encouraged to find our personal topics, and yet when I chose to work with the material that was truly important to me, that shaped me as a person, I was told not to use it. These were *my* stories, and they were real ones. Didn't I have a right to use whatever material I chose to use? I admit to you now that it would take me several more years to truly understand what Daňková and my other professors meant when they said "more distance" and "less therapy." One of the key factors in this eventual realization was my work with the psychosomatic discipline Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner.

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<sup>20</sup> MgA, Kateřina Daňková graduated from KATaP and teaches Beginner's Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner and first year Authorial Acting to the students of KATaP's English program. She often goes by Káča.

*There's a funny thing that happens  
When you are with friends  
Or sometimes even just new acquaintances  
Where suddenly the benign details of your life  
Your day to day,  
Your personality,  
Become interesting subject material  
And the words flow easily from your lips  
And the hours slip by,  
Hardly noticed  
Between the mutual sharing of  
These two beings  
How nice it would be to feel this way,  
Like the stories you hold inside are worth telling,  
But when you are alone,  
You find yourself monotonous,  
Boring  
To the point where you look  
For something – ANYTHING!  
To distract yourself  
How nice it would be to have such interesting exchanges  
In no company but your own.*

I wrote this poem October 10, 2018, a little over a month into my second semester of study at DAMU. I read it aloud in an Authorial Reading class shortly afterwards, and one of my peers, Jakub Keller, gave me some very interesting feedback. I believe his words were along the line of “Perhaps DJ will take you there.” I didn’t realize it at the time, but what I had been yearning for was one of the fundamental pillars of the philosophy of KATaP — the ability to engage in a dialogue with oneself, with one’s “inner partners.”

Founded by Ivan Vyskočil, *dialogické jednání*<sup>21</sup> is more often described by what it is not than what it is, just as the guidance in its methodology is more often what not to do rather than a direct instruction on what to do. Despite that and the fact that it is a relatively new discipline (that Vyskočil states has been “crystallizing for almost fifty years”),<sup>22</sup> it is something that most people have at least some experience with. Vyskočil’s favorite example of this phenomena is when one is sitting

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<sup>21</sup> This is the original Czech for dialogical acting, which is it’s referred to as DJ. I do have to admit, it has been quite fun to use, especially when you tell someone (outside of KATaP) you have to go to AA before your DJ class.

<sup>22</sup> Vyskočil, 38.

in a bathtub. What happens to you in the bath? Do you find yourself going over the details of your day, maybe thinking about a conversation where you could have said something better? Do you replay or even reenact a favorite scene from that new Netflix film you saw last night? Do you talk to yourself? In these moments of solitude, in the absence of a physical partner, an *inner* one emerges. It can be a voice, a gesture, a kind of “corporeal tension.”<sup>23</sup> It happens spontaneously, surprising us, captivating us. For a moment, we can forget where we are, forget we are alone, and follow this new impulse to uncharted waters. Vyskočil tells us the central aspect of (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner is to allow what happens naturally when we are alone to happen in front of other people.

Sometimes referred to as healthy schizophrenia, DJ is a difficult discipline to decipher, particularly in the beginning. When you are first starting out, you are not able to witness the attempts of more experienced participants; there is no “right way” to do DJ, and we are greatly discouraged from taking inspiration from others in that way. You have to discover the path yourself. The process is your own, and no one can tell you how to get there, but the role of the DJ assistant is to help guide you on your journey. In truth, no one person is ever truly alone in public solitude.<sup>24</sup>

The format is as follows. A line of chairs stands on one side of the space, two slightly removed off to the left side (the DJ assistants sit here). There is at least one, but typically two DJ assistants per session. The optimal number of participants is either seven to ten or nine to thirteen (I’ve heard both), and the minimum group size is three. Ideally, each participant will be able to make three attempts, usually about three

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<sup>23</sup> Corporeal tension, as I understand it, refers to the amount of energy, awareness, and readiness that is most conducive for a dialogue with the inner partners. It must be active, yet neutral, relaxed enough to allow impulses to surface, but not too relaxed to notice them. This is a state of readiness, of patience, of kindness. Until I had the physical sensation myself, I was not able to understand it or look for it. It had to happen on its own, at its own pace.

<sup>24</sup> Constantin Stanislavski was the first to coin the term public solitude, which Vyskočil paraphrases: “Basically, it means that whoever is in the space in the center of everyone else’s attention, tries to and learns to behave, interact and experience as if the others weren’t there and weren’t watching him, as if he were alone, that is, alone with himself.” Vyskočil, 41.

minutes in length.<sup>25</sup> At the beginning of the session, one of the DJ assistants will prompt the start of attempts, and one person will go into the space. The viewers look on the attempt with kind or wishful attention, giving respect and energy to the space and to the person in it. But then, what should one do there? During a lecture Vyskočil gave at The Jánaček Academy of Performing Arts in Brno in 2004, he said to his students,

“The task is simple and always the same: Try to interact dialogically with yourself, with your self as a partner, with your selves as partners... all of us have had some experience, some inkling of what and how that could be like. So that means it’s about evoking, recalling, reminding yourself.”<sup>26</sup>

Simple enough, sure, but how to get there? And what happens when we arrive?

My journey with DJ has not been a smooth one. In the beginning, I found myself constantly frustrated, too preoccupied with fulfilling the task to allow my partners the space to emerge. For me, this experience of public solitude was a terrifying one. The sensation of being in that space, not knowing what to do, not knowing how to listen to my body, how to listen to the impulses that were already there, in front of an audience giving you their full attention was excruciating — my ego could not bear it. It was (and still is) a process, but through continuous work in class and on my own, I slowly began to glimpse what it meant to have psychosomatic fitness.<sup>27</sup> In the first attempts, I focused too hard, too critically, to allow space for impulses that might emerge. I was trying to force my inner partners to come out, and they refused. Over time, I began to develop a different kind of attention, a different kind of awareness. I learned that it

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<sup>25</sup> I have attended other experimental DJ sessions where each attempt was much longer, between 10-15 minutes in length. I found these much more demanding, but equally as rewarding in terms of the discoveries made and the things brought up during my attempts. Other DJ sessions included a more continuous methodology; each participant would enter the space whenever they felt inspired by something they saw there, the participant already in the space would freeze for a moment, and then return to their chair. Sometimes it would be quite a while before a participant would be “tagged out,” but more often than not, the attempts would cycle through quite quickly. Though this brought with it an excess of available energy, these quick turnovers also made it more difficult to maintain the “sense” or concentration necessary for active communication with one’s inner partners.

<sup>26</sup> Vyskočil, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Psychosomatic fitness (for me) refers to the state we strive to reach at KATaP, where the mind (psyche) and the body (soma) are interconnected and in active communication, and we are not only aware of this, but can actively use it in real time to react/respond and create honestly.

required a calm, active concentration to give the inner partners a chance to introduce themselves.

The more practice I had, the more my inner partners would pop by during my daily life, often outside the classroom. They would often appear as a random voice, usually in a completely different tone, that would just blurt out of me in response to myself or even others around me. These “aha!” moments were always a surprise and a delight, and though they were short-lived, I enjoyed them greatly. The more I explored in my DJ attempts, the more at ease I began to feel in the space, the more at ease I felt to engage in play. Along with our extensive work in movement classes, geared toward guiding us to a presence in our bodies, and awareness of ourselves and ourselves in the space, a freedom to play and explore, and to make mistakes, my experiences with DJ allowed me to be more present and aware of my body and what was going on inside of myself, whether in a dance improvisation workshop or in the grocery store. Though by no means designed to be a form of therapy, or even a method of acting, (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner as a discipline, I must admit, did have therapeutic qualities for me. Furthermore, it became an instrument of creation in every performance I have made since, particularly when it comes to *Hunger*.

About a year into my studies at KATaP, I began seeing a psychotherapist here in Prague. Diagnosed with clinical depression and PTSD<sup>28</sup> at the age of nineteen, I am no stranger to psychotherapy (or struggles with mental health). I will not name her here, but I will tell you that she is a certified integrative psychologist<sup>29</sup> with extensive experience working with dreams and trauma therapy. For our purposes here, I’ll refer to her as Robin. Much to my surprise, my sessions with Robin and the

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<sup>28</sup> PTSD, or Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, is a psychiatric disorder that may develop in those who have witnessed or experienced a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, serious accident, war, terrorist attack, assault, rape, serious injury, or near-death experience. “What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder” Aug. 2020, 3 Dec 2020 <[www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd](http://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd)>.

<sup>29</sup> Integrative psychology combines multiple elements of therapeutic techniques, drawing on them to create an approach that is tailored to the individual.

personal revelations and growth they led me to went almost perfectly hand-in-hand with my studies at DAMU.

Much of her work involves looking into yourself, into your body, and noticing what is there, what is happening in the moment. She encourages me to stay with the sensations, to follow them, to give them what they needed, to allow them to emerge. Sound familiar?

I remember one particular session very strongly. Robin asked me to imagine the critic, the one who governs all that I think, say, or do, in the room with us. I knew immediately she was in a seat to my right, pale legs crossed tightly, impossibly tall and straight-backed, piercing blue eyes pinning me down from beneath her giant black mane of curls. Her face was my face, my mother's face, and somehow other, and her name was Sonya. Throughout the session, Robin encouraged me to allow her to be present, to be aware of her, and to notice what was going on inside me. Many revelations came from this exercise, most of them painful, and I was grateful for them all. I was happy to have met her. How do you ask someone why they won't let you be free, why they won't let you play, if you don't know who they are?

A few weeks later, Sonya made a surprise appearance, this time in one of my DJ attempts. At first, I was just grateful that an inner partner had really appeared, but then I found myself more active and engaged in play in the situation I found myself in. Sonya wanted me to behave. Another inner partner, a mouthy eight-year-old girl, wanted to play. This play of opposites<sup>30</sup> provided me the opportunity to engage in real dialogue, and for the first time I truly enjoyed my moment of public solitude. Furthermore, it marked my first experience of the "correct" corporeal tension. When I told Robin about it later, she was quite surprised and more than a bit worried that such a deeply personal part of

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<sup>30</sup> Vyskočil uses this term in his lecture at the Jánáček Academy of Performing Arts in Brno in 2004. "Yes, there are situations in which we interact with our inner partners spontaneously. They are wonderfully polarized, full of contrast — a play of opposites." This polarity, this dichotomy, (in my understanding) generates a great deal of energy, as well as possibilities for where to take that energy. Vyskočil, 40.



me had come out in a public setting. Honestly, I was relieved. I felt better, somehow. But what exactly had occurred?

Dr. Bessel Van der Kolk provides some context in his book *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma*. One of the US's most experienced physicians in the field of emotional trauma, Dr. Van der Kolk gives a detailed account of the brain and body in those who have PTSD or who have experienced trauma, complete with case studies, empirical data, and possible remedies. A person with PTSD is essentially stuck in fight-or-flight mode; the connection between the mind and body is broken, and the person can no longer distinguish body sensations like hunger, discomfort, or pain. They often do not know what they are feeling and are incapable of being present. This alexithymia<sup>31</sup> makes it difficult to connect with other people as well as with oneself. Van der Kolk writes, "Sensing, naming, and identifying what is going on inside is the first step to recovery."<sup>32</sup> By reintegrating the body and the mind, by cultivating awareness, and by practicing mindfulness, you are allowing yourself to heal.

When Vyskočil was asked whether DJ is a technique intended to bring out the best in a person, to effectively make someone a better person, he replied with the following:

"It's not exactly the way you put it, the way you ask. Just a little while ago I said, or tried to say, that (inter)acting with the Inner Partner is *not* a technique. I was trying to say what it most probably *is*. Also, I don't teach anybody how to liberate themselves or how to find themselves. I don't teach that or even with that as a goal, but sometimes that does happen. Or what happens is that there is a feeling that this is happening. You're correct that some people do discover a certain ethos or pathos, but we don't teach anyone that. That's something some people experience and discover. Sometimes that's connected to meeting yourself in a genuine way, and with self-understanding and, especially, self-acceptance. We also never say, nor promise, what studying (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner is for, or what someone can get out of it. Those who are imaginative and have some conceptual abilities will surely find a number of possibilities and reasons for applying it, as well as various overlaps. But in all honesty, we

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<sup>31</sup> Alexithymia, the Greek term for the inability to describe feelings in words, appears often in Van der Kolk's book. When he first introduces the term, he says, "Many traumatized children and adults simply cannot describe what they are feeling because they cannot identify what their physical sensations mean." Van der Kolk, 98.

<sup>32</sup> Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body Transformation of Trauma*. (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 2015)

say that, generally speaking, (Inter)acting with the Inner Partner is for nothing. In other words, it is for that which someone can take from and make of it based on his own resources, abilities, and potential. Self-discovery and self-acceptance play a significant role in that."<sup>33</sup>

I believe the reason DJ is described primarily in negatives (i.e., it's not a technique, it's not a method, it's not therapy, etc.) is that to truly define it, would be to limit it. Vyskočil says himself that DJ is not for everyone; it's up to the individual to know what they are capable of, to take that risk.<sup>34</sup> Meeting oneself is indeed a risky business, and the possibilities of what one could take from that meeting (or more precisely, repeated meetings) are endless. For me, it was absolutely instrumental on my journey to self-discovery, and the beginning of my journey to self-acceptance. Though it was not my original intention, either in DJ or therapy,<sup>35</sup> through extensive work and exploration in the classroom, the dance hall, and the therapist's office, I was no longer just a brain with a body, a rider with an unruly horse.<sup>36</sup> Both my university studies and my therapy sessions have worked in perfect conjunction to further me in my process toward self-realization and the realization of my final AP, and I am very grateful to have had that experience. But more importantly, this transformation was wholly necessary for *Hunger* to come to be.

I hadn't realized in those early days of KATaP what I was doing wrong in those AA classes with Káča. The problem wasn't in my choice of subject material; anything can be used to make a performance, no matter how dark or deeply personal a topic might be. The difference is how you approach the topic, where you stand with it, and why you chose that topic to begin with. In the beginning, I chose my topics because I was looking

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<sup>33</sup> Vyskočil, 49-50.

<sup>34</sup> Vyskočil in regard to DJ and risk: "It is dangerous... It's risky to do anything concerning self-understanding, coming to know yourself, self-realization. Anything that leads to changing the status quo is risky. It can lead to insecurity, to freedom." Vyskočil, 52.

<sup>35</sup> I started to see my current therapist "to be more productive," not to resolve any trauma, though I was open to the idea.

<sup>36</sup> Van der Kolk references neuroscientist Paul MacLean, who "compared the relationship between the rational brain and the emotional brain to that between a more or less competent rider and an unruly horse. As long as the weather is calm and the path is smooth, the rider can feel in excellent control. But unexpected sounds or threats from other animals can make the horse bolt, forcing the rider to hold on for dear life." Van der Kolk, 64.

for catharsis<sup>37</sup>, not for my audience, but for me. My performance created empathy, not for the character in the piece, but for me, the performer, the person in the space. Though effectively conveying the pain and turmoil of the situation, I was also effectively holding my audience hostage with me there, not giving them the opportunity to choose to be engaged or not. I was unintentionally forcing them to bear witness to my catharsis instead of offering them one of their own. "Distance" didn't refer to literal space or time; it referred to the actor's ability to move within a topic or situation, to stand back from it and see the piece as a whole, as its own entity. When you lack the necessary distance (either because you can't see the piece as separate from yourself or because it is too emotionally charged), you risk being swept away. Instead of you having the piece, the piece has you, and these are dangerous waters to tread. When you are caught up in the emotions you are trying so desperately to convey (or perhaps exorcise), you lose the ability to be free, to play with or within the topic.

When I first wrote *Hunger*, it was for me, to better understand the relationships I had experienced in my life, to better understand my relationship with love and my lifelong yearning for it. There was for me no separation between the text and myself. It was, in a way, a testament to the hardships that I had endured and overcome, and what I had learned from them.

I was so married to the text that I couldn't at first stand criticism of it; any feedback I perceived as negative or critical I took as a personal affront. I had no control over this, and that also frustrated me greatly. I didn't know how to let it go, to let it grow and change on its own. It turns out all I had to do was wait and, in the meantime, keep experimenting, keep growing.

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<sup>37</sup> Aristotle states that the purpose of theatre is to "arouse terror and pity" so that the audience can experience catharsis, or the purification/purgation of these emotions. This has a supposedly healthful and humanizing effect on the spectator. "Catharsis," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. 2 Mar. 2021 <[www.britannica.com/art/cahtarsis-criticism](http://www.britannica.com/art/cahtarsis-criticism)>.

It was not an easy process, as progress rarely is, and not a linear one either. I wasn't able to escape the trap I had created for myself until after my first performance attempt at Klauzury in January 2020. One of my professors, Michaela Raisová,<sup>38</sup> gave me some feedback that I will never forget. We were discussing a portion of a song I had included that was of great personal significance for me. She had commented that with the current structure of the piece, the song didn't seem necessary; it seemed like I had put it there just to showcase my vocal ability. I was surprised to hear this. I had put the song in there because I felt it was important for me, and I told her so. She asked me, "*But what does the piece need?*" That was the moment that everything really clicked for me.

It had taken me nearly three full years, but I finally understood that what I had done before was unethical and served neither the audience nor the performance. By reestablishing my connection with my body and my Self, I became a better performer, and (I hope) a more trustworthy one. Yes, writing *Hunger* was therapeutic. Performing it could also prove to be so, but that is no longer my intention. I think it has so much more potential than that, and in order for that potential to be realized, I would have to do the research and the work necessary to do so. I would have to let it go. I would have to follow where it led me.

I honestly cannot tell you why as a three-year-old child I was convinced I was a wolf reincarnate. Herman quotes Carolyn Case from her book *Imagining Animals: Art, Psychotherapy and Primitive States of Mind*, where she suggests the cross-species identification and play-acting of traumatized children in the therapy room could be an attempt to "elicit tender loving care" from the therapist or to defend themselves by effectively donning an "animal skin," blurring the line between "self" and "other" and fusing the two together.<sup>39</sup> Whether originally a defense mechanism or a call for love, I can't be sure, but I can say that this wolf

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<sup>38</sup> MgA. Mgr. Michaela Raisová, Ph.D. teaches multiple courses at KATaP, including Body in Motion and Interpretation Seminar. She usually goes by Mish.

<sup>39</sup> Herman, 53.

has always been a part of me, and most likely, she always will be. I glimpsed her briefly both in Robin's office and room 312,<sup>40</sup> but I would have to search for her on my own. Now, *Hunger* is *her* story, not mine, and that is a story that would make for a final authorial presentation. The question is: how to do it?

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<sup>40</sup> I am referring to the main classroom in KATaP where our DJ sessions typically took place, along with a multitude of other courses.

## A "Final" Performance

### On Procrastination

I have never been the kind of person who can prepare in advance, long before a deadline. No, for me, it has always been a last-minute frenzy to finish, whether "it" is an application for long-term residence in the Czech Republic, a performance for Open Sunday,<sup>41</sup> or even this MA thesis. It's not for a lack of trying, either. Whenever I try to work on a project in advance, I find myself stuck, frozen. No matter how much I try to force it, no matter how long I sit myself in front of a laptop or in an empty rehearsal room, I am incapable of making any progress until the overwhelming stress of a swiftly approaching deadline kickstarts me into action. Not that I'm pointing fingers at anyone, but my mother and father are this way too. Hereditary trait, just plain laziness, or some combination of the two, this tendency towards procrastination has been an endless source of stress and frustration for me. Of course, all of us have experienced procrastination to some extent, in our own ways. In all honesty, I spent most of my life hating myself for it, all the while being utterly incapable of changing it. I will admit, there have been occasions where I didn't prepare for a lack of desire to do so, but for the most part, I do actually want to work and progress in a time efficient manner. So, what exactly is stopping me?

In my experience, procrastination has always been viewed in a negative light, often used to indicate irresponsibly, laziness, cowardice. *Just do it already! It's simple. Just DO IT!* Sonya<sup>42</sup>, the critic, always has a field day whenever a deadline is looming. She becomes a bully, encompassing all the voices of my mother, my father, my teachers, my

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<sup>41</sup> Open Sunday is a monthly event hosted by Crew Collective, where new or work-progress-pieces are performed in a small studio space, filmed, and photographed, complete with a built-in feedback session at the end of the event. I performed at Open Sunday many times with many different authorial presentations, and I feel it was a highly valuable source of experience and growth throughout my process as a student of KATaP and as a performer.

<sup>42</sup> Sonya is the inner partner I met in one of my therapy sessions with Robin, who later turned up again in a DJ class. She has since reappeared many times, though nowadays, much less often.

friends, my worst fears. In the beginning, it's easier to ignore her. When I can't, I often try to abide by her, setting myself before the task at hand. And then... nothing happens. This enrages her even more. Instead of just calling me lazy, she underlines my utter lack of intelligence and incapability to do anything, let alone to do anything right. On her behalf, another partner, the drill sergeant (some bizarre hybrid between my father and my high school track coach), steps to and starts raining down abuse and profanity. Someone somewhere cries. Another stares off into the middle distance, stone-faced, seemingly unfazed. The wolf growls, then whimpers. Chaos ensues, sometimes escalating, sometimes quieting down. On the outside, a woman stares blankly at a computer screen, or lays on the floor of a rehearsal room, staring at the ceiling. Sometimes, she cries. Most of the time, however, she is just stuck, frozen solid, waiting for the snap to set her whirling into motion.

This snap always happens eventually, when the weight of the stress has grown to monstrous proportions and the deadline is only a short time away. I can never predict when it will finally come, but I can always tell when it starts to happen. There is this sensation of roiling anxious energy, like fire ants scurrying up and down my bones. It grows in intensity, and I become more and more restless, yet still remain incapable of doing real work, no matter how much I plan or contemplate or attempt to rehearse. Suddenly, the dam is broken and the energy surges through me, all-encompassing and unstoppable. I throw myself at the task at hand, often without stopping to eat or sleep properly. I drink ungodly amounts of coffee. My heart races: I sweat profusely. I work furiously and desperately until the task is complete, often finishing right in the nick of time. The adrenaline high is intoxicating and exhausting. I loathe it, and I'm addicted to it. I've always said I work best under stress, but I have always wished that it was possible for me to be different.

Dr. Van der Kolk might be able to provide us with some more insight here, too. Throughout his book, he references multiple experiences with his patients over the course of his career. In so many of his patients with

PTSD, he found a tendency to repeat or perpetuate traumatic or stressful situations, almost like they were addicted to it, dependent upon it. He explains that a person who has experienced severe or repeated trauma becomes desensitized to the sensations of everyday life, unable to feel fully present or alive in normal day-to-day life. This is the same reason that people with PTSD often become fixated on their most traumatic memories, often revisiting or reliving them: in those most terrible moments, they felt truly alive. Once caught in that state, it is nearly impossible to truly function or enjoy the mundane parts of one's life.

He also references the physical structure of the brain and how the communication between its respective parts are severed or disrupted when we experience great trauma. We humans have a triune brain: it exists in three main parts. The oldest, located in the brainstem, is in charge of the most basic regulation and survival functions and is often referred to as the reptilian brain. The second, the limbic system, is our emotional brain; it's in charge of emotions and our feeling of safety. The youngest, the prefrontal cortex, is the cognitive part of the brain, where we analyze and categorize data (and perform all other high brain functions). After a traumatic event, the connections between the three are interrupted or impeded, as the reptilian brain takes over. When we cannot effectively escape or battle our way out of a traumatic situation, we often become stuck in this state, and our ability to use our prefrontal cortex for higher order processes is significantly impaired.

"If an organism is stuck in survival mode, its energies are focused on fighting off unseen enemies, which leaves no room for nurture, care, and love. For us humans, it means that as long as the mind is defending itself against invisible assaults, our closest bonds are threatened, along with our ability to imagine, plan, play, learn, and pay attention to other people's needs."<sup>43</sup>

So that was it then - my horse was stuck in first gear. According to Van der Kolk, this "being stuck" can manifest itself in two main ways: the manic/reactive and the dissociative/numb. In my procrastination cycle, I

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<sup>43</sup> Van der Kolk, 76.



experience both. People with PTSD often find themselves stuck repeating patterns, either for a lack of awareness or an inability to escape them. For the majority of my life, I tried to fight fire with fire, using guerilla tactics as a means to improve productivity levels. Though I (almost) always succeeded in finishing the task by the deadline, I cannot say that my methodology was a particularly effective one. It certainly was not a kind one. In order for a real change to take place, I was going to have to look at the situation from a different perspective.

It all boiled down to one thing: fear. *I can't do it. I don't know enough. I don't have the energy. I don't know what to do. I'm not going to do it right. It's not going to be perfect...* These thoughts are not unique to me. Anyone who has ever tried to create something has most likely thought the same a time or two. But if you are an artist, we can view your inability to produce work a little more leniently. You're not lazy, you're just blocked! Declan Donnellan writes extensively on the subject of the blocked actor in his book *The Actor and the Target*: "...perfectionism is a vanity."<sup>44</sup>

I remember the first time I read that dreaded sentence in the introduction of Donnellan's book, I literally felt my hackles raise, my hair stands on end. I was offended. Surely one should strive for perfectionism, no? Otherwise, what on earth was the point? I had often prided myself on being a perfectionist, despite the countless times that selfsame perfectionism stood in my way of finishing a text or trying something new. Failure was completely unacceptable! Except, it wasn't. Donnellan was right, and without realizing it, I had over-indulged in this vanity, and most skillfully blocked myself with it.

According to Donnellan, fear is like the Devil: neither truly exist, but for this same reason, we can never fully banish them.<sup>45</sup> There are many ways to take his power away, just as we are the ones who unwittingly provide him with that power in the first place. In terms of my

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<sup>44</sup> Declan Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target*. (Nick Hern Books, 2002) 8.

<sup>45</sup> Donnellan, 32.

procrastination, my best chance at undermining it would be to, ultimately, accept it as a part of me and as a part of my process.

A few months ago, I found myself completely stuck. I needed to submit a draft of my thesis and come up with a new version of *Hunger* to perform at Open Sunday. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't seem to do anything that felt like real progress in either direction, and my time was running out. All my old tactics weren't working — I couldn't "force it" this time.

Luckily, my biweekly meeting with Robin fell the week before the deadlines. I woefully explained my predicament, full of frustrated and anxious energy that never served me nor allowed me any peace. To my surprise, she pulled out a bag of rocks and asked me to use them to name the parts of my performance and what was keeping me from working on them. Out of the many that I chose, there were two that called to me most strongly, and both represented my procrastination in different forms. One, a perfectly smooth and round stone, fitting most pleasantly in your palm, was my inability to start for fear of finishing my master's studies. The other, an ugly misshapen thing with a perfectly round hole, above which were two tiny chips, giving it an expression that looked like :O, was my inability to start for fear of not doing it perfectly. At the end of the session, Robin offered me the two to take home with me, which I did.

The next day, I booked a rehearsal space at A Maze in Tchaiovna, my favorite local teahouse, and took the two stones with me. I placed them next to each other in the front of the space. For over an hour, I struggled, trying anything I could to spark some creative inspiration or calm my ever-rising panic. Eventually, something happened. I forgot about everything else but my body and the space it was in. I danced, I howled, I bristled. And then, she came. The storyteller I had been searching so hard for, the human-wolf wise-woman, the White Wolf. Her body was different than mine yet was me. Her voice was slow and deep and absolute, and I wanted to listen to her. She told me her name, and I

cried with relief. I finally had a place to begin, and WW (pronounced “wuh-wuh”) knew where to go.

I couldn’t kill my procrastination, but I could incorporate it as part of my process. I couldn’t change that part of who I was, but I could accept it. Now, instead of letting Sonya dictate to her heart’s content, I have someone else, someone wiser, someone kinder, that intervenes. She takes me by the hand, whether I’m the three-year-old throwing a temper tantrum, screaming “It’s not fair! I just don’t wanna!” or the terrified teenager striving for perfection, and she leads me away. As we walk, she tells me a story. Eventually, the three-year-old falls asleep. The teenager calms, and I don’t feel so afraid anymore. Finally, I can begin again.

Those very same procrastination stones still have an active role in *Hunger*. If WW looks at you and finds you wanting for sustenance, she will “feed” you with an object. You could be handed a wishbone, an acorn, or even a perfectly smooth and round stone, fitting most pleasantly in the palm of your hand. And then, WW will tell you a story.

### **Speech vs. Storytelling**

I first performed *Hunger* at Klauzury<sup>46</sup> in January 2020, only shortly before a global pandemic gripped the world and well before I met WW. At this point, I didn’t recognize *Hunger* as something outside myself, outside of my memories, my wolf story. Though I had originally considered using the wolf story as a voiceover for animal-like movement, I ultimately opted for (what I thought was) a more storyteller-like approach, including multiple vignettes of memories that I have of and with my mother.

When I think of all of the wolf stories, and subsequently, all of the “loves” I have experienced in my life, one stands apart from the rest, both the infinite and the origin. The very first story, the wolf and her mother, is the most important one because without it, there can be no beginning, no

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<sup>46</sup> Klauzury refers to the exam period at the end of every semester at DAMU. Each department has its own klauzury, and KATaP’s includes individual and group presentations in multiple disciplines, including movement, speech, authorial acting, voice, singing, dialogical acting, and authorial presentations.

young wolf to feed and be fed upon. Because the ideal length for a final authorial presentation is about forty minutes, I knew I would have great difficulty fitting in all the wolf stories, let alone any additional material. For this first attempt, I chose to only use that first text, delivered as a bedtime story from a child to her mother in the throes of depression.

I began the performance with a series of memories. The first, my mama and I in a grocery store being stopped by a random lady who heard me call my mother "Mom" and simply could not believe we weren't sisters. The second, Baby Kierstan tells her mama she used to be a wolf. The third, Mama sings Baby Kierstan a lullaby. The next, Mama tells her a "bed-night" story, a situation I suggest repeats itself time and time again. Then, as Mama, looking into the audience, I gradually become more lethargic, more lackluster and deflated. Kierstan, older now, comes home to her mama, and she sees her in distress. Kierstan tucks Mama in and offers her a bed-night story, which happens to be the first wolf story, spoken to the audience as if they were Mama. When Kierstan finishes the tale, she sees her mother has fallen asleep. Singing the end of the lullaby Mama sang to her earlier in the show, Kierstan kisses her thumb and traces a cross on Mama's third eye three times, just as her mother had done for her every night for as long as she could remember. The piece ends with Kierstan singing the line "Please let the light that shines on me shine on the one I love."

Afterwards, I received a great deal of positive feedback: the memories were touching and unquestioningly human, the song sounded nice, it made me think of my mom, the wolf story was clear and well-paced, etc.... However, there were also some issues. Because the memories were mostly improvised, there were inconsistencies in rhythm and occasional drops in energy. My blocking was a bit too static. The switch from an imagined mother to the audience as my mother was unclear, and when I switched into the telling of the wolf story, this inconsistency made it hard for the viewers to adapt to the switch. The feedback that impacted me the most, however, was that the wolf story

was presented perfectly – as a Speech text. According to my peers and pedagogues, this first attempt to perform *Hunger* seemed like two performances stuck together without any meaningful or understandable link.

I felt this disconnect happen in real time during the performance. When I turned to the audience to deliver the wolf story, something changed. I looked into the audience and I saw my friends and colleagues and professors, and I remembered that I was, in fact, Kierstan, standing in the middle of room 312, delivering my authorial presentation. The magic was lost, the energy was broken, and I couldn't seem to get it back. I felt that no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't reconnect with the audience. I could sense that something was wrong, but I didn't know what exactly that something was or what had caused it. When I received this feedback, it occurred to me that there is a difference between a Speech text and a storytelling performance; I just... wasn't quite sure what that difference was.

Speech, or rather Speech as Active Communication, was one of our core classes at KATaP and one of my personal favorites. Because I am a native English speaker, I first thought Speech would be one of my easiest courses. I'm fluent in the language I'm studying in; I have experience reading texts and monologues in front of an audience. I thought these things would give me an advantage, and I was wrong. It was precisely because I was a native speaker that I had great difficulty slowing down and finding the right tempo. I'd often gloss over words or enunciate poorly because of my familiarity with the language. Moreover, I had to unlearn all of the habits that I had developed in my undergraduate studies. I had the tendency to decide how I was going to deliver a text and how I wanted it to be received, and this greatly limited my ability to move freely within the text, to play with the images I was presenting.

Like dialogical acting, Speech requires a level of consciousness and concentration, an awareness that demands communication with the text, with yourself, and with the audience, all at the same time. This sense or

sensitivity can only be developed through much time and practice, and when I look back at the videos of my Speech attempts from Klauzury, the difference from my first in January 2019 to my last in May 2020 is undeniable.

In those first attempts, I'm visibly nervous, my body rigid and shoulders tense. I gesture often as I speak, but the stiffness in my body makes the movements stilted and staccato, giving me the appearance of an earnest tyrannosaurus rex trying desperately to communicate something. My feet are rooted to the floor, I speak too quickly, and I often make mistakes with enunciation. I wanted so badly to please the audience, to "do it right," that I effectively blocked myself from actually enjoying the texts I was trying to communicate. Despite the fact that watching these early attempts is quite often an excruciating ordeal, these videos have proven invaluable in noting my progress, recognizing the issues I couldn't see before, and accepting my mistakes as an integral part of my process.

After my first year, I was approached, along with my colleague, Alex Asikainen, by Mish<sup>47</sup> to take part in her PhD, "Between Speeches: Different views on pedagogy of speech (and voice) in the Czech and British context based on personal experience." She would take over as our Speech instructor, and we would provide her with reflections for use in her PhD thesis. I readily accepted her offer, as did Alex, and we commenced the work together, even requesting to continue to work with her the following two semesters.

We began nearly every class with a breathing exercise, which Mish encouraged us to utilize outside of the classroom for at least 15 minutes every day. The exercise included several different body positions: lying in a supine position on the floor, being on all fours with hands and knees

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<sup>47</sup> Typically, Speech is taught by Howard Lotker, but I only worked with him for two semesters. For the remainder of my studies, I worked with Mish, whose approach was very direct and body-oriented. Her clear, concise feedback and her use of sarcasm really worked to quickly recognize problems and areas that needed improvement without getting frustrated at my mistakes, instead allowing me to laugh at them and utilize this added energy to work even more freely.

shoulder/hip width apart, sitting back on your heels with your arms outstretched in front of you, squatting with your feet flat on the floor (your head and arms relaxed and dangling between your knees), standing with your arms wrapped around your chest (hands resting on your scapulae) and your head relaxed and resting on your crossed elbows, and the final position, standing and reaching with each arm over your head (as if you were trying to reach for something over a bar) while keeping your lower body in place and upright. In each body position, we were asked to notice our breath, where it goes, and what sensation it produces in each respective position. Also, we were to produce voiced and unvoiced consonant sound pairs (s/z, š/ž, f/v), repeating each at least three times in each position, allowing the breath to inform how long the sound would last. We were told not to force it, not to push. Instead, we should notice when we ran out of breath and allow the sound to end naturally before inhaling and starting the next.

This exercise became a kind of swiss army knife for me, and I used it often. When I was about to perform, I used it to calm the wild surge of energy and panic that (for me) always precedes a performance, whether on a stage or in a classroom. When I couldn't get out of my head enough to actually rehearse, I would use it to reconnect with my body and arrive in the space, allowing me to bypass my perfectionism just enough to start to play or explore. When I was tortured by insomnia, I would use it to relax my body and disarm my mind, often quickly falling asleep. When I was on the brink of a panic attack, I would use it to remember that I'm no longer in danger and that this body is mine. I used it in that rehearsal for Open Sunday that led to my discovery of WW. I used it to make *Hunger*.

The repeated practice of this breathing exercise had a multitude of effects. In Speech class, it enabled me to better control and use my breath, to place my voice more correctly and use it more dynamically, to arrive in the space and overcome my performance anxiety, to really slow

down and become “the master of time.”<sup>48</sup> In my personal life, it helped me to reestablish my connection with my body and breath, to cope with the overwhelming effects of my anxiety, to rediscover balance after such prolonged state of fight-or-flight.<sup>49</sup> No one had ever told me the precise purpose or even the desired outcome of this particular breathing exercise, but I intuitively used it, guided by something instinctive that called for a redirection of attention, from my overactive ego to my easily forsaken body, from my past and the future to the present.

By the time I gave my last Speech Klauzura in January of 2020, so much had changed from those first few attempts. I look visibly more at ease in the space, much less overwhelmed by the state of crisis<sup>50</sup> performing in front of an audience entails. I not only speak more slowly and more clearly, but I actively use tempo and rhythm to communicate more effectively with the audience. I am more able to access and maintain energy throughout the performance, despite the fact that I am standing, in a relatively fixed position, centerstage.<sup>51</sup> From an internal perspective, I felt much less terrified at the prospect of delivering my text, finally able to

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<sup>48</sup>In Speech class, Mish would often say, “you are the master of time,” reminding us that we have essentially all the time in the world when we are delivering our texts or standing on stage.

<sup>49</sup> I am referring again to my PTSD, and the prolonged state of fight-or-flight many people with my disorder find themselves trapped in. I had been in it for so long, I didn’t know what “normal” felt like, what baseline felt like anymore. Only through extensive work with body in multiple courses at KATaP, along with my sessions with Robin, was I finally able to glimpse what that might be like, to return to that equilibrium more easily, and ultimately, to inhabit that state in my daily life (most of the time, at least). This breathing exercise played a large role in that process, a most unexpected source of development in my journey as an actor and as a human.

<sup>50</sup> Here I am referencing Anne Bogart from her book, *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World*. “The stage is a place where the stakes are raised intentionally. A body is put into crisis intentionally. For an actor, it should cost something to walk across a stage. In art, every task should cost something to accomplish, and the stakes can always be lifted higher. Stepping upon a stage should feel like jumping off of a high diving board at an Olympic pool. The baseline intention *to try* requires you to draw away the thick veil of inertia and habit that surrounds your daily life. Equipped with the incisive blade of the intention, fueled by courage and persistence, and armed with an idea, you go to work. With this approach, something is bound to happen.” Bogart, Anne. *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

<sup>51</sup> In one of our Body in Motion classes, we were participating in a movement improvisation exercise that involved attention, i.e., how to catch and maintain an audience’s attention. Our task was a simple one: go into the space and do everything you possibly can to draw and keep the audience’s eyes on you. In one of my attempts, I stood, motionless, centerstage. Though at first I drew several curious gazes, waiting to see what I would do, they very quickly turned elsewhere. Stubbornly, I held my position until the end of the attempt a few minutes later. The entire time, I felt invisible, even though I was standing right there in the middle of the stage. During the feedback session after the attempt, this sensation of invisibility was reinforced. They said it was almost as if I had disappeared. Mish said then that the center of the stage is an energy vacuum; it requires a massive amount of energy to stand still centerstage and maintain the audience’s attention. I was (and still am) fascinated by this, and I really enjoy experimenting to see just how I might be able to overcome this energy vacuum. As a result, the main character of *Hunger* stands/sits centerstage for the majority of the performance.



really take my time to play with the audience, to listen to and enjoy my own text as I spoke it aloud. I could feel the energy the audience was feeding me, and I could access it, using it to feed the text. I knew that they were really *hearing* the story I was sharing with them. Their laughter and their engagement fueled me to go even further, to play and experiment in real time. It felt free. It felt honest. It felt incredible. I remember thinking to myself, "Ah, this is what it must feel like to be a real storyteller."

Even so, when I had used the same techniques, all the same things that had worked for me in Speech class, in my January 2020 AP attempt, they didn't quite work the same way. Something was missing; Speech wasn't storytelling. In order to address this issue, to reconstruct the form of my piece, to tell this story effectively, I would have to fill the gap between the two. I would have to know what the difference is and how to use it. If Speech is active communication, then what exactly is storytelling?

I'm fifth generation Ojibwe, and though technically that's close enough to officially change my race from Caucasian to Native American/Eskimo,<sup>52</sup> I grew up without any real access to that culture or its history, separate from that part of my family. Nevertheless, I found myself drawn to it, the idea of a way of life inseparable from the natural world (and the creatures in it) beckoning to me from somewhere in the distance. One of my most cherished gifts I've ever received is a pair of knee-high buckskin moccasins, handmade in one of the traditional ways.

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<sup>52</sup> If you are a descendant within seven generations of a full-blood Native American in the U.S., you can legally change your race. Of course, extensive documentation is necessary to do so, and you have to be first accepted as a member of your tribe. Birth certificates, family trees, census reports, and even genetic testing may be required to prove your relation, but the specific procedures for membership vary from tribe to tribe. My Ojibwe blood comes from my mother, who inherited it from her (estranged) biological father. I never knew him, and I didn't meet anyone from that side of the family until I was nearly an adult. My mother's father died over two decades ago, and though we do have contact with that part of our family, it is not what I would call a close relationship. One day, I hope to sit down with my great aunts and uncles, to hear all the stories I've missed, to learn of all of those who came before me. When I return to the Motherland (whenever that may be), I plan to trace my lineage all the way back to the Red Lake Nation, the band of Ojibwe I hail from, and if I may be so lucky, to visit the reservation and hear their stories, too.

My father spent three days crafting them, his hands blistering in the process. Aside from those moccasins, my high cheekbones, and my “Crowley slants,” my connection with my Native American heritage has mostly been an imagined one.

I have always been particularly drawn to Native American myths and stories. This penchant followed me to KATaP, too. I chose one Ojibwe tale, “The Star Maiden,” as a text for one of my Speech Klauzury. Working with it was one of my most challenging (and enjoyable) experiences in Speech class. It’s surprisingly difficult to tell a Native American fairy tale to a modern audience. The stories operate under a different kind of logic than what we are typically used to, where anything is possible. A star might turn into a maiden, who tries to make a home on the petals of the wild mountain rose.<sup>53</sup> A young mother might turn into a white gull when her jealous mother-in-law tries to push her off a cliff, flying away to safety.<sup>54</sup> A wise woman might tell her final story, becoming a wolf once more to return to her mother in the moon.<sup>55</sup>

The sense of time in these stories is different. One story might span hundreds of years, another just a single instant. Because they were born of an oral tradition, many of these stories are repetitive in structure, making them easier to remember and to tell again. Native American stories are not crafted to create suspense or curiosity for what will happen next; everyone in the tribe, except maybe the youngest members, would be deeply familiar with the tales, if not having had the experience of telling them themselves.<sup>56</sup> The plot of these stories often serves mainly to “bring into meaningful contrast parallel actions, scenes, characters, and

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<sup>53</sup> Reference to “The Star Maiden.” Margaret Compton, *American Indian Fairy Tales = Pohádky amerických indiánů*. (Garamond, 2015).

<sup>54</sup> Reference to “Snowbird and the Water-Tiger,” Compton, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> Reference to *Hunger*.

<sup>56</sup> “Stories that had been retold for years, decades, even generations were familiar to everyone but the youngest children. Since Native American cultures did not favor professional storytellers, and everyone told stories, listeners to a story might well have told the story themselves, perhaps many times. So suspense, passive curiosity as to what happens next, was of little interest to any [Native American].” Karl Kroeber, *Native American Storytelling: A Reader of Myths and Legends*. (Blackwell Publishing. 2007) 2.

speeches that have no direct causal connection."<sup>57</sup> Instead of making the connections for you, you are provoked to come up with your own. This requires a much more active kind of imagination on the part of the audience. It takes work to really listen to a Native American story, and audience participation was not only encouraged, but expected, with audience members often calling out "yes" after every line, to show that they were listening.

Furthermore, the purpose of Native American storytelling is not purely to entertain. Each story serves as a mirror to society, allowing members of the tribe to actively examine and reevaluate the elements of their reality and culture. Literary scholar Karl Kroeber writes,

"For us, stories are usually light entertainment, trivial amusements, with which we while away — waste — time. For [Native Americans], storytelling was their most important cultural activity. Every one of their most sacred rituals was rooted in a narrative. Storytelling articulated the foundational systems and commitments by which each unique cultural life was formed, and at the same time it was the primary means by which those systems and commitments could be examined so as to be better understood, sustained, modified, and improved. Their narratives seem to us strange because they are far more culturally serious than the stories we read and watch on television, and demand far more daring, adventurous, and ultimately responsible imagining than we are trained to bring to our story responses."<sup>58</sup>

In Native American culture, stories were an integral part of daily life, living records passed down from generation to generation. Though some do have some sort of "lesson," they leave its interpretation up to the audience. Every member of the tribe could be, and often was, a storyteller.

I will admit, I do aspire to reach a certain proficiency in storytelling; I swell with pride whenever I hear I told a story well. However, I love the

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<sup>57</sup> Kroeber expands on the Native American tendency toward paratactic sentences with the following: "Where we are likely to say, "Because it is cold, bears hibernate," the paratactic [Native American] style is, "Bears hibernate. It snows." Our style is to connect the two parts of the sentence with an unequivocal cause-effect relation, a relation often made equivocal in [Native American] stories. It is not that the [Native Americans] necessarily believed that bears hibernating caused winter, but they are more modest than we in assuming they infallibly know what causes things to happen. Generally, [Native Americans] found their world more complicated, uncertain, and changeable than we do ours. The paratactic style leaves more to listeners' imaginations — they are not *told* what the relation of two events is; they are encouraged to imagine different possibilities and implications of the relationship." Kroeber, 5.

<sup>58</sup> Kroeber, 6.

idea of a story that serves the audience, not by telling you what to believe, but by provoking you to come up with your own conclusions. I love the idea of a story that belongs to everyone, that can be retold again and again, subject to change based on the current circumstances of the time in which it is told. I love the idea of a story that can be passed down through generations and still serve all that might listen to it.

I would love for *Hunger* to be this kind of story, to use this kind of storytelling to share it. But *Hunger* isn't an old story, and despite the number of friends and colleagues of mine that are familiar with it, I don't have a tribe to share it with that knows it as intimately as I do. How could I transform my tale from a Speech text to the kind of storytelling I yearned for?

I knew I couldn't suddenly change the context in which I had written *Hunger* or performed it, but I could change the way I performed it. Whereas before I was too attached to my word choice to allow for any alteration to it, I knew I could choose to emphasize the *essence* of the stories rather than their diction. I started by repeating the wolf stories aloud over and over, allowing the superfluous literary descriptions to fall away naturally. I tried to tell the stories the same way I would describe a memory to a friend. I tried to notice the differences in rhythm and intonation as they occurred on their own. Slowly, the stories became less about the way they were written and more about the way they are told and what they say. I recorded my attempts and listened to them, over and over again, noting which moments "felt right" and which felt clumsy or false.

I also looked back at those Speech videos, watching them again and again. I noticed that as a narrator I had a certain air of ownership, as if the words I was delivering belonged to me, which was significantly apparent in that AP attempt in January 2020. I realized I could only change this by essentially giving the wolf stories away, by separating them from myself. To give them the energy, freedom, and dynamicity I

dreamt of for them, I would have to give them to WW. But I would have to find her first.

### **The Search for the White Wolf**

In another one of those early AA classes with Káča, I chose to work with a memory. I was eight years old, and I was at a sleepover birthday party for my childhood best friend; for our purposes here, I'll call her Moo.<sup>59</sup> There were eight or nine of us, and when I casually mentioned that I was a wolf, the whole group erupted into laughter. Naturally, I became the wolf, to show them that I was telling the truth. I fell on all fours, the change happening instantaneously. I could feel my sharp fangs and thick white fur. I growled and howled and chased them and nipped at their ankles. They screamed and ran and laughed with glee, fleeing into Moo's bedroom and locking the door behind them. "No wolves allowed!" They shouted when I frantically pawed at the door, at first snarling, then growling, then whimpering, then silent. They didn't emerge for several hours, and I sat alone in the living room, surrounded by sleeping bags, waiting for them, no longer a wolf, but a sad little girl. I was the first to fall asleep that night, exhausted from all the earlier commotion. While I was sleeping, the other girls put chocolate syrup, glitter, Elmer's glue,<sup>60</sup> whipped cream, mustard, hair gel, and raw eggs in my hair. When I woke up an hour or so later to their laughter, I discovered my waist-length ginger curls impossibly knotted, congealed with a tar-like sticky goop, atop my head. It took another three hours to get it out of my hair. I sobbed the entire time.

In that AA class, I played the little girl who played the wolf. I played the group of girls, laughing in delight and sneering in cruelty. I played the older version of that little girl, looking on the scene with empathy. But when Káča asked me to play the wolf, to *really* play the wolf, not just the

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<sup>59</sup> My mama and Aunt G (Moo's mother) were friends long before they were pregnant with us. We were born within two months of each other, both ending up the only children of (mostly) single mothers. We grew up quite close; Moo was more like a sister than a friend.

<sup>60</sup> A common brand of washable school glue

little girl pretending to be one, I froze, completely incapable to do so. Every muscle in my body locked into place, and I stood motionless in the center of the space, quietly battling for dominion over my unruly bag of bones. I wanted so desperately to fulfill the task, to play the wolf as I'd been asked, but no matter how hard I tried, I simply could *not* do it. After a few minutes of this public struggle, I left the space in tears, going to the bathroom to collect myself again. I realized something in that moment: after that sleepover, I had never played the wolf again.

"A healthy woman is much like a wolf: robust, chock-full, strong life force, life-giving, territorially aware, inventive, loyal, roving. Yet separation from the wildish nature causes a woman's personality to become meager, thin, ghostly, spectral. We are not meant to be puny with frail hair and [the] inability to leap up, inability to chase, to birth, to create a life."<sup>61</sup>

Clarissa Pinkola Estés, PhD writes extensively on the wildish nature of women in her book *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. She refers to this wildish force of the psyche as the Wild Woman, the intrinsic source of knowledge and power, the well of women's intuition, the instinctual nature of woman. When we are separated from her, the symptoms are innumerable:

"feeling powerless, chronically doubtful, shaky, blocked, unable to follow through, giving one's creative life over to others, life-sapping choice in mates, work, or friendships, suffering to live outside one's cycles, overprotective of self, inert, uncertain, faltering, inability to pace oneself or set limits."<sup>62</sup>

The list goes on and on and on.

According to Estés, the Wild Woman is essential; without her, our inner lives become stunted, pale shadows of what they could be, and we find ourselves blocked, afraid, trapped, frozen. By embracing her, this wise, wild, intuitive part of ourselves, we can heal. By listening to her stories, we can accept her as a part of us; we can rediscover our power. The Wild Woman is the gut feeling, the memory, the emotion, the past,

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<sup>61</sup> Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. (Ballantine Books, 1995) 11.

<sup>62</sup> Estés, 10.

the future, the present. "She is utterly essential to women's mental and soul health."<sup>63</sup>

I am painfully familiar with the symptoms described above; I've experienced them often throughout my life, particularly in those early days at KATaP. I didn't realize that my inability to play the wolf represented something bigger, something deeper, going on inside of me: a(nother) separation of self. Though DJ and movement classes helped me make huge steps in reestablishing my connection with my body, I was still alienated from this innate wolfishness,<sup>64</sup> this ability to stand my ground, to growl, to run, to play. I desperately wanted to embrace this part of myself, this part of all the women who had come before me, but I was terrified to do so.

Looking back at that sleepover now, I recognize that it was not just a memory of a silly kid. It was yet another account of my trauma, and my inability to play the wolf yet another example of my PTSD effecting my life, as an actor and as a functional human. I knew that in order to fully separate myself from this text, to gain the distance necessary to perform it ethically, I would have to learn how to be the wolf again. I would have to find the Wild Woman.

A year after this incident in AA class, I found myself in a rehearsal room in A Maze in Tchaiovna, preparing for performance of my final authorial presentation for Open Sunday. I placed two stones in the front of the space. I played Native American flute music. I laid on the floor and started the (s/z, š/ž, f/v) exercise to calm myself and arrive in the space. I knew I had to become the wolf; only then could I find the Wild Woman. Taking inspiration from Lee Strasberg's "Animal Exercise" and work we had done in one of our movement courses, Training for Movement, I

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<sup>63</sup> I would like to expand on Estés point here with another quote. "The wild nature carries the bundles for healing; she carries everything a woman needs to be and know. She carries the medicine for all things. She carries stories and dreams and words and signs and signs and symbols. She is both vehicle and destination." Estés, 11.

<sup>64</sup> Small side note: I had originally written "wildishness," which is not really a word, but Microsoft Word suggested it be changed to "wolfishness," which is (in my opinion) quite humorously appropriate.

started to work. Strasberg's "Animal Exercise" typically calls for extensive study of the animal you want to create a character from, studying its movements, mannerisms, and habits.<sup>65</sup> Because of my lifelong familiarity with my chosen animal, I skipped this step. I started by assuming the "resting" or "neutral" form of the wolf, feeling how her body, her rhythm was different from mine. It took me several attempts to settle into it, often stopping myself or feeling silly. Once I had a strong sense of the wolf's body, I started to move through the space. I felt trapped, frustrated, stuck, angry. The room was cold and poorly lit. I could hear people talking in the corridor, and I was worried about someone bursting into the rehearsal space. I eyed the door suspiciously. Someone dropped something heavy outside — BANG— and the wolf growled.

The wolf growled! I was so excited to feel her genuine impulse that I almost lost it. I tried to concentrate again, to refocus on the sensation of her body. I moved through the space, growling and prowling about. All grew quiet outside the door, and the wolf relaxed. She yawned and stretched, looking up at the moon overhead. She let out a long, mournful howl and then... she started to change.

A long white mane of curls atop my head replaced the plush coat that had covered my body the moment before. My bones felt as if they were carved from stone, impossibly ancient and heavy. My skin was as thin as paper, crisscrossed with thousands of lines from a thousand lifetimes. I could feel her strength, her knowing. I could feel her body, how she moved, as slowly as the shifting tides or the everchanging moon.<sup>66</sup> I had found her. I had discovered the Wild Woman. I had finally met WW.

I spent several hours getting to know her, learning the sensation of her in my body, exploring with her in the space. When I was finished, too tired to continue, I cried, I gave thanks (though to who, I can't

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<sup>65</sup> Lee Strasberg. *The Lee Strasberg Notes*. (Routledge, 2010) 34.

<sup>66</sup> When I look back on this now, I see that WW has a lot of similarities to the main character of another text I have written, called "The Gray Woman." I have attached that text (Appendix II) for any of those who are interested in making the comparison between the two.



really say). I wrote everything down in the yellow notebook I bought in Berlin last February. I collected the stones, and I decided they needed to be a part of *Hunger*, too.

In our department, we are often discouraged from using costume or props in our authorial presentations. However, I chose to include several props in *Hunger*. Why are these props necessary? For me, each prop has a powerful personal association, but are they necessary for the performance? Are they a distraction or a disruption? We are discouraged from using props because our discipline is about finding the essence of what is already in the present and at play, without hiding behind masks, costumes, or props as possible crutches. Why do I want these props there anyway?

Almost everyone I know has a grandmother (I even have six of them).<sup>67</sup> When I think of “grandmother” and “storyteller,” I think of Mommom, my father’s mother. I spent countless hours in the backseat of her car, curled up on her couch, walking through small Amish towns in Pennsylvania, completely enraptured by her tales. But Mommom’s stories weren’t make-believe. They were real stories, her stories, of her life and of our family and of all the things that had come before me. It didn’t matter if I had heard them before; as a matter of fact, I often requested my favorite tales about my father as a wily youth over and over and over again. Other times, I would pick up a photo from the hundreds of frames that covered every surface of her home, and ask, “Mommom, who is this?”

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<sup>67</sup>I have two stepparents, and both of my stepparents have two stepparents. That means I have six grandmothers and six grandfathers. The list is as follows: Mary (Mommom), Debi (Meme), Debbie (Grammy), Debbie (Granny), Debbie (Nana Deb), Lynn (Mommom Lynn), Bobby Jo (Pop), Dick (Poppop), Andy (Peepaw), John (Papa John), Frank (Papa), and Eric (just Eric). I have attached a family tree as another appendix, for any who are interested in seeing what that looks like.

(I must admit, I do technically have a seventh grandfather, my mother’s biological father, but because he was not a part of my life or my personal history, I have left him out of this family tree)

When I think back to it now, I can still feel the metal filigree around the edges of those cherished memories. It is precisely because of this that I want WW to have these real, tactile items in my final authorial presentation. I don't want her to be an actor on a stage — she's not a stranger. She's your grandmother. She's my grandmother and the one I will become. She is as old as time, and she remembers everything. But she is real, tactile. She offers to feed you, and hands you an acorn. Your meal, a story the sight and feel of that acorn inspired.

I want the audience to feel like family. To feel the heat of the campfire and the crossing of the stars overhead. But is this combination of imaginative feeling and the real, physical sensation of an acorn a stone or a pinecone in your hand counter-intuitive? Does the presence of the tactile disrupt the imaginative? To be honest, I'm not sure, and the answer probably waivers from audience member to audience member.

I remember one performance I went to see called *Mraky* by Veronika Švábová at Alfred ve dvoře here in Prague. Described by its makers as a "subjective study of one's own family, presented in a series of images without a casual connection, as fragments of past events live in our memory,"<sup>68</sup> *Mraky* remains one of the performances I've seen that has stuck with me the most. Full of emotional stories and memories, *Mraky* also included a portion where mraky, or Czech "clouds," a kind of sweet cake, was baking in a small convection oven on stage throughout the performance to be portioned out and served to the audience after the show. As you watch the main character account the painful details of her family history, you smell the sweet, delicious scent of the baking mraky (her grandmother's recipe) permeating the space. It reminded me of the countless pancakes I would make with Mommom in the morning after a sleepover, and through Švábová's stories, I was transported back in time.

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<sup>68</sup> Veronika Švábová, "Mraky." *i-Divadlo.cz*, i-Divadlo, 20 Oct. 2011, 5 Dec. 2020 <[www.i-divadlo.cz/divadlo/alfred-ve-dvore/mraky](http://www.i-divadlo.cz/divadlo/alfred-ve-dvore/mraky)>.

It is precisely this effect I hope to bring to an audience of *Hunger*. Each of the objects are deeply personal to me, and immediately evocative of multiple memories and strong emotions, but to an audience member, they may bring up something else entirely or even nothing at all. As we humans are very associative creatures, I believe more often than not, if WW hands you a stone with a perfect, circular hole in it, it will remind you of something. This is my intention, and my hope. Though *Hunger* is autobiographical to a certain extent, I do not simply want to hold the audience hostage to my stories, my memories (as I have done previously). Reactor or performer wants to hold an audience's attention; of course, I want to be engaging enough to open a doorway to a different reality, but I want to give the opportunity to choose whether to enter that portal, or not. If instead of paying attention to what I was telling of a young wolf trying to become a vegetarian for her love of a doe, you were transported back to your grandmother's living room, where the heating was provided solely by a bottomless bucket of pinecones, that's alright by me. And even if you aren't speaking to them aloud, somehow, they are still being shared among us. For this to occur, I feel a certain kind of safety and intimacy is necessary to establish.

By reaching out and contacting the audience, physically handing them objects and calling them food, it could have the opposite effect, becoming frightening or even intimidating rather than an invitation to engage even further. It is my hope that I can circumvent this through WW's characterization, manner, and way of speaking. Everything about her should convey this performance is an invitation rather than a mandatory lecture. She tells you the stories because she has to, because they are yours too. you can choose whether to hear them; you can choose where they take you.

When I performed *Hunger* at Open Sunday in October of 2020, the conditions were less than ideal. It was cold, the space was poorly lit

during my performance, the audience was rather small.<sup>69</sup> I had recently gotten a haircut, a thick fringe of red curls hiding my eyes throughout the performance. Because another colleague of mine was also performing his final AP, with his deadline for state exams quickly approaching, I was asked to shorten my performance to only twenty minutes. I had to decide on the fly what parts to cut and what to keep, how to maintain the integrity of the character and the story with half the amount of material I had prepared.

Despite all these potentially disruptive factors, the performance went surprisingly well. The audience was actively engaged throughout the presentation. They didn't shy away from WW as she "fed" them. Instead, they were captivated by her — too captivated. Her physicality was too distinct, her mannerisms too quirky, her presence too dominating; almost all of the feedback that I received that day revolved around how much focus the audience placed on WW... and how little focus they placed on the stories she was telling.

"[The actor] should not be too perfect. His demonstration would be spoilt if the bystander's attention were drawn to his powers of transformation... he must not 'cast a spell' over anyone."<sup>70</sup>

Bertolt Brecht cautions against this very phenomenon; if you focus too much energy on the character (or presenting her "perfectly"), she becomes the only thing the audience can see, outshining everything else in the performance. I had clung to WW so desperately, so afraid to lose her again, that I made the performance about how well I could play her instead of allowing the performance to play out *through* her.

Yoshi Oida addresses the same issue in his book *The Invisible Actor*.

"For me, acting is not about showing my presence or displaying my technique. Rather it is about revealing, through acting, 'something else,' something that the audience doesn't encounter in daily life. The actor

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<sup>69</sup> In my experience, it usually takes a lot more energy to keep a small audience engaged, if only because there are less people feeding you energy throughout the performance. Of course, this is not always the case, as energy levels vary from audience to audience, from day to day, or even from hour to hour.

<sup>70</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre." *The Routledge Drama Anthology: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance*, by Maggie B. Gale et al. (Routledge, 2016) 469–474.

doesn't demonstrate it. It is not physically visible, but, through the engagement of the onlooker's imagination, 'something else' will appear in his or her mind. For this to happen, the audience must not have the slightest awareness of what the actor is doing. They must be able to forget the actor. The actor must disappear."<sup>71</sup>

In order to convey the stories WW was telling, I would have to find a way to remove myself even further, to "disappear" completely. I am still not entirely sure how to do this, but the answer might be simpler than I could imagine. It might just boil down to a change in tempo and physicality.

A few weeks ago, I send the videos of my Open Sunday attempt to Káča, who is now the advisor for my final AP. She praised the speech, the pace, the gestures, the story, the way it was told — but not the posture, not WW's physicality. She recommended that I work with WW's tempo and rhythm, placing emphasis on her timing rather than her physical stiffness. Káča even went so far as to suggest that this change in rhythm (taking more time to let the audience imagine, taking more time to find the stories, taking more time to follow the thread and energy to carry on after each story) would be enough to heighten the quality of my audience interactions.

Because of the current (global) situation, I haven't been able to plan or rehearse for my "final" final authorial presentation to the extent I would prefer. As we find ourselves in the fourth lockdown in the Czech Republic, I find myself not only worrying about the future of *Hunger*, but the future of theatre as we know it. How can a piece that revolves around contact, around sharing intimate space with others, survive in post-COVID world? Would anyone listen to WW's stories if she were wearing a respirator? If she were on a computer screen?

I don't have the answers to these questions. Káča suggested that I add pauses and moments of reconnection (like in a faulty Zoom call), perhaps even incorporating recorded text, to try and tie in today's

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<sup>71</sup> Yoshi Oida, Lorna Marshall. *The Invisible Actor*. (Bloomsbury Academic, 1995) 17.

context with my final piece. If I'm honest, I'm not sure how I feel about that, but I am open to experimentation. And if I am certain of anything, I am certain that these wolf stories, as well as all stories that *need* to be told, will find a way to be heard. I look forward to witnessing and participating in the process that gets them there.

## Conclusion

A few months ago, I found myself completely and utterly stuck in the process of writing this master's thesis (surprise, surprise). I called up my mama, as I often do when I find myself a bit lost. She told me something then that changed everything for me: "Let Baby Kierstan take you by the hand. Let her tell you a story. All you have to do is write it down." And, like mothers usually are, she was right.

I have tried to tell this story as honestly and intuitively as I can, detailing my journey from a blocked, PTSD-riddled, graduate student to a (slightly less) blocked, PTSD-riddled (but not overwhelmed), (aspiring) master's graduate, describing my process of creation of a hastily written, autobiographical wolf fable into a (unfinished) final authorial presentation. My work with the psychosomatic disciplines of KATaP, DJ, Speech, and movement courses in particular, along with my independent work with Robin, my therapist, not only contributed to the development of my final AP, but to my development as an authorial actor and as a more fully connected human.

I hope this account of my personal and practical<sup>72</sup> process can shed some light of the intricacies of authorial creation, self-discovery, and acceptance. I hope my experiences with PTSD and artistic blocks can help others struggling with similar afflictions integrate and overcome them. But most importantly, I hope that by telling my story, others might be encouraged to tell their own.

Thank you for reading.

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<sup>72</sup> In terms of the creation of my final AP

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# Appendix I

## Hunger

One day, a young wolf was playing in a meadow. She was chasing the butterflies that flit stop-stop-startingly upon the wildflowers adorning the tall grass, which swayed ever so gently in the summer breeze. She would leap and snap, always missing them by just a hair's breadth. This was no accident. She could have easily caught one, maybe even all of them, snatching them from the air and crunching their small, delicate wings betwixt her sharp white teeth. But she didn't. That would have ended the game, and they don't make for much of a meal anyway.

A rustle from the nearby undergrowth drew her attention. She froze instantly, yellow (or were they blue?) eyes focused intensely in the direction of the sound. The ridge of fur along her spine stood on end, and she held her breath in anticipation, ready to defend herself (or make a quick escape) at a moment's notice.

She relaxed when the source of the sound, another wolf, emerged from the trees. She was smaller than the young wolf, with a gorgeous ashy black coat and gentle gray eyes. She was older, and though she had kindness on her face, one could see a strength and power within her that was undeniable. She commanded respect (and admiration) just by looking at you. The young wolf put her ears back and lowered her tail, wagging it slowly, a greeting and a submission. It was her own mother.

They nuzzled each other warmly and with great affection. Upon seeing her mother up close, however, the young wolf noticed that she was thin and gaunt, a few ribs visible beneath her silken ebony fur.

"Mother, are you hungry? You look unwell..." she asked, yellow (or were they blue?) eyes full of concern.

Her mother shook her head, as if to deny, but a deep resonant growl escaped from her. It was so loud that the young wolf at first took it for a reproach, and began to grin in apology, before it happened again, surprising the both of them. The growl had not come from her mother's throat at all.

The young wolf remembered the days of warmth and comfort, fat-bellied and content on her mother's rich milk and loving caresses. She remembered her early youth when she couldn't do much other than stumble around and chase her own tail, pouncing on unsuspecting leaves and twigs, her only prey. She remembered kissing the corners of her mother's mouth, an enthusiastic plea for sustenance that would always be met, without fail, by the regurgitation of her mother's own meal, carried lovingly in the basket of her belly, so that her daughter's hunger might be sated.

There was no prey in this meadow, and the young wolf couldn't feed her mother paltry butterflies. She looked down at her own form, well-muscled and well-fed, strong and fit and able. Her shoulders were particularly large and developed. She stared at the left one for a long moment before turning it towards her mother.

"Take a bite, Mother. I have enough to spare, and it will give you strength to be successful on your next hunt."

Her mother recoiled, once again shaking her head, but the young wolf did not miss the flash of hunger (and subsequent guilt) that appeared in those gentle gray eyes.

"Come, Mother. You borne me of your own flesh, allow me to sustain you with mine. Please, Mother. Feed."

The pain was intense but over quickly. The young wolf walked with a limp for a while, but the wound healed after only a few weeks. Though her shoulder would always be

weaker, she felt stronger still having a mother who would in turn feed her, if she ever found herself in need. And so, they both survived, at least for a while.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was winter when the young wolf met the fox. She was sleeping in the weak sunlight that filtered through the now-barren trees of her forest. She dreamt of summer hunts and howling and the moons of autumn with her mother, of times when hunger didn't gnaw at her belly at the forest teemed with prey and life.

She awoke with a start when a red, bushy tail tickled her nose. In front of her, now sitting calmly with his tail curled over his black-dipped paws, sat a gorgeous fox.

She raised her head and looked at him with mild disinterest, before yawning to show just how at ease she was to find him there. After all, what does a wolf have to fear from a fox?

"I see you are alone here," the fox said, voice smooth and full of confidence.

The young wolf was indeed, alone. She had traveled off in search for a new place, a place she could claim as her own. She had found her forest, and indeed claimed it, but had not yet a pack of her own. In the harshness and the cold of winter, hunger was not the only thing that gnawed at her. Every night, she would sing her loneliness to the ever-silent moon.

"I heard your song, and I know what it is like to be lonely," the fox assured her, twitching his whiskers sympathetically, "If you want, I can keep you company. I'm a wonderful storyteller." He winked at her before continuing, "And I certainly wouldn't mind spending my days with the most beautiful wolf I've ever seen."

The young wolf smiled, knowing the game already, but she thought it might not be so bad to have the company, especially through the long winter nights. Perhaps she could even teach him how to sing to the moon. And so, she agreed. After all, what does a wolf have to fear from a fox?

\* \* \* \* \*

The young wolf was fishing in the burbling creek on the border of her forest when she saw the doe. It was spring, and the early evening air was full of music; the crickets' cheerful chirp and the whooping croak of the spring peepers. It had rained that afternoon, and a lingering mist hung amongst the trees.

The young wolf had just snatched a trout out of the water, and, chest puffed with pride, turned to the large, flat rock on the bank, intent on devouring her prize there. Much to her surprise, a small doe stood there instead, ears forward and huge, brown eyes watching her closely. The young wolf lost her grip on the silvery fish, and it dropped back to the water with a quiet splash, its luck proving to have held another day. The doe snorted at the sound, and stamped her cloven hoof on the stone. A warning.

The young wolf froze, hackles raised slightly. Her yellow (or was it blue?) gaze locked with the doe's molten brown. Flicking her ears, the doe moved her head from side to side, as if trying to get a better look at the predator standing in the water in front of her. And still, the young wolf stood still.

She had never before encountered a doe like this one. Everything about her was a deep brown, from her eyes to her coat, her fur lacking the usual white highlights on her throat and underbelly. She was smaller too, and could have easily been mistaken for a fawn. But there was a gracefulness about her, a surety that suggested she was older than her size would indicate. Plus, she lacked the tell-tale dappling of white spots along her flanks.

“I see you, Wolf.” The doe stamped her foot again.

Why didn't she run? In all the young wolf's life, all it took was one whiff of her scent to send the nervous beasts crashing through the undergrowth, white tails flagging their swift retreat. She remembered her mother's lessons, the way of the hunter. But this doe stood her ground. Curious, the young wolf stepped forward on to the bank.

The doe watched her closely, immobile except for the almost imperceptible twitch of her ears. The young wolf did not miss this, and sensing the doe's unease, approached even closer. By the time she had reached the edge of that large, flat rock on which the doe stood, the sun was low in the sky, painting the horizon in rich hues of purple and orange. The clouds smudged across the sky were the same pink as the flesh of the salmon, and to the wolf seemed as though they too were taking part in some great migration, journeying towards the place of their birth to release the eggs they carried in their fat bellies, only to then fade away and float back downstream, having completed their final quest. This was the way of the salmon, and to the wolf, it made sense that it was also the way of the clouds.

Now the doe was trembling, but still, she stood firm. The wolf could smell her fear, intertwined with the scent of prey and, curiously enough, of the wild honeysuckle vines that grew throughout the forest. How odd. Had the doe eaten the honeysuckle? Or perhaps walked through it? Rolled in it? She sniffed at the air hungrily, greedy to take in this unusual bouquet, and leaned even closer to the doe.

Less than a tail's length away from her now, the doe's resolve cracked. She jerked her right hind leg and winced in pain as some invisible force drew it back. A shrub behind the rock had jerked along with the leg, and the force of the motion had shaken loose a few leaves which now drifted slowly to the ground. The sweet, salt tang of blood began to permeate the air, a few ruby rivulets trickling down the doe's dainty ankle. She was caught in a hunter's snare.

The young wolf's mouth watered, and she ran her tongue over her sharp, white teeth. This would make for an easy meal, a much more substantial one than the trout she'd lost. She placed one of her large, black-clawed paws on the edge of the stone, never breaking the doe's gaze. Wide-eyed with fear, so much so the white rings around those brown pools shown brightly in the ever-growing darkness, the doe put her ears back and snorted.

“Will you eat me then, brave Wolf?” The doe's voice rang out through the night, mocking despite her obvious distress. “What mighty quarry you pursue. Will you tell tales of your victory here?”

The young wolf's lip curled ever so slightly, caught between a smirk and a snarl. She was a proud creature and did not enjoy being taunted, especially by such a helpless thing. And yet, she marveled at the doe's spirit. She had expected a mad dash, however fruitless it might have proven, and would have leapt for the doe's soft throat the instant the snare had snatched her leg out from under her. The young wolf would have relished her own power and the doe's panic, and would not have had a moment's hesitation in making the kill. But the doe did not run. Perhaps she was a much more clever creature than her brethren, and knew that her instincts would have proven fatal if she were to indulge them. Or perhaps, she was of a different character entirely. Perhaps she was brave.

The young wolf had experienced bravery of a deer only once before, back in the forest of her birth. She had been barely more than a pup at the time, and had ventured far from the den in pursuit of a warty, brown toad that always seemed to be just out of her reach. She had chased the toad to a clearing in the forest with a weeping willow at the center of it. She remembered the way the tree's long tresses swayed in the gentle breeze.

Toad forgotten, she had run carelessly through the clearing to the tree, like any young, playful creature would have done. But she tripped over something in the tall grass

surrounding the tree, something small and soft, that bleated a plaintive cry for help when the young wolf's legs became entangled with its own, leaving them in a heap amongst the grass. The small thing continued to bleat as it weakly struggled to get out from under the wolf pup atop it. It was a fawn, speckled in white with knobby, uncooperative little legs. There were still remnants of the tether that had bound it to its mother dangling from its soft, round belly. It couldn't have been more than a day old at most.

The young wolf had never met a deer before, aside from the pieces her mother brought back to the den, let alone a fawn. The thing didn't even have a scent, a phenomenon her mother would tell her later was to help conceal the young creatures in the grass or undergrowth where their mothers left them when they went to forage. But the young wolf did not know this, and she was very confused. And very, very curious. She quickly untangled herself and stood, watching the fawn try to get onto its four unsteady limbs, bleating all the time. What a strange sound, she thought to herself. She felt pity for the thing, which kept falling over and rolling on its back whenever it tried to stand. She stepped forward and placed her muzzle between the hind legs of the little fawn, which began to cry even more frantically.

The young wolf didn't like to watch anything suffer, especially a small and helpless creature such as this one. But the fawn couldn't know she was trying to help, and it began to scramble madly with its front legs, bleating louder and louder. When it finally managed to find some purchase, the young wolf lifted its back end with her muzzle, and held it there until its back legs also seemed firmly beneath it. Then she stepped back and looked at the fawn. Still swaying slightly, but remaining upright, the fawn looked right back at her, finally quieting.

They gazed at each other for a long moment, both starting when something large came crashing through the trees. Suddenly, a huge doe stood before them, snorting and stamping her hooves wildly. She towered above the young wolf, who cowered backwards, her tail between her legs. She was the fawn's mother. The young wolf bared her teeth and growled, but her pitiful rumble was nothing in the face of the mother doe's rage. She stamped again, this time right next to the young wolf's chubby little paw.

Terrified, the young wolf turned tail and bolted through the forest as fast as her legs could carry her. But she was no match for the long-legged fury that pursued her. She barely made it to the edge of the clearing before the mother doe caught her, raining down a frenzy of sharp-hooved blows on the young wolf's tender body. The young wolf yelped in pain and panic, trying in vain to escape, but none was to be found. Blow after blow, the hooves came down on her, and for the first time in her short life, the young wolf thought she would die.

Just then, her mother leapt from the undergrowth with an earth-shaking bark, and buried her fangs into the back of the doe's neck. The force of her attack knocked the doe off of her feet, and they both tumbled to the ground in a tangled heap of angry limbs. When the doe found her footing again, she kicked violently at the mother wolf's head and shoulders, but no matter how hard she tried, the mother wolf would not loosen her grip. Instead, she bit down harder and shook her head violently from side to side, tearing a huge gash in the doe's soft brown hide.

The young wolf looked on as the struggle continued, neither mother willing to give up the fight for her offspring's life. She cowered under a low-hanging holly bush, tail between her legs, not paying any mind to the sharp-spiked leaves that littered the ground around her. All she could do is watch, whining quietly to herself, and wait for the battle to end.

Bit by bit, the doe's blows weakened, failing to hit their marks as she lost more and more blood. Eventually, they stopped falling altogether, and the wolf and the doe held

each other in a moment of stillness, the only sound in the meadow the ragged panting of their breathing. This is it, the young wolf thought, holding her own breath, now she will kill her.

Much to her surprise, her mother released her hold on the doe's neck and stood over her, ebony fur bristling on end. The doe's chest heaved as she gasped at the air, completely exhausted. They stayed like this for quite some time, until her mother was sure the doe would not rise against her once more. Then, she turned her back on the doe, picked the young wolf up by the scruff (though by now she was far too big to be carried in such a way), and took her back to the den, where her siblings were waiting.

But the doe before her now was no mother. If she was, the young wolf would be able to smell milk, instead of honeysuckle. Remembering those sharp hooves, the young wolf slowly circled around behind the doe. The doe watched her intently. Not meeting her gaze, the young wolf went to the shrub behind the rock and found the mooring of the hunter's snare. It was made of thin wire, braided together and tied to the base of the shrub. Short work for the young wolf's strong teeth. And so, the young wolf freed the doe.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was the peak of summer, and the young wolf's forest teemed with life. The midday heat hung heavy in the air, and the screams of countless cicadas rang out through the trees in a near-deafening roar, their frantic serenade overpowering even the birdsong. The young wolf had happened upon a massive thicket of blueberries, and, like the myriad of other creatures here, she had decided to partake in the feast.

There were creatures of every size and shape, from chittering gray-furred squirrels to clumsy polled-laden bumblebees, vibrant red-feathered cardinals to purring round-breasted turkeys. There were mockingbirds, chipmunks, robins, skunks, mice, and mourning doves. The young wolf even scented a few deer somewhere nearby, though she couldn't see them from where she was grazing. They eyed her warily, but none of the smaller beasts seemed particularly concerned that they would become her next meal, though none of them decided to come too close and chance it either.

The young wolf smiled to herself as she went along, bemused by the wide berth the others gave her. She had no interest in eating them, for the berries were dark and sweet and plentiful, and were much slower to escape than any of the other quarry. The longer they supped together, the more comfortable the other creatures became, but still they kept a respectful distance from the predator in their midst. How good it felt to be at the top of the food chain, to go about one's business with hardly a care in the world. There weren't many things that could eat a wolf in this forest, not a full-grown one at least. One day she would be even bigger, even stronger, leader of her own pack. Then she would truly reign here. But for now, she was content with where she stood, for she did not fear much other than an empty belly.

That certainly was no issue now, and the young wolf wandered casually amongst the many blueberry bushes, slowly gorging herself and day-dreaming of the future, of her pack, and of her greatest wish, pups of her own. She imagined kissing their little faces, telling them stories of hunter and hunted, teaching them how to survive, no, to thrive. The young wolf sighed. Everything in its own time.

Before she knew it, much of the day had crept past her, and the sun was starting to dip towards the horizon. The cicadas had ceased their calling, and the plethora of life that surrounded her earlier had greatly diminished. Now that she took a moment to look around, the young wolf realized that she was actually quite alone, the only other creature

being a sparrow flitting around in a nearby chokecherry tree. It was quiet, and the silence an uneasy one. No, she wasn't alone. They were all waiting, holding their breath.

Hackles raised, the young wolf licked the berry juice from her muzzle and took a deep breath, scenting the air. She could detect nothing unusual: blueberries and earth. Then again, moss and a day-old rabbit trail. Once more, and there! On the breeze, she smelled it, just the slightest hint of-

Panic took hold of her. Suddenly the scent was all around her, thick and musty and dangerous. How had she missed it before? It had become so strong, she couldn't pinpoint the source. Every instinct within her told her to bolt, but the young wolf held her ground. Instead, she pricked her ears and listened intently, waiting.

She did not have to wait long.

"I smell you, Wolf." The low, reverberating grumble came from the thicket to her right, no more than two or three strides away at most. Then, he stood — an almost impossibly enormous bear — to his full height, dwarfing her many times over. He fixed his beady brown eyes on her and huffed in two deep breaths from his open mouth.

"I smell your fear."

The young wolf had seen a grizzly before, but never one so large, so impressive as the brute that towered over her now. Summer was clearly treating him well, for he was heavily muscled with thick pads of fat on his shoulders, back and haunches. He must be quite the hunter. Just looking at him, the young wolf guessed he could eat a whole yearling elk to himself and still be hungry. Despite her fear, despite the danger, she couldn't help but feel awe at the sight of him. There was no such beast that could cause him fear. He truly was ruler here.

"Yet, you stay," he mused, "though I could end you with one swipe of my paw." He did not need to gesture to prove this. The young wolf could clearly see the claws on those colossal forepaws, each one half the length of her foreleg. She believed him.

Swallowing her fear, she steadily raised her tail, a sign of confidence, no mind her still bristling fur. The young wolf dared a step forward, craning her neck to meet his gaze.

"What it must be like to live without fear." She willed herself to step forward once more.

The bear snorted, surprised and amused at the young wolf's pluck. He swayed for a moment before lowering himself, huge paws thumping against the earth. He nibbled a few blueberries before growling back, "All great things start small."

"There will never be a time where I command the respect that you do." The young wolf forced herself to sit, curling her tail around her paws.

The bear sized her up, shoulders rippling to shoo away a horsefly that had landed there.

"It is not impossible."

The young wolf scoffed, shaking her head. She tried to imagine herself as large as he was, tried to imagine owning the forest as he did. But this was not the way for wolves. Wolves' power belonged to the pack, to the family. Perhaps even this formidable bear would falter, if the pack he encountered were big enough. She knew bears were solitary creatures, except for mothers with cubs. The young wolf looked at him, at his shaggy brown and blonde fur and his small, rounded ears, and wondered if he was ever lonely.

"I could help you." The bear was regarding her calmly, his face stoic, impassive.

The young wolf laughed again, finally starting to relax a little.

"How cruel of you to tease me, Bear." She curled her lip at him in half-smile.

"You are the first lone wolf to ever approach me, and certainly the first to sit before me and speak so openly," he leaned forward, so close she could smell the rank breath from his scarred muzzle, "So... boldly."

He took a deep breath, scenting her, before leaning back on his haunches again. The bear ate another mouthful of blueberries, mulling something over in his big meaty head.

"I would help you gain the respect you seek," he paused for a moment, "But I would ask for something in return."

The young wolf eyed him up suspiciously. His demeanor seemed perfectly at ease, and though she didn't trust him, she didn't sense malice in him either.

"What is it you are asking for?" She tried to keep her voice even, the slight waver betraying her mistrust.

"Your tail."

"My tail?" She laughed again, the tip of her tail wagging despite herself. "What for?"

He stared at her for a long moment before answering, humorlessly, "You wolves are so expressive with your long, plush tails. I have only this useless stub." The bear's eyes shone in the growing twilight. "I will help you, but you must give me your tail first."

The young wolf stood then, taken aback by his sincerity. What use would a bear have for a wolf's tail? She couldn't help but look at hers, tense and straightened out behind her, the fur dense and silky. What is a wolf without a tail? She looked to the bear again. He sat there, unmoving, calmly awaiting her decision. After another long moment, he rumbled,

"I will take half. Then we would be equal."

When she thought about it, it did seem like a fair trade, if he kept his word. The young wolf considered him for a few long moments. Meanwhile, the fireflies had begun their evening dance, their golden flashes lighting up the trees and the air around them. Finally, she turned and offered her tail to him.

Now the bear laughed, his deep voice rumbling through her. She whirled, instantly furious, fangs bared. He raised a paw the size of a tree trunk and she lowered her lip, begrudgingly, and remained standing, hackles raised.

"You must give it to me." He set the paw down once more. "I cannot take it."

At last, the young wolf understood. She met his gaze, his small glittering eyes never wavering. Then, she turned and took her tail betwixt her teeth, ready to begin.

When it was over (and it was over fast, with just one strong snap), the young wolf spat her beautiful tail (a little more than half of it) at the bear's feet, her muzzle marked with red and blood dripping from her ruined stump. She glared at him, defiant.

"So how will you help me, Bear?"

The bear smiled, ever so slightly, huge, yellowed fangs gleaming. Suddenly, with a speed that should be impossible for a creature that size, he lashed out with his left paw, raking his long, sharp claws along her right flank from rump to cheek before she could even draw a breath. Her yelp of pain rang out, echoing into the night. Instinctively she jolted backwards, away and out of reach of those vicious claws. She should have run then, escaping into the safety of the trees, but she couldn't help herself. She had to know.

The bear slowly lapped her blood from his paw, nonchalant in his efforts. When he'd finished, he looked to her again.

"The wounds are not so deep, and if you survive them, all that meet you will know you met a mighty bear and lived." He rose up on all fours and yawned, great maw stretched incredibly wide. "Then you will have their respect."

With that he turned and ambled off into the gathering darkness, until he disappeared from view. The young wolf stood, motionless, until she could no longer hear him crash through the undergrowth or smell his must on the evening breeze. Then, she looked to the four bloodied stripes carved into her side. The bear was right, and though she



could see glisten of bone peeking through the rents in her pelt, she would probably live. And so, she limped off to her den to lick her wounds, leaving her tail where it had landed in the dirt.

\* \* \* \* \*

The doe had been without a herd for quite some time, just as the young wolf had been without a pack. And she was injured - even after the hunter's snare had been removed from that delicate ankle, the doe could not bear weight on it, let alone make a quick escape if she be pursued. She would be no match for the hungry creatures of this wood. Because she had freed the doe, she felt as though she were somehow responsible for her wellbeing. And perhaps she would even prove to be interesting company. For above all things, the young wolf hated the humdrum, the monotonous, most. She eyed the doe again, who was licking her tender leg, keeping the young wolf well within view. The young wolf sat, tail curled around her massive paws, and waited patiently for the doe to attend to her wound.

"Were you caught there long?" By now, it was night, and the velvet darkness lay heavily all around them.

The doe looked up at her, searching. Not finding what she had been looking for, she replied curtly, "From the morning."

"You must be thirsty then." How terrible it must have been, struggling through the day, no shade from the sun, so close to the brook, yet just out of reach, unable to quench her thirst.

"You have nothing to fear from me. Drink."

Now the doe stared. For a long moment, their gazes met and lingered. Finally, she snorted, defiant, "I do not need your permission, nor your command. I am not afraid of you, Wolf."

A brave doe, indeed. The young wolf smiled, then lay down, resting her head on her paws. She made no response, instead looking on in silence, bemused.

The doe was a proud creature too, and bristled at the young wolf's "good humor." But her throat was dry, and the brook was cool and fresh and enticing. Eventually, she limped over to the water's edge, now refusing to look at the young wolf at all, as if to prove that she was not and had no need to be wary. But her ears twitched in the wolf's direction as she bent her head to drink, and the young wolf knew she was tracking her still. The wolf lay, unmoved, allowing her doe to drink her fill before raising her head once more.

## Appendix II

### The Gray Woman

Everything was gray. The sky was gray. The clouds were gray. The sand was gray. The waves were gray. *She* was gray.

--but this is not to say everything was the same shade. This is far from the case, actually. I could describe for you in detail the exact humor of each of the aforementioned, but they tell me I should stay away from flowery, descriptive language, so I suppose this time you'll have to imagine it for yourselves.

The "she" I mentioned is an old woman. Ancient, even. She too, was entirely gray. From the thinning, wiry curls that draped well below her waist to the delicate paper-like skin of her toes, half-buried in the gray sand, she was dressed by the universe in a rainbow of gray. If you'd glanced at her too quickly, you could've easily mistaken her for a mirage, but she most assuredly was not one.

She stood there, steadfast in the shifting sands, gazing out at the restless waters. The smell of salt and sea things that swim and shit and die in the depths of the unfathomable hung heavy in the air. The air itself was cold and wonting, but the old woman did not shiver. She did not move at all – the only stillness in a world that was everchanging around her. Her hair though, as if by its own volition, danced about her heavy crown, each curl an individual coryphée, hopeful in her search for a partner, but often finding none.

(I'm sorry, I really couldn't help myself...)

Despite her apparent frailty – the skin thinly draped across her bones now held little resemblance to anything fleshy or alive – everything about her gave off an air of heaviness. Just by looking at her, this heaviness would have begun to permeate your own body, a slow injection of something like iron first into your skeleton, then into the complex musculature that supports it, and after that into the seven layers of skin that envelop that. This is not to say this sensation is unpleasant, because it is not at all. Rather, it could have been the first (and maybe the only) time you've ever felt steady, that you've ever felt stable, in your life.... I did it again. Perhaps I'm getting carried away here in my own storytelling (I have a tendency to do that). So maybe I should take a break and ground myself a bit by speaking of something else.

I have always been drawn to the ocean. I find that I am always drawn to things that intimidate, or even terrify, me. Once, when I was six years old, I got sucked into the undertow of my family's favorite vacation place. I was (and still is) called Ocean City, MD, and the waters I'm referring to belong to the Atlantic Ocean. Anyway, an undertow is an unseen force beneath the waves that pulls you beneath the surface and keeps you there.

It took me from one end of the beach to the other, repeatedly smashing me against the sandy ocean floor before spitting me out like an unwanted piece of crab shell. Speaking of shells, I had three quarters of a clam shell jammed into the flesh just above my left knee. I still have the scar. You can ask me to see it sometime if you want (I love to show people my scars). I began to throw up as much sea water as a six-year-old can hold without drowning, spewing even more saltwater from my eyes, and tore the shell from my knobby little knee before hobbling back to my mother, who was in a state of her own.

Sometimes I think I never really left the waves that day, so I often wonder who exactly I was talking to, all the innumerable times afterwards, that I would wade into the ocean and slap it violently, provoking it to, "give me all it's got!"

So let's get back to our dear gray old lady...

# Appendix III

## A (Truncated) Family Tree

