

Talk The Fire Out: An Experiment in Multimodal Storytelling

A Thesis Project

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Tamar Cohen

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Abstract

This study demonstrates the benefits of using multiple artistic modes to tell a story. The bulk of the research I present here was occupied with studying the work of storytellers who use multiple media and deciphering the reasons for the choices they make, particularly in places where the medium shifts. I then used this information to make these same choices in my own creative work. I found that a change in medium can dramatically shift the perspective of the audience, pulling them deeper into the story. It also allows audience members who process information and communicate differently to access the story. Working in multiple media allows the storyteller to meet the audience where they are and engage them in it by moving them through different positions relative to the story and by providing a variety of ways in.

Introduction

This thesis began as a children's book with notes in the margins and bookmarks in every direction. More specifically, it encapsulates the process of returning to a children's book as a young adult and marking out the artist's and author's choices in telling a story to a person who has not yet learned standard ways of engaging with stories. Much of my research took place in this way: sitting with a book, many (though not all) of which were created with young readers in mind, and several pads of post-it notes, marking out the places where the creator chose a different medium or mode of storytelling, and trying to figure out their reasoning. I then compiled these pieces of rationale to inform my own choices in telling a story across multiple media.

This paper, which is also an art gallery, a video series, a poetry book, and a bedtime story, explores the nonstandard ways in which I personally engage with information and, reflexively, presents these as a new standard for engagement with the story it tells. There are two parts to this presentation of my work: the story, and the rationale. The story is told through a combination of my own poetry, visual art, and dance. Following this collection of creative work is the longform version of the post-it note process. This rationale includes notes about each medium, mode, and form, where I learned it, and why I chose it.

The media I used in this investigation are the following: sketches in charcoal and white chalk; drawings in pan pastel; paper cuttings done with Xacto knives and sketch paper; formal poetry, including pantoum and shape poem forms; choreographed dances, some of which were structured using the villanelle, sonnet, limerick, and double dactyl poetic forms; and written imaginary dances.

The following creative work exists in the second person perspective to remove the concept of a main character from this work, in the effort to bring the text closer to *you*, the reader and audience. This is a technique I learned from fanfiction writers—the driving force behind reader-insert fanfiction is to bring the reader closer to the characters and world they love. While this paper will not ask you to insert your name in any dialogue, it does invite you to place yourself on the inside.

In short form, the story I will tell here is this: your community is singing songs and telling stories around a campfire. You have a story to contribute, but you are unsure of how to tell it. As you walk through the woods toward the campfire, you encounter three animals. First, you meet a squirrel, who tells you that it is safe to practice your story in the dark. Second, you meet a bat, who suggests that you listen from the edges of the fire to learn how other members of the community tell their stories. Third, you meet a moth, who reminds you that what you desire is the community around the fire, and that once you get there you will not be afraid or want to leave. Finally, a friend notices you at the edge of the circle and invites you in so that you can tell your story.

I regard this summary as an outline, from which the story can unfold in ways that will allow you to engage with it more deeply. I borrow this mindset from storyteller Michael Katz, who described his oral storytelling process in this way in an interview I conducted in the beginning of April of 2022.

Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the people who worked with me on the 2022 Senior Capstone Concert, *Landmarks*. My own piece, the video of which is appended to this document, was realized by dancers Andi Grace, Isabela Haskell, Annalise Kuhlmann, Meghan MacBeath, and Kate Snyder, as well as musicians Mav Leslie and Kayla Fennell. Additionally, neither the choreographic work nor the written sections would have been possible without the support of my classmates Hannah Berry, Felix Bryan, Toby Clingan, Caroline Gan, Miranda Lawson, Hannah Liebermann, and Sandra Scarlatoiu, or our faculty advisor Professor Barbie Diewald.

The work presented here was created and performed on the ancestral land of the Nonotuck people. Additionally, the setting for this story lives in my imagination as a scene from my childhood, which took place on the traditional land of the Chumash peoples in southern California.

The Story



Through the woods, your feet on leaves
to bugs and bats your ears awake
and still inside you something grieves
your silence you can't seem to break

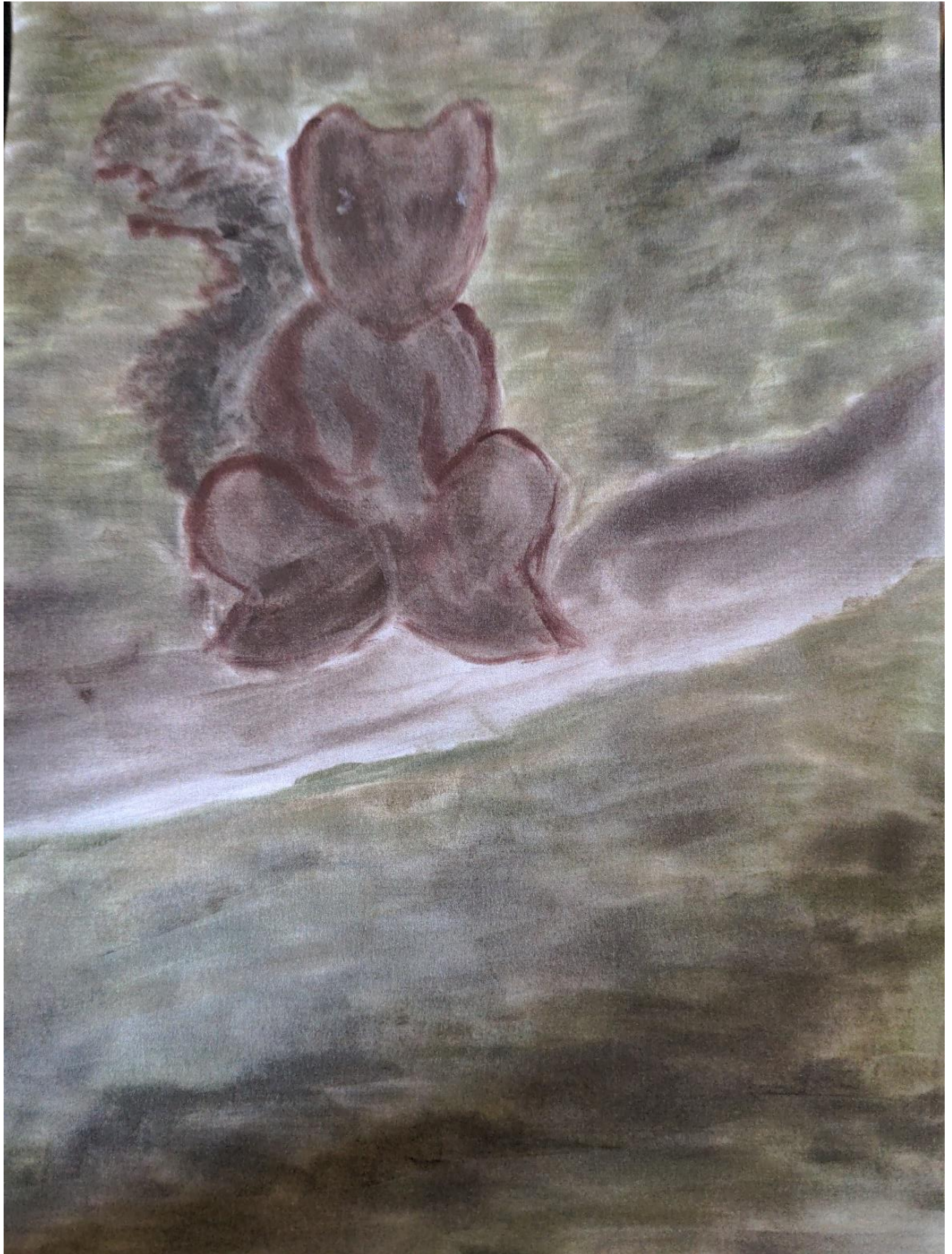
To bugs and bats your ears awake,
this, at least, you understand:
your silence you can't seem to break
you cannot write with shaking hands.

This, at least, you understand:
propelled by words you do not know
and cannot write with shaking hands,
to the campfire you must go.

Propelled by words you do not know,
walk haltingly and hum along.
to the campfire you must go
and find a way into their song.

Walk haltingly and hum along
and though inside you something grieves,
to the campfire you must go:
through the woods, your feet on leaves.





Do you know your feet well enough
 to recognize them in the dark?
 When the path is
 as dark as it is now? Can you pick them out from
 the pine needles?
 Can you distinguish between
 the foot that steps
 and the stone that rises up to trip it?
 and how much do you trust those feet?
 How much do you trust those eyes?
 How much do you trust the people at
 the campfire
 on the hill
 to listen to your story?
 How much do you trust
 the voice that lives
 in your throat
 and how much do
 you believe the
 story it will tell?
 They are waiting
 to hear it. What will you tell them?
 Better practice here, on the path
 in the dark the trees
 won't judge.
 Get the words right. Learn to see the outline
 of your feet, learn to feel
 the weight shifting and the ground, solid,
 under you. Learn this first, then go.

Imaginary Dance:

The stage is made of pine needles at various stages of decomposition. It stretches out in front of you and your feet stretch into the ground and the curtains of trees stretch up on either side of you. You bend your left knee forward toward the slope of the hill. It catches the firelight between the dancers and pulls on your calf until your leg is stretched again. You reach for more of it, that light, and fall forward onto your left leg. And you press your heel into the ground and wiggle your toes in the pine needles while your right leg swings forward towards the light. You cross it just a little too far and it turns you around.

In the shadow of your spine, you braid your fingers together, saving the intricacy for this moment when your unwatching audience cannot see you. Turning the rest of the way around, you are at once digging into the ground and floating above it, with each step toward the edge of the woods. Your feet burrow behind you, your ribs float out ahead of you; only your head remains in the place where you are.

Up and up and up, you raise the trees around you with the line of your eyes. From the trunk of a pine tree you draw out a branch with the crown of your head, just high enough off the ground for you to walk under it.



You are looking for
the words in
your own head to speak

.

Looking for the words
in the dark.

For words of your own

.

Your own words were your
parents' first.

Listen in the dark

.

Your words are made by

light; I live

in the dark. Listen

.

I listen in the

dark for my

meals. You listen too

.

For me, bugs. For you

words. We can

find all we need here

.

Hear the song of the dark

and firelight.

Words will come for you

.

As language comes to

you in song

first listen, then see

.

Then see the shape of

your language

and echo it back

.

From the echoes, all

we need to

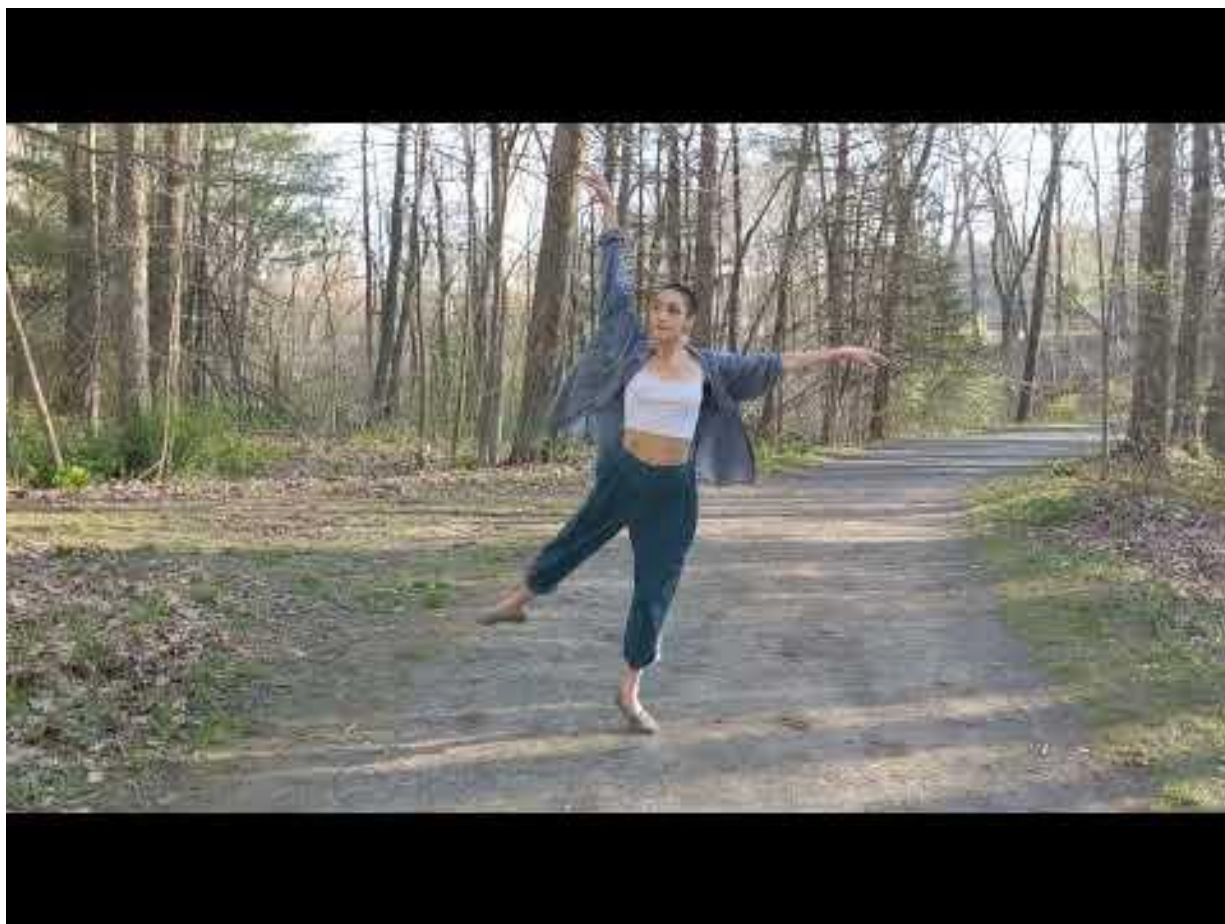
know is apparent

.

If you echo first

your language

will come. Listen in:



¹ Music Credits: “Clay Pigeons” by Blaze Foley, played by Mav Leslie



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³ Music Credits: “Dance Me to the End of Love” by Leonard Cohen and “Wildflowers” by The Wailin’ Jennys, played by Mav Leslie (guitar) and Kayla Fennell (fiddle)



Imaginary Dance:

The words you hear and the words you think are staccato on the floor and the roof of your mouth
like pepper

and even milk has water in it if you want the flood badly enough

you want the milk to soothe the roof of your mouth because staccato sometimes means broken.

You swim through the air which is thick like honey and does not flow

and task yourself with unbreaking things

until you find the dam which is the thing you need to break the most

and then you tap against it

first with your fingertips then with your knees then with the palms of your feet then with your
spine

until you are tapping it with the crown of your head and

tapping turns into resting.

The dam, which was all along the last tree at the edge of the woods, holds your head tenderly
like a lullaby

and you know it is time to wake up to other flavors of music and let the flood come. Still, you
look back.

It is difficult to leave a place where your head fits

even if it is to spin in a field and yell back to the migrating geese.





⁴ Music Credits: “Dance Me to the End of Love” by Leonard Cohen and “Angi” by Davy Graham, played by Mav Leslie (guitar) and Kayla Fennell (fiddle)



To the light! To the firelight!

We'll go together and be warmed.

Me, in the light at last, and you

in the sound. Hasn't it been long enough?

Aren't you getting cold? Don't you want to

fly with people like you, in the warmth? Do you

know that a group of my kind is called an eclipse

We are named by the dark and the light. The dark is where quiet

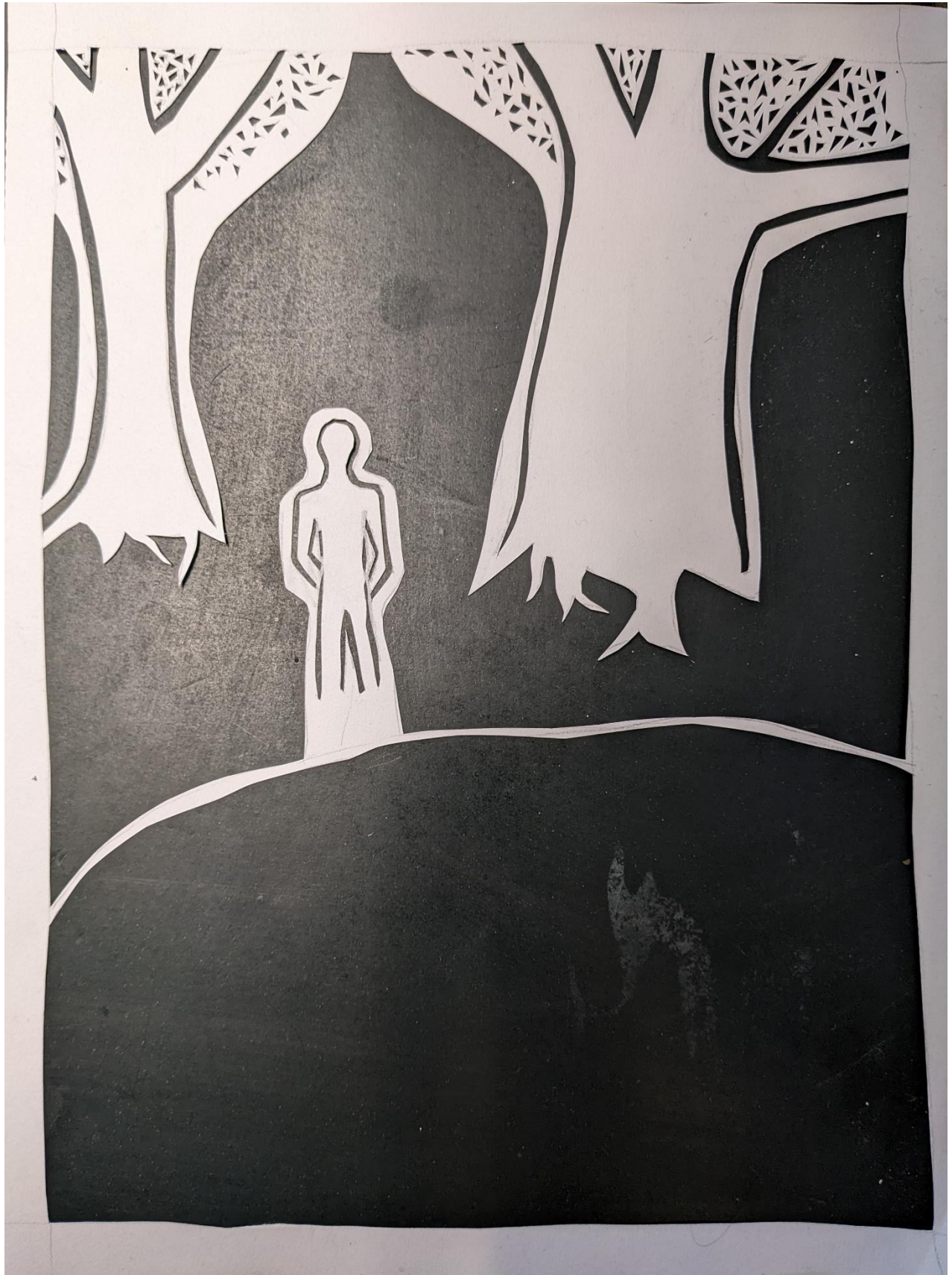
is safe. You may take comfort here,

but the warmth is the voice we long for, you and I. And

that voice, when it carries you never leaves. You

never want to leave it. Once you get there,

you can talk the fire out.





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⁵ Music Credits: “Rivers and Roads” by The Head and the Heart, played by Mav Leslie (guitar) and Kayla Fennell (fiddle)

All of a sudden, you knew how to ride a bicycle.
Your feet were under you and
your tires were a part of you and
your world opened like the roadmap your dad kept in the glove box of the old minivan
and the waves of children, riding our bikes to school—
you were one of them.

The moment when you shifted from watcher to rider,
it was not because of something someone said.
You listened when your dad told you how the gears and chains work
when he explained pedaling to you
again and again
but you did not know how to ride.

And then all of a sudden, there you were, flying.
The little machine you'd been building in your mind
with all your careful listening
switched on,
and your legs knew circles, your hands knew brakes
you didn't have to think about it anymore.



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⁶ Music Credits: “Dance Me to the End of Love” by Leonard Cohen, played by Mav Leslie (guitar) and Kayla Fennell (fiddle)

Rationale

I begin with a charcoal sketch to move through the exposition of this story. A written opening that describes setting can be both beautiful and powerful, such as the opening to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, but a lengthy written description can imply a stagnant moment, which this is not. To set the reader into the story in the moment of walking toward the campfire, I present all the visual information at once. Immediately, the pathway is visible. The reader is able to see themselves as the protagonist, looking toward the campfire from which they are separated by distance and by difference in lighting.

I did this work in charcoal specifically because it emphasizes dark and light. As an achromatic medium, every slight difference in the amount of charcoal on the page is noticeable and meaningful. As a result, the points that draw attention are those with the most- and least-concentrated charcoal. This worked well for setting up my story, because at this moment the reader-protagonist is in a dark place, moving toward a bright place.

Charcoal, especially in a sketch style like I have used here, also has an implicit temporality of its own. There is a sense that the drawing was done very quickly, and that it could easily be shifted, which makes it a fitting medium for storytelling. Thematically, the charcoal drawing fits into the scene which it describes: it is conceivable to our collective imagination that this drawing might have been done with a burnt stick from the campfire, as an illustration to accompany a story told orally.

To introduce the central conflict of my story, I use the pantoum poetic form. This form uses every line twice, repeating itself in a rolling pattern. Its structure sounds like walking: the “back

foot,” or second and fourth lines of each stanza, shifts in order to bear the narrative weight of the next stanza as the first and third lines. The final stanza’s return to the first stanza becomes an arrival, like coming to stand still on two feet. This last stanza can either arrive at a destination having completed its journey, or use the circularity to illustrate a lack of significant directional movement. This latter possibility is the one I lean on here. Because the poem ends as it started, the movement conveyed by the walking cadence is proven insignificant in the journey toward the campfire. The reader-protagonist might expect to find themselves a few yards closer to the campfire, but the things that separated them before are still barriers.

The form’s repetition also mimics the cadence of my voice when I rehearse what I am going to say to people while I am alone. I double back on thoughts and lines until I get the inflection and tone right; similarly, this form repeats each line in a different context in order to build its trajectory. My goal with the placement of this poetic form is to establish a) a sense of steady but stumbling movement, and b) a characterization of words as a rehearsal modality. So far, what the reader-protagonist sees is communicated through sketches, and what they think is communicated through words.

The second charcoal sketch references several moments in Jewish tradition that involve holding your hand up to a light source; one of these is Havdalah, a ritual of separation around which campfire jams are often arranged. In this service, participants hold a hand up to a candle in order to notice the separation between light and shadow on their hand. This is a moment in my story where I wanted to re-emphasize the separation between the light of the campfire and the darkness of the woods, to double down after the movement of the pantoum and remind the reader that while they have been walking toward the campfire, they are still distinctly separate.

Additionally, the lantern in this sketch allows a visual parallel between the body and the faraway campfire, which are the two lightest points in the composition. It establishes the idea that the reader-protagonist belongs at the campfire, despite being so distinctly separated. This is also the first point of reference to the reader-protagonist's body. This sense of embodiment is necessary in this sketch in order to prime the reader to understand the storytelling through dance in upcoming sections.

The first interaction the reader-protagonist has with another character is also the first instance of color in this telling. I chose pan pastel because it works well with charcoal, and my drawing style with these two types of materials is similar enough to maintain the structure of an established artistic style, while introducing the element of color. Here, I draw on the tradition of the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, which introduces technicolor when protagonist Dorothy enters the magical land of Oz, in contrast with her "real-world" home in Kansas, which is portrayed in sepia tones. When any element of magic or the supernatural enters the story, there is a shift into color that cues the reader or viewer to suspend disbelief. I employ this here in order to introduce the otherwise-unbelievable character of a talking squirrel.

I continue to use visual art to move through moments of exposition; rather than telling the reader, "you see a squirrel, which is brown, sitting on a branch, which is also brown, but not the same brown, and around it the trees make the world green," I show the squirrel, the branch, and the greenness of the trees at once. There are arguments for both methods: if I had chosen to write it out, the reader would have had the opportunity to engage with the world of my story by constructing their own version of the setting based on my description. I chose to present this image visually despite this advantage because I have already established visual art as a way of

introducing what the reader-protagonist sees through the preceding two charcoal sketches, and this consistency allows me to introduce the new elements of color and fantasy without breaking the structure I have been building for this telling.

The squirrel's advice to the reader-protagonist introduces a new type of section to this work. So far, I have tied visual art to things that the reader-protagonist sees, and poetry to the things that they think. Somewhere in between those two lie the words spoken to them by another character. Because the object of others' speech does lie in between these two modes, I decided to use shape poetry, also known as concrete poetry, for the squirrel's speech. This mode is both verbal and visual. By spacing the words out to form the shape of a tree, I remind the reader of their position in the woods and continue both the expository visual and the verbal thought process simultaneously.

The imaginary dance is a mode I learned from Barbie Diewald. It describes theoretical movement, not limited by the mechanics of the human body or laws of physics. This form, at least the way I use it, could be described as a prose poem, but I am choosing to term it an imaginary dance because it deals with movement. Here, I do what I chose not to do with the introduction of the squirrel: I give the reader information and invite them to participate in this telling by constructing their own image of this impossible dance performance.

In reality, much of this section simply describes walking. This is one of the things that is most attractive to me about this form: I can take a description of something mundane in my reality and turn it into something impossible, which the reader can then bring back to their own reality as the dance they imagine based on the words. In this way, I can scaffold the reader's participation in

the world of my story, without limiting their creativity. In doing so, I take a lesson from *Harold and the Purple Crayon* by Crockett Johnson, inviting the reader to construct their own reality within my story. Throughout the preceding sections, I have offered three types of visuals; now, I invite the reader to make their own. Rather than giving instructions on how to do this, I have offered examples chosen to teach the reader how to interact with this world, which gives them information without limitation.

I return to pan pastel to introduce the second encounter in order to reinforce the structure of which I let go in the last section. Additionally, by continuing with the fantasia of the talking animals in a color palette that is not quite dark enough to read as the woods at night on its own, I ready the reader to suspend disbelief in the upcoming movement sections, which for practical and logistical reasons were filmed in daylight.

The bat's advice takes the form of a series of lunes, a form created in the 1960s by poet Robert Kelly. It is inspired by the Japanese haiku, which traditionally convey small, serene ideas. In the lune, the syllable-per-line counts—thirteen syllables total, with five in the first and third line and three in the second—are catered to the English language, rather than to Japanese, which tends to use larger numbers of syllables than English to communicate a given amount of information. According to Ron Padgett in *The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms*, “He called it ‘lune’ (French for ‘moon’) because the right-hand, varying edge of it is bowed like a crescent moon, and also because it reminded him of the number of lunar months in a year (thirteen)” (Padgett, pp. 103).

I chose this form for several reasons. The first is the thematic association I personally have between bats and the moon, which I attribute to Janell Cannon's 1993 picture book *Stellaluna*. Because the bat is such a well-known nocturnal creature, I am operating under the assumption that the association between bats and the moon is, on some level, universal. The second layer of my choice is the visual aspect. Because the lune contains the crescent moon shape, this form allows me to stay in relation to the shape poem which comprises the squirrel's speech. Thirdly, the 5-3-5 syllabic structure is reminiscent of echoes, which is important both to the character of a bat, and to the message of this section—that the reader-protagonist should learn to speak by echoing the language already being used at the campfire. The characterization of the bat is important because it draws on the tradition in folktales of letting the qualities commonly ascribed to a particular animal influence the way they advise human figures. A fox, for example, is commonly characterized as clever and mischievous, and often appears in tales that rely on a character following bad advice to communicate their lessons.

My final reason for choosing this form is the ability of short syllabic patterns to exist in sets or series. This gives them a mutability that is difficult to find in longer stand-alone forms, because a message or thought can be communicated in short bursts. In this case, it also allowed me to further explore the echolocative quality of the bat's speech, as each lune plays on the words of the one before it. The form communicates in a roundabout, somewhat cryptic way, by throwing out short bursts of language and waiting to see what returns in future bursts.

The final line of the final lune introduces the next section, which shifts the reader-protagonist's focus from their own position and movement to the things taking place around the campfire.

The first movement section is a solo choreographed using the poetic form of a villanelle. Like the pantoum, this form repeats itself frequently; the difference is that while the pantoum repeats each line a consistent number of times, the villanelle repeats the first and third lines as the third line of each stanza, alternating throughout the poem. The final stanza contains both repeated lines. I use this repetition here to dig deeper into the idea that the reader-protagonist is rehearsing what they are going to say.

The development of a rhyme scheme by assigning a specific, small gesture to the “A” and “B” rhymes builds a theme-and-variation-like structure in the dance without becoming obvious. I find that this allows me to build surprises into the choreography, while ensuring that it will have a satisfying conclusion.

In this video, the “A” rhyme is a sequence where the dancer extends one arm and one leg to the front, then moves the extended foot to the back along the floor, changing direction. The “B” rhyme is a movement in which the dancer raises one leg to the side and bends the other, leaning their torso toward the bent leg, and draws the arm on the same side as the bent leg across their chest.

Poetic form as choreographic tool is something that I was researching deeply in 2020. Though that conversation has been tabled, I bring the practice with me into this research. This method draws on the work of Merce Cunningham in that I assign movements and phrases to variables that can be put together in various configurations. Rather than leaving the position and order of these variables to random chance or a computer algorithm as Cunningham did, I leave them to the preconceived pattern of a poetic form.

I return to the charcoal modality in which I started in order to demarcate the reader-protagonist's progress in moving toward the campfire. While the content in between charcoal sketches has taken the understanding of movement into consideration, I find returning to the original medium to be most effective in showing contrast between two points in time. My basis for this is the concept of a control group as used in the scientific method—if everything else remains the same, we can better understand what has changed based on our manipulation of the independent variable, which in this case is the steps the reader-protagonist has taken since the first two charcoal sketches.

While there is still significant distance between the reader-protagonist and the campfire, the increased visibility of what is happening on top of the hill reaffirms their progression toward it. This also prepares the reader to understand the next section as the things that are happening at the campfire. This sketch tells them where they are looking and contextualizes the following sequence.

The next three dances were created using the limerick, double dactyl, and sonnet forms. There is a trick to understanding them this way, and the patterns can be confusing to watch if you don't know what the form is. I use them here to accentuate the division of understanding between the people at the campfire and the reader.

In choreographing the limerick and double dactyl forms, which are syllabic stress-based structures, I made a rule that a stressed syllable represented a big movement while an unstressed syllable represented a transitional step. In the sonnet, I assigned each dancer either even- or odd-numbered lines, and asked them to orbit around each other, picking up with their line where the other left off. These rules are a valuable and generative choreographic tool for me, but they make

it clear that there is a structure which is not obvious to a viewer who does not know the rules. This attention to the fact that rules exist which the reader does not understand brings back the awareness of the reader-protagonist's separation from the community.

When for the first time, the reader sees the representation of themselves in full, I introduce a new medium. We have already seen the reader-protagonist's hand, but until this point have not seen any part of them that would not be visible in a first-person view. Because papercutting relies on positive and negative space, it requires the viewer to understand where their eye is going in relation to the objects in front of it. Papercuttings often take on a quality of optical illusion, causing the viewer to be uniquely aware of their own gaze in a way that can be somewhat surreal. I use this quality here to shift perspective to a viewpoint that includes the representation of the reader. In other words, I introduce a new medium here to allow the reader to see themselves in the third person, where up until this point they have been addressed solely in the second.

The second imaginary dance comes from a workshop on writing about dance at the 2022 New England regional conference of the American College Dance Association. Each line is based on a dance improvisation to music and ideas curated by Karima Borni. Part of this curation involved a game of telephone beginning with Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese." We improvised and choreographed short phrases of movement based on lines from the poem, then let go of the words and wrote our own words based on the movement.

I use this here because the imaginary dance is a form that contains a certain reluctance to be one thing. It wants to be a dance, and refuses to be just a poem, even though the most obvious description of it is as a prose poem. The reader-protagonist is at a similarly transitional point,

where they are reluctant to leave the safety of the trees to join the circle and become part of the community's collective story. The imaginary dance form uses the tension of this reluctance to emphasize the precarity of form—it is implied that it has been one thing, either a poem or a dance, in the past, and that it is going to be the other in the future. The sense that it is hanging in the balance, waiting for its meaning to be translated into a more easily categorized artistic language, is the reason I chose it for this moment in my story.

In returning to the expository mode of charcoal sketches, I move the reader's viewpoint up the hill to the campfire once again to see what is happening there and give the reader-protagonist a better understanding of what they are trying to join. The dance segments following this sketch will also take place there, so this sketch teaches the reader how to understand the coming segments. This use of the charcoal sketches draws on the structure of many illuminated manuscripts of the medieval period, which often use a specific trend or stylistic consistency in the illuminations at the beginning of new sections to teach the reader how to use the following text.

The next three dances do not follow poetic forms. One is recognizable as a game of “Ninja,” a fairly ubiquitous summer camp game in which players try, one movement per turn, to “chop” their opponents' limbs. Once a limb has been hit, the player may no longer use it. They are eliminated when they have no limbs left to use. While the duet based on this game does have rules, they are straightforward and easily understood structurally. The other two dances are similarly abstract and prosaic. I place them here to provide contrast to the confusing structures of the stories viewed from outside of the circle. These dances can be understood as dances. The one

based on a game can be understood as a game. Whereas the first set of three dances had rules that made them inaccessible to the reader-protagonist, this second set makes them able to understand the dance mode of storytelling. This brings them closer to joining the circle.

Sets of three encounters are common in folktales. This structure allows a development arc of the lesson or advice that the encounters offer. The first encounter introduces the lesson, the second gives it an additional dimension, and the third brings the protagonist back to the original objective, having gained new insight into their journey. In this case, the squirrel introduces the idea that the reader should find support and clarity in their story before continuing on to the campfire. The bat adds dimension by suggesting that the way to learn how to tell a story is by listening to the stories others are telling, and the moth completes the arc by reminding the reader of their story and certifying that they are ready to tell it. For this arc to function in a story told through as many forms as I use here, the forms of each encounter must contain significant parallels, particularly in introducing the creature with whom the reader will interact.

I chose the moth as the final encounter because of its draw to the light, as in the saying “like moths to a flame.” We understand that the moth is attracted to the firelight, so it reaffirms the reader-protagonist’s desire to reach the campfire, rather than to wait in the woods as the squirrel advised, or to hang back and listen like the bat. Despite the obvious utility of this image, I struggled with this decision. The moth to the flame also carries a sense that the thing the creature desires is the thing that will be its demise. On one hand this reminds us of the reader-protagonist’s anxiety, fulfilling that stripe of the arc that began with the squirrel, but on the other, it implies that there is real danger awaiting the reader-protagonist at the fire, which there is not. We have just seen what is happening at the fire, but when we are brought back to the edge of the

woods it is with an encounter that implies danger, rather than warmth and joy. I decided that the implication of desire was useful enough that it was worth carrying the other side of the connotation.

In a conversation with Mount Holyoke alumna Izzy Kalodner (class of 2021), I asked, “if a moth wrote a poem, what form would it be in?”

She suggested “sentences that move diagonally across the page, from top left to bottom right, with various words out of the form—like fluttering away.” Her other suggestion was an ode—I chose this one because it contains visual cues that relate to the shape poem and lunes I used for the other two encounters.

The second papercutting is another moment of perspective shifting. The reader’s avatar in the story is now noticed by someone at the campfire. In keeping with the uses I have already established for various media, I have chosen to portray this moment as a papercut.

I also chose a visual for this moment to emphasize the stillness, as the following section is movement. This is a place where I contemplated using a detailed verbal description, for the same reasons I decided not to do so at the beginning of my telling. I wanted to communicate suspension of the moment of finally being seen by a member of the community, but not yet being incorporated or included. My decision to convey this stillness and suspension through a papercutting rather than words was made based on my awareness that I was too far along in the story to introduce a new mode.

The turning point in the story, in which the reader-protagonist is finally welcomed into the circle, works best through dance because there is a humanness to the connection between two dancers that cannot be portrayed in any of the other media I am working with. Touch in dance is a powerful communicative tool, especially in the two years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The moment when a dancer takes another dancer's hand is a moment when the isolation of the reader-protagonist is shattered.

While the reader-protagonist has encountered other characters before this, this is the first time that they are shown in the same frame. I decided to use partnered dance here to almost over-emphasize this difference. Up until now, the reader-protagonist has been distinctly separate. Now, they are overwhelmingly connected to another character, to the point of sharing each other's weight. This sensory overwhelm causes the story to move forward rapidly, in satisfying contrast to the stillness of the moment before.

The reader-protagonist's final thoughts before telling their story at the campfire are a poem with just enough structure to hold it together. It consists of three stanzas of six lines each, with one very short line in each stanza. There is no rhythm pattern or rhyme scheme. In other words, there is nothing to figure out. I find that this basic structure without the game rules of more formal poetry allows for the clearest communication. Because this is the final step of the journey, I wanted a form that required little to no decoding. At this point, the reader-protagonist has learned how to tell their story, so the language of the poem is simple.

It operates around a very basic and very familiar metaphor of learning how to ride a bicycle, in order to continue to appeal to the reader on sensory levels without complicated language or patterns. Where simply stating, "you are ready to tell your story." would potentially remove the

reader form the world of the work, especially because they may not have a story in mind that they want to tell, the metaphor gives the reader space to access their own memories. As in the imaginary dances, this loose structure gives the reader agency to play within the world of my story as a participant in its telling.

The ending of my story requires the reader to tell their own, and to feel incorporated into the community story space. I chose to let the dance represent the telling of the reader-protagonist's story so that the reader is able to interpret and insert any story they personally have to tell, and to keep the consistency of the non-form-based, and therefore conversational, stories told by other members of the campfire circle.

It was my desire to end my own telling with an expression of ease and joy at being part of a community, and there is no way I know to express that better than through folk dance. While the background dance language I share with the dancers is that of ballet, the styling and patterning of the choreography here is based on Jewish folk dances. In circle dances, it is common to have an "A" part that moves around the circumference of the circle and a "B" part that moves toward and away from the center of the circle. Simpler circle dances occurring in multiple concentric circles is also common.

Folk dances often end with a self-consciously dramatic finish, or "ta-da" moment. This serves as a transition from being part of a dance to being a person again. I employ this here to draw the reader's attention back to the fact that I have just told them a story. As my pseudo-folk dance comes to an end, the reader's ties to the protagonist dissolve and they come back to themselves. In other forms of storytelling, this is the moment where the teller might bring the narrative to a

moral lesson, or return listeners to consciousness with a familiar statement external to the narrative voice, such as “and they all lived happily ever after.” I use the group dance here as a version of that. The dancer who has up until now been a proxy for the reader ceases to be differentiated from the group, allowing the reader’s identification with the protagonist to fade.

Conclusion

In doing this work, I was able to see my story evolve through the process of telling it in different ways. As a storyteller I am now more deeply connected to my story than I was when I started because I have broken it down into pieces to tell in different ways.

When I presented the choreographic parts of this work on a proscenium stage, I was gratified to hear feedback from audience members who felt pulled into the work by the dancer who I set up as a proxy for the reader of this thesis. From this feedback, I think I was successful in making a dance in the second person, which was a challenge for me once I decided that the other forms I used in this story would address the reader as the protagonist. I also heard from audience members that they enjoyed the catharsis of the moment when the dancer representing the reader-protagonist was noticed by a member of the circle.

I created this work with the intention of presenting it to an audience of mixed culture, with white Americans of Christian culture as the majority. A lot of the traditions, forms, and practices which informed this work come from identity groups other than this majority. Because of this, a challenge I faced was finding ways to code meaning into symbolism and connotations that would be shared by a majority who do not share my own culture, or the other cultures whose folklore I studied.

This study looked at quite a few modalities, rather broadly. Around the point that I introduced papercuttings into my story, I became aware of the precarity of working in as many media as I used here at once. It was a challenge to make this telling cohesive while exploring as many forms as I used here.

In future work, I would like to work more deeply in fewer media at a time. Most of the authors whose work I studied in preparation for this work use about two forms—my design here was to

explore and demonstrate the use of many, and to that end this process has served its purpose, but for future works I would lean into fewer forms at a time in order to use each one to a fuller capacity.

There are clear sections to this work, in a way that many of the artists and authors I studied do not delineate sections of their stories. In future work, I would like to look more closely at sectioning practices in transmedia storytelling to figure out how and why a change in medium does or does not mark a new section of the story. I would like to experiment further with shifting through media without creating section breaks or otherwise stopping the flow of the story.

In a future study, I would love to see the effect of keeping the forms of the three animal encounters consistent. Communal interactive storytelling often uses parallels and repetition to establish a pattern that the group listening to the story can join in on, because they know how the interaction is going to take place, whether or not they know the words the character will say.

One method I am interested in is establishing these encounters as riddle poems. There is considerable precedent for a character meeting a non-human who gives them direction, advice, or other useful information in the form of a riddle—famously, the role of the sphinx in Sophocles’ Oedipus cycle, or even Yoda in the original Star Wars trilogy. I touched on this tradition in this articulation of the research by choosing poetic forms that appeal to the reader visually before linguistically, and which can be made somewhat cryptic, but in future work I would move deeper into this aspect of a creature encounter as a story element. Alternatively, a future telling might add a self-reflexive layer by structuring the advice of the three encounters as stories within the story, in the vein of Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*.

On a structural level, future study should put this theoretical framework into practice and should rely more on dialogue between storytellers and audiences for its results. This iteration of my

research focused on how I told the story and the effects that my research had on me as a teller. The main goal of my presentation of artistic work in this paper was to offer an example through which to explain theoretical aspects of my research. An appropriate design for studying the effects these ideas have on others might involve a workshop setting in which storytellers tell the same story to groups of listeners using different combinations of modes in each group, in order to offer a better frame for comparison of the effects of multimodal approaches to storytelling on the audience, rather than only on the teller.

This thesis contributes a case study to the existing scholarly discussions of the role of the arts in academia, the accessibility of academic research, and the ways in which standardized methods of intellectual engagement and education are prejudicial toward certain ways of creating and processing meaning. I present this work at a moment when these norms are being challenged, having been brought under scrutiny by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is my hope in submitting this thesis that these conversations will continue, and will make changes to systems of education and intellectualism that value the arts as a way of providing access to those with non-standard ways of learning.

Appendix



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⁷ Video credit: Paul Fortier

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