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The Dilemma of Dezra: An Adolescent Manifesto in Five Parts

Erin Phillips

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Erin Phillips

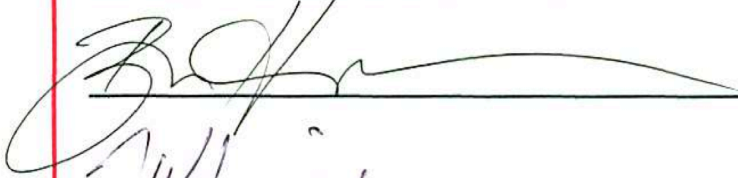
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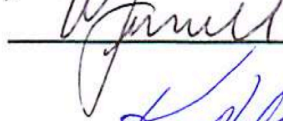
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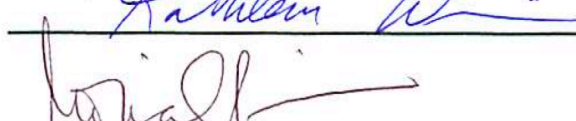
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An Adolescent Manifesto in Five Parts

by

Erin Phillips

BA, Theatre Arts, Beloit College, 2005

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts
Dramatic Writing

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

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ABSTRACT

The adolescent body and the space of performance both employ a dynamic of liminality - constantly changing and shifting, never “complete,” never able to be fully defined, understood, or categorized. There is a compulsion we have in naming, categorizing and defining the bodies and emotional life of young people. Where the liminality of performance may be welcomed and viewed as a necessary and desired component of the experience, the liminality of adolescence is deeply troubling.

The issue of erotic agency further complicates our relationship to the adolescent body - a concept of “body” that seems almost born out of erotic tension. The adolescent body is not yet seen as a sexual being, but is also not devoid of sexuality and erotic potential. We try so desperately to define and manage how an adolescent body might traverse its maturation and find its own erotic agency, and we strip them of that chance by managing it with such conviction.

Through the course of developing my play, *That One Forbidden Thing*, which centers on a young girl who is experiencing her own, deeply complicated, sexual “awakening,” I encountered these dynamics in action - fixing themselves on my own work. I began to wonder if the tensions that were playing out on my play could shed light on how we might more productively engage adolescence - in performance, certainly, but also in life. This manifesto is a step towards finding a way to fully engage bodies that are limited in their access to agency and voice, a call-to-arms, of sorts, to push towards an existence wherein we might live fully and allow the experience of that living to be felt by any body that might want it.

Table of Contents

I. Identify the Problem (With Your Chin Up); or, How We Begin	1
II. Know Where You Stand (Without a Map); or, How We Define	5
III. What is <i>That</i> ? (And Why Do I Feel Like <i>This</i> ?); or, How We Hesitate	12
IV. Sacrificial Lambs (and Girls, and Pears, and Hearts); or, How We Commit	19
V. Bring It On Home To Me (And To You, Too); or, How We Live	23
VI. <i>That One Forbidden Thing</i>	31
VII. Figures	101
VIII. Notes	103
IX. Works Consulted	105

I: Identify the Problem (With Your Chin Up); or, How We Begin

A manifesto is a communication made to the whole world, whose only pretension is to the discovery of an instant cure for political, astronomical, artistic, parliamentary, agronomical and literary syphilis. It may be pleasant, and good-natured, it's always right, it's strong, vigorous and logical.

Apropos of logic, I consider myself very likeable.

-Tristan Tzara (figure 1)ⁱ

Hi, my name is Erin, and I am completely obsessed with adolescence. This is my manifesto. It is a manifesto born out of crisis, out of a need for recovery in the form of enlightenment. The first step to recovery, as we all know, is to admit the problem. Ok. I have a problem. A problem with adolescence. A problem with my plays. A problem with my thoughts. Luckily, others share my problem. It is here, today, tomorrow, and days and nights beyond, that I come before the world to say clearly: I, like lots of the world, simply don't know what to do with youth. I am enticed by its possibility, and frightened by its vastness - love and fear at every turn. And it is with this manifesto that I formally commit myself to addressing these feelings of love and fear in an effort to understand more - in order to make better art, better literature, better sex, and a better world. Lofty ambitions, I know. Just stay with me. That's why I brought Tzara along for the ride - to remind me of what a manifesto can do. See, this work has to come out this way. A manifesto holds power, and momentum, and grandiose expectations of the

creator (and even of the readers). I like Tzara's style: unabashedly go for whatever you believe in - even if a lot of people think what you're talking about is full of poo. Forward motion, self-love, *trust* - even in the illogical (*especially* in the illogical). Come on, Tzara. I've got a point to prove. Or not. Whatever.

Wait. Before we get rolling, I have to bridge the gap of my heart and mind. The way I see it, there's an emotional way to deal with this thing, and there's an intellectual way. Visceral vs. theoretical. But it doesn't have to be a competition. It's time to change the way we think, the way I think, and hopefully the way other people think. It's time to acknowledge that we can address things with our heart and mind simultaneously. It's time to open our hearts and open our minds and tell them to stop fighting. Give them pacifiers to suck on. Good. Hear that *full* silence? That's progress.

It's time to acknowledge the bodies that get kicked while they're down, the bodies that get words written on them with other people's ink, the bodies that get tape over their mouths when they speak out of turn (which is *ever*). Saying so isn't enough, though. We can say things all night, even to the moon and to the stars if we want, but they don't get to speak either. They speak in storms and beauty, but not in human action. They're so beyond us. So we must *do*. Join hands, friends. We're going live.

Now that we're holding hands, let me say this: I want a more productive way to engage adolescence, and all its baggage, in performance and in life. Something that will move us beyond speculation. Something that will move us beyond categories and into truth. Something that will move us beyond judgment and limits and rebellion and denial.

I want to write my own definition of adolescence. One that is open enough to possess the intangible magic that comes with the territory. One that could allow someone to find footing for themselves within it. One that is positive in asserting the power of itself.

I want to wade around in the moment that happens when we confront adolescence. I want to face it, and look it in the eyes, and have a staring contest of honesty. Because there is something in that moment that holds the key to making the world a better place, and I'm going to find it. I know, I know, *overly ambitious*. So sue me.

I want to do these things for a selfish reason. Or, for a completely *selfless* reason. Or for both, simultaneously. As a writer, I give life to voices that would otherwise never exist. I am not putting myself on a pedestal. Quite the opposite, in fact. In my mind, I have the job of a servant. The rewards may be grand in feeling, but in truth, I am writing so that a story may be told. It is out there in the universe, and it leaps into my head/heart/mouth/hands and pushes until I let it out. I am grateful for this intrusion. It is because of that intrusion that I am here, today, announcing my stance to the world. It is because of a certain intrusion by the name of Dezra (figure 2), that you are reading these words. Dezra is the twelve-year old girl who is the center of my play - that play that has made this work really stew. See, my little intruding Dezra has given me a hell of a time. She's confused me, seduced me, enraged me, betrayed me, and forgave me. I do this work for her, to see if she and I can make a go at this thing called life (mine and hers). To see if she can make it through the cards that have been dealt to us.

We are not alone in this struggle, Dezra and I. We have friends - imaginary, but present never the less. This is the moment in which I must inform you about a support system that is in place for the course of your experience with my humble little manifesto. If at any moment, you feel the unease, uncertainty, concern or insecurity that I have felt while writing this, simply turn to the end of this trifle and you will find some friends whose hands are outstretched, ready to receive your doubts with open arms (they have no choice in that matter, they're drawn that way). These are my imagined partners in crime, my fellow revolutionaries who have held my hand in spirit (though they are not aware of it) through this process. And I feel able to lend that support to all of you. Color them how you wish. String them up like floating angels. They're our Paper Doll Army and I shamelessly love them. And they're ready to love with us. So come on. Find your footing and let's dig in. For the children's sake.

II: Know Where You Stand (Without a Map); or, How We Define

*Well I feel just like a child
From my womb to my tomb
I guess I'll always be a child
Well some people try and treat me like a man
Yeah some people try and treat me like a man
Well I guess they just don't understand
Well some people try and treat me like a man
They think I know shit
But that's just it
I'm a child*

-Devendra Banhart (figure 3)ⁱⁱ

I don't mean this to sound arrogant, but I feel like I must make my own definition of adolescence. Definitions and classifications of the term abound, but for me, they leave something to be desired and tend to make adolescence feel strictly clinical and completely devoid of magic (a key ingredient to the pot-stirring qualities requisite in this manifesto). Those tend to be the least effective definitions, but even some of the most effective aren't so much definitions as they are nebulous concepts. So what should we do? Don't get me wrong - I love the nebulous-ness of adolescence. It is one of my favorite things about it - it can't quite ever be fully defined. But, I'm going to try anyway. I like futile efforts, I suppose. Makes it feel like a noble cause.

Here's how I like to think of it:

Adolescence is any body, space, time and/or thought that is no longer that of the child but is not yet that of the adult. It is the in-between. It is the liminal. It is the incomplete. It is a very special zone.

Temporal, physical, emotional and intellectual all at once. A bit like performance. Isn't that convenient. And so it is through a performative lens that I will

charge myself with investigating that *special zone* - why it is what it is, why we treat it like we do, and how we might possibly evolve our way of dealing with it. The “it” I’m referring to is not merely the idea of adolescence itself, but the embodied erotic potential and certain agency that stems from its complicated embodiment, especially when represented in performance. This specific conception of erotic agency is at the core of our strange and troubled perception of adolescent bodies.

But I must give credit where it is due. Two key players have helped me tremendously as I try to situate my own ideas about how to define this funny thing called adolescence: James R. Kincaid (figure 4) and Sarah Chinn (figure 5). If you are not familiar with these brilliant scholars, you should be. Kincaid’s work offers incredible renderings of our cultural attachment to Victorian values and how they ripple in social norms and practice, specifically in terms of our erotic comprehension and (de)sexualization tactics. His book *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*, forever changed the way I thought about adolescence and its inhabitance in our culture. Sarah Chinn is an equally compelling cultural historian whose work explores questions of how gender, race and sexuality have shaped literature and culture during the 19th century. Her articulations of early 20th century American immigration in her book, *Inventing Modern Adolescence: The Children of Immigrants in Turn-of-the-Century America*, illuminated the foundational currents of the creation of what we might think of as “modern youth.”

Go ahead. Cut them out. Decide what color shirt you want them to wear. Use crayons if you’d like. String them up next to you while you continue. Use the thread

included. You can do it so it looks like they're holding hands. Done? Ok, great. Aren't they cute? Here we go...

Through a dynamic tension between their analyses of adolescence, Kincaid and Chinn have helped me discern two different ways of thinking about what I want to examine within its weird, murky territory. As mentioned before, there are two sides to my instincts about this subject. One is the intellectual (strengthened by Chinn), and the other is the visceral (strengthened by Kincaid). My parenthetical assignments reflect an admittedly elementary division, but hear me out.

There is the issue of how this thing of adolescence began, and how we started thinking about it. And then there's the somewhat intangible sense of what we did with it after that point, and how it affects deeply set emotional currents and erotic chords within us. Adolescence didn't pop out of nowhere as a recognizable social category and distinction. Quite the opposite, in fact. It came as a reaction to brewing shifts in various social consciousnesses, and was further propelled by rippling effects of interpretation and ownership, as the identity of our country was shifting. I must acknowledge that my priority in this piece is to engage the dynamics of *American* adolescenceⁱⁱⁱ, which would be different from any other national or cultural identity given the fact that social, economic and political factors specific to the U.S. paved the way for adolescence to be constructed and designated as an identity zone. Within the social, economical and political reasons for establishing a new way thinking about young people and their bodies, there is a deeper, more ambiguous reason that bubbled up the surface of the social consciousness. This reason is simple, and at the same time more complex than anything: there was not a sufficient answer to the question of "What to do with the young people?"

New categories were legitimized by the masses, and the actual *bodies* inhabiting those new categories were defined. These definitions were constructed by evolving understandings of the physical, mental and emotional places that those bodies could exist within, however contradictory they may have been.

Chinn's book illuminates the literal, tangible formations of the social structuring of adolescence. Shifting expectations of national identity - immigrant populations, race, class, socio-economic status, child labor laws, dancing, sex, you know, everything *important* - paved the way for a new, strictly *American* way of thinking - one that evoked the roots of adolescence that we see today: fun-loving, fun-seeking, rebellious, sex-crazed, foul-mouthed youngsters.^{iv} The groundwork she so eloquently illuminates is easily felt in our present-day assumptions and accusations of what is precious and dismissable, loved and hated, obsessed with and forgotten about in adolescence today.

Where Chinn holds a mirror to our *past*, illuminating the turns of consciousness that dictated what and how we are now, Kincaid holds the mirror up to *our present*, asking us to check ourselves in a more emotional, personal way. What do we ask of the youth around us? To be our grounds of desire as well as our bastions of innocence? To be our scapegoats and our saviors? Kincaid, for me, sheds light into the dark corners of our collective America psyche around what we do with our young people, and what we expect them to do with their bodies (or what they should do with their bodies to placate us). I have had such a long-standing affair with Kincaid that I have walked around for years talking about the *inherent* eroticism that resides in adolescent bodies. This is wrong (remember: *admit the problem*). Sorry, James.

It is not that bodies of adolescence are inherently erotic or sexual, rather, they are *coded* with eroticism because they are spaces of possibility and change that we (the audience, viewer, observer) veil in sexual and erotic potential. This occurs because the adolescent body is without strict erotic boundary. It is neither completely devoid of sexual utility and erotic comprehension, but is also not completely adrift in the sensual sea of erotic intention and active sexuality. It is a space of possibility - an open, blank, nubile canvas that can hold any manifestation of desire. They are not necessarily *sexual* beings. Rather, they manifest the erotic implication put upon them by other bodies. This theory of how adolescent eroticism functions is key to my own theorization and work.

Kincaid and Chinn provide me with a sturdy foundation, upon which I can find my own footing on this tricky little subject. I must know some grounded information about how and why these ideas exist and manifest themselves in action. And so I say thanks to Kincaid and Chinn for lending me their fence posts to straddle. Because truthfully, and I mean this in no disrespect, *that is their work*. And this is mine. They are important voices that I want to continue to have ringing in my ears, but their voices leave empty space for my ideas. Thanks guys. At this moment, if you'd like to give a small thanks to them, too (remember the dolls), you may do so. Or, if you'd prefer, think of your own fence-post providers and send a thanks into the air. Generosity of spirit.

I give my sappy thanks so that I feel legitimate leaping forward. Because, you see, I have to acknowledge the fact that I am entering this discussion with Kincaid and Chinn (and others we've yet to meet here). They are not providing all of the stepping stones for me - I've got to unearth some myself, with their help. And so I enter this

discussion, with you as my witnesses, with my chin up and my heart open, ready to commit myself to this tricky business.

I remember having a wake up call about a year ago, in the early stages of my play's conception, that of all the moments of intense physical and emotional change that happen within a human being, the shifts of adolescence have to hold a place somewhere high in the ranks of significance and magnitude. For some, it might be the most fervent moment of change, for others it is not. But, in my opinion, it is undeniable that *something is happening* during those formative years, and we must pay attention to that *something*. The second point is that this recognition should continue beyond the realm of young bodies and into the response to any body that is somehow outside of acceptable representation and behaviors. (This gets into a conversation that is outside of the scope of this specific manifesto, but is important nonetheless: the issue of how these developing thoughts of adolescence can relate and prove useful in addressing marginalized bodies whose agency is complicated and troubling within the realm of performance. How can the issues of co-opted agency help us discover more productive ways to engage the erotic potential and agency within any character who seems to be disrupting a normative social system? My instinct is that by engaging this idea, we would be more able to deeply investigate marginal bodies' representation and performability, lending them deeper meaning, and freeing them from limiting judgment and categorization. That said, let's get back to business, shall we?)

The adolescent body has been fixed as a place of embodied purity, of innocence, of inexperience. However, by defining the adolescent body so stiffly as a locus of innocence, we in turn write it specifically as the opposite. As James R. Kincaid explains,

as time went on, the idea of innocence and the idea of ‘the child’ became dominated by sexuality - negative sexuality, of course, but sexuality all the same. Innocence was filed down to mean little more than virginity coupled with ignorance; the child was, therefore, that which was innocent: the species incapable of practicing or inciting sex. The irony is not hard to miss: defining something entirely as a negation brings irresistibly before us that which we’re trying to banish. It’s like the surefire alchemical recipe for *turning* lead into gold: just add water and don’t think of the word *rhinoceros* (Kincaid, 55).

Kincaid’s assertion that the very act of defining adolescence as innocent and pure is, in itself, partly responsible for our current conundrum with adolescence. Adolescent bodies are weird and messy, and gross new things are happening to them. And we have two choices for what to do with them: We can continue to ignore them, not fully recognizing the brewing currents of the *now* that exist within them, or we can acknowledge the zone of nothing and everything that they exist in. As in Devendra’s lyrics in the epigraph of this section, we can let them be what they are, in full complexity and weirdness, or we can try to make them something they most definitely are not. Devendra Banhart, an artist whose lyrics and sound aesthetic inspire in me a deep sense of unbridled youth, says it plainly: *Well some people try and treat me like a man, They think I know shit, But that's just it, I'm a child.* I want to let young people be what they are, *and* what they want to be. I want to give them that credit, that agency. And I want to create the space to address a new kind of agency that is particular to the spaces/bodies embodying adolescence - a very special kind of erotic agency.

III: What is *That*? (And Why Do I Feel Like *This*?); or, How We Hesitate

I loved my own undoing. I loved my error - not that for which I erred but the error itself. A depraved soul, falling away from security in thee to destruction in itself, seeking nothing from the shameful deed but shame itself.

- St. Augustine^v

Most of the time, the hesitation starts like this: We see a young person doing something they shouldn't be doing. Not like breaking a rule. Not like cheating on a test or burning ants with a magnifying glass. Like... touching themselves in a place we deem inappropriate. Or speaking words that we think they shouldn't know, and certainly shouldn't say. Or displaying their body in a way that we read as overtly sexual. What do we do? We have an inner freak-out. That inner freak-out is full of combating emotions and thoughts, along the lines of, "*oh my god that shouldn't be happening... umm... What should I do/think/say.*" Or, you know, something like that. It's a thought hiccup that I like to call *the moment of hesitation*.

It is through my love and fear of those *moments* (are we sensing a dichotomous trend here?) that I want to engage my own experience with them, in order to be able to better manage them, and hopefully teach other people how to do the same. It is so easy to intellectualize the moment of hesitation. But I would argue it is inherently emotional. It is about gut reactions and misunderstood impulses. When you take it out of the context of its moment of occurrence, it's easy to break down and dissect into logical pieces. But

that's not very honest, I think. Because we deal with things in the moment, whether we're conscious of it or not.

Like St. Augustine, as documented in his confessions, desired to be within the feeling and action of the act of transgression that was his fateful choice to steal the pears^{vi}. He says he loved the error for the simple fact of its experience. That's actually very complicated, isn't it? That the experience itself is a valid act, worthy of recognitions and thought. I want a more productive way to engage adolescence, and all its baggage, in *real life*. Something that will let us relish a bit in the sin of it all, and in the *actual experience*. Something that will move us beyond the everyday moments of hesitation about what young people can and cannot do/think/say.

Kincaid's illumination of our societal demand - that adolescent bodies be simultaneously repellent and representative of erotic possibility - points to the unrealistic (and let's face it, *cruel*) expectations that we continue to place on young people and their bodies, minds and souls. We want them to live before themselves, or after themselves, but seem to care very little about what they are *now*. Maybe because it is too scary. It is. It freaks me out. I'll admit it. I don't know what to do when my five year old stepson has his hand in his pants for no reason. Or, rather, for a reason that I don't understand. He is not fully experiencing a sexual moment, and yet, I freak out, worrying that he is behaving in a way that is inappropriate. Or that my reaction to his action will make him feel insecure about his body and the sexuality that is developing within him. Or that because I am just simply not familiar with being aware of a young person touching themselves -without trying to get off. Why? Why do I feel so much ownership over his

experience? It is *his* experience. He's not doing any harm. It's really none of my damn business.

This, my friends, is an important moment of crisis. It is one of the many, many moments of hesitation that I experience daily. Hell, *hourly* on some days. I will not run from it, or any others. I will face it, like it's a lion and I'm a raw steak. Want to join me? It'll be fun, I promise. Get the Paper Army. I know they're game.

Adolescence is a beautiful thing. It is a time of possibility, of newness, of awakening, and of change. Change, change, change. Change is a difficult dynamic for us to handle. We love it and we hate it. We relish in it and we resist it. We are turned on by it and we are repulsed by it. In the realm of adolescence, change is representative of a certain kind of tension. It is my effort in this work not to condemn adolescence as being a zone full of sordid sexual deviancy. Nor am I trying to assert that viewers or participants of adolescence are in any way gross or wrong for having complicated feelings about adolescence and the bodies that inhabit it. In fact, I want to revel in that strange tension of sexuality and erotic possibility where it *shouldn't exist*.

I'm not a perv, and I don't think you are either.

I say this in order to release myself, and you, my lovely reader, from feeling a burden of taboo behavior within this topic. Repeat it out loud to yourself. Go ahead. I'll wait. Relieving, yeah? Does sexual abuse against young people exist? Yes. Do the bodies of adolescent people get objectified and taken advantage of? Yes. Do certain adolescent bodies undergo choices by their inhabitants that are unhealthy for their mental and physical survival? Yes. But these unfortunate dynamics do not apply to *every*

adolescent body. And yet, each adolescent body is subtly coded as if it has/is/will be. It's not our fault, but we do have a responsibility to acknowledge this topic fully. My objective is to find a way to productively situate new ideas about addressing adolescent eroticism and sexuality in a way that directly engages the tensions they embody. It is only *through* the tension that we might find productivity. *First, admit the problem.*

This brings me to a thought about what is brought about by watching adolescence in performance - be it an adolescent body performing "adult" behaviors or an adult acting as an adolescent body performing "adult" behaviors: Perhaps some of the hesitation (and implicit anxiety) stems from the fact that young people are not acknowledged as legitimate "change makers." We do not, generally, empower them to create, enact or significantly comment on change around them. They are assumed to not fully understand or possess the necessary tools of maturity required in addressing those changes, so why would they be able to navigate or engage those changes unsupervised?

Please note I am not arguing for distance from young adults as they travel through their territory of change. My point is that we distrust their potential to the point that we disengage them from their own process of change, distancing their mind from their body and therefore disempowering them to make productive choices within and about their specific ways of change. So, in the realm of performance (versus life), as audience members who are unable to actually *make change happen* within the performance happening before us, are we bothered by watching the *wrong* bodies trying to negotiate change, considering their perceived inadequate abilities? Do we not validate their ability to effect change, and therefore see a disruption occurring within our experience of watching them *try*?

The act of watching implies a disengagement from the action being watched. How does the space of the theatre disrupt that disengagement? How separated can you really be in a small theatre space in which the performance space is within reach of the audience's senses of touch, smell and participation?^{vii} The act of watching is, in a way, a violent act^{viii}. By watching, we make choices about what we see and how we see it, and a choice severs further possibility^{ix}. When watching beings instead of objects, how do those choices play out in front of us? When a being is knowingly being watched, this implies liveness, a tangibility of response that does not exist when watching an object without conscious understanding. And so, watching within the context of theatre is scary, no matter the subject. The awareness of the bodies in front of the audience poses a level of threat.

The threat of watching occurs, primarily, because the immediacy of live performance is heightened beyond our day-to-day understandings of observing and engaging around and with other bodies^x. Contemporary live theatre tends not to venture into the territory wherein audience members *directly* act upon the scene along side the performers. This tendency is tied to many core values of what "going to the theatre" means, but more than anything, it is about retaining the boundary between those able to effect change and those who will watch the change occur.

How we treat a space is much like how we treat a performing body - we put in it/on it what we wish to be transformed and reflected back through the performative lens. The potential for dangerous discovery is heightened when the body or space in question is inherently destined for change - as are both the space of performance and the bodies that perform. There is a threat *and* a pleasure in addressing the possibility of change, as

well the act of change itself. Attempting to find pure comfort within the throes of change is a difficult challenge. The relationships between liminality and its ties to threat and pleasure hold interesting metaphorical relevance to the physical time and space of adolescence. What is it about adolescence that allows it to hold the tension of threat and pleasure? I suppose this all ties me back to Kincaid's notions that there is a specific erotic possibility alive in adolescent beings, whether they are aware of it or not. The point is that a non-adolescent being is able to transfer their own erotic understanding onto the adolescent body, acknowledging the possibility (and therefore actual presence) of erotic potential. Eroticism implies a sense of pleasure, of sensory awareness that is heightened from banal interactions and feelings - but that feeling of pleasure can be severed if the *wrong body* tries to own that feeling.

When an adolescent body is being signified with erotic potential, their whole being becomes a threatening hurricane of change, whether or not they are even aware of their owned significance and liminality. This notion acknowledges the idea of agency, and of how much control the adolescent body has within that space of liminality. If we presume that erotic action is victimizing to an adolescent body, what choice or control does the adolescent body actually have to acknowledge the truth of their own experience? Very little, I would argue. Especially if we get stuck in *the moment* trying to acknowledge it for them.

It is my goal, within these developing theories; to negotiate the way that troublesome agency might function. What would it look like if the adolescent body were empowered to negotiate its own liminality and erotic potential, action and development, both inside and outside of the moment of hesitation? I know. This disrupts so much of

our notion of what paths of understanding are appropriate in coming to know one's sexuality and eroticism. But this acknowledgment of internal knowledge is necessary, I think, both in terms of addressing my theories for performance, as well as in addressing the sexual development and healthy erotic comprehension within young people. I ask myself these questions as I move to the most frightening section of this manifesto: my own work. Firing squad, here I come. The Paper Army's got my back. Right guys?

IV: Sacrificial Lambs (and Girls, and Pears, and Hearts); or, How We Commit

The only thing that matters for a writer is not how clever you are...the only courage that matters is the courage to write the thing you want to read. Not to be afraid of the thing that seems to matter the most to you...the experience of becoming an artist [a writer] is not learning to throw out your authentic obsession, it's learning to recognize your authentic obsession. Which most of the time people don't want you to write about because it's embarrassing in some way – that your authentic obsession is your real material.

-Adam Gopnick^{xi}

It's time to engage myself. It's time to engage Dezra. She's got something to teach us all. And I am trying to do it justice here and within my play (excuse me, *her* play). So here it is, the crossroads of my work and my *work*. I know the moment of frigid shock is close at hand, the recognition that this *theory* I've been spouting on about actually impacts what I'm doing in my plays, and that what I'm doing in my plays does actually impact this "other side" of my work. How easy it is to get carried away with separation of ideas...

So, the day has come. In these pages I will engage the play I am currently writing. This is the play of mine that is most closely, directly, *symbiotically* engaged with the work of my thesis research. This exercise I've posed for myself feels a bit like I've set up a date for my babies to play on the freeway. Just a *tad* bit vulnerable. Here goes. Do your worst, speeding vehicles.

My play is, most simply put, about a young girl on the verge of womanhood. Now then, simplicity aside, here is a more comprehensive articulation of the story:

Dezra, a 13 year-old girl who has been raised by her father in a repressive (though not necessarily *oppressive*) community, finds herself in a secret, forbidden Grove that lies at the outskirts of her town. This is the kind of place that people do NOT visit. The kind of place that legends are told about. The kind of place that people are known to go in to and never return from. Upon entering this Grove, she discovers a beautiful, beckoning cottonwood tree - that grows pears. She consumes a pear and rests at the base of the tree, among its gnarled roots. It is here that she begins to “see” visions of her family’s past; the history of her father and the mother she has never known. These visions are entwined with an aphrodisiac effect from the pears, enveloping Dezra in a new experience of desire and sexual consciousness. She masturbates and has her first orgasm as the foundations of her parent’s relationship are played out in front of her, in memories. Her friend/companion/unrealized lover/almost brother, Arlin, finds her at the Grove. She tells Arlin of her experiences, of the visions she’s had, of the awakening she’s experienced... *down there*. Arlin freaks out, runs away, but eventually comes back. He did it. He relishes in their new, shared feelings, they have sex, Dezra finds out the tree is really her mother, Cora.

Oh, right. Her mom’s the tree. Yeah, ummmm....

See, Porter and Cora were *lovers*. Dangerous lovers. Porter was a respected spiritual leader of the community, and Cora was a frighteningly sensual woman. Her *being* alone was a threat to her community. But Porter was drawn to her, and Cora to him. He talked of marriage, and of “taming” her, and Cora went along with it. The satisfaction she got out of awakening deeply-buried senses within Porter outweighed any

actual fear of his “offers” coming true. She becomes pregnant, and his offers become plans set in stone - sanctioned by the town’s communal principles.

Out of panic over being contained, Cora makes a quiet plea to nature as she gives birth to Dezra, alone in the Grove: that whatever force is out there keep them held within the Grove, to be free from confinement and reform. Her plea is answered, the transformation begins. Porter comes to get her for their wedding ceremony, and she is half-swallowed by a thick, bark trunk. He snatches Dezra before she is taken, and leaves Cora to the Grove.

Return to the present day, to Dezra, vibrating with newfound sexual awareness. She has just had sex for the first time, after discovering her feelings for Arlin, and he leaves. He *leaves*. He freaks out and runs from her - a crisis of faith, or you know, just plain panic over his body. He runs to Porter, spilling the news of what they did together. Porter returns to the Grove in search of Dezra - who will likely spend the rest of her youth locked in her room, and Arlin follows him, afraid of what his confession may bring. And then, in a moment of crisis, Cora transfers the “gift” of the tree existence to Dezra. She becomes part of Cora’s world, acting as a bridge, allowing Cora to exist once again with Porter.

Dezra is forced to undo what has been done to her by her parents, fight for a life with Arlin, manage to not get swallowed by bark like her mother, all while she reconciles these old and new relationships that are evolving upon her (and within her). Porter must encounter his past, Cora must encounter her mistakes. Arlin must encounter

his faith and his *feelings* and Dezra must encounter... *everything*. That's my play. As of right now. On three... One, two, three... *eyebrow lift*.

Why did I write this play? Easy. I had to. Like Gopnick says, it was my authentic obsession. One I thought I had to get over. Instead, I'm rolling around in it like a pig in shit. So, fine. I know *why* I wrote this play. Why I started it, why I kept going. But what am I trying to do with it, besides tell the story? Simply put, there are brilliant people who are dealing with questions about adolescence and all its *everything* and I feel like I am joining the conversation. I am joining it with my play, and this manifesto, and with my attempts to *discern moments* and not dismiss them. I want to acknowledge my discomfort in those moments, rather than turn my back on them. I want to dive in to my discomfort.

This play is about trying to put female sexuality, specifically the kind in young bodies, on a pedestal and revel in its complexities without turning it into a spectacle or a peek show or a joke. I am trying to engage, within the realm of dramatic structure, the dynamic of expectation lived out on young people - that they must somehow be everything we aren't and everything we are and everything we wish we could be, all at the same time. Am I doing it right? I don't know. But I am doing it. Because I have to. Because it brings me to my knees with wonder. But Dezra is leaving me with a dilemma... The dilemma of Dezra. I'm gonna take one more stab at figuring it out. Feeling up to it? If not, I won't be offended. Here we go.

V: Bring It On Home To Me (And To You, Too); or, How We Live

“Sex is not harmful to children. It is a vehicle to self-knowledge, love, healing, creativity, adventure, and intense feelings of aliveness... Our moral obligation to the next generation is to make a world in which every child can partake safely, a world in which the needs and desires of every child - for accomplishment, connection, meaning, and pleasure - can be marvelously fulfilled.”

- Judith Levine (figure 6)^{xii}

Why is it so easy to forget what it was like to be a kid? Why is it so easy to forget what it was like to feel like an adult before we were allowed to be one? Why is it so easy to forget what we're made of, underneath our skin? Being alive is a tricky thing. We want so badly to be a part of every moment of it, but sometimes we get so caught up in telling someone what he or she can and can't do, we forget what we are capable of ourselves. I don't want to do that anymore. Magic. When you walk into a room, and it's empty except for bodies, there's room for it. When you make it into a theatre, you should demand it. I don't mean the kind that comes from top hats or fireworks. I mean the kind that makes our existence light up in front of us.

Get to the point.

What will it take? Is it a practice? A method? God forbid, a *theory*?

Sex is wonderful, right? It's a gift we've been given that, yes, can turn into a burden at times. Levine's acknowledgment fuels the fire under my work. Levine is, by the way, the 6th member of the Paper Army. She's the one who makes me feel like it's all

gonna be OK. Levine's work in her book, *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex*, " is what I would call a revolutionary text. Her bold assertions that sexuality can be a productive, healthy, and - god forbid - pleasurable part of young people's idea had me shaking in my boots. It is so *right*, but how can we possibly get there? Through eloquent unpacking of our national crisis around sex and young bodies, she leaves us with an inspiring call to arms: To do our part in creating *a world in which the needs and desires of every child - for accomplishment, connection, meaning, and pleasure - can be marvelously fulfilled*.

She completes the picture, I think. So, then, if I have my supporters, and my inspiration, and my Dezra, what is my role in helping this cause? I can write these plays and do this research and then what? The distrustful *eyebrow lift* still happens, and I recoil. But I must commit to the cause. I am not, obviously, the only person trying to speak out in support and admiration for the potential of actual sexual happiness for young people. But I am one of them, and I must stand my ground. Perhaps I need to follow my own advice, and hang my little paper dolls in front of my face (like I've told you to do) and ask them to perform their duty as my little army of reason and possibility. Maybe my little scholar dolls can help me figure out what to say to the unwilling eyebrow lifter, the questioning, resistant sigh that signals to me I've hit a brick wall with someone.

I am told on a weekly basis, "you're so very complicated, aren't you, Erin." At best, there might be a "you're so *beautifully* complicated," but still, there is a very central acknowledgement happening in these moments that implies that this confusion is something I must *get over*. And I suppose that's my hurdle - not so much to get over the confusion, but to get *in* the confusion, and let it become personal. It is personal. It's all

personal. Sex is everything, and sex is personal, so must be everything else. I failed my Logic course during my undergraduate career, by the way, so I know the flaws in my progression of thought. Whatever.

I have, I think, spent so much time trying to understand, on this end of things, the theoretical and scholarly ponds I'm wading in that I have forgotten the centrality they hold to my playwriting. And even there, I have become so bound in traditionally structured methods of creating and engaging dramatic literature that I have forgotten that implicit in my work (and this play in particular) is a deliberate attempt to remove myself, and those who will come with me, from the ground of traditional methods of recognition - of granting worth and significance in terms of writing and theatre and thinking. I am in the moment, I suppose, of giving a big, metaphorical middle finger^{xiii} to the forms and methods I have been working within, since by its very nature, my work is asking for new foundations to be built underneath it. I recognize that asking my fellow writers, professors, friends, colleagues and collaborators to grant me permission to write a story about a young girl having a *productive* sexual awakening, not one that victimizes her or puts her in harm's way or ruins her life, is a hefty request. And further, that I am complicating her function by asking that she be responsible for the actions of those around her (as adolescents are so often silently asked to do). *And* that she really be in charge of the story. And I am asking a lot of myself to really face the fears and resistance that I am not, myself, devoid of, no matter what I want to believe. I have to really ask myself, and answer with honesty, whether or not I am actually doing these things, or if I am just on a soapbox. I have to back up this stuff I'm spouting on about with the *work*, which at some point will have to speak for itself if all goes as planned.

I make, in these pages, a charge to myself: Do not back down from your thoughts about this. You are engaging ideas that some people will not appreciate. This makes your commitment all the more important. Grapple with those ideas with the fervor of a tsunami. Don't be coy or clever, don't be arrogant or dismissive. Don't assume you're right but don't doubt your instincts. Don't, at any moment, think the work is done. Don't, at any moment, think you're screwed.

It's like this: We're kind of *made* of sex. It makes us and compels us and can fuel, satisfy and hurt us equally. To deny its importance is stupid. That's all. You know, young people are not deviants, any more than adults are. Or, really, we're all deviants. So why do we only persecute some of us? We can't help the bodies we are born into, or the ones we want to inhabit. Remember what pleasure feels like. I'm pretty sure kids/adolescents/teenagers are always remembering. It's us lame adults who threaten to forget. We need to listen to them before we command for them. We need to TRUST them before we listen. It's not easy. I'm not saying it is or ever will be or that it even should be. But I think we're ruining the young people of this world by sanctioning their bodies only for our consumption. We need to sanction *their* consumption. Why are we so afraid of things that aren't finished? What's so enticing about being complete? When something is complete, it's done. Being done is boring. Isn't it? Am I crazy? Yeah, well, so are you.

What if all the freaks lived together in a little town way up in the sky?

That way, no freaks would be freaky - *freaky* wouldn't even exist.

Squares be damned.

We should revel in watching. But we should do it in ways that love. We should perform love-watches, not hate-watches or judgment-watches. What if having a set of eyes rest on you was a sign of admiration and respect? What if being spied on was the same as being loved? Our eyes are friendly when we want them to be. And when they're not friendly, maybe they could just be eyes. We're allowed to get to know things. Maybe looking doesn't have to feel so wrong.

We should all be so lucky to be in love with ourselves the way children are.

I am not on a soapbox about how definitively important my work is above all other's - although I recognize it might seem like that's the case. I am instead trying to create some accountability for myself to adhere to. Maybe by putting it in these pages it will keep me on point and help me to not waiver when the sighing eyebrow happens. I'm getting to know that sighing eyebrow and, truthfully, there is something I am beginning to love about it. But I need Dezra's help to find the full manifestation of the love for that judgmental brow and the stigmas that are coming with it. So, Dezra, come help me. Help me help you - so you can live a productive life in your little world and mine.

Whatever you are - God, earth, stars, mud: Guide me to release. Please! I have woken up to you! I taste you! I hear you. Every bee sting, every crash of an ocean wave licking the sand. I feel this surge of feeling. It's sweet. And hard. And it hurts so bad, but I want more. I want more of it, and I want to be inside it and taste it! I'm there. I can see love. I am love. Help me. Release me. Follow me. - Dezra^{xiv}

What am I to do with her? I must tell her story, and tell it with great honesty. I must let her celebrate her body, and I must celebrate it with her, and I must teach her ways to love herself and let her fully teach me in return. And to the critics who deny her power: I think you're wrong, and so does Dezra. Her story is a little different.

I would say sorry, but I'm not.

My play is not perfect. In fact, a lot about is wrong at the moment. But you know what? The doubtful *eyebrow lift* that I receive from the bigs doesn't help me get anywhere.

What is so hard about getting on the damn bus with me?

I promise you, Dezra: I will bring people on board.

I will do this by writing her. I will do this by defending my choices to write her. I will do this by recognizing the different structures their bodies call for. Structures that will still serve our emotional hunger and desire for a good story, but will do that without condemning them for not being right.

I will do this with a generosity of artistic spirit.

I will do this with a quick reflex for calling out unproductive oppression. These are stories - oppression is part of their backbone. But there are the productive and unproductive varieties. Representations of oppression should illuminate - not oppress further.

I will do this by watching young people live, and despite the challenge, holding steadfastly to the fact that they are *important* and *worth listening to*. Even the crappy little kid who thinks he's already an adult and breaks sticks when he should be in the classroom. He's worth listening to. In fact, he's probably one of the most important voices that people could hear. His heart is full of something magnificent. I guarantee this.

I feel this work evokes in me a call to action. In developing this work, and Debra's work, I have been condemned, challenged, insulted and trivialized. I have been mocked, condescended, distrusted and unrealized. I don't say these things to play the martyr - quite the opposite in fact. These reactions that have played out on me are proof that this is difficult, nay - terrifying, territory to wade around in. Looking in on these ideas, trying as best I can to engage them as an unfamiliar spectator, I can see how it might feel like these ideas and theories seem to try to pull the rug out from underneath assumed identity and privilege. I suppose they are trying to do that, but I mean no insult in that action.

This raises, to me, a challenge for the future of my work: continue on, unwavering, but with an attention to how I might best translate these ideas so as to not oppress identities in any unproductive way. (Because, like I said, representations of oppression should illuminate, not oppress further.) I don't offer up my resolution as a signal of any future placating on my part. I think it has been proven to me that no such placating would even be possible, given the nature of this work and its critical deconstruction of deeply embedded, at times intangible, levels of privilege.

And so, I will keep going. Keep digging. Keep searching for the best possible way to illuminate the fullness of life.

I will do this by charging myself with never being aware enough. It's probably going to suck a lot, but hey, it'll be worth it. I will do this by letting go of the things I don't like about myself. Maybe others will follow suit. I will do this by trying to work through the *moment* I experience when I encounter young people encountering their

sexuality, when I want to object and also celebrate. Both reactions are valid, but there's something to be found deeper within them. I will do this so that young people have a fighting chance at happiness - sexual and otherwise. I will do this so that we can make better theatre. I will do this so we can stop disregarding people. I will do this for world peace. I will do this: Lift my chin up, face the problem, find my footing without a map, feel *that* feeling, sacrifice the lambs and bring them home to me and you, so we can *live*.

There, I said it. Thanks for listening.

Thoughts? Questions? Below-the-belt jabs? Bring 'em on. The more the merrier. Just leave the *eyebrow* at home. Or not. Whatever.

The End.^{xv}

THAT ONE FORBIDDEN THING

By Erin Phillips

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Characters:

Dezra - 13

Arlin - 15

Cora - 30

Porter - 35

Place:

The Grove. The kind of place people go to and never return from.

Time:

Now and then.

Act I:

The Grove.

A cottonwood tree that grows pears.

Dezra is on the floor of the Grove, engrossed in herself.

A long, full, breath-catching moment. Her world feels... different.

Arlin enters.

ARLIN

Dezra! We've been looking for you all night. Why didn't you come home?

DEZRA

What are you talking about?

ARLIN

It's seven in the morning.

DEZRA

What?

ARLIN

You've been here all night.

DEZRA

Don't be silly, Arlin.

ARLIN

Dezra. All night. Come on. Your dad is losing his mind. You shouldn't be here, you know!

DEZRA

You won't believe what happened to me.

ARLIN

You can tell me later. Come on. Let's go. This place creeps me out.

(beat)

DEZRA

I don't want to go back.

ARLIN

Stop acting like this.

(beat)

DEZRA

I think I felt heaven.

ARLIN

Excuse me?

DEZRA

I found this perfect feeling - it just came upon me and my body swelled and it was like I was in a memory but I wasn't I was sitting here but I could see myself. I never want this feeling to stop and I don't want to leave so I'm not going to go back with you.

ARLIN

You need some water.

DEZRA

Yes, I do. I do need water.

ARLIN

And... and some food. You need some... substance.

DEZRA

Yes. Yes, look!

She holds up the pear.

DEZRA

Isn't it beautiful?

ARLIN

Put it down.

DEZRA

Why?

ARLIN

You shouldn't eat that, you shouldn't even touch it, you shouldn't even be standing here!
Come on!

DEZRA

Arlin - I told you, I'm not leaving. Just stay here with me! I want you to feel what I'm feeling!

ARLIN

Dezra, stop!

DEZRA

When it happened, it was like a balloon burst inside me. But the balloon wasn't filled with air. It was filled with liquid. Like, honey and milk and lemonade. And it filled me up and I could smell it and it smelled like heaven and I could taste it and it tasted like... me. And I haven't felt the same ever since. I want to have that feeling all the time. All the time. All the time! Whoa. Yes. Have you... felt it?

ARLIN

You know, you're not supposed to do that.

DEZRA

But that feeling!

ARLIN

No. I've never felt it.

DEZRA

You must! Immediately. Go home and try.

ARLIN

No! Dezra!

DEZRA

What? It's *perfect*. There's no other word for it! It's just... perfect.

ARLIN

Do you even know what it is?

DEZRA

I know that my heart felt connected to history when it happened.

ARLIN

That's a weird thing to say.

DEZRA

It woke something up in me. And I want to share it with you, Arlin!

ARLIN

Go take a bath or something.

Swooning...

DEZRA

Oh, and then I could do it again...

She is lost, dancing to herself.

DEZRA

And I could bask in it! Soak it up into my skin!

ARLIN

Stop! Stop twirling like that, just hold still!

DEZRA

The movement of the earth is too strong, I have to move with it!

ARLIN

Dezra! Get a hold of yourself! You're acting like your mother.

She stops.

DEZRA

How would you know?

ARLIN

What people say about her. I mean. And you should stop. It's disgraceful.

DEZRA

Then may I live in *disgrace*. It feels better.

ARLIN

What? Dezra? Fine - I'll never speak to you again.

DEZRA

I do not need your voice. There are many more to hear...

ARLIN

I will never even look at you again!

DEZRA

I do not need your gaze...

ARLIN

Dezra! I will tell your father!

DEZRA

No! Come on...

ARLIN

I will. You're freaking me out.

DEZRA

Just... try it? Please? Just let go? I won't tell anyone.

ARLIN

Never. You're, you're... too much.

DEZRA

But. Just...listen. Imagine all the winds in the world wrapping themselves around your toes, and then your fingers and then your eyes and your shoulders and your brain and your bones. And the wind is warm and it climbs through you to your heart, and through your heart into your lungs and your stomach and down into... your... into your...

(beat)

ARLIN

Yeah...

DEZRA

Where it dances with you, inside you, and twirls you and bends you and sends floods of sugar water through your limbs. And the wind carves a stream inside you and lifts you up into heaven. And you can't see because you feel too beautiful. What's left of your breath is full of nectar and your muscles are vibrating so fast that you feel like you're running but you've never been so still. Your breath is moonlight. Heavy and bright and full of desperate love. The waves keep rocking and rocking like you're a boat they're trying to break in the night ocean. And the waves crash, and lull and crash and lull and crash and the hardest rain drops pound down on you and your skin swells with feeling but your bones are stuck to the ground way beneath the water and the waves keep coming and coming and coming and finally they break through the middle of you and that honey water spills through you. And even though you're in pieces you've never felt so whole. Never felt so connected. The raindrops kiss your splayed out body, your severed pieces, licking them with the sweetest tongues, stitching them back together with soft wetness. And your vision returns from its blurry life of spots and color shapes and breezy haze and you see yourself from the outside and you're perfect.

(beat)

DEZRA

And then there is just the pulsing and the great whollop of the world's beauty.

Arlin is speechless.

DEZRA

Arlin? Try it.

ARLIN

Ok.

He runs off.

Dezra grabs the pear.

She bites into it.

Juice pours down her chin and neck.

She sucks at the fruit - sensually, savoringly devouring it.

She conjures something with her swallows - visions, memories, dreams.

Cora emerges from the tree.

Porter appears, his face still hidden from Dezra.

PORTER

I shouldn't be here.

CORA

But you are. Which means you should be.

PORTER

I didn't mean to come. I walked, but I didn't plan on coming *here*.

CORA

And yet this is where you arrived. It's ok.

PORTER

No. No. It's not. I have to go. Goodnight.

CORA

Back to your books.

PORTER

Yes.

CORA

Maybe God is sleeping, his eyes closed tight. He'll never know.

PORTER

Please do not mock me.

CORA

I wasn't.

Silence.

CORA

What do you think we are here to do?

PORTER

Here? With you?

CORA

On this earth.

PORTER

To live in God's vision. To see our souls in eternity, even when we live in minutes. To reach beyond ourselves at all times.

CORA

And how do you achieve that?

(beat)

PORTER

I am failing.

CORA

No, you're not.

PORTER

I try to talk to God. I do. Every minute I wake up and I ask him to think of me, to see me during my pursuits of servitude. And... he doesn't respond. In any way. Not the smallest signal. And I'm losing my grasp.

CORA

And... lots of other things.

PORTER

You frighten me.

CORA

I know.

They fall still and silent.

CORA

We are here to *live*, Porter. That's why we're here.

PORTER

I do live.

CORA

You live in the sky. And I can tell - you don't let love live up there with your thoughts. Do you?

PORTER

I see no point. Love will blind me. From what I need to pursue. There is so much to know beyond ourselves! It may be cold in God's shadow, but at least it is constant. The sky is home to me. And it sustains itself without touch.

CORA

No. It doesn't.

PORTER

It can! We have to live beyond that touch you speak of. Don't you agree?

CORA

No.

PORTER

Please. Tell me I'm right?

Cora takes Porter's hand and kisses it.

CORA

We have a history to build. Whatever you might believe.

How do you know that?

PORTER

You think too much.

CORA

You're made of wrong. Your being. It's... everything that I can't touch. We could... I mean, you could... I could help you. Be different?

PORTER

Get out of the sky.

CORA

I don't know how.

PORTER

You could know.

CORA

Why am I here. I have to go. Please don't be offended. Please... don't tell anyone.

PORTER

You're not going to go.

CORA

What is this hold you have on me?

PORTER

I'm not holding you. I am here, open. I can't help but be any other way.

CORA

Your path in nature.

PORTER

Exactly.

CORA

I'm afraid I don't have one.

PORTER

You do.

CORA

But I can't find it. How you found yours, in this *place*...

PORTER

CORA

It's because you won't get out of the sky. Out of those pages...

PORTER

I know.

CORA

Our blood has dirt in it. Mud and soil, along with the water and air and love and hate.

She kisses him again. This time, he sinks into it. He breaks.

PORTER

No! You're... too much.

CORA

I see.

PORTER

This is not going to lead anywhere but terrible places. God has something else in mind for me! Something that is severed from anything like... you.

CORA

Like me?

PORTER

You're not the same as me. Not the same as the other people here.

CORA

And this bothers you.

PORTER

I don't know what that does to me.

CORA

Why did you come here?

PORTER

I needed to hear you.

CORA

Hear me?

PORTER

You have this... force. I feel one building in me, but it can't get out. I want to let it out and I feel God's eyes on me and I want them to lift me but instead they burn. And the fire is painful and I see no way for myself in life. I wanted you.

CORA

You wanted me?

PORTER

Your *guidance*.

CORA

But, *I'm everything you live against*. Against everything you scribble down on those pages, against every word the Elders speak to you. Right?

PORTER

I see you. Something in you. And it won't release me.

CORA

And what is that?

PORTER

I wish to know - How you can stand so firmly in the ground, yet reach at every moment up, beyond yourself, into the place in the sky that you can't see. The clouds...

CORA

Are in the sky.

PORTER

But they're the part we can't see through. In the middle of them, who knows. And you, I can see, reach blindly into them to find what you need. Never letting go of the earth below you - stretching around the world in opposite directions, reaching into the ground with your toes and up into that threatening sky with your fingers. And you keep yourself. In balance. And I can't. I think I hate myself for it.

CORA

You shouldn't. I am just here. I can only be me. And I am here, for you, Porter.

(beat)

PORTER

You are?

CORA

I am not willing to stand in the way of the knowledge of my heart - it is much deeper than that of my brain. I don't even think I could if I tried. Porter - there is something inside of you that beats into my heart like a fist in clay. And I can't help that. I envy you. Being able to shut off your *needs*. You may doubt your abilities, but I know that my limits rest well before yours.

PORTER

You shouldn't envy me.

CORA

But I do. To live so completely in the shadow of God. Of your faith. Complete trust, or...?

PORTER

I cower.

CORA

Still, though. You've devoted yourself. I understand that now.

PORTER

I try.

(beat)

CORA

Have a good night, Porter.

PORTER

Are you asking me to leave?

CORA

I think we understand each other now.

PORTER

Oh.

CORA

And... there's nothing to stand on. Between us. Right?

PORTER

Right.

CORA

Because you're committed to your faith.

Right. PORTER

And my... *senses* are too strong for you. CORA

Right. PORTER
(beat)

So. Goodnight. CORA

Yeah. PORTER

CORA
You should try trusting *yourself*. Live in your own shadow. The danger of it. Just once.

(beat)

Porter rushes to Cora, lifting her up around him.

Dezra sees Porter's face for the first time.

He kisses Cora furiously.

Cora releases from the kiss. Porter is frozen.

Cora lifts back into the tree.

The moment of vision breaks.

Porter is in the Grove, with Dezra.

Dezra, you can't be here! PORTER

Dad? DEZRA

PORTER

What are you doing here? In this place? You know about this place! I've told you - you don't come here! Haven't I told you? Where is he? He said he'd bring you back! Back to me! Where is he?

DEZRA

Dad.

PORTER

What? Where is Arlin?

DEZRA

He... he left.

PORTER

He left?

DEZRA

Yes. Dad?

PORTER

He was supposed to bring you home! This morning! The sun is setting!

DEZRA

What?

PORTER

What do you mean, *what*? Stand up! We're leaving.

DEZRA

The sun is setting?

PORTER

Yes, yes, look at me, Dezra! What is wrong with you? Come on...

DEZRA

Dad?

PORTER

I said we're leaving.

DEZRA

Dad?

PORTER

We cannot stay here!

DAD!

DEZRA

What, Dezra?

PORTER

I saw you...

DEZRA

Get up, Dezra. Now!

PORTER

DEZRA

This flood of visions is coming. When I sit right here - like everything I've ever known pours out of my eyes and flows into this place and saturates it with old life. And it was you. In these dreams of... some other time. Hungry? This pear is the most delicious thing you'll ever taste.

PORTER

Put that down!

DEZRA

But the taste!

PORTER

What did you do?

DEZRA

Dad, it's wonderful.

PORTER

Did someone touch you?

DEZRA

No. I found something... inside myself. Deep inside like a well full of honey blood - and it's perfect! Come sit with me, Dad. Do you know about this feeling? Of course you do...

PORTER

You disobeyed me! Do you understand? Dezra - the preciousness of life is not to be taken... so lightly! In vain! That thing you've done, *here*, is not for you to know! Not here! Not anywhere.

DEZRA

Dad, I couldn't help it -

PORTER

Yes you could! You can help it! You don't wake that up! You just don't. Ever.

DEZRA

But I saw you...

PORTER

You're hallucinating. Do you understand this? That thing you did. It's wrong. And now it's making you see things.

DEZRA

But it was you.

PORTER

In your imagination. Lies. Fake.

DEZRA

But it was so real...

PORTER

I am done speaking to you about this. Come on.

DEZRA

I don't want to leave.

PORTER

You do not belong here! And I will see to it that you come to understand that.

DEZRA

You're going to punish me?

PORTER

You do not need more help with that. Not since you woke up that terrible thing.

DEZRA

It's not terrible!

PORTER

We're leaving.

DEZRA

Dad - I'm not making it up. Something is happening to me. Do you know what it is?

PORTER

It's ugly. It's an ugly, filthy, putrid mess. It's *happening* to you, *inside* you. And I will beg for the day this ends! Why? Why did you do that?

DEZRA

I didn't *do* anything!

PORTER

You need to fix yourself. You're spouting lies. And you need to fix it.

DEZRA

Why? Why would I fix this? I feel happy! Happy!

PORTER

You are begging for trouble.

DEZRA

Then let it come.

PORTER

I'm reporting this to the Elders.

DEZRA

Fine. I will face them.

PORTER

Listen to me, Dezra: Something terrible is going to happen to you. If you continue to do this.

DEZRA

What?

PORTER

Our life will be over.

DEZRA

Yeah right.

PORTER

As soon as you let someone *else* play with this feeling you love so much, it will be done. We will be done. You and I. Our life.

DEZRA

You are just jealous.

PORTER
Do not speak that way to me.

DEZRA
Tell me!

PORTER
Tell you what?

DEZRA
Was it you?

PORTER
I will not listen to this any longer!

DEZRA
I feel the earth now, Dad. It's taking breaths with me!

PORTER
Stop.

DEZRA
And I'm connected to it. I can tell! It feels like I'm cutting myself open, ready to let the sun take my blood away to it on my veins!

PORTER
Stop speaking like that!

DEZRA
I feel something new. Full... of something new. Why won't you just tell me?

PORTER
BECAUSE THERE IS NOTHING TO TELL!

DEZRA
You're hiding something from me. Aren't you.

PORTER
You think you know what you're playing in. Let me tell you something: you don't. You have no idea. You will never be the same now. Are you aware of this? You have asked demons into you, invited them right into your being. You know this? Your spirit will be dead now, because you poisoned it. That feeling you think is so wonderful, it's poison. How does that feel?

DEZRA

(quietly)
I don't think it's poison.

PORTER

I'm sorry, what?

DEZRA

(quietly, again)
I said I don't think it's poison. I think it's really... wonderful.

PORTER

What?

DEZRA

It's NOT poison, it's wonderful and I'm not stupid! *You are!*

PORTER

Watch your tongue, young lady. Your heart, you think it's so full right now. So full of love and feeling that harm will never come to you. Right?

DEZRA

Yes.

Do you know what it feels like to be broken in pieces? Completely shattered? Stomped on and gutted with blades of anger and misery and contempt? Do you?

DEZRA

No.

PORTER

Well, just wait. Because that is what you've set yourself up for. You need to wake up. Because that feeling is going to be ripped out of you. Trust me.

DEZRA

What... I - what could happen?

PORTER

I don't ever wish for you to feel the - pain, no it's not pain, it's agony, unexplainable anguish. When your heart is broken.

DEZRA

But Arlin's not going to -

PORTER

How do you know? It's very easy to think that. Isn't it.

DEZRA

But it's in *me*, not ... not him.

PORTER

It's so transparent. You're becoming that feeling. It's consuming you.
You can't guarantee love. Because it is human. And humans lie. And hurt. And betray.

DEZRA

I'm scared.

You really want to trust your eternal life in the hands of some boy?

DEZRA

Can't you remember feeling like this?

PORTER

I choose not to.

DEZRA

But you did. You did feel this way?

PORTER

Don't speak of this again. Do you hear me?

DEZRA

I'm asking you to help me.

PORTER

I can't. You've trespassed far beyond my reach.

DEZRA

Who was she?

PORTER

What did you say?

DEZRA

There was a woman with you. In those dreams I watched. She was so wise.

PORTER

Stop it.

DEZRA

Did she... did she fill you up inside? With that feeling?

PORTER

I said stop it!

DEZRA

You kissed her. I saw you. You love her. Don't you.

PORTER

I tried to warn you.

He runs out.

DEZRA

It couldn't be my imagination. This is nothing I've ever felt before. I feel you there. Whoever you are.

Cora speaks from the tree.

CORA

You're right to think the things you do.

DEZRA

Where are you?

CORA

Everywhere. All around you. Inside you. Beneath you above you behind you before you and after you.

DEZRA

Are you dead?

CORA

Beyond death. I exist beyond existence.

DEZRA

That doesn't make any sense.

CORA

It will when you experience it.

DEZRA
Experience what?

CORA
There is much for you to discover. You're starting to know...

DEZRA
Who are you?

CORA
Your start.

DEZRA
I don't understand.

CORA
You don't need to. Keep feeling. Watch your body open up a road for your soul to walk on. You're growing, Dezra.

DEZRA
How do you know my name?

CORA
I know you. I've known you forever.

DEZRA
How?

CORA
By the scent of the stones and the murky wet beneath the soil, you're tied to me. And I to you. And that can never be broken. I have much to make up to you. Please forgive me.

DEZRA
You're not answering my question.

CORA
In time, sweet Dezra. In time. For now, rest your eyes.

DEZRA
Please! Just answer me?

Nothing.

DEZRA
Hello? Please? Come back...

Nothing.

She looks up at the sky.

Night? Stars? Why... why are... DEZRA

Arlin enters.

Dezra, I have to tell you something. ARLIN

Arlin. You look weird. DEZRA

I know. ARLIN

And... happy. DEZRA

Yes, and, something... else. ARLIN

What happened. DEZRA

(beat)

The stars. They're really perfect tonight, aren't they? ARLIN

What? DEZRA

I found a new constellation. On the way over here. ARLIN

What time is it? DEZRA

ARLIN

I don't know. Dezra - listen. I did it, Dezra. What you said?

DEZRA

Oh, Arlin, no. No.

ARLIN

What?

DEZRA

I think... I made a mistake.

ARLIN

No, you didn't. You really, *really* didn't.

DEZRA

How can we trust each other? With the weight of our hearts? My dad says... we can't. We can't trust each other. I can't trust you.

ARLIN

What, Dezra? No. No, listen -

DEZRA

Our eternal lives are on the line? Right? And we- we're playing with them. Tossing them into the air while our eyes are covered, letting them float and land wherever the earth pulls them!

ARLIN

I have something to tell you.

DEZRA

I don't want to hear it. I think. Go. I think we shouldn't talk to each other. Maybe ever.

ARLIN

Do you really believe that?

DEZRA

I don't know! I'm scared! And my dad said I've *damaged* myself and I'm shattered and I'm being consumed by agony and he said that you will betray me, absolutely, because humans lie and we're not perfect and I don't know but I feel all these feelings and I just need some help!

She's breathless.

ARLIN

Dezra! Dezra, stop. Listen to yourself. Those aren't your words.

DEZRA

I don't know my words.

ARLIN

Do you *feel* like you're being consumed?

DEZRA

No.

ARLIN

Do you feel shattered?

DEZRA

No. Not in a bad way.

ARLIN

I'm not going to betray you. I'd kill myself before I would ever even think of doing that.

DEZRA

Stop.

ARLIN

No. Dezra, listen to me. I did it. And, it was everything you said it would be, but it was not the same, you know, because, I'm... you are...

DEZRA

Yes.

ARLIN

I'm different. I feel different.

DEZRA

You do?

ARLIN

Yes.

DEZRA

In a good way?

ARLIN

I've never known anything this good. The stars are... looking at me.

DEZRA

Go on.

ARLIN

It felt like I was breaking into pieces. But in a good way.

DEZRA

Yes.

ARLIN

And there's this pulling, this weight, dragging me down to the center of the earth...

DEZRA

Yes -

ARLIN

And then this bursting open -

DEZRA

Yes!

ARLIN

And that whollop heart beat thump, like all the sound in the world is swallowing you -

DEZRA

Yes!

ARLIN

And it takes you over and your skin leaves your bones -

DEZRA

YES!

ARLIN

And you lift up, into the glowing warmth of the stars, and all I could think of was you.

DEZRA

What?

ARLIN

While it was happening. While I was, doing... that? All I could think of was you.

DEZRA

Arlin...

ARLIN

I know, I know. I don't understand, but I had to tell you.

DEZRA

You were thinking of me, like -

ARLIN

Like I wanted you to be in the stars with me.

DEZRA

Oh.

(beat)

ARLIN

I'm sorry. I mean, thank you. But also sorry. I'll go now.

DEZRA

No, don't.

ARLIN

You think I'm gross.

DEZRA

No.

ARLIN

You think I'm inappropriate.

DEZRA

No.

ARLIN

I couldn't help it. I think I love you.

DEZRA

What does that even mean?

ARLIN

I don't know. Everything. And nothing.

Silence.

Arlin throws himself on Dezra. They kiss.

They pull away.

Whoa.	DEZRA
Yeah. Ok. Sorry. Bye.	ARLIN
Arlin. Stop.	DEZRA
No, really, goodnight.	ARLIN
Arlin -	DEZRA
Don't tell anybody, ok?	ARLIN
Stop!	DEZRA
I have to have you!	ARLIN
What?	DEZRA
I can't deal with this thing inside me.	ARLIN
Me neither.	DEZRA
I kissed you.	ARLIN
Yeah.	DEZRA
That felt really...	ARLIN

Do you want a pear?

DEZRA

No.

ARLIN

Oh. Ok.

DEZRA

I mean, no, thanks. Not for me. I hate fruit.

ARLIN

Oh.

DEZRA

But you go ahead. Please? I'd like to watch you.

ARLIN

What?

DEZRA

Ummmm, oh nothing.

ARLIN

She bites.

What does it taste like?

ARLIN

Spring grass, and skin, and bedsheets, and wind. And light, and dust, and nectar. And...

DEZRA

And?

ARLIN

This?

DEZRA

She bites again, reeling in intoxication.

Visions start opening up.

You're beautiful.

ARLIN

So are you.

DEZRA

This is ok, that we do this?

ARLIN

Eat this pear?

DEZRA

No, this. This.

ARLIN

I don't know. Will you, touch me?

DEZRA

He grazes her body with his hand - across her stomach, maybe her breasts.

She moves his hand between her legs.

Oh my... God.

ARLIN

It's ok. Don't you feel that?

DEZRA

Yes. I feel it. This is ok?

ARLIN

I don't care.

DEZRA

I don't know how.

ARLIN

Yes you do.

DEZRA

You're so warm.

ARLIN

DEZRA

So are you.

She rolls him over and straddles him.

(beat)

ARLIN

Those stars I found tonight? I... umm, I named them after you.

DEZRA

You did?

ARLIN

Yes.

DEZRA

Will you show them to me?

ARLIN

I can't move.

DEZRA

Oh, ok.

ARLIN

I will, though, I just...

DEZRA

Not right now? Right?

ARLIN

Right.

They kiss with a panicky fever.

ARLIN

What's happening inside us?

DEZRA

The whole world.

Ok. ARLIN

DEZRA
Touch me, Arlin. Please. Don't be scared.

ARLIN
But I am.

DEZRA
I'm here. Feel my skin. We're here together. We're safe.

ARLIN
How do you know that?

DEZRA
I don't. But the stars are watching. They can help, right?

Stillness.

She kisses him.

She bites into the pear again. She swallows. Hard.

Porter appears with Cora.

Cora kisses him. He stops her.

When Dezra sees Porter, something inside her changes.

DEZRA
As soon as you let someone *else* play with this feeling you love so much, it will be done.
No... no, no.

She pushes Arlin away.

PORTER
I came here to tell you something.

CORA
Wait. Don't speak.

She kisses him again. He backs up.

CORA

Just listen. To yourself.

He waits. She kisses him again. He lets her.

CORA

How is the sky today?

PORTER

Happy.

CORA

Happy? Good.

She pushes Porter against the tree.

PORTER

Cora - wait.

CORA

I can't wait.

PORTER

You're so... consuming.

He gives in. She kisses him.

ARLIN

Dezra, what's wrong.

DEZRA

I... with you, no, because we can't. Because it will be over.

ARLIN

What will be over?

DEZRA

I don't know. Life? Me? I don't know... he said -

ARLIN

Who said?

DEZRA
My father.

ARLIN
Oh.

DEZRA
I think we can't. I think we aren't supposed to let that out. Beyond ourselves. Beyond... where its safe.

ARLIN
We are safe. This space between us. It's safe.

DEZRA
How do you know?

ARLIN
I don't. But the stars are watching you too.

DEZRA
Show me.

ARLIN
Show you?

DEZRA
Open *me*. Open me up wide and let the air come in and fill me with your safe breath. Let me feel it?

He moves his hands up underneath her skirt.

ARLIN
Oh...

CORA
Stay here with me.

PORTER
What?

CORA
Couldn't we just stay here? Forever?

PORTER
No, Cora. No. Wait -

He gently pushes her off of him.

CORA
What? Are you going to leave?

PORTER
No. I need to tell you something.

CORA
And what's that?

PORTER
I love you, Cora. I do.

DEZRA
I want to be everything to you. Arlin? Is that ok?

ARLIN
Ok.

DEZRA
My skin... it's like it's on fire. Oh god, Arlin -

ARLIN
Dezra!

DEZRA
Will you touch me? Inside? Please? I feel like I might rip in half...

He does.

PORTER
I want to feel you. Without this...

CORA
Guilt.

PORTER
Yes. Fine. Without it. I want to find truth in you.

Find it, then.	CORA
We can't, Cora. Not like this?	PORTER
Why not?	CORA
Because...	PORTER
You don't have an answer, do you.	CORA
Arlin, be my insides. Can you?	DEZRA
You look full of moonlight.	ARLIN
I am. Please. Please, Arlin.	DEZRA
Dezra - I, I...	ARLIN
I love you. I love you with all the love that comes from the ground beneath us. It's ok, you don't have to say anything. I feel it enough for both of us.	DEZRA
<i>He penetrates her.</i>	
<i>They make love for the first time.</i>	
Everyday you come here.	CORA
I have to see you.	PORTER
And you resist me.	CORA

PORTER

I can't have you.

CORA

You can. Each day, I awake with the sun and I stare at it - into its joyful and burning eyes looking back at me, and I open up my cavity to let it in. Let it burn through me. I imagine my body's blood wrapping a bridge of itself to the sun, allowing the little drops of light to ride back to me on that red vine. My skin tingles with touch. My touch, the touch of another. Doesn't matter. Tingling. Sensation. Gets me. Right... *there*. That feeling... is perfect. It's like a pull from the center of me to the molten core of the earth. When I touch the dirt it feels like love. Love is inside the dirt. Love is in everything we are and everything we eat and everything we touch. It's in our spit, and tears, and skin. Our hearts are made of it. We're made of it. You love me?

PORTER

Yes.

CORA

Then you have to let love in.

PORTER

I could. If...

CORA

If what?

PORTER

It would only take a few meetings with the Elders, Cora. I need you, Cora.

CORA

Then have me.

He kisses him gently. He sinks into it - truly.

He lets her push him to the tree.

CORA

I love you, too, Porter.

Cora and Porter disappear.

Dezra rolls over on top of Arlin.

Silence. Except for the whollop.

Cora appears, in the tree, watching.

Arlin and Dezra reel in the moment.

ARLIN

Wow. Just, wow.

Silence.

ARLIN

Dezra? Look. Look at the sky. The stars. Those are the ones. Our constellation.

Silence.

ARLIN

Dezra? Look, past that branch, those two really bright ones?

DEZRA

Yeah.

ARLIN

That's it. And the ones around it. Aren't they amazing? I... feel so alive!

DEZRA

Yeah.

ARLIN

Dezra? Are you ok?

DEZRA

Yeah. I'm fine.

ARLIN

Wasn't that amazing?

DEZRA

Uh-huh. Yeah.

ARLIN

Is something wrong?

DEZRA
Do you feel like someone is watching us?

ARLIN
What? No... Do you see the stars?

DEZRA
I feel like... there's someone else here. You know? That feeling?

ARLIN
Dezra, please. We just... that was incredible. Wasn't it?

DEZRA
Yes.

ARLIN
Like, the most amazing thing to ever happen. To me. In the whole universe.

DEZRA
Yeah. Me too.

ARLIN
You're not even listening to me.

DEZRA
I am. Arlin. Can't you feel that?

ARLIN
Feel what?

DEZRA
Someone's eyes... staring at us.

ARLIN
I'm sorry, I don't. Is something wrong? Did I do something wrong?

DEZRA
No.

ARLIN
Let's not tell anyone, ok?

DEZRA
Why?

ARLIN
Just don't ok, because now I feel all weird and so just don't. Let's not.

DEZRA
Ok.

ARLIN
Ok.

DEZRA
Was that how it is supposed to be?

ARLIN
What? Well, yes, or, I mean... yes?

DEZRA
Oh. Ok.

ARLIN
What? Just say it.

DEZRA
I kind of liked it better when I did it.

ARLIN
Oh.

DEZRA
By myself.

ARLIN
Ok.

He stands and put his clothes back on.

DEZRA
Arlin, wait, stop.

ARLIN
Stupid. I was so stupid.

DEZRA
That's not what I meant.

ARLIN

Why did you tell me you love me? You don't love me!

DEZRA

Yes, I do, I do! I just... God! It's totally overwhelming! Hello? Is someone there?

ARLIN

See! You're not even paying attention to me! You don't love me!

DEZRA

I do - I just... I'm just saying that for me -

ARLIN

I know, I know - I didn't do that right. Well excuse me, I've never done that before.

DEZRA

Neither have I.

ARLIN

Well then how do you know? Maybe *I* did it right! Maybe you were the one who was bad!

DEZRA

No one was bad, that's not what I'm saying.

ARLIN

That is what you're saying! I didn't do it right and now you're all... frigid.

DEZRA

There's no right, there's no wrong, there's just my body. And your body. And they have to find their ground, together. You know?

ARLIN

I think you're crazy. Actually. Yeah, fine.

DEZRA

Arlin - I thought I wanted you that close to me...

ARLIN

But you don't.

DEZRA

I do, I'm just scared.

ARLIN

Oh, now you're scared! You know what? I'm leaving.

DEZRA

Arlin, don't - please.

ARLIN

You have your father in you! You know, you - you told me I was the one who needed to let go. But you're the one so full of judgement!

DEZRA

I'm not.

ARLIN

You are. You think you're so... enlightened.

DEZRA

Arlin...

ARLIN

Goodbye, Dezra. I - I - I, I named stars after you!

DEZRA

Please, don't go.

ARLIN

Like you care!

DEZRA

I do care! I just, oh, God, what is that?

ARLIN

I'll see you around. Please pretend this never happened.

DEZRA

But, Arlin, I - I don't want - I do love you!

He storms off.

Cora appears.

CORA

You. It's... you. It is so good to be able to look at you. To see you.

DEZRA
You were watching us.

CORA
No.

DEZRA
But you were... here?

CORA
I have no choice in that matter. You look hungry.

She hands a pear to Dezra.

DEZRA
No thank you.

CORA
You have to.

She pushes the pear into Dezra's hands.

DEZRA
I don't want anymore of those.

CORA
They only tell you what you need to know.

DEZRA
I don't want to know anymore.

CORA
I said what you *need* to know. Go ahead, Dezra.

She bites.

Cora seems to swell with relief as a vision spills into the Grove.

Cora helps conjure the memory as she releases from the tree...

CORA
Hear my words...
I know the fate that will find us - and it is one of misery.

Contempt and control
and I don't want it!
It has me
Within its grip and I can't continue
Keep us!
Hold us near, within the veins of green.
With all I am I beg you!

Cora is holding baby Dezra.

CORA

A girl. You're a girl. A girl. Dezra. I'm going to call you Dezra. For the way I feel in my heart, and head, and soul. Right now. This feeling. Full of living. Dezra. In all my days alive on this earth... I've never seen such fear and beauty. It's dangerous, isn't it? But that danger is the living. And we will live. Here. Rise up, beside me. Underneath me. Underneath us. Whatever God might be out there - or from the wind or the soil or something. Raise us up in sanctuary. Keep us here!

Nothing.

Then, a root climbs out of the ground and wraps itself around Cora's ankle.

Another root emerges, and climbs quickly up Cora's leg.

CORA

Dezra - I swear to you now that you will never know this place of threat. You will never be taken.

Cora closes her eyes and lets the roots climb up over her, basking in the silent transformation.

Porter voice is heard, entering the Grove:

PORTER

Cora? Come now, everything is ready. We have to hurry - the ceremony is starting.
Cora?

Porter sees her.

PORTER

What's happening to you -

CORA

A girl. I named her Dezra. We're not coming with you. We're staying here, to live.

PORTER

You did this? Alone? No, no no, we're getting married today!

CORA

No, we're not. I see your mother. I see my mother. Their souls have been sucked dry. By the stagnant air. The pages and pages of *wrong*. You want to make me disappear. We needed this... refuge.

PORTER

From me?

CORA

I won't let you tame me. Make me like every other woman in that forsaken town!

PORTER

You are being completely ridiculous! Come out of there!

CORA

I can't, Porter. It's done.

PORTER

Give her to me.

CORA

She's part of me now. You can't compete with this. You can't pray or learn your way out of this, Porter. Goodbye.

The roots thicken, climbing further up.

PORTER

You lied to me.

CORA

As you did to me.

PORTER

Give me our daughter!

CORA

Never.

(beat)

In an instant, Porter climbs the gnarled trunk, snatching baby Dezra out of Cora's grasp.

Porter! CORA

Dezra. Dezra - I, I - you're so perfect. PORTER

Please... CORA

I should never have trusted you... PORTER

She's tied to this. She's part of this now. She always will be. No matter what you do. CORA

Your threats mean nothing. You're dead to me. I should have stayed in God's shadow. PORTER

He runs out, as the trunk swallows Cora.

Dezra, in the present moment, is in breathless shock.

You needed to know. Come here... CORA

Cora tries to take her hand.

Don't please. I don't even know what you are. What I am... You're... Mother? DEZRA

The discovery hits Dezra.

End of Act I.

Act II:

Dezra reels in the weight of her discovery, her life, her whole being.

DEZRA

Love does not have one meaning. It is just inside us, all of us, and you can choose to open up to it or you can choose to turn away from it, thinking you know better than the earth. The weight of ourselves is so huge - I sometimes can't wrap my hands around it. But now - just in this moment - I feel like I see the bottom of it. I see it. I know - what I am. And where I am. And... I love.

Porter storms into the Grove.

He carries with him a sack of books, which spill out as he walks.

He reads from one...

PORTER

*And I speak now to thee;
And beg you to hear my warnings!
You shall no longer hold want of this desire.
Let it be cast out!
And may you be led to brightness!
Without which, your eternal suffering shall be unmeasured.*

DEZRA

I'm not leaving.

PORTER

*Your grip on life is growing weaker by the second,
Your grasp of true faith in the gift of life is dying,
And you have one chance to redeem your soul in the eyes of the creator!*

DEZRA

I said I'm not leaving.

PORTER

*You shall come to know your transgressions,
You shall come to bear their wound on your skin
Forever marking your mistake in consequence.*

DEZRA

I'm staying here. My birthplace.

(beat)

Porter lowers the book.

PORTER

What did you say?

DEZRA

I was born here, wasn't I?

PORTER

Your words show signs of madness.

CORA

Remember the dirt, Dezra.

DEZRA

I *know*, Dad.

PORTER

You know nothing! You are too young to know what you're doing, to know the ground you tread on. He came to me. Running, panting. Banging on the door. He told me, Dezra.

DEZRA

What?

PORTER

You seem surprised.

DEZRA

But he said not to tell anyone...

CORA

Remember the stones... beneath the soil.

PORTER

I guess he changed his mind.

DEZRA

I love him.

PORTER

No. You think you do. But you cannot possibly know what that means. You don't have enough life in you. You say you love him...

CORA

Keep feeling.

PORTER

He betrayed you.

DEZRA

No he didn't! I don't care... that he left! I don't care! Where is he?

PORTER

I sent him home. You are not to see him. Ever again! Pick up your things. I've made arrangements for you.

For you are meant for greater things than this.

You are made for something pure.

DEZRA

I'm staying here. I know what you did. I know my place... here. And there's nothing to want beyond it. So... go.

Arlin runs in, breathless.

ARLIN

Dezra, oh my god, your Dad found me and he made me tell him and I'm so scared - he's going to kill me!

PORTER

Hello, Arlin.

ARLIN

No. Oh, no. Look, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what happened. Please, please don't hurt me.

PORTER

I told you to stay away.

DEZRA

Arlin, you came back?

ARLIN

I love you.

DEZRA

Maybe it's too late.

But I do -

ARLIN

CORA

Dezra - remember the path your heart walks on. Give me your hand...

DEZRA

What am I supposed to do?

PORTER

Don't say another word, Dezra. Just gather your things!

CORA

Give me your hand.

DEZRA

Why?

PORTER

For we will walk to where there is light!
And true faith will guide us beyond indiscretion!
No creature will stand in my way as I move beyond this pain!

ARLIN

I'm not letting you take her!

CORA

Do you trust me?

Dezra nods.

She extends her hand to Cora.

Cora slices her own arm, and then Dezra's.

A sharp inhale from Dezra...

A transformation begins.

ARLIN

Dezra, are you ok? You're bleeding?

PORTER

You stay away from her!

Dezra - CORA

What is this. DEZRA

You're here now. With me. How long I have waited for this. CORA

The worlds settles.

Porter is struck. He can see Cora.

Cora. PORTER

Hello, Porter. CORA

Is it... is it really you? PORTER

After so long... you seem to me not as I remember... CORA

How do I seem? PORTER

Hello, Arlin. CORA

Ummm, hi? ARLIN

Cora? How... how do I seem? PORTER

I'd hoped you'd be different. CORA

Dezra is tied in with the tree.

Time is different.

The air is different.

DEZRA

Do you see me? Look at me. Tied to this place. I didn't do this. Not alone.

ARLIN

I want to free you. I do. I want to free you and find a way to make this up to you. I want to fix this for you, and you'll be mine forever and I will love you right. Your father told me you're too much...

DEZRA

What did he say?

ARLIN

When I told him, he spoke to me.
About the universe.
And the heavens.
And about our... sinful nature.
Not pure. Wrong.
And full of evil.
I don't want to die having lived incorrectly.
But now I understand the truth.
That we aren't meant for pleasure.
Seeking that is what did this to
us in the first place.

PORTER

*Life does not measure itself in minutes
Life measures itself in faith
The universe holds value in living
Living within the shadow
Living within truth
Within this you will find purity*

*Now you will see you the truth
That will guide to acceptance.
If your vision is clouded with flesh,
Your fate is in the dark.*

DEZRA

Arlin - those aren't your words. That is not our love.

ARLIN

You have a fever in you that keeps you separate from devotion. And it's ok - you don't have to be perfect right now. I sense your *true* perfection. If I get us out of here, *when* I get us out of here - I'm going to make such a good future for us.

DEZRA

Life?

ARLIN

Yes, isn't that what you -

DEZRA

I don't know. I wanted *now*. With you. That is life. To me.

PORTER

The universe holds value in living...

ARLIN

I wasn't good enough for you.

DEZRA

Good... what a useless word. For that. It just wasn't complete, Arlin. Not that time. Tell me it didn't feel... different. When you were alone. That it didn't lift you higher or cloud your vision deeper. Tell me the whollop wasn't quieter. When we were together.

ARLIN

I couldn't even hear the whollop after we... After we were together.

DEZRA

I didn't mean it wasn't right. I think it was. Even if you don't. Because you help me feel more like myself. Help me feel further inside myself. Reflecting back at me what I am. To the rest of the world. Mixing with my own visions of myself.

ARLIN

I do that?

DEZRA

Yes, Arlin. Like the stars.

ARLIN

You can't even see them in here. It's like the trees got bigger. What is happening to me? I have these whirling feelings - no, they're not feelings, they're like pangs, like hunger, and they won't stop - they're tormenting me. And I try to answer them but it's wrong and I can't do it right! And I love you but you don't love me in the same way. And now this is done. You're... attached.

CORA

Arlin - shouldn't you be going?

ARLIN

What? I can't. I can't leave.

CORA

You can trust me Arlin - tell me: why Dezra?

ARLIN

Why Dezra...

PORTER

Cora - stop it.

CORA

No. He needs to answer. When I look at him I see a faceless boy. Scared, in need of something to control. Something to tame. Scared of knowing anything that some other person didn't already name as fact.

DEZRA

That's not true.

CORA

Let him prove that. Arlin?

ARLIN

Why Dezra? Because she terrifies me.

CORA

Faceless boy...

ARLIN

No - no, I mean, like she really terrifies me. Like she shakes my insides with panic. Because she's so... open. And I want that. And she tried to give that to me and I tried to take it, but even then, I got scared. I admire her. I do. There, I said it. I wish I were more like her. I don't want to tame her. I would die if she were tame.

CORA

And yet... you tried.

ARLIN

I wasn't trying to do *that*.

CORA

I know. You weren't *trying* to. But you were. Accidentally. Which is even more dangerous. Packaged with the promise of difference... but the same as every one of you who has walked before.

ARLIN

What if I am different?

CORA

You're not.

ARLIN

She is, though.

CORA

Yes. *She* is.

ARLIN

And I think she changed something in me.

CORA

That's an easy feeling. The giddiness of pleasure, of being wanted.

ARLIN

But she doesn't even want me.

DEZRA

Yes, I do.

ARLIN

You do?

DEZRA

I never said I didn't. I just also want myself.

CORA

I see your fate, Arlin. You will always be bound by artificial truth. You shouldn't be surprised, Dezra. I've seen this forming from the first day of your life.

DEZRA

You've always seen me?

CORA

I always felt you, knew you.
Everything you know, I know.
And everything I know, you know.
Every taste you've ever tasted, I have tasted.
Every smell you've smelled, so have I.
Every sound,
every feeling,
every dream, every fear, every hope
I've experienced.
The sensations that I hold within my touch,
you're beaming with them now.
We're connected, Dezra.
We're made of the stones of this earth.
In every woman waiting to roll down hills of living.
But in us, they sit differently.

PORTER

*You shall come
To know your transgressions
You shall come
To bear their wound
To forever mark your mistake
And consequence.*

CORA

You're told you're too much?

Sometimes?

DEZRA

I can't see them...

ARLIN

That the very center of you is wrong?

CORA

Yes.

DEZRA

You shall come to know your transgressions.

PORTER

It's not true.

CORA

I know. Arlin and I -

DEZRA

He's no different.

CORA

He is, though. He is.

DEZRA

I can't see them...

ARLIN

Look at him. I saved you. And now we can be together.

CORA

In this?

DEZRA

To know the cold ground of death and the warm soil of life and the glittering mess of air and space - all at once. That's life. I should know.

CORA

I never knew who you were. All that time. I just walked blindly, thinking I only had a father.

DEZRA

You are my daughter. You have walked by my side.

PORTER

DEZRA

Did you always miss me?

CORA

Every day - every new leaf, every turn of every root.

DEZRA

And my father...

PORTER

We will walk to where there is light.

CORA

I loved him.

DEZRA

But not anymore.

CORA

Not so simple.

DEZRA

It is simple. It's all simple. I love you or I don't. Those are our choices. What is this thing you've done to me? I wanted to see you, everyday for so long. And now that you're here, in front of me to touch... you're just like him.

CORA

Dezra, no.

ARLIN

I can't see them...

DEZRA

You did this to me. You thought it was a blessing. But it's a curse.

CORA

It's very far beyond your understanding.

DEZRA

I thought we've lived the same *everything*. That we've felt the same *everything*.

PORTER

The universe holds value in living...

We understand differently.	CORA
	DEZRA
You unearthed those memories for me.	
	CORA
I do this for your protection...	
	DEZRA
Protection from what?	
	CORA
That boy will betray you. I watched it seep into every other woman. Trying to turn you into a breathless shell. I know this! Your words gone. Your body barricaded. I saved you from that danger.	
	DEZRA
Danger.	
	CORA
You can <i>be</i> .	
	ARLIN
<i>I can't find them.</i>	
	DEZRA
Danger?	
	PORTER
<i>To bear their wound...</i>	
	CORA
You're better off this way.	
	DEZRA
But. No. The danger is the living, right?	
	CORA
What?	
	DEZRA
You said it. <i>The danger is the living.</i> Right?	
	ARLIN
<i>Find them...</i>	

CORA

That was a different time. These actions, these things you've let him do to you... They will only bring harm.

DEZRA

What actions?

CORA

That *feeling*.

ARLIN

I can't...

DEZRA

You're made of those feelings!

(beat)

DEZRA

And so am I.

CORA

You think you know what comes of love. Dezra. You don't.

DEZRA

And you do?

CORA

Through this... I have learned. The truth. I want to share it with you.

ARLIN

I can't...

CORA

Those feelings, sensations... You should have saved them. For yourself. Let them live here.

PORTER

Without which, your eternal suffering shall be unmeasured.

DEZRA

I don't want to.

CORA

They will watch you blossom into your true form, and they will be unable to do anything about it.

DEZRA

Your heart is rotting with anger.

CORA

Look deeper.

DEZRA

It is. And I don't want any part of it.

ARLIN

I can't... Is it normal to not be able to see the stars in here?

CORA

No. The fullness today is quite... rare. It makes this place swell up - it's not used to holding this much life.

ARLIN

Usually, when the stars are out, you see them?

CORA

Yes.

ARLIN

I found some stars the other night. I had never seen them before - when I saw those stars, it opened something up in me the same way Dezra did. I saw something bigger than myself. Bigger than my thoughts and dreams. And it was a horrible and wonderful feeling. And I told Dezra and it felt so right. She lets me out. She makes me feel what I've always thought the stars must feel every night, hanging in the sky above us, knowing exactly the way the sun is going to look when it rises, but being astounded by its beauty anyway.

DEZRA

Arlin -

ARLIN

I would be lying if I said I understood my love. I don't. I don't know if I will. But I love you. In my way. Because you make me feel life.

Arlin and Dezra connect.

Porter chants, very quietly, in desperate prayer for meaning.

CORA

You have many things to live for - beyond this place. Leave.

ARLIN

But -

CORA

Go. Release yourself from this.

ARLIN

I will not. I would rather live in this place, forever, than be without this feeling. I'm not leaving without it. Without Dezra. So, if I have to be here to have it, fine.

CORA

You're not part of this!

DEZRA

He is. If you want him gone so badly, then let me go too. Let me go and I'll take him with me. I'm sorry if you hate my father. But I don't. And I don't hate Arlin. And I don't hate you. And I don't hate myself. Let me go.

CORA

You belong here! This is your place - your connection rests within this ground and you must stay! Find your path within this... within *this*...

DEZRA

Then maybe you should leave. We'll stay. Go. Leave us. I'll find my path.

CORA

I can't.

ARLIN

You do to her the very thing you tried to flee from...

CORA

I can't.

DEZRA

I'm telling you to leave me!

A cacophonous racket:

DEZRA

Just go. Go! Go! Go away from me! From us! Go! Go! Go! I don't want you here I want to do this myself I want you gone away from me away from us away from this feeling within me because it's mine not yours so leave me leave me leave me!

ARLIN

You do to her you do to her you do to her the very thing you tried flee from flee from flee flee flee from. You do to her the very thing you tried to flee from. You do to her the very thing you tried to flee from. Dezra. You do to her. You do to her. Dezra. Dezra. Dezra.

PORTER

I speak now to thee, I speak now to you, to me, to her, to the sky, the ground, your insides, I speak to thee and cast you away from this place, your transgressions, something pure, you need something pure, within you, you're not well, you rot within you, Dezra, Dezra, Dezra, I cast you out, I cast you away, away from your transgression, away from darkness, I speak now to thee!

CORA

I can't leave. I can't leave this place.

PORTER

I always hoped for more. For you.

DEZRA

There is always more. You just have to let yourself want it.

CORA

And so did I.

PORTER

What happened to you?

DEZRA

Everything you tried to keep me from.
My body. Love. Tears.
You know what? It hurts less than resisting.
What's the point?
When you release, and let everything in,
Trusting yourself
To navigate the desperate seas of life,
That's faith.
I know what I want now.

CORA

You think sometimes that you know
But in all those moments of blame
It was just panic
Just fear
Wearing a mask of understanding
Wearing a veil of deeper meaning.
What about this?
That one thing in the shadow...
I know what I want now.

PORTER

What's that?

DEZRA

That one thing. That you seem to forbid so completely.

CORA

That I turned my back on.

PORTER

What.

DEZRA

I wish you might someday know the feeling. And the immense love it brings with it.

PORTER

I did know it once. I wanted to be a part of it. Of feeling. Of knowing. Of living.

DEZRA

The danger is the living. Right?

(beat)

Arlin hands Dezra a pear.

DEZRA

But you hate fruit.

ARLIN

Oh well.

CORA

There's nothing more to see.

DEZRA

There is. I know it. There is so much more.

Arlin and Dezra bite together.

DEZRA

We could be so perfect. I know it. In this lifetime, and others beyond it, we can have happiness. And truth. And we won't own any of it, or be able to call any of it our own. And that's so perfect, isn't it?

PORTER

Looking at you right now, I don't recognize you, Dezra.

CORA

I do.

PORTER

Look at what we created.

CORA

Against our strongest efforts.

PORTER

Like they all exploded into... her. This force.

CORA

I begged for the change to come -
and when it did
it sealed me here. Forever.
It's felt like forever...

(beat)

A moment.

Cora's feet touch the ground for the first time since...

Dezra frees herself.

Porter walks towards Cora, his hand extended to her.

Cora walks to him on his path of books.

PORTER

And I speak now to thee;
And beg you to hear
May you be led to brightness.
For we will walk to where there is light.
True faith will guide us beyond indiscretion.
You shall come to know your transgressions.
You shall come to bear their wound.
Life does not measure itself in minutes
Life measures itself in faith
The universe holds value in living
Living within the shadow
Living within truth
Within this you will find purity

Now you will see...
That which will guide you to acceptance.
For you are meant for greater things than this.
You are made for something pure.

CORA

For you are meant for greater things than this. You are made for something pure.

She places her hand on him.

Her touch moves him, as if emerging from a haze.

PORTER

Cora.

CORA

You are made for something pure. Aren't you...

ARLIN

Dezra - I see this, wonderful warmth. It's surrounding us. Can you feel it?

DEZRA

Yes. I can feel it Arlin.

CORA

You know my place. Our history is built. And now...

DEZRA

There's a space for you. For both of you.

PORTER

Just in this moment. You all look full of moonlight.

CORA

We are.

PORTER

I do want it. And I always have.

CORA

I know. We are meant for something pure...

Porter and Cora disappear, together.

ARLIN

They're gone.

DEZRA

And now we now. You could leave. Walk away. Look, you could go.

ARLIN

Come with me.

DEZRA

They're gone. We live. They're gone.

She breaks down - The weight of her loss finally hitting her.

ARLIN

Dezra. Look at me. Touch my skin. Can you feel the vibrations?

DEZRA

We're here together. You're here.

They kiss.

A new brightness shines down on them.

DEZRA

Look, Arlin. Look at the sky.

ARLIN

That's it. Our constellation.

DEZRA

We live beyond the dirt. And we live beyond the clouds.

ARLIN

Beyond the stars.

DEZRA

And so we'll find everywhere in between. Find the gifts to be taken. Wherever they live. Within us, beyond us. Feel my skin. Breathe with me. And I'll hold the light of our stars within me, the feeling of our ground beneath me. And we'll remember what's true.

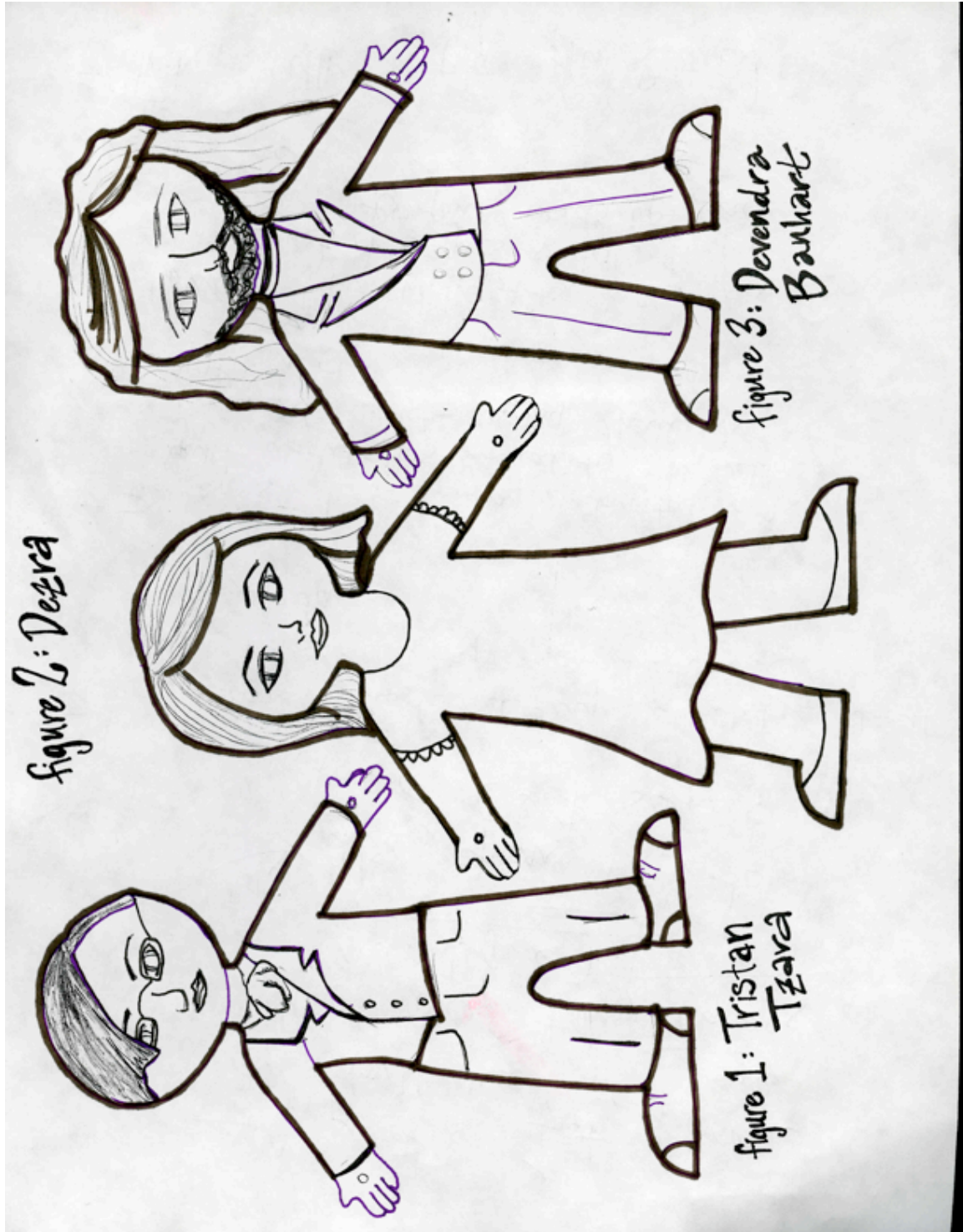
They breathe and, finally:

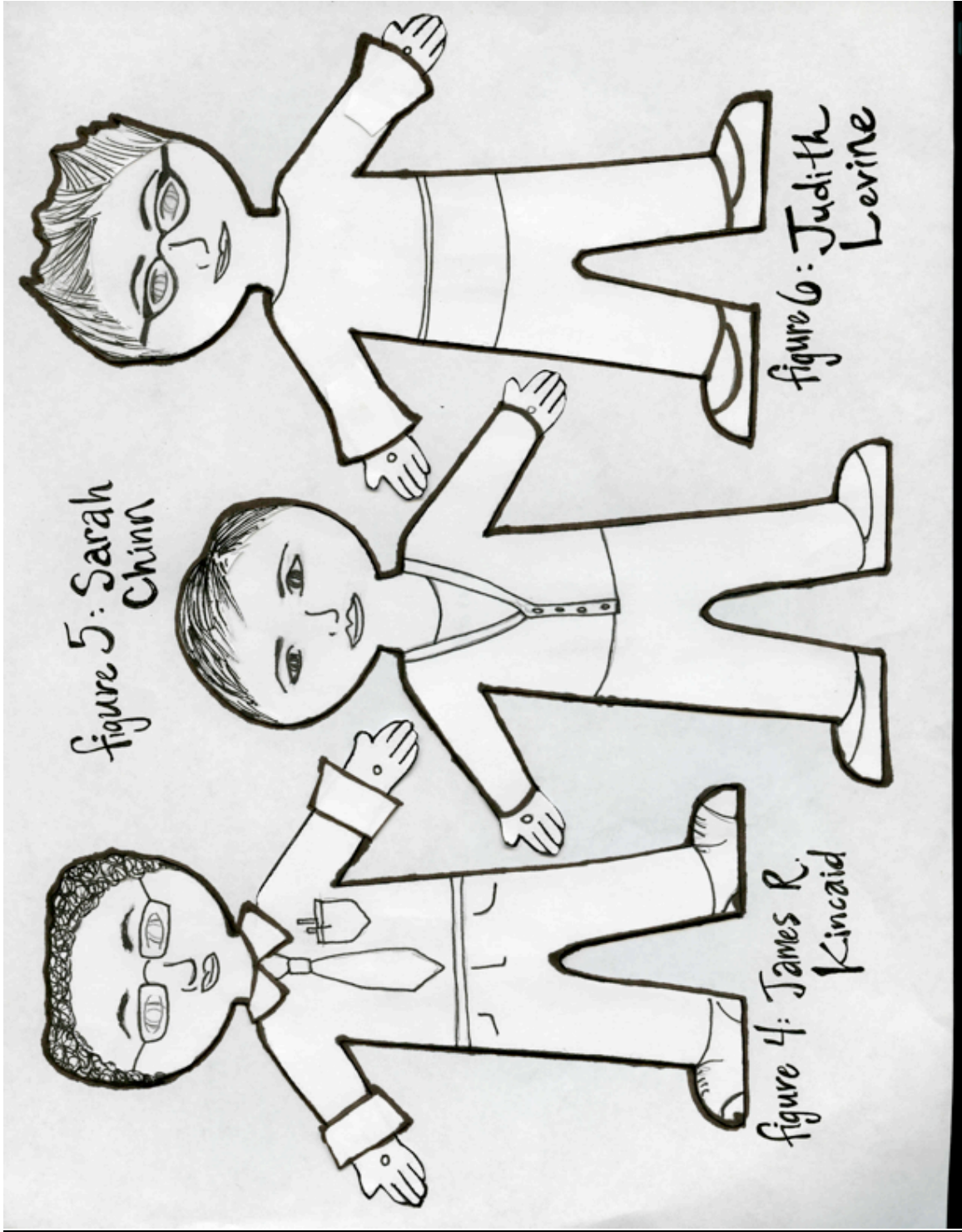
They walk out of the Grove, together.

The Grove breathes a sigh of relief.

End of play.

Figures





Notes

ⁱ From *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries's* "Dada Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love," translated by Barbara Wright (London, John Calder Ltd., 1977).

ⁱⁱ From the song *I Feel Just Like a Child*, off of Banhart's 2005 album "Cripple Creek."

ⁱⁱⁱ This is not say that I am not equally obsessed with the construction and action of adolescence outside of American cultural bounds. For the purpose of this endeavor, however, which is in pursuit of a new method in which to engage adolescence in modern American drama and performance, I am keeping my scope bound within the bounds of the, admittedly subjective, American culture.

^{iv} I should point to Chinn's assertion that the adolescents in turn of the century America were actually quite tame. Certainly in comparison to future generations, but even in comparison to their own parents.

^v *The Confessions of St. Augustine* translated and edited by Albert C. Outler (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1955), Book Two, Chapter IV.

^{vi} "I did not desire to enjoy what I stole, but only the theft and the sin itself," from *The Confessions*.^{vi}

^{vii} These questions become even more vivid when considering "alternative" staging concepts, especially in spaces akin to black box theatres. What permissions, or limitations, are opened up by the ability to negotiate the bodies of the audience members and the performing bodies of the actors simultaneously? What does this ask of the audience? Is it an invitation or provocation?

^{viii} See Anne Bogart's *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (London, Routledge, 2001). Bogart's interpretation of violence is quite inspiring, asserting that even moving a chair into a certain spot is a violent act. It is my opinion that Bogart's effort is not to criminalize every action as a hurtful, aggressive act, but rather, to frame a way in which we can acknowledge violence in a productive, not only destructive, way.

^{ix} This "choice as axe" thought is not meant to criminalize the act of making a choice. Within the choice, there will surely be new possibilities to discover. The point is that making a choice eliminates at least one element of an argument, tension, etc... Therefore, it is violent in nature since its purpose is elimination.

^x From Peter Brooks' *The Empty Space* (Touchstone, New York, 1968): "The theatre is the arena where a living confrontation can take place. The focus of a large group of people creates a unique intensity - owing to this forces that operate at all times and rule each person's daily life can be isolated and perceived more clearly (p99)." Perhaps Brook's^x point is also pointing to the fact that as audience "watchers," the freedom to act back does not generally exist in traditionally staged live performance. Even in more experimental work - whether experimental in form and function or in performance mode - there is not a huge amount of "active" participation on the part of the audience. Obviously, watching and listening and receiving are active behaviors that imply engagement with the events being played out in front of the audience members.

^{xi} From Charlie Rose's interview with Adam Gopnick (New Yorker Magazine contributor) about the life and work of J.D. Salinger, answering the question of what he had learned from Salinger about writing (originally aired on February 1st, 2010).

^{xii} Final paragraph from Judith Levine's *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

^{xiii} I mean this not to dismiss, but to challenge. It's a friendly middle finger, like the kind your stupid friend might give in a candid photo(bomb).

^{xiv} Excerpt from *That One Forbidden Thing* by Erin Phillips, 2009 (Dezra's final transformation).

^{xv} I'm lying.

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