

Just the Song

JENNIFER BOWEN

~For E

The year is 1999 and no one knows if computers will cease computing or if planes will fall from the sky. This worries me not at all. Most days I work at a desk in front of a screen but focus, nervously, on my uterus, or more specifically, the centipede inside it. I like when the centipede squirms. I hate when the centipede is still. Thanks to ultrasound, I can picture the bean-shaped silhouette of the baby who I already know is a boy. I'm young—in my twenties—and full of conviction about how I will raise this, my first, child in the new millennium: breastfeeding, not bottle; books, not screens. I want badly to do it right, whatever that means. The small Iowa college town I live in smells of patchouli and promise, and my worries for my son revolve around attachment and his next breath, never civil unrest or a new world order. It is a failure of imagination born from living amidst cornfields in a time of peace that the thing I most worry about is feeling his next kick. To calm my fears, I need only to lean my belly into the corner of my keyboard so this baby can assure me he's alive. *Are you there?* each poke asks. I think some part of my brain will talk to this baby in the back of my mind for the rest of my life. *You OK? You still there?*

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Before he has language, he demands eye contact. He kicks for attention, then he smiles, then coos, and eventually tells one-word jokes that are funny only because of how hard he's trying. He wiggles his hips in coveralls and baby shoes. He sings along to all the songs and makes up his own. If he is quiet, it is because we're reading a book. When we are in our house, we are in stories; we live in sentences and song. When he is old enough to dress himself and turn the doorknob, he grabs a cape and cowboy boots and steps outside.

Oz, 2007

He is a be-glittered seven-year-old boy on stage for the first time wearing striped tights and blue circles painted on his cheeks. His mohawk is peaked like meringue, and he holds a giant wooden lollipop and dances like nothing in the world ever was or will be heavy.

Middle School

E plays one of three Martin Luther King Jrs. He gets to say, "The arc of the moral universe bends toward justice," which I tell him might be the best line he'll ever speak. Later E's a heel-kicking scarecrow in *The Wiz*. He's a beast in *Beauty and the Beast*. He sings everywhere he goes: in a wrestling singlet, in his underwear, in high tops and tap shoes.

Pecos Bill

At fifteen he plays a string of tall-tale characters from the Tundra on a stage set in bright primary colors and lit with warm yellow lights. He falls hard for Slue-Foot Sue and wears a tailored cowboy suit and acts—as directed—larger than life. His character chases girls in slinky dresses, then catches the girls, then two-steps with them and looks them up and down like the cowboys in the movies do. He spins the roulette wheel—spinning, spinning, *winning* in love and money and all the world until his body turns stiff. He's gambled himself to death, which makes the audience laugh. A perfect slapstick death. Part of my brain chuckles along with the crowd at the silliness, but a small part of me—the gut part—feels ill at the floppiness of my son's corpse as the casino man hoists him over his shoulder to haul away the body.

The Giver

At sixteen, he's cast as Jonah in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. Jonah lives in a world of conformity that's absent of all color, until he becomes The Receiver of Memory. The Receiver must absorb the entire history of his people in order to spare those same people pain or sorrow.

The first memory he ever receives is snow. Then a sled ride, a red sled down a hill. A broken arm. A flower blooms. As the play progresses, a sepia-hued screen, which doubles as The Receiver's growing consciousness, projects helicopters and flames. The first time he ducks to the sound of gunfire, I think of my dad, who heard those helicopters live in the jungle, not on screen. E's job is to act the part of a boy who must swallow his community's jagged history to spare his people pain. His character decides saving one human's life is more important than a pain-free existence. The show's director loans out her actual baby, Josiah, and straps him to E's chest in a baby carrier. The first time E hops on and off the getaway bike, I worry he'll fall and crush Josiah. He doesn't once hurt the baby, who remarkably never cries. He does his job, which is to say, he keeps an actual human safe, in real life and in the play, twice a day, every day, for twenty shows.

My son does not fare well in dystopia. When he's home, he is curled in his bed. When he isn't withdrawn, his interactions are clipped, acidic, impatient. Maybe it's the relentless work of a long show that makes him sour, or maybe the fact that he's toting a forty-pound human in a baby carrier, or maybe this imaginary world forces him into a deeper moral consciousness. Maybe this play ushered an end to a certain innocence. Whatever the reason, he's miserable in ways I've barely seen before. He doesn't sing, he sulks. I find myself wishing he were acting slapstick comedy again.

These are the years where I watch him trying on other people's skins, as all of us did and do. E morphs before my eyes, a different boy entirely.

Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson

This play happens in the primaries leading up to the 2016 presidential election when the reality-TV star's candidacy seems a punch line, not a threat. This is the month the protests at Standing Rock grow mighty and might just prevent the Keystone pipeline from going in the ground. The month I get drunk on the couch watching the protest via YouTube, and Obama halts the pipeline, and I think maybe the people do have power and maybe there are god(s) or good spirits

and MLK's arc is real and bending, not breaking. My kid/Andrew Jackson tells me his play is complicated because Andrew Jackson was an idiot. On stage my kid/Andrew Jackson stands in the Oval Office wearing a black leather jacket and hollering to the crowds: WHAT DO I DO NOW? WHAT DO THE PEOPLE WANT? Andrew Jackson discovers the presidency is hard as fuck. Trail of Tears is ended. Genocide doesn't seem to faze him much, but all these decisions? WHAT THE HELL DO I DO? In one scene there's a punk rock solo and a lot of fuming and the cabinet isn't angry because of Indigenous genocide, but because Andrew Jackson can't decide what kind of pizza to order and no one will help him and he realizes he is in over his head. He is so in over his head. *Populism, yea, yea.*

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Cabaret

Cabaret opens on the same day the former reality-TV star stands in the Capitol with his hand on the Bible. Thirty minutes into the inauguration of the man who chose for his chief of staff a white supremacist, my son enters stage left and sings, "I met this perfectly marvelous girl ..." The perfectly marvelous girl sits on his lap, the chair wobbles, perhaps more than it's supposed to, but they right themselves just before the fourth leg leaves the floor. In this play he has his first stage kiss with a boy in fishnet stockings, his first lap dance. He is Cliff, an American visiting Germany in 1931, while the new president looks at the screen in real life and denounces American carnage, pounding his fist and promising AMERICA FIRST, and my son and his friends are in a staged Berlin rooming house with fake drinks and merriment, and the actors—all high schoolers from Minnesota—are playing characters who are chatting and flirting and drinking at parties, and while the parties continue, swastika signs start popping up on walls behind them. Darkness is brewing in the Nazi Party, but no one pays it much mind.

The hour the 45th president is sworn in, my kid, "Cliff," befriends a Nazi. His new friendship is benign, even chummy, until the moment the Nazi takes off his overcoat. Cliff sees the swastika band around his thick upper arm. He refuses to run more errands to Paris, refuses to soften into approval for the Nazi Party. In the next scene the orchestra plays dissonant drumbeats. E, who is slim

and playful, looks vulnerable on the stage with the hulking guys who've banded together in the shadows. They wear leather and holler in German and skulk around the corner to beat the shit out of Cliff/my kid who makes the gut-punched sounds of a man getting kicked till something bleeds.

It is around this time in the inauguration that rain spits into a gray sky on the National Mall in Washington, DC.

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I began with the premise that above all I should flood my sons with love. That everything else would take care of itself. But even love has limits. Even when we love we get it wrong. That I'm experiencing this most viscerally in the middle of my life is, of course, a sign of breathtaking privilege. They have white skin. They have never been hungry. Only one so far has had to only play at dystopia and war. I no longer want to write an essay. I only want to say, my son is leaving soon. The other is soon to follow. I am going to miss my sons.

E is a person I love with laser focus and without hesitation. Everything I never thought to fear for him is simmering in the streets. We are hash marks on a timeline, kin to the same human family who 5,000 years ago etched carvings as witness of fear and awe on ancient rock. Prairies and forests burn and grow back and burn and grow back and whole communities morph and evolve and even, we must admit, devolve. Through it all, we raise our voices in song and in lament. We leave our record. E joins that tradition.

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When he was a freshman, E went through a zombie apocalypse phase. He brainstormed the physics of outwitting the undead, the strength of hiding holes. He squirreled away a stockpile of water jugs, pinto beans, and candles. His stash is still in the basement and now it reminds me of my friend who, since the election, is preoccupied with bugout bags, those survivalist packs filled with Bic lighters,

ropes, flares, dried peaches. They're meant to help us survive floods or drought or alien invasion. He never intended to research them; his subconscious just pulled him there, one midnight click at a time, and maybe wisely so. I compare bugout bags with E's zombie provisions and I check the dates on our passports and I envision rowing him across some lake to Canada. The US is chest-bumping North Korea. We wait for war. We see too many children of the new millennium take to the streets, march in Virginia with torches raised high, and this time it's not a play. A protestor is killed, others are beaten. Photos of a young black man with a bloody gash in his head are everywhere and so are photos of the white men who beat him, their mouths flanged open in angry shouts.

Vigilance, we all say. Our world might parallel 1930's Germany; we watch for signs and we see them:

The reality-TV star turned president attacks the media.

He endorses police brutality.

He demonizes people who look and believe and love differently.

The day after the election, radio stations ask the airwaves what song best suits the mood. We crave order; we need a story and we want that story's soundtrack. What is happening? What music fits our awareness that the arc of the moral universe is capable of *bending backward*? The clear winner according to those who called in to the radio station: REM's: "It's the End of the World as We Know It And I Feel Fine." The rapture, yes, but put to an intense let's-sing-our-demise beat. Should we survive, someone will surely stage a play about how we did so. I can picture the militia of white men marching in our city's streets, armed with semi-automatics. I hear the counter-protestors, the sound of Confederate statues toppling over. I hear that REM drumbeat in theaters fifty years from now, perhaps the same theaters in which E and his friends resurrected history on the stage. *World serves its own needs, listen to your heart bleed / Tell me with the Rapture and / the reverent in the right, right / You vitriolic, patriotic, slam fight, bright light ... / It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine.* But before the musical reaches a crescendo, some seventeen-year-old kid will practice the song in his room late at night. Another will recite excerpts of an inaugural speech, another a reporter's take on the Muslim ban, and another the words of a lying press secretary. The chorus will chant the sounds of those who resisted.

None of us knows what damage will be done before stories are made from the wreckage and what effect those stories might have on those who perform them. Right now, the country is still unraveling and E is packing his bags.

All I know right now is that my son is one second from grown and, only now I realize, proud but foolish—if he is armed with anything, he is armed with art.

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A puzzle: Two young men leave home to greet an angrier-than-expected world. One has a gun, the other can tap-dance. One has a pocket full of bullets, the other has just the song for this very occasion.

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The Giver is the play I return to most, not because it's the best performance or a transcendent play (it was neither), but because it's the first time I see E carry terror and care for a child, neither of which he's allowed to put down, even when he's tired. He crouched in imaginary jungles that my dad ruined and that ruined my dad. He learned (or pretended to learn, or learned because he's pretended) how people with power abuse those without. He discovered, in a matte gray world, a streak of the color that we call red: red for apples, red for sled, red for the blood that comes after bullets. Toni Morrison: *Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created*. E's character (that time) chose love over nothing; he bet on the future, even at the risk of death. Choices have consequences, and in the play that meant both boys may die; in real life, E's choice means he had a charming, slobbery, heavier-by-the-day baby strapped to his torso. Thus Baby Josiah, with his eager brown curls and dimples and drool, gazed for hours that added up to days staring straight into my son's eyes. Because he was too young to walk away from it, Josiah was stuck in this narrative. His mom dropped him into the play, and that baby carrier limited his field of vision, possibly by design. Some evil genius, maybe a formerly abandoned child, designed it.

Are you having fun with Josiah? I ask often. *Are you going to miss him when you don't see him every day?* E never says he misses the baby, not one time. Whether he's intolerant of kids or is simply a distracted teen, I'm not sure. Right now, he's excited about theater. He loves to talk about dropped lines and big dreams. Besides, telling this story has become a job for him, and his character has work to do, beyond affection (indeed because of it), which is why, again and again, he

hops on the getaway bike, one hand on the handlebars, the other on a baby's head, until the trip ends and he stops pedaling and crouches in a ditch and holds the baby in his arms. E touches Josiah's feet and whispers something the audience can't hear; he might be saying, *A cheeseburger sounds good* or *I'm tired as shit*, but we're meant to assume he's whispering something like *We'll be all right*. *Shhhhh*.

Shhhhh.

The snow falls and the lights dim and the helicopter thwacks through speakers, and these two kids breathe in and out—pulses synching, music rising. Sometimes when it replays in my memory, it feels like foreboding. Other times it just feels like a show. In either case, the ending seems right: find another person. Find a person to care for, and carry him as long as you're meant to, or until the curtains close.

