

where the air meets the water

a play
for two actors and two audience members

by Alexander Attea

characters

AJ	A writer. (Any, 20s)
CARA	A creative director. (W/NB, 20s)

time

The present. At the time of writing, about one year into the Covid-19 pandemic.

place

Chicago, Illinois.

notes on the text

- This play must be cast and performed with diversity in mind.
- This play may be concurrently performed with as many pairs of actors, in as many places, as geography, finances, and director's vision allow.
- This play may be performed multiple times in one day, if scheduling permits.
- Line breaks indicate when the audience member may like to respond, or the actor may improvise.
- If the audience member decides to respond, follow their instinct. Return to the story when it feels right.
- In the designated moments, the actor may choose to play any song that is resonating with them and let it inform the character's journey.
- The phone calls from AJ to Cara doesn't need to be timed exactly to the lines in the script. If they interrupt Cara, that's okay.
- If the stage manager needs to contact the actors during the performance, conduct the communication via text. The actors can then excuse themselves for being distracted by the text, and say they're responding to a friend or family member.
- ~~~ indicates points where an actor may choose to improvise.

before the air

AJ texts the audience member, "Hey, thanks for meeting up tonight. I'll be at [Meeting Place] at [Performance Time]. Probably just hanging out for a bit, you know the drill lol. I'll be wearing [Costume Description] in case you've forgotten what I look like (aka I'm aware it's been too long!) Let me know when you get here!"

When AJ arrives at the Meeting Place, 10 or so minutes before the show begins, they text the audience member again, "I just got here, see you soon! Let me know if you have trouble finding me."

While waiting, AJ could play some basketball.

the air

*AJ and the audience meet.
AJ is hanging out.
Maybe shooting a basketball, or on swings reading.
The important thing is: they meet.*

AJ

Hey!
Thanks for meeting me.
Especially on kind of short notice.
I appreciate it.
I've been having a day.
I figured it would be good to hang out with someone.
Talk.
You know?
Sometimes you just need to talk.
And you're a good person to talk to.
You know that.
It feels like any time I need to vent, or just talk things through, I call you.
Ha.
And the offer still stands, if you ever need to vent to me, you can.
Anyway, have you been good?

Good.
That's good.
We've been to this park before, right?

I like this spot.
It feels right to me.
I don't know.
Do you want in?

*Maybe AJ and the audience member play some basketball together.
Maybe not.*

Cool.
We can get moving soon, too.
It's a nice night.

So, you want to hear a funny story?
At work today, my boss got really obsessed with having me wash the windows.
Like, really obsessed.
Yeah, weird, right?
First, he asked me to get warm water, and I was looking all over the building and asking the janitor to use the slop sink, but all I could get was cold water.
So I came back and told my boss, and he was like, "I asked for warm water. When I ask you for something, you need to figure it out and get it done. Or tell me that you're having trouble."
And I was like, "Yeah. I'm telling you I'm having trouble."

He didn't say anything back to that.
Anyway.

I ended up finding warm water in one of the bathrooms, and had to pump the stupid bathroom sink faucet a million times to fill this bucket —

Like —

AJ demonstrates the faucet, exaggerated.

And then he insisted on demonstrating, like showing me exactly how to hold the squeegee and everything.

So I was really careful to do exactly what he said, exactly how he did it, because I just couldn't do it with him anymore.

I hate that he sees me as someone who half-asses things.

I guess I was just thinking, let his stupid power display wash over me and it'll be over soon.

So I squeegeed.

I felt like J. Pierrepont Finch.

You know, from *How to Succeed?*

The musical?

Yeah, that's a deep cut.

Ha.

Anyway, yeah, that was just part of the day.

But you get the idea

I keep telling myself, I'll find a new job soon.

I've been applying like crazy.

Well, I was, for a while.

Nothing really came through, though.

Speaking of being weirdly obsessed with something.

There was a time where I got really obsessed with this idea of being a Hemingway sort of writer.

The tragic creative.

I thought, to be a writer you had to erode yourself.

Expose the nerves.

You had to drink.

I've spent a lot of time thinking I wasn't truly a writer.

I hadn't suffered enough.

Have you ever felt that way?

I was trying so hard.

Seems stupid now.

Have you read *How To Write an Autobiographical Novel* by Alexander Chee?

And yes, I promise I won't go into one of my book rants.

I know I'm guilty of that.

Ha.

But yeah, I think you'd like it.

It's about the process of accepting yourself as an artist.

Well, it's about a lot of things, but —

I've been meaning to tell you about it.

I actually have it with me —

*AJ opens their bag to look for the book.
Sees something.*

Actually.

Can I get your opinion on something?

AJ pulls out a small gift bag.

I just want to talk through — this.

And yeah, what is it?

That's the question.

That's exactly the question.

My friend Cara gave it to me exactly three years ago.

When she first moved to Chicago.

She told me, "Give this back to me in three years.

Don't open it."

It was the first night we met.

We were both drunk.

I don't know why or how she singled me out, because I saw her walking around with this stupid gift bag for half the night, but for some reason she walked right up to me.

She said, "You look like someone I can trust."

Those were the first words she said to me.

I said, "Do I?"

She laughed at that.

I think we became friends because we had the same way of speaking around the things we really wanted to say.

And yeah, I blinked and it's been three years.

I never looked inside.

And now, after all this time, today's the day to give it back to her.

I wonder if she remembers it.

I've got it here, I've held onto it through three years, two apartments, the same shitty job —

I've built up this day of giving it back to her, and I haven't even called her so she'll know to meet up.

Ha.

Usually we make plans.

It's the anniversary of the day we met.

I've been putting off calling her, and now it's been a couple weeks, and she hasn't said anything —

But.

You're my most rational friend.

I mean, you know, you're good at giving me perspective.

I should probably call her.

You think I should call her?

I mean, yes.

Of course I should.
I should call her.
Okay.

AJ dials.

I'm terrible at phone calls.

AJ makes the call.

Hey, Cara.
It's me.
Yeah, it, um, it has.
How are you?
Good.
That's good.
Yeah, I'm good.
Just work, you know, and trying to write when I can.
Same old same old.
Yeah.
So, hey, I was wondering if you're free tonight?
Sorry that it's so last minute.
And sorry that I — well.
It's just that I have this — gift bag thing you gave me three years ago.
You told me to give it back to you?
Do you remember that?
Ha.
I don't know.
No, I haven't looked in it.
I want to give it back to you.
It's been exactly three years.
Well, you know that.
Ha.
Oh — yeah, okay!
That works for me.
The usual spot?
Cool, cool.
Yeah, no, I get it.
Okay, I'll see you then.
Okay.
Bye.

AJ hangs up.

So.
We're going to meet her in like twenty or so minutes, over by the lake.
What time is it now?

Okay, that works.
We'll start heading over there soon.

I'm kind of nervous about giving this back.
What is it she wanted me to hold onto?
The mystery's been killing me this whole time.

It's not, like, a family heirloom or something, do you think?
No.
I'm going to stop asking questions about it.
I'm only making myself curious.

Or like, a terrible secret?
Classified documents?
Proof of aliens?

You're thinking I should just open it.
I know how you think.
But no.
Nope.
I won't.
I'm not giving in.
You can't make me.

~ ~ ~

We should get moving.
Are you ready to go?
Let's head out.

I'm excited to walk around a bit.
It's nice out, we can take our time getting there.
Enjoy the night, you know?

They leave the first location, and begin walking.

God, this place can be so beautiful.
You know, one of my favorite things to do is walk around an unfamiliar place, and just take it in.
It's always what I look forward to most, whenever I get out of Chicago and go somewhere.
You can really get a sense of a place that way.
I love it.

~ ~ ~

AJ is silent for a few moments, walking.

I'm going to play a song.
It's a good night for some music.

AJ plays a song from their phone.

I've been listening to this like non-stop.
I'll listen to it like five, six times in a row.

It's been speaking to me, I guess.

*AJ is silent again.
They listen to the song.*

I'm trying to think if you've met Cara before.
I think you have.
You must've.
You've come to see my storytelling before.
I think you might've met her at one of those.

I remember when I first started storytelling.
I was a couple years out of college, and I hadn't really made any real friends yet, you know?
Obviously it was before I met you.
Anyway, I started performing at these storytelling events occasionally, every few months.
Just to get my writing out into the world, in front of people.
God, I miss those —
But this one night, one of the other storytellers was having an afterparty thing, and even though I
had to work early I said screw it and went.
I felt stupid at first, I didn't have anyone to talk to.
But yeah, that's where I met Cara.
It got later and later and we just kept talking.
The party got boring so we just walked.
Like now.
And this spot at the lake was where we ended up.
She said it's her favorite spot in Chicago.
Especially at night.

Meanwhile I was thinking "I think this could be my first Chicago friendship."

Think that's lame?
I said it out loud.
I said "I think you're my first friend in Chicago."
She said "Are you new to the city?"
I said, "Not really."
And she said, "Well, I'm honored."

I haven't told anyone else about this.
But we kissed that night.
We never talked about it.
We were both kind of drunk.
Maybe she doesn't even remember.
Then we just — became really good friends.
And, yeah.

Sorry.
I know I'm going down a rabbit hole.

~ ~ ~

I really miss those storytelling events.
I miss standing up there in front of people — you know?
I miss being in a group of strangers and watching someone reveal something about themselves.

Oh!

You'll like this.

When I was younger, like in high school and college, my friends and I used to do this thing called Collecting.

I mean, it's stealing, we stole things.

But we called it Collecting because the rule was it had to be replaceable, it wouldn't really be missed, and it couldn't have a price tag on it.

That's how we justified it.

So we took things like price signs from grocery store shelves, clocks from the walls of empty classrooms, employee of the month photos, that sort of thing.

The more bizarre, the better.

We thought it was hilarious — mainly the thought of someone eventually noticing.

Like, the poor employee of the month: "Did someone take my picture? Who would do that?"

I guess it was pretty cruel, in retrospect.

Once I took a construction sign from the parking lot of a Kohl's — they were repaving it in zones, and the signs said "Phase One", "Phase Two", etc.

We went in under the cover of night and I grabbed "Phase Four."

I liked the way it rolled off the tongue.

Phase Four.

My college friends called me Phase Four for a while.

I liked that.

Like I was just on one phase of a journey, like I was not yet complete.

Like there were better things to come.

It makes me think of this book I read by Jhumpa Lahiri.

About her process learning Italian, immersing herself in Italian books, taking trips to Italy, then finally moving to Rome.

Then she wrote this book, in Italian, about the whole thing.

She wrote a lot about her uncertainty with the language, a hyper awareness of her own shortcomings, how she felt like she was faking it the whole time.

But to me it seemed like it was perfectly planned out.

She did it phase by phase.

Anyway.

Sorry.

No more book rants, I promise.

What was I talking about?

Collecting — yes!

I tried to get Cara to go Collecting with me once.

I thought it would be fun.

I hyped it up and everything, I was like "You're going to love this, we'll go to Jewel and see who leaves with the best stuff."

It was around Halloween, I remember, they had pumpkins out front.

I grabbed the little sign that said “Pumpkins” — she was worried that someone would see, since we were right by the door.

Obviously no one did, because I’m a professional.

Then the whole time we were inside the store, she was looking around like we were being followed or something.

AJ laughs.

I was like “You have to chill out.”

It was the least chill I’d ever seen her.

I couldn’t even get her to take anything.

She just went to the bathroom, then she felt bad about only using the bathroom and not buying anything, so she bought a bottle of Vitamin Water, and we left.

But then — when we got outside, she took something out of her pocket.

She’d taken the Employees Must Wash Hands Before Returning To Work sign from the bathroom!

I was so proud of her.

I was like “You’ve come so far.”

It was a good one.

I tried convincing her to hang it up above the sink in her bathroom.

She said “I don’t have any employees.”

I just thought it was funny to imagine someone who’d never used her bathroom before, seeing it for the first time.

But then she felt bad and insisted we take it back.

So we went back inside, past the pumpkins — she made me put my sign back, too — and she marched right up to the customer service desk.

She said “I found this on the floor of the bathroom, I think it fell off the wall. I thought you should know.”

The guy was like “Okay.”

He didn’t even care!

But she felt good about herself.

She’s a better person than I am.

I tried explaining to her that I liked Collecting not because I enjoyed taking things, but because I liked the feeling of getting away with something.

I think she understood that.

~ ~ ~

You know, when I was washing the windows at work earlier, I found myself just watching people walk by.

Everyone looked so focused, so direct.

Like they knew exactly where they were going.

And here I was, wiping circles on a pane of glass.

But I was thinking, do they all really have destinations?

Or are they just looking confident while they fake it, and getting away with it?

I don’t know.

I saw one person walk by with a tote bag from a lit fest Cara and I went to last year.

No — it feels like last year, but I guess it was almost two years ago.

Time is — well, yeah.
Remember when we had street festivals in the summer?

I loved this one.
It was my favorite.
All these book vendors, authors, publishers, colleges.
I always spend too much money.

There was this author there when we went, just doing signings at a booth.
This local publisher had just put out one of their books, and like half the display was just for this one writer.
It was kind of exciting, because I'd read some of their work before.
Cara was like "You should say hi, get a copy signed. Tell them you're a writer too."
I couldn't do that.
I don't know.
I felt awkward.
My imposter syndrome was kicking in hard.
It's not like I've published anything.
They wouldn't know who I am.
Or care.
I was standing there clutching a brochure for a writing master's program at this college that had a booth we'd passed.
Cara had told me to take a brochure.
She told me to apply.
"Why not?" she said.

But who am I to tell this actual writer that I'm a writer too?
I'm no more writer than I am, I don't know, a chef.
I do it at home, with no one to watch or judge how it turns out.
And when it turns out badly, I'm the only one who has to consume it.
Usually groggy-eyed, late at night in front of my laptop with Netflix playing in the background.
That's not how a chef's meal is supposed to be eaten.
But I'm not a chef.
And it's not how writers are supposed to write.
So — I'm not a writer.

But Cara kept bugging me to go up.
So I did, and they signed the book, and I said "Thanks, I'm a fan."
They said "Thank you so much."
And that was it.

Cara was mad that I didn't say I was a writer, and I was mad that she pressured me into doing it.
But it was fine.
We got tacos for lunch and sat in the sun and talked about books.

Anyway — how did we end up talking about this?
Oh right.
The tote bag.
I got one that day, too, but the handle broke.

AJ laughs.

Sorry, am I being depressing?
I feel like I'm being depressing.
Let's talk about something else.

~ ~ ~

*They have arrived at the lake.
They take a moment to appreciate it.*

Don't you just love the lake?
It's my favorite thing about this city.
Especially at night.
The way it blends into the sky —
I'm going to miss it.

Oh —
Right.
Okay.
You'll be the first person I've told.
I applied to the master's program at that college.
I figured it was time to bet on myself and just do it.
Maybe it would make me feel like a real writer, or something.

I just got the response a few weeks ago.
They accepted me.
Shocking, I know.
But — yeah.
They liked my writing enough to accept me.

I haven't talked to Cara since I got the acceptance letter.
I don't know how to tell her.
I thought she'd be the first person I told, but —
I don't know.
I tried to call her when I found out, but she didn't answer.
Which was weird.
She always answers.

And then I got too nervous to pick up when she called back a few days later.
I don't know how to have that conversation.
Not with her.

I haven't told anyone yet.
I haven't even decided if I'm going or not.
It would mean leaving Chicago.
Which —
Would be good and bad.
The program starts soon, though.
I'm running out of time.

What do you think?
Should I tell Cara tonight?

AJ waits for the audience member's response.

Okay.
Yeah.
You're right.
That's the plan, then.

I almost feel bad, putting all this weight on this.
Compared to everything going on in the world, maybe it's small.
I don't know.
We're here, surviving through something that so many haven't.
And on the other side, how will we go on?
Back to the same.
We'll keep living our lives.
We'll move to new cities and think about how we'll rearrange the furniture.
We'll buy the same cereals at the same grocery stores, we'll order the same beers at different bars.
We'll drift too fast through all the little familiarities and then look back and mourn.
I know I will.

I should probably give her a call.
Let her know we're here.

— I'm worried she's going to ask me to stay.
Because I think I would.
If she asked.
I don't know.

AJ makes the call.

Hey, Cara.
Just wanted to let you know we're at the lake.
I'm with a friend, yeah.
Sounds good.
See you soon.

AJ hangs up.

She'll be here soon.

They look at the lake.
Silence.

I wish I had a boat.

~ ~ ~

Maybe they talk more.

Maybe not.

Eventually, Cara arrives.

before the water

Cara texts the audience member, "Hey! Just finished up a couple errands. Want to meet me at [Meeting Place] around [Performance Time]? Then we can do our walk.. I'll be wearing [Costume Description] in case you don't recognize me with my mask on lol. I've missed this!!"

When Cara arrives at the Meeting Place, 10 or so minutes before the show begins, they text the audience member again, "I'm here, just going to draw for a bit. See you soon! Let me know if you have any issues getting here!"

*While waiting, Cara could be drawing.
Kind of mindlessly doodling.
Maybe with chalk, on the sidewalk.*

the water

*Cara and the audience meet.
Cara is drawing.
Could be at a park, in front of a residence, anywhere.
The important thing is: they meet.*

CARA

Hey!
Sorry, I'm just doodling a bit.
I'm not much of an artist.
Ha.
It helps clear my mind, though.
Want to join?

Maybe they draw with chalk together.

Thanks for meeting me up this way!
And on such short notice.
I didn't think I'd have tonight free, and then I did.

Sorry, I feel like that came out rude.
I didn't mean it that way.
My mind's just kind of — everywhere right now.
You got here okay, though, right?

Good.
We can start our walk soon, too.
But it's nice out, so why rush?

I missed doing this.
Really.
I mean, obviously we couldn't go on our usual walks in the middle of winter.
But getting out of the house is nice.
And maybe if we feel like getting a drink or a coffee, we can.
So how are you?
How's your day?

~ ~ ~

I feel like I've got so much to get you caught up on since the last time we saw each other.
I got a promotion at work.
Moving up in the world a bit!
It's kind of crazy.
I'm officially managing the creative team.
Which is pretty much what I was doing before, but now I have the title to go with it.
But it feels good to be the decision-maker on things.
I feel like I actually have ownership of something.
It's like it's fully mine now.

It feels good to be good at something.
It feels good to have the company finally recognize it.
So I've been super busy, but it's good.
Yeah.
Good.
Sorry, my mind is just — you know.
I feel like I've had a million things on my plate recently.
It's weird to feel busy when you're working from home.
My body's in pajamas, like I'm ready to go to sleep, but my mind is juggling all these different projects and deadlines and —
I guess everyone's dealing with that to some extent.
Anyway, you've been good?
You've been surviving okay?

Surviving is the best we can hope for right now, I think.
Just to keep on keeping on.
One day at a time.
Ha.

~ ~ ~

You know, I think the thing I'm happiest about right now is that we don't have to be all bundled up.
I think I'm disproportionately happy about it.
Ha.
When the weather starts to warm up, the city just feels like it comes to life.

I miss art festivals.

You know?
Like I miss going and taking in all the sights, people walking around together, all the different artists and vendors.
It reminded me how big this city can be.
It feels so small right now.
The size of a computer screen, an apartment.

One of my coworkers had a setup at the Glenwood Ave Arts Fest a couple years ago.
Have you ever been?

It's so much fun.
That's one of my favorites because it's less crazy than some of the others.
They usually do a farmers market up there during the summer too.
I used to say Rogers Park was too far north, and then I moved into my second apartment there.
And then it was the perfect distance.

Anyway, sorry.
Festivals.
I went to the Printers Row Lit Fest two years ago this summer.
Have you ever been?

It's so much fun.

It was my first time going.
I went with a friend, who's a writer.
We went and got tacos for lunch, and they met a writer they really admire.
Got a book signed.
It was a good day.

I remember seeing someone there alone at their own booth, selling copies of just one book.
A photography book.
They said they'd only been doing photography for a few years, and wanted to print a book just to prove to themselves they could.
They said they'd already sold half their copies.
I bought one.
It was pretty inspiring, the thought of just — doing it.
Why not, you know?

I wonder about what my booth would look like, if I would ever have one.
I went out and bought a canvas later that day, after the festival.
To try and paint something.
I still haven't used it.
I think I get intimidated whenever I look at it.
Like I couldn't fill it with something that would do it justice.
Sidewalks, I can do.
Sidewalks don't intimidate me.
I'm working my way up to the canvas.

~ ~ ~

I'd love to get more into photography, too.
It interests me.
The mechanics of it.
I took a class in college and loved it.
That feeling of being in the right place at the right time, to get a good shot.

Can I tell you something a little weird that I've started doing?

I've been photographing my skin up close, almost every day.
Just to see if I notice any changes.
I haven't yet.

I don't really know what I'm thinking.
It's not like things are going to move.
But I haven't stopped.
Not yet.
I want to feel like I have an eye on it.
I feel like there's been so much time slipping away.
I don't want to wake up one day and be surprised by the mirror.
It's dumb, but it's what I've been doing.
Other people bake, and I take close-up pictures of myself.

Well, I did try baking bagels a couple months ago, and I burnt them so badly.

Ha.

I took a picture of that, too.
It was so bad.
Look.

CARA shows a picture of a burnt bagel on her phone.

I don't even know what I did wrong, I followed the recipe.
I was so confident they would be good.
I bought cream cheese and everything.

CARA gets a little lost looking at the picture of the burnt bagel.

I feel like I've been re-learning how to live.

~ ~ ~

CARA's phone rings.

Oh, sorry.

CARA looks and sees who's calling.

Huh.
Actually — do you mind if I answer this?
I'll be quick.
Thanks.

CARA answers.

Hey!
AJ, yeah, I know.
It's been a bit, how are you?
Oh — I'm good.
Keeping busy.
What have you, um, been up to?
Yeah.
Well, I'm glad to hear that.
Oh — um.
No, it's —
Gift bag?
Oh my gosh.
You still have that?
Yes, I remember.
Have you opened it?
Yes, I know what tonight is.
Three years.
Hey, can you meet in like, twenty, thirty minutes?
By the lake.

Yeah, the usual spot.
Yeah.
Sorry, I'm just in the middle —
Okay.
See you soon.
Bye.

CARA hangs up.

Sorry about that.
That was AJ.
He's actually the writer I went to the lit fest with.
I — wasn't expecting to hear from him.

Do you mind if we meet up with him for a minute?
Just over by the lake.
Sorry to kind of throw a wrench in our walk, but — yeah.
AJ's always kind of like that.
Last minute.

I was wondering if I'd see him today.
It's the third anniversary of the night we met, and — yeah.
Usually we do something.

I don't think you've met AJ.
I've told you the story of how we met, though, right?

It was one of those things that felt like it happened at the right place and the right time.
It was back when you and I were waitressing together.
I was new to Chicago, and I was feeling really unfulfilled creatively.
You know this.
Like I wasn't really going anywhere.
Or doing the work I wanted to be doing.

I would get home from work and feel so unmotivated, and I stopped wanting to go out.
I'd just stay at home and not do anything.
Well, I watched a lot of tv.
Spent a lot of time on instagram.
Empty hours.
I told myself I was recharging from stressful days at work.
Which was true, in a sense.
But either way, not a great time.

But my friend Tiff knew someone who was doing a storytelling thing at a bar I liked.
So I decided to go.
I'd never been to one before.
Have you?

It's pretty cool.
There are like 10 or so people who each tell a story from their lives.

Usually each night has a theme.
The night I went, the theme was Unsaid.
So people were doing stories about things they wish they'd said, moments of silence with someone where nothing needed to be said, what they would say to loved ones they'd lost.
That sort of thing.
But then this person gets up there in front of the mic.
AJ.
And his story wasn't even really a story.
He spoke about his relationship with writing.
How it's a way to put on the page things that can't be said.
Speaking the unspeakable.

He had put a notebook on the music stand to read from, but eventually he stopped looking.
He closed his eyes.
Like he was trying to go from memory.
His hands were in his pockets.
I could tell he was nervous.

I wish I could remember exactly how it went.
I don't think there was a recording, but if there was I'd want to watch it again.
For sure.
I remember a few lines, though.
I typed them into my phone, sitting there.
Just a few.
I didn't want to forget.
I read it sometimes, on the train or waiting in line at the grocery store.

CARA could pull out her phone, with the text note of the lines, but she knows them by heart.

"I will write myself into oblivion.
What a relief that will be.
To be fooled into thinking I was ever as concrete as words.
Someday, someone will think I was immovable.
When all I was doing was convincing myself I was alive."

When I heard that I knew I wanted to meet him.
Get to know him better.
He just seemed like a cool person.

Then, a couple months later, Tiff and I decided to go again.
And AJ was performing again.
He did another piece, kind of a poem of a conversation between air and water.
I wrote that in my phone, too.

Tiff knew one of the storytellers was having a house party that night, and I thought "This is my chance to meet AJ."
Ha.

So I did a really dorky thing.
Have I told you this story?

I can't believe myself.

After the show, on the way to the party, I made my friend stop at a CVS with me, so I could buy a notebook and a gift bag.

And I copied AJ's piece into the notebook, and put it in the gift bag.

And I brought it to the party.

When I got there, AJ wasn't there yet.

I was embarrassed, like "What if he doesn't show up and I just have to awkwardly hold this thing all night?"

I almost threw it out.

But then he showed up.

So I had another drink to get my courage up.

Then I walked over to him, and I wanted to seem cool and interesting, so I handed the bag to him and said "Give this back to me in three years."

I wanted to make him curious about what it was so he'd open it.

But he didn't.

We just talked all night and it was a really good time, and we became friends.

I thought it might turn into more, but it never did.

~ ~ ~

Anyway, now it's been three years and he wants to give it back to me.

I guess he hasn't opened the gift.

Or seen the poem inside.

Unless he has seen it, and he hasn't told me, which would be a very AJ thing to do.

Ha.

Anyway, we'll just meet up with him for a minute.

It won't take too long.

I don't really know what to expect.

But.

Let's talk about something else, yeah?

Sorry, I can get on these rants sometimes.

Ha.

AJ gets on rants about books he's read.

He likes to sound all cultured.

Oh, actually — I do have to tell you about this book I just read.

What About the Rest of Your Life by Sung Yim.

It was so good.

You have to check it out, I think you'd love it.

Really personal, really devastating.

One of the best books I've read this year.

So far.

And there was a part where they talked about how the Paris Review and McSweeney's and the Atlantic and all these different publications reinforce the idea of depression as the territory of working class white male writers.

That that's who gets the attention for writing about their depression.
And it really struck me.
Partly because I read the Paris Review a lot. And McSweeney's. Ploughshares. And AJ's work.
But also because it made me think — am I reinforcing that by encouraging AJ's writing?
I don't know. I like his writing.
But, yeah — I could feel the anger in that part of the book.
Like Sung Yim felt that their depression wouldn't be taken to be as literary as a white male writer's depression.
And, I mean, why is that the standard?
How do we break it?
Why is it that even the right to express a feeling is a battleground?

I had to put the book down a lot.
But I think that's good with books sometimes.

Usually when I have to put a book down it's because I'm angry, or I'm crying.
Or both.
Ha.

I was listening to a podcast about crying.
It said that crying is how adults communicate empathy.
It's a way of communicating "I feel for you."
It made me cry.

I cry at movies and books and music all the time.
But in real life it's like the tears build up and only come out once every few months.
All at once.
I hate it.
It's overwhelming.

Isn't it that art is supposed to evoke emotion in you, and then in turn you'll be more in tune with your emotions in real life?
For me it feels like the more I cry at art, the less I cry in real life.

Maybe it's not a skill I can learn.
Maybe I should stop trying.
It's just how I am.
Ha.

~ ~ ~

Speaking of art, though, have you listened to any good music lately?

I've been listening to this one song a lot.
Mind if I play it?
It just seems like the perfect night for some background music.

*CARA finds a song on her phone and plays it.
They listen in silence for a while.*

AJ and I used to do this.
We'd walk to the lake and take turns playing each other songs.

I introduced him to this artist, and now he listens to them nonstop.

*The song continues playing.
It plays through to the end.
Another song starts, but CARA isn't in a rush to turn the music off.*

It's one of those songs I just sink into.
You know?
It creates its own world and you get lost in it.
I never get tired of listening to it.
At least, not yet.

There's something about walking around the city at night, with music playing.
I think I notice more.
Like the door on that building is cool.
I don't think I would've noticed that if I wasn't listening to music.
It's like the city is putting on its best face.
Like it knows it's putting on a show.
I enjoy that.

They walk in silence, taking in the city.

I remember when I first moved to Chicago, I used to walk around all the time.
Usually aimless wandering.
Just to see if I'd come across something new.

There was a time when AJ and I tried to do that with other places.
Maybe once a month or so, we'd drive to different suburbs and walk around.
See what they were like.
I was relatively new here, so it was a fun thing to do.

But nowhere we went really felt the same as here.

I remember we went out to Oak Park once.
I wanted to see the architecture, the Frank Lloyd Wright Studio.
AJ wanted to see Hemingway's birthplace.
All this history, all in a few blocks.
It was kind of overwhelming.
There wasn't enough time to do everything.

We ended up at this book store, just to look around.
And AJ went up to the fiction shelves, right to the section of V last names.
He put his finger up, right between two books, and made a little space on the shelf.
I didn't know what he was doing, I thought he was looking for something.
But no.
He was making a space for their own eventual book.
Someday his writing would live in that space, in the section of V last names.

It's something to aspire to, he said.
He'd read a memoir where the author talked about a writing professor who told her students to do that.
AJ said "You've got to know where you're aiming."

I told him I'd be the first to buy his book.
The next day is when I put in my two weeks at the restaurant.
I remember you were so mad at me.
Ha.
I'd decided to apply for something more creative.
I wanted to know I was aiming toward something more creative.
So — yeah.

I've always had these fantasies of being with creative people, spending nights talking about ideas and theories and what we're working on.
How we're experimenting with our work.
Being a part of something like that.
I guess being a creative director is sort of close.
It would be cool, though, don't you think?
To be a part of a community like that.
Pushing each other to be better.

Maybe I should just start a group.
A creative club.
Weekly meetings.
Or something.
Who knows if people would come.
Would you go to something like that?

No pressure if not.
I'm kind of rambling.
Ha.

AJ would make fun of me for that.
He'd say I could have conversations with myself.
One time while we were talking, he started a timer on their phone without me knowing.
He wanted to see how long I'd go talk by myself, without him responding.
It was something like 20 minutes.
After that, every time I'd start rambling, he'd say "I should get the timer out."
Ha.

It's kind of embarrassing.
I don't want to be that person.
I just get excited.

~ ~ ~

*They're at the lake.
CARA stops and takes it in for a moment.*

It always surprises me, how dark it can be.
It's the perfect contrast to the city.

CARA turns around and takes a picture of the city on her phone.

I've been thinking about buying a camera.
A nice one.
Something I can practice on.
I want to really get into learning something new.
I don't want to get comfortable doing the same things all the time.

*A call from AJ appears on CARA's phone.
CARA answers.*

Hey.
Okay, I'm here too.
— We?
Got it.
I'll find you.
Okay.
Bye.

*CARA hangs up.
She looks at the picture she took of the city.*

Yeah.
I'm going to buy a camera.

~ ~ ~

*Maybe they talk more.
Maybe not.*

Eventually, AJ is found.

the air meets the water

*CARA and AJ walk up to each other.
The audience is with them.*

CARA
Hi.

AJ
Hey.

CARA
Hi.

AJ
Long time, no see.

CARA
No kidding.
How are you?

AJ
Good, good.
How are you?

CARA
Good.

AJ
That's good.

CARA
Yeah.

AJ
This is my friend, [audience member's name], by the way.

CARA
Nice to meet you.
You've met [audience member's name] before, right?

AJ
I don't think so.
Hi.

CARA
Oh.
I thought you had.

AJ

Thanks for meeting up.
I know you're busy.

CARA

No, no, it's all good.
Remember when we would come here like once a week?

AJ

I was just talking about how you showed me this spot.
How it's your favorite place in the city.

CARA

It is?

AJ

That's what you said the first night we came here.
The night we met.

CARA

Right. I remember that.
I was coming here a lot back then.
It grounded me, in a way.
Looking out at the water made me feel like I was a part of something more important than myself.

AJ

Yeah.
I know what you mean.

They look out at the water.

CARA

You just get lost in it.

AJ

You don't have a favorite place.

CARA

What?

AJ

In Chicago.
I remember now you said your favorite place changes.

CARA

Oh, yeah. I think it does.
Some days it's the Art Institute, some days it's Myopic Books.
Some days it's my bedroom.
Ha.
— Are you sure it was this beach?

AJ

I'm sure.

I wouldn't forget something like that.

CARA *re: the gift bag*

Yeah, I know you don't forget much.

AJ

"Give this back to me in three years.

Don't open it."

CARA

You really did it.

AJ

I haven't even peeked.

CARA

Maybe you should open it.

You deserve to, after waiting so long.

AJ

I was instructed to give it back to you.

CARA

AJ, seriously, just look inside.

AJ

I'm being serious!

It's yours.

Take it.

CARA takes the gift bag.

Looks at it.

CARA

I can't believe it's three years.

AJ

Are you going to open it?

CARA

— No.

AJ

Come on, I've been waiting all this time.

I'm dying to know.

CARA

It's a long time to wait.

AJ

Am I not supposed to see?

CARA laughs.

CARA

Do you remember how the first night we met, when we came to the lake, you looked at me and said "I think you're my first friend in Chicago."

AJ

I remember.

Do you remember when you stole the bathroom sign from Jewel?

CARA

I gave it back.

AJ

You were so mad at me.

CARA

Do you remember when we drove out to Arlington Heights?

AJ

Just to say we'd been to Arlington Heights.

All we did was get coffee, walked around a bit, and started driving back.

CARA

No, we went to the forest preserve too.

AJ

Oh!

Is that the day we went to the Baha'i Temple?

CARA

Yep.

AJ

I still can't get over that building, it was incredible.

CARA

Except for when they yelled at you for taking pictures.

AJ

How was I supposed to know?

CARA

Do you remember the blizzard?

A few months after we met?

You came over to my place and we made cookies and cocktails and watched movies?

AJ

It felt like the city disappeared around us.
I remember looking out the window and the whole world was blank.

CARA

It wasn't that bad out.

AJ

You know what I mean.
It was our own little world.

CARA

You know I don't like when you do that.
You don't see things.

AJ

I see things.

CARA

Not really.
It's like you see the world as something to be revised.

AJ

It's just an exaggeration.
It makes the story better.

CARA

But it's already a good story.
You don't need to exaggerate.

AJ

It's just what I do.

CARA

You don't need to revise our memories.

AJ

Why didn't you answer?
When I called?

CARA

Why didn't you?
I called you back.

AJ

Two days later.

CARA

So you don't talk to me for weeks?
I think it's the longest I've gone without hearing from you.

AJ
I haven't heard from you, either.

CARA
I know.
You don't need to — I know.

AJ
I'm just saying.

CARA
Did I do something wrong?
Why do I feel like you're punishing me for something?

AJ
I'm not.
I've just had a lot going on.

CARA
Yeah.
Me too, AJ.

AJ
I'm sorry.
I wanted to talk to you, but I didn't know —

CARA
I've been busy too.

AJ
Time got away from me.

CARA
I just got a promotion.
I'm creative director now.
I'm leading my own team.

AJ
— That's really great, Cara.
When did that happen?

CARA
A couple weeks ago.

AJ
Wow.
That's — great.
I'm really happy for you.
You've deserved that for a while.

CARA

I know.
Thank you.

AJ

You should've told me.
We could've celebrated.

CARA

Would you have wanted to?

AJ

Yes.
Of course.

CARA

You're not just saying that.

AJ

Cara.
I mean it.

CARA

— Can I tell you something?

AJ at the same time

So I applied to grad school.
That writing program.
And I got in.

CARA

— Really?
You got in?

AJ

Yeah, really.
I didn't know how to tell you.

CARA

Congrats, AJ.
That's amazing.
You really deserve it.

AJ

Thank you.

CARA

In Chicago, or — ?

AJ
Seattle.

CARA
Wow.
That's —

AJ
Yeah.

CARA
Well, look at us, huh?
Moving up in the world.

AJ
Yeah.

*CARA wants to hug AJ.
AJ wants to ask whether or not they should even go.*

CARA
So — when do you leave?

This kind of breaks AJ.

AJ
In the fall.

*This kind of breaks CARA.
She doesn't say anything.
She doesn't need to.
She looks at the gift bag, opens it, and takes out a notebook.
She hands it to AJ.*

CARA
Here.

AJ
— This is what you wanted back in three years?

CARA
There's something inside.

*AJ opens the notebook.
Finds a poem inside.*

AJ
Should I read it?

CARA

One second.

To audience members.

Do you have your phones on you?

Do you mind turning on the flashlight?

The audience points their flashlights at AJ.

AJ

What are you doing?

CARA

Creative directing.

CARA plays a song on her phone.

AJ

Ready?

CARA

Ready.

AJ reads out loud.

AJ

there's a conversation on the horizon

it's always changing

where the air meets the water

CARA joining, memorized

if they could speak, what would they say?

AJ

the air says to the water

"you're deep and blue and churning and steady

teach me how to wash things clean"

CARA

the water says to the air

"you're light and blue and loud and free

teach me how to fly away"

AJ

when the day breaks

the water evaporates and thinks it's learning to fly

but is trapped in clouds

CARA

and the air gathers around it, ready to wash clean the earth

but the water does the washing

AJ
as always as always

CARA
then the night falls
and they resume —

AJ
the wind blowing

CARA
the waves crashing

AJ
the stars shining

CARA
and the depths reflecting them back

AJ
where the air meets the water

CARA
a thin line in the distance

AJ
blending into itself in the deep blue night

CARA
the air cannot reach the water

AJ
the water cannot be the air

CARA
the air and the water do not touch

AJ
it seems they do

CARA
but at the smallest level
the atoms repel each other

AJ
leaving a fraction

CARA
of a fraction

AJ
of space between

CARA
glancing off each other

AJ
never joining

CARA
at their most elemental
they push each other apart

AJ
the wind only hushes

CARA
the waves only settle

AJ
the stars only dim

CARA
and the depths darken

AJ
but when day breaks
all will be light again

CARA
the water will keep flowing

AJ
the air will keep floating

CARA
not quite touching

AJ
though the possibility remains

CARA
as always as always

AJ
as always as always

The poem is finished.

AJ

Then at the bottom of the page it says “To remember where you came from.”

Cara.

You wrote down my poem?

CARA

The night we met, yeah.

AJ

That — means a lot to me.

CARA

I thought you should know it inspired me.

I saw you read it, and — yeah.

I wanted to meet you.

AJ

Cara.

CARA

I thought you would open it that night.

You were supposed to open it that night.

AJ

We still met.

We still talked.

CARA

Yeah.

We did.

AJ

We’ll see each other again.

CARA

Yes.

Yes.

AJ

You should keep this.

It’s —

You should have it.

AJ gives the notebook to CARA.

CARA

Thanks.

*CARA flips through the empty notebook.
Considers it.*

*What could've been.
Rips out the page with the poem and throws it into the lake.
And hands the notebook back to AJ.
AJ and CARA watch the crumpled page float.*

AJ
What did you want to tell me?

CARA
What?

AJ
You said you wanted to tell me something.

CARA
Oh.
I forget.
It's not important.

AJ
Do you remember what we did here, the night we met?

CARA
I'll never forget.

AJ
Neither will I.

CARA
I know.

*AJ nods.
AJ and CARA go to the water.
They put their hands in.
Just their hands.
They release everything into the water.
They are washed clean.
They stand back up and stare out at the horizon.
Nothing more needs to be said.*

End of play.