

paper backs



a play  
by  
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## CHARACTERS

ARTIST: any type\*

WRITER: any type\*

*\*My plays do not live in an unrealistic land of all thin, abled, cis and gender-binary white people. Populate **BOTH** the stage and production team with people historically excluded from your theatre and/or your region's theatre at large. I **WILL** follow up with you about this if you produce my plays.*

## SETTING

An apartment

## TIME

Now and maybe then and maybe the next time

A "/" indicates an overlap where the next line begins.

## PROLOGUE

*The apartment is disheveled, somewhat wrecked. Placed amidst the mayhem are the ARTIST and the WRITER. The ARTIST approaches the WRITER and holds the WRITER from behind. The ARTIST turns away but the WRITER reciprocates. They begin a game. A caress for a caress. They notice the mess.*

## SCENE 1: REBEGINNING

*The ARTIST and WRITER tidy the room until it is their room. The WRITER invites the ARTIST to sleep. Then:*

## SCENE 2: MY LITTLE STORM

WRITER

You waver even now.  
No one ever planted  
peace in your soul.  
My little storm.

I'm sending out my messages  
rolled tightly into bottles. Green  
glass bottles. They'll float along

your veins trying  
desperately to reach  
your center through  
the lightning.

No message will be the same.  
I hope, if they break along  
your muscles, their words sink

deep into your bones  
until you believe,  
until you trust  
every sentiment.

But my strongest bottle I've  
wrapped tightly in my love  
and I know it sails straight

towards your innermost  
self. And one day,  
when you need it most,  
you will open

my bottle and read: "I wrote this  
while you were sleeping, your  
legs braided with mine.

Nothing is as close to you  
as I am now. And I'm tempted  
to pray to every God I don't  
believe in for us

to always stay this way. But for now  
I will pray to your hair, to the crook  
of your arm. To your wavering eyes."

*THE WRITER gets up, careful not to wake the ARTIST,  
sits in front of the bed and begins to read. The ARTIST  
wakes up and splays over the bed, looking over the  
WRITER's shoulder.*

### SCENE 3: PENELOPE & ODYSSEUS

ARTIST  
Penelope and Odysseus.

WRITER  
Yes.

ARTIST  
Why do they interest you?

WRITER  
Penelope waits for twenty years, fending off suitors until Odysseus returns. She loves

WRITER (*cont*)

him so much, is so faithful, she waits amidst a hundred other men.

ARTIST

Do you expect me to do that?

WRITER

Maybe. Would you?

ARTIST

How strong are my suitors?

WRITER

I can be stronger.

ARTIST

How smart?

WRITER

I'm smarter.

ARTIST

But I'm sure one of them is dark and mysterious.

WRITER

I'll wear a cape.

ARTIST

Please don't.

WRITER

Would you wait?

ARTIST

Would you?

WRITER

Deflecting.

ARTIST

No.

WRITER

Yes.

ARTIST

Maybe. But I want to know.

WRITER

If I were Penelope and you were Odysseus, I would wait.

ARTIST

If I were Odysseus and you were Penelope, I would slaughter all your suitors.

WRITER

With your muscly arms.

ARTIST

Yes. It's a lovely story.

WRITER

It is. She remembers him. And he remembers her. Through two entire epic poems, they think of each other.

ARTIST

To be forgotten is to be unloved. Will you remember me?

WRITER

Will you remember me?

ARTIST

Deflecting.

WRITER

What if someone wipes my mind?

ARTIST

I'll remember you.

*The WRITER moves to the bed. A tender moment. The lights dim and they both fall asleep.*

#### SCENE 4: I MADE THIS WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING

*The ARTIST wakes. They try to explain how they feel, but cannot express it in words. They begin to paint as they talk.*

ARTIST

Your hair.  
Your hair is  
is like.  
Your hair is like  
this.

And when you smile  
that smile right before  
you tackle me, the  
sideways one, I feel like  
this.  
I feel like this.

And your arms, no,  
your hands. Yes. Your hands  
they feel like

this.

And when I can't express  
myself but you understand  
anyway, you look like  
this.

And I always.  
I always want you to feel.  
To feel me. To feel like me.  
Like this.

And now I've tied  
you into everything.

All you had to do  
was sleep.

SCENE 5: LIE TO ME

*The WRITER wakes as the ARTIST finishes painting.  
The ARTIST presents the canvas.*

ARTIST  
What do you think?

WRITER  
Lots of things.

ARTIST  
What do you think of this?

WRITER  
It's lovely.

ARTIST  
Lovely?

WRITER  
The blue. It's calming.

ARTIST  
Is it too much? There's too much blue.

WRITER  
No. No, it's still simple.

ARTIST  
Simple.

WRITER  
Yes.

ARTIST  
Well, it's not finished yet.

WRITER  
You're taking offense.

ARTIST  
Of course I am.

WRITER

Don't. I like it. I really do like it very much.

ARTIST

Do you understand it?

*Pause.*

WRITER

It's about your-

ARTIST

Lie to me.

WRITER

I don't love you.

ARTIST

Thank you.

#### SCENE 6: THE SPEECH

*The ARTIST returns to work while the WRITER dresses. The WRITER steps forward with index cards, a prepared presentation about Chaucer. It is boring. Also awkward.*

WRITER

The purpose of this study is to clarify the distinctions between Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and other classical literature of and before his time. Unlike the epic sagas of the Greeks or the knightly tales of some of his contemporaries, Chaucer embraced literature tropes and turned them against themselves. We will be looking specifically at the Knight's, Miller's, Wife of Bath's and Monk's prologues and tales for this particular study and discussion but please pardon a scholar and allow me to quote the beginning for my own vanity: "Whan that aprill with his shoures soote" blahblahblah.

*The WRITER is proud of their performance. They pick up a book to read.*

SCENE 7: CHAUCER

*The ARTIST approaches the WRITER and sprints across the other box or chair, looking on.*

ARTIST

What's that?

WRITER

The Monk's Tale. He's telling tragedies of the ages. Men who have fallen. Hercules, Sampson, Julius Caesar.

ARTIST

Chaucer.

WRITER

You don't like Chaucer?

ARTIST

Not particularly. But you do. So why does the Monk tell tragedies?

WRITER

It's a Mirror for Princes. To teach leaders and future leaders and even us about how to behave and what to expect from Fortune, from Fortune's wheel. It borrows largely from Boccaccio's De Casibus... You aren't interested.

ARTIST

I am.

WRITER

You don't hear me.

ARTIST

No, I do! Tell me about Fortune's wheel.

WRITER

The king starts high, at the top, but as the wheel turns he loses his crown, becomes the lowest man, and then begins the upward rotation towards being king again.

ARTIST

But it's all of us? We're all on the wheel somewhere?

WRITER

Exactly.

ARTIST  
Where are you?

WRITER  
Right about here.

*The WRITER points at a spot.*

ARTIST  
And it always circles around.

WRITER  
Yes.

ARTIST  
Over and over again.

WRITER  
Until we die.

ARTIST  
Morbid.

WRITER  
A little.

ARTIST  
Put the book away.

*There is a playful moment between the two but the WRITER chooses the book.*

#### SCENE 8: THE WORRY

*The ARTIST leaves the WRITER's section and heads towards the painting. The ARTIST turns around to watch the WRITER.*

ARTIST  
Do you know how many times I've drawn you? I'm just drawing, letting a pen move while I daydream and when I look down you're peering through a flower, a sphere, a hand. I can't count how many times I've painted you. I'm surprised no one's stared at my strokes and asked who you are.

ARTIST (*cont*)

And art's supposed to be a reflection, right? But mirrors have to be strong to hold another person's image. And I feel more like paper. I lean into you and I crumple and fold. You see through me, back to front, right past my spine and all the things I can't eloquently say out loud, right past my heart and ribs.

But when you brush your hair back my brush paints a stroke of blue. I feel so delicate and I'm a mirror.

And. And it scares me. I'm scared because. (pause) What if my art's worse with you in it?

### SCENE 9: SPACE

*While the ARTIST is busy, the WRITER paints an indiscernible stroke on the canvas. The ARTIST turns and sees.*

ARTIST

What are you doing?

WRITER

I thought I'd try.

ARTIST

No. Stop.

WRITER

Stop?

ARTIST

Put it down. It's not yours.

WRITER

It's yours.

ARTIST

Yes.

WRITER

I'm yours, too; we belong together.

ARTIST

Yes. No. It's. You can't. I have to do it.

WRITER

Why just you?

ARTIST

It's mine to form.

WRITER

This?

ARTIST

Us. In this.

WRITER

I didn't realize it was that important to you.

ARTIST

Insulting.

WRITER

I don't mean to.

ARTIST

Of course it's important to me.

WRITER

I meant/this part

*The ARTIST begins obsessively painting over the WRITER's stroke.*

ARTIST

I don't care.

WRITER

You don't care?

ARTIST

I just want you to go to your side.

WRITER

My side? Let me understand!

ARTIST  
I have to fix this!

WRITER  
Fix it?

*The WRITER paints a circle on the canvas. This does not go over well.*

ARTIST  
Get away!

WRITER  
Am I not allowed here? Is this a private room? I didn't realize we had closed doors.

*The WRITER begins to exit but stops to watch the ARTIST paint, wanting to understand.*

#### SCENE 10: FORTUNE'S WHEEL

*The ARTIST continues painting, frenzied. Nothing comes out right. The ARTIST throws handfuls of paint on the canvas and paints a circle over and over. They paint down their arms. Then, exhausted, collapses.*

*The WRITER, concerned, runs forward.*

#### SCENE 11: CHOOSE ME

*The WRITER washes the paint off of the ARTIST's arms. It should be treated with the same gentleness as wounds.*

ARTIST  
Your mind feels like a wasteland. All your unvoiced thoughts, the muggy air sticking to my burnt skin. I can't breathe in all this space.

WRITER  
I don't know what you want.

ARTIST  
I don't know what I want.

WRITER

Really?

ARTIST

I don't want to lose you. I don't want to lose me.

WRITER

I can't focus on something so vague.

ARTIST

Try.

WRITER

I'm trying. I'm trying. What are you feeling?

ARTIST

I don't know.

WRITER

What makes you say that?

ARTIST

Because I don't know.

WRITER

I'm just trying to understand.

ARTIST

It's not enough.

WRITER

I'm trying/I'm trying

ARTIST

I know. I'm sorry.

WRITER

It's not enough.

ARTIST

Don't. Please.

*Pause.*

ARTIST

We've done this before.

WRITER

Like... déjà vu?

ARTIST

Kinda. But worse. I remember everything. It hurts more this time. It hurts more the fourth or fifth time. Times all the times it's happened.

*Pause.*

WRITER

Decide what you want.

ARTIST

It's not that easy.

WRITER

I know. But figure out what you want and then ask for it.

ARTIST

Choose me. Just this once. Pick me.

*The WRITER pauses.*

## SCENE 12: THE DREAM

WRITER

I had a dream.

I might've been awake.

You stood on a dock  
overlooking the ocean.

I could see you  
weighing the water  
and I was terrified you would step  
into the waves and let the seaweed  
embrace you until your lungs forgot  
the taste of air, until your skin matched  
the lapping tide and your eyes and my fear.

I tried to drag you back

WRITER (*cont*)  
but my fingers passed  
through and I knew  
I should find help  
but I didn't want  
to leave you  
to jump alone.

*They sit in silence. Time passes.*

### SCENE 13: ALTERNATE UNIVERSES

*The ARTIST is trying to engage the WRITER in conversation. The WRITER is immersed in a phone and a difficult thought.*

ARTIST

What if there's a me out there who makes all the opposite choices I make? Like from what I eat for breakfast to what I read to what I say to you. Every single choice was and is different than what I choose here.

WRITER

There would be many of you. One for every choice.

ARTIST

Exactly! So one of them chooses cereal and years later lives on a boat. Or goes to Nashville instead of graduating and ends up with a kid. What if one of them is an ambassador or sings in a nineties cover band or never meets you?

WRITER

I can't imagine any you as an ambassador. They're still you, even if they made different decisions.

ARTIST

A teacher then.

WRITER

Poor children.

ARTIST

A professor. Maybe there's a me that loves numbers. Can you imagine me as an accountant? In a little cubicle.

WRITER

I have to/tell you

ARTIST

All scrunched up with a picture of my perfect spouse and my perfect two point five kids.  
Or what if I

WRITER

I really/need to talk

ARTIST

married a politician? I could see me owning a garden if we had the space. Or a greenhouse. Where I'd sit in the sun. I could've been a missionary, you know. If I believed in that kind of thing. I mean, I always wanted to travel.

WRITER

You're talking about alternate universes.

ARTIST

Yes.

WRITER

Have you really never thought about this before?

ARTIST

Not so personally. Have you?

WRITER

Yes.

*Pause.*

WRITER

I have to go.

*The WRITER leaves.*

ARTIST

In all my billions of universes, do you think any of me are happy? Just content and joyful and happy with whatever they chose. Or do you think all of us are sitting right here, wondering about the others and whether we'd be happier there?

SCENE 14: CAN YOU

*The ARTIST begins working on a new piece, a sketch.  
The WRITER returns.*

ARTIST

Can you see me?

WRITER

I see you all the time.

ARTIST

But even when you're not here?

WRITER

Even when I'm not here.

ARTIST

Can you hear me?

WRITER

From miles away.

ARTIST

You're making fun of me.

WRITER

I'm glad your lungs are so strong.

ARTIST

When was the first time you saw me?

WRITER

The first time this was ours. I felt you stirring in my muscles and I tried to find you. The first time I just saw your face. But when I looked again, I saw you.

ARTIST

When was the first time you heard me?

WRITER

The first time I read a poem.

ARTIST

Romantic.

WRITER

When was the first time you heard me?

ARTIST

What?

WRITER

When was the first time you saw me?

ARTIST

Have you let me see you yet?

You're difficult to find amidst your words, pressed between the pages of life, your stories.

I know your mother's name, your sister's name, your father's name, your father's wife's name, your cousin's name. I know which grandmother is your mother's and which is your father's. I remember the story of your father cleaning your mother. I remember believing it was the most tender, passionate scene in the history of stories. I remember their divorce.

I remember wearing your father's black jacket. It was twice as big on me as you and it was always too big on you.

I remember you accidentally laughing rice through your nose.

I know how you load the dishwasher and where you like your clothes hanging in the closet.

I know how you hold a child. I know as a child you saved a place in your bed every night for your future lover.

I remember every story you've told me at least twice because you could never remember if you'd told it to me before.

I remember watching you punch walls and holding you as you berated fences and tore up grass. I remember you yelling at the air for its existence but I don't think I've ever truly seen you cry.

I have all your stories cataloged. I remember every experience but I'm still not sure where you feel most comfortable.

I'm not asking for all of you. Just let me see a puzzle piece of your innermost self. The piece that stays here. Please let that piece resonate around me and feel flat without me.

WRITER

This is why you question.

ARTIST

I love you.

SCENE 15: I'M NOT HERE MOST DAYS

*The WRITER moves away from the ARTIST. The ARTIST focuses on the drawing as the WRITER talks. The ARTIST doesn't hear the WRITER.*

WRITER

I'm not here most days.

You're beautiful and interesting and funny and  
I'm not here most days.

Your worry became my worry  
and now, no matter how thickly  
you've iced over your previous  
fears, I know they're there.

When you laugh and tease me,  
when you knock on the door  
wavering from your late night party,  
when you sing or read or hold me  
I'm not here.

I don't know what / wanted.

*WRITER exits.*

SCENE 16: YOU'RE NOT HERE MOST DAYS

*The ARTIST is refining the drawing. Perhaps it is a self portrait, their own back.*

ARTIST

You're not here most days.  
Some mornings I wake  
and you've already dressed

ARTIST (*cont*)  
and eaten and gone.

I don't mind your existence  
outside of our space.  
You dwell in so many  
outside options but  
continuously choose me.

So I'm ripping myself from  
my roots. I'm drawing you  
an apology filled with my  
short comings and fears  
and frightening corners  
and with its presentation  
comes a promise.

I will be true. I will change.  
If you will help me.

#### SCENE 17: LIE TO ME 2

*The WRITER re-enters and faces the ARTIST. The ARTIST realizes something has changed.*

ARTIST  
You don't want me anymore.

WRITER  
No.

ARTIST  
What changed?

WRITER  
I changed.

ARTIST  
Why?

WRITER  
You wouldn't.

ARTIST

You never say what you want.

WRITER

You don't either.

ARTIST

I don't know!

WRITER

Maybe I don't.

ARTIST

You know you don't want me.

WRITER

I don't right now.

ARTIST

I'm changing. I'm trying. Just/look at

WRITER

It's too late.

ARTIST

For a wordsmith you love cliché.

WRITER

For an artist you love ugly.

ARTIST

At least I'm honest.

WRITER

I'm being honest now.

ARTIST

Lie to me.

WRITER

I can't anymore.

ARTIST

How many times/have you

WRITER

Don't attack with the past.

ARTIST

It's the present.

WRITER

I don't want to worry anymore. I don't want to be here. I want new things.

ARTIST

Easier things.

WRITER

Not true.

ARTIST

It is. You aren't content with uncertainty. You give up as soon as it's not easy.

WRITER

Who's cliché?

ARTIST

There's someone else.

WRITER

Still cliché.

ARTIST

But there is.

WRITER

Isn't there always?

ARTIST

They're easier.

WRITER

They're easier to understand. I'm sorry.

ARTIST

Then fix this.

WRITER

I can't.

ARTIST

You can.

WRITER

I don't want to anymore.

ARTIST

Too much responsibility.

WRITER

Maybe. Take some yourself.

ARTIST

How long? How long?

WRITER

It doesn't matter.

ARTIST

How long?

WRITER

Not long.

ARTIST

Why? How many suitors? Were they stronger, smarter, more mysterious?

WRITER

Better! New. Not you.

ARTIST

I was trying.

WRITER

I know.

ARTIST

I was giving everything.

WRITER

I know.

ARTIST

But still?

WRITER  
Still.

ARTIST  
You're leaving.

WRITER  
Yes.

ARTIST  
For good.

WRITER  
Maybe.

ARTIST  
Don't disappear.

WRITER  
I won't.

*The WRITER leaves. The ARTIST turns to the charcoal and considers ripping it, then hanging it, then ripping it again. The ARTIST sits for a moment and then gathers the WRITER'S things, putting them all in a box or a pile on the floor. Time passes.*

#### SCENE 18: QUESTIONS

*The WRITER returns to move seats/boxes and bookshelf off the stage as the ARTIST watches. The WRITER reenters, a final farewell, and the ARTIST presents the WRITER with the charcoal back.*

ARTIST  
I made this for you. When things were better, I looked in the mirror and tore this from my insecurity.

WRITER  
It's beautiful.

ARTIST  
You don't have to keep it.

WRITER

I'd like to keep it.

ARTIST

When did you stop?

WRITER

I didn't stop. I still do.

ARTIST

Then why did you leave?

WRITER

I'm sorry.

ARTIST

It's not good enough.

WRITER

I didn't expect it to be.

ARTIST

Where will you put it? In your closet? Will someone see it and ask? You'll roll me away. Will you tell them who I am or say nothing as I crumple?

*The WRITER is silent.*

ARTIST

You aren't looking at me.

WRITER

I'm looking at you.

ARTIST

You don't see me.

WRITER

I can see you.

ARTIST

You don't SEE me.

WRITER

I can see you.

ARTIST

I feel lonely.

WRITER

You feel lonely

ARTIST

You make me feel lonely.

WRITER

I make you feel lonely.

ARTIST

You make me feel so lonely.

WRITER

Why do I/make you feel lonely?

ARTIST

I don't answer questions anymore.

WRITER

Tell me why you don't answer questions.

ARTIST

Don't be tricky.

WRITER

I'm just trying/to understand.

ARTIST

To understand! Questions make me second guess my answers. Questions make me unsure of myself.

WRITER

Questions make me feel guilty.

ARTIST

Do you feel guilty now?

WRITER

Don't be an asshole.

ARTIST

There are parts of me that want you to feel guilty sometimes. Because you hurt me.

WRITER

Did I hurt you?

ARTIST

Yes. I think so. Maybe I hurt myself.

WRITER

You're second guessing.

ARTIST

It's hard not to when you act so innocent.

WRITER

Maybe I am innocent.

ARTIST

Do I attract you?

*There is a long pause as the WRITER turns away.*

ARTIST

You turned away from me.

WRITER

I stopped listening.

ARTIST

To hurt me. Because I made you feel guilty.

WRITER

I forgot you.

ARTIST

But you remember me now because we're talking. You've turned away but you can hear me.

*Long pause.*

ARTIST

Can you hear me?

*Silence. The WRITER moves away.*

## SCENE 19: NOTICE ME

WRITER

I think about you every once in awhile.  
Your name, in passing, settles in my mind  
and I worry about you  
but there're so many people to touch,  
so many things I need to write.

I haven't written since I left.  
Reading feels heavy.

My new lover distracts me. That night--  
The one of the fight--everything  
in this muse's body said "Notice me."  
Walk to eyes, all saying "Just notice me."

We have become inseparable.

But sometimes when we walk in the park  
we pass lovers, caught in an embrace  
and I'm tempted to catch them right  
before they kiss with a warning:

"The hour of the waning of love has beset us,  
And weary and worn are our sad souls now;  
Let us part, ere the season of passion forget us,  
With a kiss and a tear on thy drooping brow."

*The ARTIST tries to initiate the caressing game with the WRITER. The WRITER tries but ultimately turns away and exits. The ARTIST tries the game alone but it proves too difficult.*

## SCENE 20: HOW TO BE ALONE

*The ARTIST pulls everything apart. After a long moment the ARTIST is aware. Not of the loneliness but of themselves.*

SCENE 21: IF YOU SHOULD FORGET ME

*The WRITER enters and places themself in the exact spot they were in at the beginning. The ARTIST does the same.*

BOTH

If you should forget me

WRITER

strand my memory along  
the side of your least favorite  
highway, please don't recognize  
the missing and drive along  
your most hated moments  
trying to locate where I fell away.

ARTIST

If you should leave me  
propped against the doorway  
of your favorite bar, dealing  
with our aftertaste, please search  
for a new crowd. Don't tempt  
me back into the cyclical  
crawl, reliving repetition.

WRITER

If you should lose me  
among the vast skyscrapers  
in your shifting mind, stumbling  
between your darkest nights  
and brightest mornings, please  
don't send out a search party  
of what if's to bring me back  
to the center.

BOTH

If you should forget me

ARTIST

roll me into a corner behind  
your next lover's baggage  
and trinkets, please bury me  
so far into the dark space  
I become a piece of your  
walls, unnoticed support.

BOTH

I've read your billboard mind  
a marquee of questioning

ARTIST

and new desires

WRITER

and uncertainty,  
and I know the best place  
for to me to be is in the crunch  
of broken glass as you stride alone--

ARTIST

please let me be alone--

BOTH

finally one

WRITER

with yourself.

*End of play.*