

Suicide Punchline

Jennifer L. Tudor

Artist's Introduction

I'm sitting in the Minneapolis Playwright's Center listening to a group of actors, playwrights, dramaturgs, and military veterans talk about character development and story arc. It's September 2010 and I've just started touring *Suicide Punchline*, my solo show about surviving my father's death by suicide. *Suicide Punchline* is why I've been invited to another playwright's script workshop. We're talking about how believable the play's military vocabulary and syntax is for the veterans in the room. We express concern about the timing of the sexual assault revelation. We discuss how best to construct the drama of post-traumatic stress disorder. And then we begin debating the two endings, one of which helps us understand a secondary character's suicide by means of a lengthy mailed letter. The letter is a classically-structured monologue that is narratively coherent and aesthetically compelling. It answers all the questions we have about the play's events and characters. There's a strong contingent of artists here advocating for this ending. And that's when I'm glad I'm in the room.

Because most people (between 60-80%) who die by suicide don't leave notes (Gold and Adamec).

Because when they do, they are most often instructions about what do at their funeral or how to distribute their belongings (Joiner 124-29; Cerel et al. 326-27).

Because most survivors of suicide loss spend much of their time asking "why?" and not receiving an answer that is anything close to narratively coherent or aesthetically compelling.

And I'm in the room to communicate these unsatisfying facts.

This nascent play is part of a long history of misrepresenting and glamorizing suicide. It's one of Western theatre's great traditions: the tragedy of noble, misguided, coherent, and compelling self-destruction. This playwright freely admits

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that while she has extensive experience with PTSD, she doesn't know anyone who has "committed" [sic] suicide. And if you haven't looked into the empirical research on suicide and suicide loss, you wouldn't know that most people don't leave notes. I certainly didn't, taking my own father's lack of a note as an indication that he didn't even care enough to leave us a note. It took years to undo the damage of this false assumption.

In 2009, I began writing a show about losing my father to suicide. Most of the popular media about suicide survival focus on how to get through the immediate aftermath. I wanted to make work that went beyond that point and into the lifelong process of survival. More importantly, I wanted to make creative scholarship that didn't simply rehearse pain. As Craig Gingrich-Philbrook asks, "Who needs instructions in despair?" I wanted to provide some instructions in hope.

Suicide has a long history of debate, defense, refutation, condemnation, and romanticization in the humanities (Fitzpatrick 223). From Plato to Derrida, Sophocles to Sylvia Plath, the major figures of Western humanistic inquiry have wrestled with the morality of taking one's own life. What is missing from these discussions are those left behind, the survivors of suicide loss.

The rising rates of suicide across the world mean that the numbers of suicide survivors are rising as well. The American Association of Suicidology conservatively estimates that over 6 million Americans are suicide survivors. Grieving suicide is complicated (Mitchell et al.), due in no small part to the cultural complexities of a death by suicide. Suicide is an act for which human beings demand an account, as it often seems senseless to those left behind. It is also a deeply stigmatizing act, one that pollutes the friends and family who survive suicide (Feigelman, Gorman, and Jordan). Finally, suicide is also a dangerous act, since those who survive suicide loss experience greater mental and emotional instability (Sveen and Walby 24). Research does seem to demonstrate that those who survive the suicide loss of a loved one are at least twice as likely to take their own lives (Runeson and Åsberg 1526). Whole communities can be placed at risk, mostly due to the silence and stigma that surrounds suicide. As Nadine Kaslow, president of the American Psychiatric Association said, "People have a lot of feelings after someone dies. And the more those become silences, secret or stigma, the less likely people are to cope with their distress and worry and fears. Unfortunately, death by suicide can pull a family or community apart" (qtd. in Carstensen). Surviving suicide loss is becoming a more common experience; it is also an experience that demands more discussion and reflection from an arts and humanities perspective.

While those in the sciences are endeavoring to study suicide survivors, those in the humanities seem to focus most upon the final decision to suicide. Philosophers still debate the morality of the decision (Fitzpatrick; Hecht) while historians examine individuals who have suicided and historical attitudes toward suicide (Bell; Lieberman). When scholars explore the arts, they tend to focus on the cultural meaning of real or fictional suicides, debating Willy Loman's final act in

Death of a Salesman (Most) or asking how to read Sarah Kane's plays in light of her suicide (Tycer), for example. In the cultural stories we tell ourselves about suicide, it is a conclusion. For those who survive, however, suicide is only the beginning. Exploring suicide survival from an arts and humanities perspective is crucial to gaining understanding and insight into this difficult experience.

In her book, *Performing Loss*, performance scholar Jodi Kanter contends that, "Performance enables and invites us to do something with loss and, in the very means of doing, find some compensation" (20). This is what I discovered as I created, revised, and presented *Suicide Punchline*. The creative process helped me make sense of my loss; it also seemed to help audiences with their sense-making processes. However, it did so without prescribing a certain approach. The highly specific nature of my journey actually invited audience members to think through their own responses, to question the cultural narratives surrounding suicide loss, and to consider other ways of grieving. As Kanter notes about her own experiences with staging loss: "Understanding our response to loss as performances and those performances as evolving practices can enable us to recognize, create, build upon, and diversify a range of meaningful responses to loss" (180). *Suicide Punchline* invited audience members to begin this process.

In "On the Haunting of Performance Studies," Powell and Shaffer apply Derrida's notion of "hauntology" to the stage, they note that the first rule of hauntology is absolute hospitality toward "the ghost":

[Derrida] asks that our approach to a thing be hospitable, that we forego trying to pin the thing down, thereby reducing its complexity, but rather to let the thing be superfluous, ghostly. (2)

I thought that if I could be hospitable to my father's ghost, I might learn something from him.

This was the departure point for *Suicide Punchline*. The title itself is a critique of the use of suicide as a cultural conclusion/punchline, as well as a play on the term "suicide hotline." It's also a nod to my father's penchant for gallows humor and his avoidance of seeking help when he was in crisis. It led to a live performance that toured nationally for seven years and offered hospitality and hope to audiences. A critical part of that process was post-show discussion. I always requested at least 20 minutes with the audience afterward. I also made myself available to anyone who wanted to talk one-on-one with me. I also requested local mental health experts be on hand. The discussions were quite challenging in a variety of ways but they were always, ultimately, about letting the survivors of suicide loss know that they were not alone.

So, this is *Suicide Punchline*, a mapping of my individual grief onto the landscapes of science, art, and the humanities. It is not the territory of all grief. It's not like a road map that tells you how to get from here to there. It's more like the photographs of small Midwestern towns after tornados have struck. There's never

just one. You want to see the aftermath from as many angles as possible. *Suicide Punchline* is supposed to work like that.

I didn't hear anything more from the playwright or her play afterward. She's a good writer and I hope she found another way to write about the things that mattered to her. But suicide is not just a punchline, or a trope, or a tragic denouement. It is an act that has far-reaching consequences, mostly for those left behind. *Suicide Punchline* is a way to start telling that story. I hope it is only the beginning.



SUICIDE PUNCHLINE

PRE-SHOW: PowerPoint SLIDE 1 UP-blank slide, no sound;

(Suggested pre-show music includes a couple of Dad's favorites: Anne Murray's "Daydream Believer"; and Tennessee Ernie Ford's "Sixteen Tons". It also includes some of my favorite songs about grief and fathers and memory: Guided By Voice's "Hold on Hope"; Pearl Jam's "Just Breathe"; Cynthia Hopkins' "If I Let It Go By"; and The The's "Love Is Stronger Than Death")

(Lights up. There is one file box DSR labeled "Death, Rhetoric, & Misc." filled with all the props. It sits R of a chair (also DSR). The DSR chair faces an empty chair in the audience with a "Reserved" sign on it. There is a small table DSL with a pair of black high heels waiting on the R. I enter wearing a black cocktail dress with pearls and yellow dishwashing gloves. I'm carrying a white washtub and scrub brush. I get down on my hands and knees and begin scrubbing at a "spill" USC. I scrub with increasing distress and urgency, becoming The Questioner. The Questioner is modeled on Athena, in her role as the goddess of justice. The Questioner speaks only in questions. The Questioner always directs her questions to the empty chair in the front row [house left] with a "RESERVED" sign on it. The Questioner treats the empty chair as a hostile witness. The Questioner receives no answers.)

The Questioner:

Why?

Why January 28, 1997? Why not your birthday, five days earlier? Why not five years earlier?

What happened that morning? Were you cold? Lonely? Tired? Hung over?

What did you think about as you passed John, asleep in bed, to get his old hunting rifle?

(I get up. Grab prop box DSR and place mask USC.)

How deep was the snow in the backyard to the garage?

Did you wonder if the sound would wake Mom or John?

Why stay in the garage? Why not drive somewhere else first? Were you scared you'd lose your nerve?

Why wear your snowsuit? Why use my old Ford Fairmont station wagon? Was it for easy clean-up?

Was it a message?

Did you think about me?

Did you imagine some neighbor would find your body just because you left the garage door open to the alley?

(Cross DSR, begin placing cocktail props: one vodka bottle, one vermouth bottle, one shaker, and one martini glass. Bottles and shaker are filled with water. Slip into high heels.)

Did you realize your 48-year-old wife would find you first, stumbling back across the snowy yard to the house, screaming for help, insensible with fear and horror?

Did you realize your 16-year-old son would have to crawl across your body, look at your shattered skull, smell your blood, your shit, your piss, to check your pulse while his mother screamed in the background?

Did you realize your 21-year-old daughter would have to endure a 3-and-a-half-hour flight from Phoenix to St. Louis with the questions of "Why?" and "How?" and "Why?" and "How?" and "Why?" and "How?" pounding through her head?

(Cross DSR. Replace empty box. Make sure the "Death, Rhet. & Misc." label faces the audience.)

Did you realize how quickly word would spread from the police and the EMTs?

How did you imagine we'd pay for your funeral, much less arrange it?

How did you imagine your friends would go on in the wake of such a violent,

shocking death?

How did you imagine your family would be able to endure the awkward silences, the silent suspicions, the suspicious questions, the questioning looks in that town that was so much smaller than it looked?

(Stop and look directly at the witness.)

What on earth were you thinking?

CUE: SLIDE 2 UP-VIDEO: blank, black slide; AUDIO: “Suicide is Painless”¹ cocktail party—fade down

*(Cross DSL to small table with cocktail props. Begin laughing as if you are having a wonderful time at a party. Begin laughing as if the jazzy rendition of M*A*S*H’s theme song isn’t reminding you of all the times you watched the show with Dad. Cross and pour a “martini” from the shaker into the martini glass. The Celebrant addresses invisible others who are attending a cocktail party with her. She is based on Dionysus, the god of ecstasy. The Celebrant is a goddess of distance achieved through humor, theory, research, performance art, and cocktails. Spaces indicate an unheard response, question, and/or comment from the invisible others at the party.)*

The Celebrant:

I’ve got a better one: If you think nobody cares if you’re alive, try missing a couple of car payments.

CUE: SLIDE 3 UP-VIDEO: blank slide, AUDIO: no sound

No, he didn’t leave a note. Most of them don’t, did you know that?² Even when they do leave a note it’s not very satisfying, by all accounts. I mean, what would constitute a satisfactory answer to the question, “Why did you do this to me?” I know that sounds selfish, but when it comes to suicide, it’s pretty much all selfish.

It was typical in other ways than just the absence of a note: a gun, preceded by a few decades of alcoholism and undiagnosed depression.³

Yes, he was a veteran.⁴ Of the Vietnam War. Stationed in Ethiopia and Thailand. He was an accountant.

Atypical in other ways: around his birthday, in the winter, no known previous attempts.

No, that’s a myth. Suicide peaks in the spring through summer months.

No, the Christmas thing is a myth too. But Mondays see more suicides than any other day of the week.⁵ What does that tell you?

It was a Tuesday.

CUE: SLIDE 4 UP – VIDEO: Underworld slide AUDIO: dripping water/owl sound effects

(Put down the martini glass, slip out of high heels and cross USC bare feet. With back to the audience, place a white plastic half-mask on face ceremoniously. Turn to face the audience as The Architect, the builder of small worlds, the seeker of lost fathers, the believer in the old ways. Unlike the Questioner and the Celebrant, the Architect is mortal, so she must be careful. Her language is strange and ornate. Her movements are slow and stylized. They are prayers for safe passage through the Underworld.)

[*Note: see liminalities.net/17-1/SP.html for audio of the following scene of the Underworld Architect]



The Architect in front of the Underworld diorama projection.

The Architect:

Great Dionysus, god of ecstasy,
Hear me.
Mighty Athena, goddess of architects,
Hear me.
Long have I been your acolyte.
Building with your wisdom and passion, Dioramas.
Oh small worlds,
Oh little stages,
Take me out of myself
And give me the power of the gods.

Here is the Forest of the Suicides,⁶
Where brave Aeneas and the holy Oracle of Delphi traveled.
Here there is no punishment.
Only pity.

There is Arachne, changed to a spider,
Now she can weave forever.⁷
There fly the Pleiades,
Sisters eternal in the sky.⁸

Pyramus and Thisbe,
once separated by blood feud and mortared wall,
now travel together to the sea,
their waters forever mingled.⁹

Here in the Underworld,
the trees have tongues,
They watch, they listen,
There is wisdom in their rustling,
signs in their quivering.

**CUE: SLIDE 5 UP – VIDEO: Underworld Slide AUDIO: Underworld Trees
Voice Over**

(During the following voice over, move slowly through four poses: Maenad with Thyrsus, the Shove, Maenad with Snake, and River Genuflection in the Cardinal Directions.¹⁰ Listen to the Trees tell you how to find your father in the Forest of the Suicides.)

[*Note: see liminalities.net/17-1/SP.html for video of the following scene, "Underworld Movement Sequence"]

The Trees (V.O.):

There is wisdom in our rustling,
Signs in our quivering,
Up above as down below.

For we watch and listen,
To you who walk among us,
Up above as down below.

We observe and sacrifice,
For you who walk among us,
Up above as down below.

In the shining light,
During the harvest time of the year,
You and your father came among us.

We heard the crunch of his footsteps
Studied the length of his stride,
And knew him for one of us.

In our shifting light,
We made him tall as the shag hickory,
Strong as the white oak.

In the dusky light,
During the darkest time of the year,
You and your father came among us.

We heard the cut of his voice,
Observed the glint of his axe,
And sacrificed ourselves to you.

In our twinkling lights,
We made him evergreen as the fir,
Rooted as the white pine.

Now he has come among us,
From you above,
To us here, below.

For a while,
You walk among us,
Speaking of your days in sunlight.

And then you part,
Daughter to walk above,
Father to remain below.

As you turn back,
He becomes one of us
Shining through the half-light.

The Architect (live):

As I turn back,
He becomes evergreen,
Vigorous in all seasons.

As I turn back,
He becomes rooted,
Forever fixed to the land below.

As I walk into sunlight,
He remains in twilight,
Surviving on the pity of the gods.

CUE: SLIDE 6 UP—VIDEO: blank slide; AUDIO: MASH Transition music—fade down

(Remove mask. Cross DSL. Slip into shoes. Apologize for your absence with a laugh and a joke, like he did.)

The Celebrant:

Here's another good one: "Suicide is man's way of telling God, 'You can't fire me—I quit.'" One of Bill Maher's. Great, isn't it? Exactly the kind of thing that

would've made Dad laugh.¹¹

CUE: SLIDE 7 UP-VIDEO: blank slide, AUDIO: no sound

Oh, we have lots of theories. You name it, we've probably considered it.

What else? Well, Dad had a lot of risk factors: white, middle-aged, probably depressed, probably alcoholic, definite chain smoker, access to a firearm.¹² All that stuff increases your probability of "success." As opposed to "attempted suicide" — they don't use that term anymore.¹³

Oh, and a deep sense of hopelessness and "perceived burdensomeness."¹⁴ What a mouthful, huh? Well, it seems that if you feel hopeless and like a burden to those around you, you'll probably give suicide a whirl. You know, "You'd all be better off without me" kind of thing.

Which would seem strange to our friends and family. Dad was the life of the party. Always the guy with a joke or a story. Always the first to offer you a drink. At the end of the night, Dad was already talking about the next party or dinner or trip. Soul of hospitality! That's why everyone was so shocked.

It's like he forgot who he was.

(Slow cross DSR to stand behind the chair.)

The Questioner:

Was it because of the booze?

Was it because you realized you really couldn't quit drinking whenever you wanted?

Did you start thinking about how your tongue would always become clumsy and mean after the sixth beer?

Did you suddenly remember subjecting your 16-year-old daughter to a litany of your shameful, intimate sorrows?

(Sink into the chair, lean forward, look directly at the Witness.)

Or were you in the closet? Was that it?

Was it because you suddenly recognized your fear as desire?

Was that why you pushed John so hard to be a man? Took away his doll, shoved a football into his hands and told him to quit crying?

What really happened that night, when you were in the army? Did he want to hurt you or did he want you?

Was it because you finally saw the difference?

(Stand.)

Were you sick, in your heart, in your soul?

Was some demon riding you, drinking your hope away?

Why couldn't you fight him off?

Why couldn't you ask for help?

Didn't it occur to you that's what a good man would do?

(Cross DSL.)

[*Note: see liminalities.net/17-1/SP.html for audio of the following scene from *The Celebrant*]



The Celebrant raises her martini glass while cracking a joke.

The Celebrant:

Noel Coward, on being told his accountant shot himself, replied, "I'm amazed he was such a good shot."¹⁵

True, women attempt suicide more often. But men have a much better shot at completing suicide. Pun intended.

Don't get me started on guns. At least triples the risk of a fatal suicide for everyone in the home.¹⁶

Because, guns are . . . efficient.

Besides, guns are so butch! So cowboy, so gangster, so macho. With a gun, you can do everything from take one for the team or tell everyone to fuck off. So forceful!

Oh, alright, I'll be serious. I mean they do. They do things for survivors. They research us, write plays about us, market to us. There are self-help books, documentaries, pamphlets, organizations, novels, support groups, poems.... It's just not enough.

It's probably just me.

And they know some things about us: Survivors are about twice as likely to complete suicide.¹⁷ It runs in the family, quite literally. But is it nature or nurture? The eternal question.

We're at higher risk for mental illness, particularly depression,¹⁸ *quel surprise*.

We tend to feel ashamed, stigmatized, rejected, relieved, guilty for feeling relieved. And we cannot seem to stop asking "why?"¹⁹

And there are probably about 6 million of us in America alone.²⁰

That's a whole lotta "why".

CUE: SLIDE 8 UP—VIDEO: Inferno AUDIO: Thunderclap/Ravens sound effects

The Architect:

Here is the Forest of Thorns,
The Dolorous Wood,
The Seventh Circle of the Inferno²¹.

Here walked trembling Dante,
And wise Virgil the Poet,
Surveying punishment
Cut to fit every variation of sin
Under the sun.

Watch!
A man takes his own life,

And his soul falls to the forest floor.
Look!
It grows into a terrible tree,
Sensible to pain root and branch
Behold!
Harpies roost in his limbs,
Those terrible bird-women
Who rip and devour.

CUE: SLIDE 9 UP – VIDEO: Inferno Slide, AUDIO: Trees V.O.

(During the voice over, go through the following poses twice: Dislocation, Harpy Claws, Harpy Thrusting Sword, the Shove²². Then the Shove is repeated until the voice over ends. Listen to the trees tell you how your father spends his days in punishment. And how you can be trapped here forever too.)

[*Note: see liminalities.net/17-1/SP.html for video of the following scene, “Inferno Movement Sequence”]

The Trees (V.O.)

Here we will stand,
Rooted in our pain,
Sheltering our tormentors,
Until Judgement Day.

Oh we were broken branches
Oh we were bleeding minds
Oh we were suffering souls

As others rise from their graves,
To enter their eternal bodies,
The Harpies will hang our violated corpses,
From our own branches.

Oh we chose to turn against ourselves.
Oh we chose to abandon ourselves.
Oh we chose to rip ourselves to pieces.

We who abandoned all hope,
And chose to enter here,

Cry out to you traveler,
Pity us our punishment.

[*Note: see liminalities.net/17-1/SP.html for audio of the following scene from the Inferno Architect]



The Inferno diorama in oversaturated black and red.

The Architect:

Watch!
A man takes his own life,
And his daughter falls to the bedroom floor.

Look!
His act lets loose a terrible tempest,
Shattering her heart and mind.

Behold!
The Furies come to roost in her spirit,
Those terrible avengers,
Who hound and harrow,

Here stands tortured David,
And wretched Jennifer, his daughter,
Suffering punishment
Punishment
That cuts both ways.

Here is the Forest of Broken Branches,
The Bleeding Wood,
The Seventh Circle of Suffering.

Abandon all hope, you who enter here.
Here there is no pity.
Only punishment.

CUE: SLIDE 10 – VIDEO: blank slide, AUDIO: MASH Transition

(Mask off. Shoes on. Cross DSL.)

The Celebrant:

“The great thing about suicide is that it's not one of those things you have to do now or you lose your chance. I mean, you can always do it later.”²³

CUE: SLIDE 11 – VIDEO: Blank slide AUDIO: no sound

I'm so sorry. My Harvey Fierstein impersonation is terrible!

(Drain your glass. Pour more “martini” from the shaker as you talk about filling a bathtub.)

Me? Of course. One of those teenage things: fill a bathtub with two parts despair to one part self-hate, shake and serve immediately. And if this were a movie, that would probably be the climax, right? Troubled heroine leaves mourning behind forever after admitting her own suicidal tendencies. Weep, embrace, roll credits.

Suicide is good drama--climax, denouement, punchline. Good research, too--there's lots of text--police reports, suicide notes, hospital records.

Survival is...complicated.²⁴

It ebbs and flows, but it doesn't end. It doesn't get resolved. And that's what they

need. Scientists and dramatists. Resolutions. Either your symptoms subside; or you're cleansed of conflict. Solutions feel good.

But surviving is the opposite of solving.

[*Note: see liminalities.net/17-1/SP.html for audio of the following scene from The Questioner]



The Questioner pauses in her cross examination to reflect on her own potential culpability. She stands in front of a white box labeled "Death, Rhetoric, and Misc Files."

The Questioner:

(Cross USR to the Questioner's chair. Move slowly, reluctantly. Cross-examination of the Questioner has begun.)

It was me, wasn't it?

It was because I wasn't there, wasn't it?

It was because I had gone off to have adventures in the desert, instead of taking care of you, wasn't it?

(Sit down in the chair with perfect posture, hands folded in your lap.)

If I had been smarter, would it have mattered?
If I had been prettier, would it have made a difference?
If I had been happier, would you have stayed?

Will it be me?
Will I wake up one day without a hope in the world?
Will I suddenly decide one morning to leave everything behind and leap into the unknown?
(Stand as you say "leap into the unknown".)

Does this demon run in our blood or does it haunt our houses?
Does it use chemistry or communication to do its work upon us?
Does it have a true name, so that I can send it back to its hell?

What will happen to me?
What will I be when I grow up?
What will grow up inside of me?

(Cross DSL, stumbling a bit. You're tipsy, a little too expressive, a little too talkative, a little too much. You're making everyone uncomfortable.)

The Celebrant:

Stop me if you've heard this one: An Oxford student approaches French philosopher Jacques Derrida after a lecture on *différance*, a notoriously elusive concept that often causes graduate students to gnash their teeth and wail, "Nothing means anything?!" Seeking to "forward [the] theoretical discourse," the student asks the philosopher why he doesn't just commit suicide already. Derrida replies, "And what proves to you, [...] that I do not do so, and more than once?"²⁵

(Laugh too hard at your own joke.)

He doesn't argue, he turns the student's question back to him! It's a little bit funnier if you've read some deconstruction theory.

You know what kills me the most about these movies and books and jokes? They end with the suicide. Like the survivors are remainders after some division problem.

You know what Derrida says about survival? He says, "Survival is life beyond life, life more than life." He says, "It is the affirmation of someone living who prefers living, and therefore survival, to death." He says, "Survival is not simply what remains."²⁶

So I am divided. I am a problem. I am what remains. But I am more than my father's remains, more than these remains. Because I remain.

CUE: SLIDE 12 UP—VIDEO: Garage Slide, AUDIO: Voice Over.

(The sound of the storm sobers you right up. Take off shoes. Put on gloves. Grab tub and scrub brush USC, cross into the Architect's space. Scrub vigorously, like your life depends on it.)

The Questioner (V.O.):

Is this the scene of a crime?
The garage where you took your own life?
It's dated 1-28-97
To whom should I make out the receipt?

Is this where you stored all your debts?
The garage where you exchanged all our lives?
They're labeled "willpower" and "provider" and "be a man"
How do you suggest we settle your accounts?

Is this a haunted house?
Haunted by whom? Which one of us? Are you stuck here?
Or am I?
Why try to remember?
Why try to put the pieces together again and again?
Again and again?
Again and again?
Again and again?

The Questioner (Live):

Don't you know I can never put you back together again?

CUE: SLIDE 13—VIDEO: Blank slide, AUDIO: no sound

(Start dumping bottles into washtub, moving between DSL and Center. You're you again: part Questioner, part Celebrant, part Architect, all you.)

Spalding Gray walks into a pharmacy. He's just left the movie set, come straight from the scene where his character suicides by slitting his wrists. So he's got these realistic gashes running up his arms, complete with fake blood. He holds them up

to the horrified pharmacy clerk and says, "Do you have something for my wounds?" And she says, "Mercurochrome!"²⁷

It was an household antiseptic. Until they pulled it because it contained mercury. Good for killing bacteria. And heavy metal poisoning.

You know what's weird? Spalding Gray published that story in 1997, the same year my father died. His mother suicided in 1967, thirty years earlier, in their garage.

Karen Finley's father also suicided in the garage. January (like my father) but 1979. Gunshot, like my father.

Both of them believed in omens and portents.

Spalding Gray couldn't leave his mother to go on vacation. When he finally left, she died.²⁸

Karen Finley read her father's palm a week before he died. She couldn't find his lifeline.²⁹

In the weeks before my father's death, I was reading my tarot cards every day. And the Lightning-Struck Tower came up again and again. I've never seen it so much before or since. The Tower signifies sudden, catastrophic change. It meant disaster was about to arrive.

[*Note: see liminalities.net/17-1/SP.html for audio of the remainder of this scene, "Tornado."]



The Garage diorama in white and silver.

And I could see it coming (*Move into the Shove*). And I couldn't see it coming (*the Shove*). I could see it (*the Shove*). I couldn't see it (*the Shove—until you back into the tub center stage.*)_

“And I am so tired of well-meaning people.”³⁰

You ask these questions in your hushed, concerned voice

You ask these questions while sipping from your cocktail of slow poison.

You ask these questions standing there in your shiny black shoes

And all the while your eyes are devouring the juicy, sordid little details.

And all the while your eyes are searching for an exit from this conversation.

You want to know how he did it?

Baby, let me tell you about dramatic resolution. (*right foot in tub.*)

Baby, let me tell you about punch. lines. (*left foot in tub.*)

CUE: SLIDE 14—VIDEO: Blank slide AUDIO: Tornado transition sound

(Close my eyes. Lift my arms.)

Last night I dreamt that our house was about to be swallowed by a tornado. As we fled to the safety of the basement, you stood there at the plate glass window, smiling. And I called for you, but the wind drowned out my voice. You didn't want to listen anyway. Because that tornado was you.

CUE: SLIDE 15—VIDEO: Blank slide AUDIO: no sound *(effect should be an abrupt silence)*

(Open eyes.) That tornado was you.

(to the booth) Bring up the ghost.



You stand in front of the Stage diorama projection holding the Architect's mask

CUE: SLIDE 16—VIDEO: Stage slide AUDIO: no sound

(Cross down right to the office. Grab box and start cleaning up martini paraphernalia, shoes, mask. You are yourself once again. Like the Celebrant, you answer unheard questions from the audience.)

This is a ghost light. It is the light that is always left on when a theater is dark.

Oh no, not closed. A theater is never closed unless the building is unsound or the company has folded. And whenever the theater is dark, the ghost light is on.

My favorite explanation is that the ghost light is left on so that when the theater is dark, the ghosts may perform. If the ghost light is ever turned off, the ghosts will punish those in the theater with malevolent pranks. So leaving the ghost light on is an amulet and an invitation.

Every theater has a ghost.³¹ Sometimes certain rituals are performed to appease the ghost. Sometimes a certain seat is kept empty so that the ghost can attend the performances.

Things were the worst with Dad after I entered my teens. He didn't deal with adolescence very well. To be fair, neither did I. But this is when things were the ugliest between us.

During this time, our community theatre put on a production of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Dad had played some minor roles in high school. So when the Great River Players came to him needing a Sir Henry, Dad stepped in gladly. And he asked for my help.

(Pull chair center, behind washtub filled with spilled martini. Like the Architect, you use this pose to move carefully through the afterlife of your relationship.)

I have a memory of sitting *(sit and soak your bare feet in the tub)* in the audience and watching him during a dress rehearsal so anxious. I remember the two of us grinning at each other like idiots afterward when he'd gotten through the whole thing without dropping a line. I remember being happy with Dad on a stage.

You know what my colleagues Ben Powell and Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, say about ghosts? They say, "Because the ghost always begins by coming back, the haunted subject has the responsibility to wait for the ghost."

They say, you can't conjure the ghost; you can't try to control the form he will take.

They say, "The ethical thing to do, is to allow the [...] ghost to manifest by waiting for its arrival, openly and without expectation."³²

Like the ghost light on an empty stage when the theater is dark

For as long as the structure is sound and the company in residence

An invitation to appear and perform.

(Dry feet and move downstage center.)

After all, what is a diorama but a little stage?

What is a stage but an invitation?

What is an invitation but a request for the pleasure of your company?

(Like the Questioner, address your father in his reserved seat in the front row.)

A sign that I am waiting,

That you can come as you are,

That this work of mourning is never finished,

That as you left, you took something with you,

And you left something behind,

So you come on by, any time you want.

I'll be here.

CUE: SLIDE 16—VIDEO: Stage AUDIO: clip of The The's "Love Is Stronger Than Death" music

END

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Notes

¹ The television series *M*A*S*H* holds a special place in my memories of dad. We watched it together when I was a kid. I liked it because it made him laugh. Dad liked it because it poked fun at the military while making some pretty dramatic humanist points. This jazzy, instrumental version of "Suicide Is Painless" captures some of that (Van Poll et al.).

² “Most” is the current consensus for suicide deaths unaccompanied by notes. Studies report a range of percentages from 50-80%. Content analyses of suicide notes reveal that “actual explanations are rare” (Cerel et al 326-27; Myers and Fine 65).

³ It’s important to note that while most people who complete suicide appear to have a mental illness, most people with mental illnesses will not attempt or complete suicide. (“Suicide: Risk and Protective Factors”)

⁴ Military veterans are 1.5 times more likely to complete suicide than the general population. Also, please note that these are numbers from 2018, the most recent data available. (Kaplan et al 131; “2020 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report” 5)

⁵ The myths around suicide, such as a higher incidence of suicide around the winter holidays, could reveal some of the most fundamental assumptions about suicide. (Berezow; “Holiday-Suicide Link”)

⁶ While I borrowed the outlines of the “Forest of the Suicides” from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, it is a collage of ancient Greek and Roman myths. I was fascinated by these stories after receiving a copy of *D'Aulaires Book of Greek Myths* as a child. Suicide is a common topic in these myths, and formed much of my early understanding of this phenomenon.

⁷ In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Arachne hangs herself after Athena becomes enraged with her tapestry. The goddess “takes pity” on Arachne and transforms her into a spider. (Ovid 217 bk. IV.110-18; Pridmore and Majeed 23)

⁸ The immortal seven sisters, the Pleiades, were also transformed out of pity. There are many different versions of the Pleiades’ story. In one version, they are so miserable after the death of their sisters, the Hyades, that they suicide. Afterward, they are transformed into stars, forming the well-known constellation. In other versions, they are transformed into doves (“Pleiades and Hyades” 144).

⁹ Pyramus and Thisbe, the original star-crossed lovers who die by suicide, experienced transformation as well. In *The Metamorphoses*, the mulberry tree’s fruit is forever changed from white to red because it is now stained with the lovers’ blood (Pridmore and Majeed 23). Ovidian scholars believe that the earlier versions of the tale concluded with Pyramus transformed into a river and Thisbe into a spring that feeds him (Knox 38).

¹⁰ The Maenad with Thyrsus and Maenad with Snake poses were created using images from ancient Mediterranean pottery. See the amphora *Dionysus with Maenads and Satyrs* (Kleophrades Painter) and the hydria featuring a maenad dancing with a snake (Meidias Painter). The Shove and the River Genuflection poses were developed using Anne Boggart’s Viewpoints approach. The Shove repeats throughout the show. It represents the feeling of being suddenly shoved off balance by an unseen force.

¹¹ Dad loved gallows humor. I think each of the Celebrant’s jokes would’ve made him laugh. (“Suicide.” *Oxford Essential Quotations*)

¹² (“Suicide: Risk and Protective Factors”; Schriver et al 1041-42)

¹³ As any communication studies scholar will tell you, language has material impacts upon the world. Social scientists have found some evidence supporting the idea that the framing of media stories and the language used within those stories can contribute to suicide “contagion” (Sisak and Varnek 131). In recent years, public health organizations such as the American Association of Suicidology have issued recommendations for communicating to

the public. These include avoiding older, more stigmatizing terms such as “commit suicide,” “failed suicide attempt,” and “successful suicide attempt.” (*Suicide Reporting Recommendations* 11). However, other studies call into question the impact of violating the reporting recommendations on individuals at higher risk of suicide (Anestis et al 1037). Given this disagreement, I decided to err on the side of caution and follow most of the media recommendations.

¹⁴ “Both hopelessness and perceived burdensomeness predicted suicidal behavior above and beyond the contribution of depressive symptoms” (Van Orden et al 464).

¹⁵ Shaw, Karl. *Mammoth Book of Tasteless and Outrageous Lists*. Robinson P, 2014.

¹⁶ Previously, I had used the most conservative rate of suicide risk to households with firearms: “At least doubles the risk of suicide to everyone in the home” (Miller and Hemenway 990). In light of Hemenway’s 2019 analysis, I updated this line (16).

¹⁷ “The main finding of the present study is that the rate of suicide was significantly higher in the families of suicide victims than in the families of comparison subjects. [...] But still, a family history of suicide was a significant risk factor independent of severe mental disorder” (Runeson and Åsberg 1526).

¹⁸ Bereavement of any kind can lead to mental health issues, but depression is one of the most common diagnoses for suicide survivors (Feigelman et al 603; Grad and Andriessen 669).

¹⁹ Suicide loss survivors “commonly experience suicide as an act of intentional rejection” (Sveen and Walby 24-25). Other “common themes” of suicide bereavement include “shock and disbelief”, the search for an answer to “Why did they do this?”, “shame”, “responsibility, guilt, and blame”, “anger”, “rejection and abandonment”, “fear”, and “relief” (Jordan and McGann 660-62)

²⁰ Estimating the number of suicide survivors is difficult. Most studies estimate that for every person who dies by suicide, they leave behind approximately 5-6 survivors, though some studies propose much higher numbers (80 survivors per suicide death). Grad and Andriessen suggest thinking about the aftermath of suicide as “a rippling effect, similar to the effect of a stone that is thrown into the water, with people closer to the epicenter being more affected than those further away” (665). They call for a distinction between survivors who were “psychologically close” to the deceased vs. people who were “exposed” to the suicide but less psychologically close to the deceased (e.g. estranged relatives, community members, acquaintances, etc.) Using this distinction, the American Association of Suicidology estimates that there are roughly 5.6 million survivors in the United States and that 6.9 million people were exposed to suicide in 2019 (the most recent data available). I’ve stuck with the “6 million of us in America alone” line throughout the run of the show because it continues to be supported by the data.

²¹ I kept fairly close to the description of the Forest of Thorns in Dante’s *Inferno*. It seemed to reflect traditional Roman Catholic views of suicide as the sin of “self-murder” (which is a literal translation of the word “suicide”). We were raised Lutheran, and these understandings of suicide as sin were part of our religious tradition’s history as well. While these attitudes have shifted over the centuries, they still contribute to our meaning-making processes. For example, we were uncertain if our church’s pastor would be willing to hold a ceremony for my father because he died by suicide. The pastor was willing, but the fact

that it was uncertain is the residue of these beliefs.

²² The two harpy poses were developed using Bogart's Viewpoints. The Dislocation pose was developed from the image of corpses hanging from trees in the Forest of Thorns as well as the description of common torture techniques employed by U.S. military forces in Iraq (McChesney).

²³ "Humankind - Humor & Wit." *Simpson's Contemporary Quotations*, James Beasley Simpson, Houghton Mifflin, 1st edition, 1988.

²⁴ "Complicated grief" is a specific type of grief that survivors of suicide often experience. Its core symptoms include: "yearning and longing for the deceased, a sense of purposelessness, feelings of futility, difficulty imagining a life without the deceased, numbness, detachment, feeling stunned, dazed or shocked, feeling that life is empty or meaningless, feeling disbelief over the loss, and excessive anger or bitterness re-lated to the death" (Mitchell, et al 499).

²⁵ Believe it or not, this joke really does make me laugh (Derrida 15). The follow-up joke about reading deconstruction theory usually makes the audience laugh, however.

²⁶ I first read Robert Knafo's English translation of *The Last Interview* on a webpage that is no longer available. Since that time, another English version has been published in book form. You can find these quotes there (Derrida and Birnbaum 78).

²⁷ Like my father, Spalding Gray had a very morbid sense of humor as well. This joke appears in *It's a Slippery Slope* (27). The saddest of all parallels, however, was that Gray died by suicide on January 9 or 10, 2004 (Simonson). From Gray I learned how a suicide survivor and performance artist makes jokes about suicide.

²⁸ I paraphrased the first line we hear Gray speak in the filmed version of *Monster in a Box*.

²⁹ Karen Finley taught me how a suicide survivor and performance artist can grieve (Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy* 59).

³⁰ When I was writing this scene, I couldn't figure out how it ended. My director and collaborator, Candace, asked me what I wished I could actually do when people asked intrusive questions like "How did he do it?" or, more commonly, tried to find someone else to talk to at the party. I replied, "I wish I could go 'Karen Finley' on them." So I borrowed a portion of Finley's words and performance style from "He's Going Home" and used it to talk back to suicide stigma.

³¹ Amy Kilgard's observations about theater ghosts resonate throughout this scene.

³² This essay helped me figure out how to stage my father. I struggled through rehearsal experiments in voicing and embodying him. It wasn't working. Then I read this essay steeped in Derrid's hauntology, and I knew that Dad would be a ghost. This essay also helped me accept the present absence of his ghost in my daily life.

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