

Performance Transcription

I want to start with a quote by Rebecca Solnit, from her book, *The Faraway Nearby*:

“To love someone is to put yourself in their place, we say, which is to put yourself in their story.. Which then means that a place is a story, and stories are geography, and empathy is first of all an act of imagination, a storyteller's art, and then a way of traveling from here to there.”

Some of these words are mine, and some I have heard and told and retold.

My mom used to care so much about the airflow in the house. She still does. We lived in California, and the sea breeze came in from the West. Our back door faced the ocean, and the water would climb up into the air and through our windows and into the kitchen so we could breathe easy. In the backyard, we had a plug-in sprinkler that made rainbows and made my hair smell of sulfur. Sprinkler rainbows meant happy mid-mornings, small wet footprints, ABCs, and horse figurines arranged in a follow-the-leader line. *(Beat.)* I hated being the leader in elementary school. I'd see so many baby ducks and geese in the Spring when we moved to Florida. Mom said she was the big one and my sister and I were the small ones, but that we'd all be the same size one day. Pajaritos. Linnunpojat. Mina rakastan sinua, minun vauvat.

I have heard of my white mother with her two brown babies. I have heard of her mother with a flower crown, captured on film in a silver oval frame. And I have heard of her mother with a sewing machine and a strong will. Suomalainen sisu. Fortaleza. *(Beat.)* I have heard of Finnish summer where the lakes are still so icy cold, you can hear it. And after a plunge, the sauna steam permeates your skin and fills your blood vessels. I have heard of seafaring in the drawn out honks of cargo ships passing by my grandparents' backyard. it was on the river. I have tasted pannukakku served hot with strawberries. I have sat in a rocking chair on a dock with my great great grandma, touching the yellowing recipe cards.

Ask the water for a story. What kind of story? What kind of water? *(Beat.)* Ask the proper question and you will see.

I was playing piano. I used to take lessons three times a week from a woman with the whitest hair you've ever seen and a hand that would shake just a tiny bit, but in another life she'd played Carnegie Hall and been a soloist with every orchestra from Portland to Paris, and when she touched the piano the shake would vanish. I loved my lessons, and unlike almost any other seven-year-old on the planet, I loved to practice. I'd make my parents sit in the easy chairs by the window and play "concerts" for them. *(Beat.)* One time my mother got up in the middle of a movement of Tchaikovsky. I stopped and started banging on the keys until she sat back down. And thus I trained my parents to stay until I played the very last note, and got up from my little

booster bench. *(Beat.)* On a beautiful April day, they are sitting there as I regale them with Mozart's Piano Concerto Number 15 in B-flat major, which would be extremely challenging at any age. They're still sitting there as we hear this far away thunder, and I look up from my Mozart and see the hint of a plume of distant dust through the window, but I don't stop playing, so they don't stop sitting, and they are still in their chairs when the entire side of the room by the windows falls away into nothing. I don't know what to do. A seven-year-old brain cannot process houses and parents winking into never agains, so I finish the 15th, but I am troubled by the middle C, which has gone terribly flat. *(Beat.)* I cry for half an hour—32 minutes, actually—but when it becomes clear that my piano is irrevocably broken, and that neither my parents nor the woman with the white hair will be coming back to listen to me play or for any other reason, I stop crying, close the cover, and two days later...

I learned that ruin is actually synonymous with reclamation. I learned that the water was tamed by dragons, the land was created under the dangling feet of someone desperately grasping a chain attached to the sun, waiting to fall. and it was She who scattered the stars from her light cotton pouch opened not by the gods but by her sweet childish negligence.

One small peek couldn't hurt
I'll just spread out the contents right here in the dirt
And as soon as I see what this bag has inside
I'm sure this great yearning will finally subside
So slowly at first with the greatest of care
She untied the knot and was hardly aware
That the bag started growing right there in her hands
By the stream by the tree on the trail in the sand
Knot after knot she was busy untying
Her excitement kept growing until she was trying
With all of her might just to loose the last knot
Then something popped out too fast to be caught
The last knot was opened and the light hurt her eyes
And thousands of objects flew up to the sky
They spread to the four winds in streaks and in swirls
With a swiftness that truly did frighten the girl
She knew she had done something that she should not
So in an attempt to avoid being caught
She grabbed at the things that had not flown away
To stuff them back in the bag where it lay
The girl picked up the bag and started to cry
The objects escaped, they had flown to the sky
She couldn't go home, they would not let her stay

To avoid such disgrace she would just run away
But then she remembered her people are brave
She also remembered that our mother gave her the bag she had trusted no other
And that she had given her word to our mother

Our mother had planned that the stars tell a story
Of all of man's challenges, failures, and glory
But now those bright stars were carelessly freed
And all who had witnessed this sad tale agreed
That although her misdeed made them all feel defeated
The task they were given must still be completed
The elders then gathered the stars that remained
And carefully set them in place by their names
The slingshot the dipper
The shield
But no others, for the rest of the stars are these patterns' wild brothers

Getting lost is magical. Unless you're five in an Old Navy and the mannequins look a little too real and none of the real people look like your mom. I'm sure you're a little lost, or that you've been lost, or forgotten, or you've forgotten how the story went or ended. but sometimes a little stutter is okay.

It's a simple game. Who likes to play simple games? When I say a word, say the first word that comes to your head. Don't repeat.

The word-association game began with tree,

Tree

Mango

Fruit

Apple

Eat

Banana

Tree, *I said*, oh, I repeated

Eden

Bible

Story

Baby

Giraffe

Ark

Whale

Fish, *and continued on for a while, until the natural end.*