

(IM)POSSIBLE REPRESENTATION:
THE ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF ABSENCE IN THE RITUAL PERFORMANCE
OF TRAUMA IN *TITTY CAKES*

A Thesis Submitted to the Committee on Graduate Studies
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ABSTRACT

(Im)Possible Representation:
The Ethics and Aesthetics of Absence in the Ritual Performance Of Trauma in *Titty Cakes*

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Is trauma representation possible without re-traumatization (of self or other)? Developed through the creation, performance, and critical analysis of *Titty Cakes: A Recipe for Radical Acceptance*—an autobiographical, ritual-performance rooted in lived experiences of breast cancer and gang rape—this thesis argues that trauma representation is (im)possible: possible only by accepting its impossibility. To navigate this paradox, I propose the ethics and aesthetics of absence: a performance theory that resists “trauma porn” by refusing direct representation in favour of rupture, remains, and ritual. Absence is neither void nor lack; it is an ethical imperative and aesthetic strategy through which trauma is held rather than exposed, allowing the unspeakable to be witnessed. Ritual becomes the vessel for this holding: it activates affect without spectacle, invites witness without voyeurism, and fosters *communitas* without demanding closure. *Titty Cakes* stages absence as presence; where the scar, not the wound, becomes the locus of meaning.

Keywords: research-creation; solo theatre performance; ritual-performance; feminist performance; cultural studies; trauma studies; performance studies; feminist praxis; body politics; embodiment; breast cancer; sexual violence; survivorship; Saint Agatha of Sicily; minni di Sant’Agata; affect; poststructuralism; hauntology; representation; aesthetics; ethics; ritual; gender; autobiography; autoethnography.

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Especially when it was weird.

To the women, girls, and femmes who carry scars in silence: I hope this work makes space for yours to speak.

And to those who've always held me through unravelling and re-weaving: you know who you are, and I owe you my life.

DEDICATION

For all the Agathas

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PREFACE

The Crater

I needed to do something sacred.

For years, I considered returning to the scene of the crime. To the ditch. To the place where my unconscious body was discovered.

Naked.

Bleeding.

Covered in snow.

Discarded like a piece of garbage after the alleged gang rape. I thought returning to that place might bring me closure, but I never went. Neither to the ditch, nor to the memory.

How could I? The event itself left no memory, only a void where a story should have been; a crater where meaning had been obliterated. The experience haunted me, not as a narrative I could revisit but as an absence I could never escape. I wanted to mark it, to make sense of it, to transform it into something else. Instead, I lived with the crater and its echo, the silence reverberating from that which could not be named.

I sought therapy. Freud's great promise of the "talking cure" assumes that healing lies in language.¹ But for me, there were no words. The crater resisted closure. What is there to "talk out" when you remember nothing? Therapy, I learned, assumes a narrative; a linear logic where events are processed and eventually understood.

Trauma resists narrative.

¹ See Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria* (Basic Books, 2000).

It exists in fragments, in echoes, in remains. Trauma is a story that repeats in the body, as if trapped in its own rhythm of latency and rupture: an event that resists being fully known, fully owned.²

After many years, on the fourteenth anniversary of the assault, I was diagnosed with Invasive Ductal Carcinoma.

Breast cancer.

The calendrical coincidence seemed almost poetic: trauma metastasizing, mutating from an unspeakable wound into something grotesquely visible, something physical, something truly abject.³

It seemed to confirm what I had long suspected but never had the vocabulary to articulate: my absent story had been present all along. It lay hidden in my body, in my very cells; it was inscribed on my skin.

My story had been archived in flesh.

It was during this time that I encountered language to describe what I had long sensed but could not name: the body remembers what the mind cannot.⁴ This realization, that trauma is not just emotional but physiological, demanded a different kind of healing. If trauma is stored in the body, then healing must also be embodied. And if healing must be embodied, it cannot rely solely on language or narrative.

The crater demanded action.

² See Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

³ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁴ See Gabor Maté, *When the Body Says No* (Vintage Canada, 2011); and Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (Viking, 2014).

INTRODUCTION

Toward an Absence-Based Performance Theory

The work began with a crater and its echoes.

A breach in memory.

A fissure in language.

An annihilation of meaning.

What could not be said insisted on form. What had no shape began to stir in batter. In blood. This thesis is both an archive and an offering: an articulation of absence—as ethics, as aesthetics, as method—through performance, poetics, and embodied inquiry.

At its centre is *Titty Cakes: A Recipe for Radical Acceptance*, a ritual-performance created in the wake of breast cancer(s) and the long-silenced trauma of gang rape. Rooted in my own body, steeped in symbolic gesture, and shaped by absence, the work refuses to reproduce the violence it emerges from. Instead, it forgoes reenactment, invoking its aftermath through gesture, trace, and ritual. *Titty Cakes* stages what cannot be staged, and through its very forfeit, speaks what cannot be spoken.

To perform trauma is to risk spectacle. To risk trauma porn.⁵ To risk simulacra.⁶ Sexual violence, particularly gang rape, circulates in popular media as shorthand—a

⁵ See Kathomi Gatwiri and Virginia Mapedzahama, “Pedagogy or ‘Trauma Porn’?” *Journal of Multicultural Education* 16, no. 3 (2022): 272–82; and Maya Gurantz, “Negative Space: Close Reading Trauma Porn” (*Los Angeles Review of Books*, 15 Apr. 2021).

⁶ See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (University of Michigan Press, 1994).

hollowed-out trope, repeated until it becomes cliché—a reduction of trauma that *stands-in* for the horror of rape, erasing the very humanity of those who have endured it.

Titty Cakes resists this repetition. It depicts what remains.

It shows scars, not wounds.

Instead of *re-presenting* trauma, I honoured the impossibility to do so.⁷

I refused reenactment; I summoned its silence. In lieu of recreating pain, I invoked its spectre. Its traces.⁸ Its cinders.⁹

In this work, absence is not void; it is structure, method, and ethical imperative.

Where representation falters, symbol steps in. Where narrative collapses, the body remembers.¹⁰ And it was through this remembering—not of crater but of echoes—that *Titty Cakes* took form. Nonlinear. Unorthodox. Fragmented. Defiantly sensuous.

What follows is not a claim to closure. Rather, it is a refusal of trauma's spectacular economies.

A theory of absence.

A praxis of scars.

A recipe for something sacred.

At the heart of this project there is a question: Is it possible to create work about trauma without re-traumatizing myself or others? I did not answer it in theory but in practice—through breath, batter, and blood. I answered with a work and a witnessing:

⁷ See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (Fordham University Press, 2005).

⁸ See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁹ See Jacques Derrida, *Cinders* (University of Nebraska Press, 1991).

¹⁰ See Gabor Maté, *When the Body Says No* (Vintage Canada, 2003); and Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (Viking, 2014).

both born from the creation, performance, and critical analysis of *Titty Cakes: A Recipe for Radical Acceptance*—a performance shaped by trauma, framed by ritual, and refracted through absence.

This thesis argues that trauma representation is (im)possible: possible only through the acceptance of its very impossibility to be represented.

To navigate this paradox, I propose a performance theory that that resists spectacle and evades re-traumatization through the ethical imperative and aesthetic structure of absence, actualized in ritual form.

Absence is not omission.

It *is* presence.

What I offer is not a model of healing, but a mode of holding. A performance that privileges crater over closure. Where narrative collapses under the weight of what cannot be said, I turn instead to symbol, sensation, and scar. The stage becomes a site of ethical refusal: a space to mark the crater of trauma where its silence still echoes.

And yet, even silence has shape.

In Chapter Two, the script of *Titty Cakes* will unfold—necessarily prior to its analysis—nonlinear and ritualized, broken-open by the very forces it seeks to name. It demands to be witnessed, not read. There, you will see absence take form: not explained but enacted. It is structured through rupture, recurrence, remains. It stages the scar, not as metaphor, but as material. Repetition becomes rhythm. Gesture replaces exposition. The kitchen becomes a temple.

The body, a text.

The baking, a testimony.

The sacrificed, the sacred.

I was determined to tell my story ethically, resisting the trappings of trauma porn. This is the risk of representing sexual violence: that it becomes not the site of witness, but the site of consumption. That suffering becomes banal.¹¹ That audience becomes voyeur.

So, I asked again: How does one make trauma felt, without sensationalizing it?

How does one honour the unspeakable without reinscribing its violence?

These questions exceed the personal; they are political and aesthetic. They demand a scaffolding that can hold their weight. In Chapter Three, I attempt to build that scaffolding. Drawing on semiotics, post-structuralist thought, trauma theory, and feminist praxis, I trace the contours of absence as ethics and aesthetics. Locating *Titty Cakes* within a lineage of critical refusals, this chapter argues that absence is not a failure of representation, but a strategy—an ethical imperative—a mode of staging what cannot be shown and should not be consumed.

Jean-Luc Nancy warns that atrocity devastates the very structures that make representation possible.¹² Ethical representation, then, must accept what it cannot show; must forfeit reproduction; must work *between* trace and opacity. Between presence and absence.

Rather than a retreat from trauma, the ethics and aesthetics of absence allow for a reorientation toward it. A turning from reenactment to remains. From wound to scar.

Absence becomes a kind of pact: a contract of restraint, a covenant with the unspeakable.

¹¹ See Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 7.

¹² See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (Fordham University Press, 2005).

In *Titty Cakes*, that covenant is enacted through ritual. In Chapter Four, I return to the ritual roots of performance; not only as symbol but as ceremony: as method and meaning-making. This chapter asks what performance makes possible beyond narrative: *What does it mean to perform a 21st century communion? To co-witness?* Exploring the ceremonial logics of *Titty Cakes* situates the work in relation to theories of performance and ritual; affect and collective meaning-making. Here, ritual is not merely a frame: it *is* the form. It houses the forfeit. It binds the fragments. It holds the unspeakable.

The stage becomes an altar.

The performance, an offering.

The audience, *communitas*.

The final movement, Chapter Five, returns to remains, this time asking: What survives the ritual, the trauma, the work? There, the crater returns—not as symbol, but as record.

A trace.

A cinder.

A scar.

A final testimony to the wound, its healing, and the future to come. This work does not offer closure. It offers connection.

It does not perform trauma.

It performs its (im)possibility.

And, in doing so, it insists: That which is unspeakable may still be witnessed.

That which is absent may still be held.

CHAPTER ONE: THE SHAPE OF SILENCE

A Performance in Words

This chapter offers the performance-text as a kind of scriptural fragment; not to be consumed, but to be savoured, to be metabolized slowly. It is a written artifact of what was ephemeral. A performance in words, yes, but more than that, it is what remains of something sacred.

This is not an archive of a performance. It *is* a performance in its own right.

Like all rituals, it resists being read.

It asks instead to be witnessed.

The Anatomy of a Show

Titty Cakes: A Recipe for Radical Acceptance is not a play that unfolds neatly. It does not offer the comfort of coherence. Instead, it breaks open, interrupts itself, stutters in its telling. It refuses closure. It oscillates between genres—between the comedic and tragic, the sacred and the absurd, the past and the present. Between presence and absence. At every turn, the work refuses the neatness of reenactment.¹³

It does not stage the crater. It stages its echoes.

This is precisely why the script appears before the analysis: because the performance *must* be encountered on its own terms. Before it can be theorized, it must be witnessed. *Titty Cakes* does not exist to illustrate theory; rather, the theory emerges from

¹³ Jill Dolan argues that performances which “break form” enact resistance to dominant storytelling and closure. Her framework supports the refusal of coherence and conclusion that structures *Titty Cakes*’ engagement with trauma. See J. Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* (University of Michigan Press, 2005), 13–15

within its ruptures, refusals, and excesses. The script does not exemplify a concept; it enacts an (im)possibility. It is the space in which absence is held without being resolved, and where trauma is felt without being displayed. In placing the script first, I honour its epistemological primacy: the performance is not an object of analysis, but a mode of thinking.

Structured through absence, marked by rupture, and composed of remains, *Titty Cakes* enacts my core theoretical intervention: that absence is an ethical demand and a structure through which that demand is answered; that performance can hold without exposing; and that representation of trauma becomes (im)possible through the acceptance of its impossibility. The performance resists spectacle, and in doing so, disorients the audience from passive consumption. It demands they witness, instead, what is unspeakable without forcing it to speak.

At its core, three registers rupture and recur in *Titty Cakes*:

1. The historical: the hagiography of Saint Agatha, the patron saint of breast cancer patients and rape victims, whose mutilation becomes doctrine, dessert, and devotional iconography. She is both mirror and weapon, an instrument for my self-flagellation.
2. The domestic: a cooking show that insists on performance and performativity, on palatability, on relentless cheerfulness in the face of devastation. A structure that offers comic relief and unbearable irony.
3. The personal: my own lived experience of cancer, sexual violence, and silence, shaped not by plot but by interruption, resistance, and unspeakability.

These registers do not exist in isolation. They collide, fold into one another, distort each other's meanings.

In *Titty Cakes*, absence becomes a palpable presence. It is an aesthetic form and an ethical imperative: a forfeit of narrative in favour of holding, honouring, haunting.¹⁴

In the end, *Titty Cakes* does not tell a story.

It performs the wreckage of one.

Refusing Martyrdom: Saint Agatha and the Inherited Script

Saint Agatha is not a character in *Titty Cakes*; she is a spectre. A presence that cannot be escaped. Her mutilated body has been sanctified and circulated for centuries: her breasts iconized, her piety glorified, her purity weaponized. She is invoked in the name of healing, yet her story omits the violence it was built upon.¹⁵ Her sainthood rests not on her victimization, but on her chastity, effectively muting the reality of the sexual violence she likely endured.

She is held up as the perfect victim: pure, unwavering, silent in her suffering. Her story has been told for nearly two thousand years. A young woman, resisting the advances

¹⁴ See Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains* (Routledge, 2011), 37. Her discussion of the temporality of remains notes that “any approach to history involving remains—material or immaterial remains—engages temporality at (and as) a chiasm, where times cross and, in crossing, in some way touch,” suggesting that performance engages multiple times at once.

¹⁵ Though Agatha is celebrated as the patron saint of rape victims, her passion narrative is conspicuously silent on the sexual violence she likely endured while imprisoned in a brothel. Her sainthood rests not on her victimization but on her sexual purity and refusal, effectively muting the reality of the violence enacted upon her. This erasure mirrors a broader Christian hagiographic tradition that frames female suffering as a test of faith rather than as gendered violence. See Jennifer Cannon, “Martyrdom and the Feminine Body in Early Christian Saints’ Lives,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23, no. 1 (2007); and Eileen Marie Harney, *The Sexualized and Gendered Tortures of Virgin Martyrs in Medieval English Literature* (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2008).

of a powerful man, is imprisoned in a brothel, tortured, and mutilated: her breasts cut off as punishment for her defiance.¹⁶ Agatha is healed by divine intervention, only to be tortured again, stretched on the rack, burned, and martyred.

Her story becomes a map, a code, a script I cannot unlearn; a measure against which my own survivorship continuously fails. In *Titty Cakes*, she is summoned each time I interrogate my own shame.¹⁷ When I ask myself if I fought hard enough, when I am suffocated by the weight of my own unworthiness; she is the saintly shadow that whispers I am not enough.

Not silent enough.

Not pure enough.

Not dead enough.

Agatha's is the voice that tells me I am faulty, flawed, filthy; that I did not suffer beautifully as she did.¹⁸

¹⁶ Saint Agatha, martyred around 251 CE during Roman persecution of Christians, is one of the few canonized female saints whose story has survived primarily through hagiographic passion narratives. According to tradition, Agatha, a young Christian woman, resists the sexual advances of a Roman consul and is punished with brothel imprisonment and brutal torture. Her breasts are severed with pincers, and she is ultimately martyred by fire. These violent acts, sanctified through religious tradition, are transformed into sacred symbols—reproduced in icons, festivals, rituals, relics, and even confections like *Minne di Sant'Agata*. See Brittany Joyce, *The Martyrdom of St. Agatha* (Master's thesis, Brandeis University, 2019); "St. Agatha," Catholic Online; "Saint Agatha," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; Alice Jorgensen, "Shame and the Breast in Ælfric's Life of St. Agatha" (*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 2021); Eileen Marie Harney, *The Sexualized and Gendered Tortures of Virgin Martyrs in Medieval English Literature* (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2008); and Salvatore Spatafora, "A Sicilian Dessert Recipe: Minne di Sant'Agata" (*La Cucina Italiana*, 2020).

¹⁷ See Figures B17-9.

¹⁸ Survivors often find themselves trapped in cultural scripts of blame and silence where dominant narratives impose meanings upon their experience. See K. J. Anderson, *Modern Misogyny* (Oxford University Press, 2015); K. Bell, "Remaking the Self" (*Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 2012); B. Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided* (Metropolitan Books, 2009); A. Gjika, *When Rape Goes Viral* (University of California Press, 2023); S. B. Kaiser, *Fashion and Cultural Studies* (Berg, 2012); Y. King, *Women and Life on Earth* (New Society Publishers, 1989); and V. Wieberneit et al., *Trauma and Memory Studies* (Springer, 2019).

But *Titty Cakes* does not canonize her. It refuses martyrdom. It steals her back from patriarchal hagiography and renders her presence both accusatory and connective. Agatha is both mirror and weapon. Her presence reflects the ways society forces survivors into impossible binaries: saint or sinner, victim or liar, healthy or sick, virgin or whore. In these moments, Agatha is no longer just a saint, she is an accusation; her sanctified pain becomes a mechanism of my self-flagellation and a symbol of collective inheritance.¹⁹

Agatha, however, is also conduit. She carries the unbearable knowledge that this has all happened before: that my traumas are not mine alone. They are hers too. They are ours. All of ours. They are emblematic of the collective experience of all cis/trans women and girls.

All the Agathas.²⁰

The Recipe: Performativity and the Tyranny of “Fine”

At first, the recipe offers comic relief: a playful distraction from the unbearable weight of trauma.²¹ The jingle chimes, the stage lights shift, and the performance resets, welcoming the audience back to *Titty Cakes*, the cooking show!

¹⁹ See Figures B3; B31-3.

²⁰ See Figure B42.

²¹ Bertolt Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* aims to alienate the audience so that they adopt a critical, questioning stance toward the action. It is explained by Martin and Bial, deliberately disrupts theatrical illusion to encourage critical engagement (91-92). Joanne Tompkins writes that such disruption allows “empathy to be replaced by analysis,” (28) forcing spectators to confront systemic forces rather than individual trauma. The recurring recipe sequence in *Titty Cakes* functions similarly: it interrupts pathos with absurdity, jarring the audience out of identification. See B. Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre* (Methuen Drama, 1964); C. Martin and H. Bial, *Brecht Sourcebook* (Routledge, 2000); and J. Tompkins, *Unsettling Space* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Hilarity ensues.

The recipe continues on.²² No matter what has just been confessed—no matter what trauma has just surfaced—the show *must* go on. The performer’s voice must stay light, cheerful. The cakes must be baked.²³

The kitchen becomes a site of contradiction: warm, domestic, absurd, and violent.²⁴ A space of shame; a place to be watched, judged, re-victimized, violated.

The audience begins to resist it. They want the baking to stop. But it doesn’t. The demand for performance, for resilience, for a palatable narrative of trauma is unrelenting.

²² Richard Schechner defines “restored behavior” as “symbolic and reflexive. It is not-for-the-first-time; it is twice-behaved behavior. It can be rehearsed, repeated, and re-enacted. The original ‘source’ of the behavior may be known or imagined, but in performance the behavior exists in its own right, independent of the system that brought it into being. Restored behavior is used to make and remake performances” (*Between Theater and Anthropology* 35). The repeated act of baking in *Titty Cakes* exemplifies restored behavior: while grounded in the familiar domestic and cultural practice of cake-making, each iteration within the performance is rehearsed, symbolic, and re-contextualized to transform a quotidian action into a ritualized act of remembrance and reclamation. See R. Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

²³ Judith Butler describes gender and identity not as innate qualities, but as the result of repeated social performances: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25). Erving Goffman likewise argues that the self is a “performed character,” maintained through interactions and symbolic props, like costume, setting, and gesture (17-35). *Titty Cakes* literalizes this: the performance of survival is not an act of healing, but a demand to be seen as healed: functional, grateful, amusing. See J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1990); and E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Anchor Books, 1959).

²⁴ The kitchen in *Titty Cakes* is not simply a set, it is a semiotic battlefield, a contested ideological space. Sue-Ellen Case argues that theatrical signs are ideologically loaded, shaped by broader cultural systems rather than existing in aesthetic isolation, exposing the “the cultural encoding of the sign” (116). Feminized acts like baking are thus encoded with social expectations, transforming everyday gestures into markers of gendered labor. This aligns with Martha Rosler’s *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, where repetition becomes protest. As Emily Goodman writes, Rosler’s work shows how tools and language “enforce or unsettle cultural presumptions about gendered labor” (Goodman 5). See S. E. Case, *Feminism and Theater* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1988); E. Goodman, “Martha Rosler’s *Semiotics of the Kitchen* in the Wake of #MeToo” (*Woman’s Art Journal*, 2020); and M. Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (Video Data Bank, 1975).

The recipe acts not only as a set of instructions but also as a performative utterance; a speech act that enacts cultural scripts of survival expectations through repetition.²⁵ Like gender and survivorship, it is performative. The baker's cheer is a demand, not a comfort. The recipe perpetuates the violence of toxic positivity;²⁶ the ways in which survivors are expected to make their trauma digestible.²⁷ How we are forced to keep smiling, keep baking, keep serving something sweet, no matter how bitter the story behind it.

It Is not an act of healing.

It is a demand to *appear* healed.

²⁵ The recipe in *Titty Cakes* does not merely instruct; it enacts. J. L. Austin coined the term “performative utterance” to describe speech acts that do not describe an action but perform it; statements like “I’m fine,” for instance, that accomplish what they say. Judith Butler expands this idea to gender and identity, asserting that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body... which congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance” (Butler 43). In this context, the recipe becomes a cultural script—rehearsed, enforced, and internalized: a performance of the performativity of survival. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Harvard UP, 1962); and J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1990).

²⁶ The relentless cheer demanded by the recipe reflects a broader cultural imperative toward emotional tidiness. Jack Halberstam critiques this as a form of “neoliberal positivity,” a fantasy of optimism that masks structural harm (Halberstam 8). Psychologist Zoe Wyatt describes this compulsion as “toxic positivity,” a pressure that leads to emotional suppression, shame, and the invalidation of suffering (Wyatt 2). In *Titty Cakes*, the demand to keep smiling becomes its own kind of violence. See J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011); and Z. Wyatt, *The Toxic Positivity Phenomenon* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

²⁷ See Figures B2; B7; B20-1; B23; B27.

The Cooking Persona and the Performance of Survival

The cooking show host is not me. She is an aspect of me, a coping mechanism, a survival tactic. She is the mask that allows the show to go on.²⁸ She makes everything look easy, tidy, do-able. Survivable.

Crafted, controlled, performative, hers is the voice that assured my loved ones “it looks worse than it feels,” while suffering through cancer treatments. She is the one who cracked jokes through police reports and agonizing, intrusive procedures, easing tension and breaking unbearable silences.²⁹

The one who learned early in life that the best way to navigate trauma in the patriarchy is to make it easier for everyone else to handle.

She is not just a performance. She is the myth of resilience, the expectation that survivors must be endlessly accommodating, endlessly grateful, endlessly “just fine.”

But *Titty Cakes* does not allow her to remain intact.³⁰

As the performance progresses, she falters. The mask slips. The polished, cheerful persona begins to crack. The performance of “fine” becomes unsustainable.

²⁸ In trauma contexts, adopting a persona is not performance for its own sake: it is self-protection. Erving Goffman describes this as the “presentation of self,” a mask maintained to navigate social expectations and minimize vulnerability. Judith Herman notes that survivors often rely on compartmentalization and emotional disconnection to remain functional in the face of overwhelming experience. The cheerful baker in *Titty Cakes* is not an act of denial, but of necessity. See E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Anchor Books, 1959), 17–38; and J. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (Basic Books, 1992), 102–05.

²⁹ See Figures B28-9.

³⁰ *Titty Cakes* does not depict trauma directly; it reveals trauma through affective rupture, performing instead the symptoms of trauma. The collapse of the cooking persona reflects the body’s refusal to sustain coherence. Emulating trauma symptoms, the work does not provide catharsis or closure, enacting instead the limits of endurance and the impossibility of narrative smoothness. The uber-feminine performance of “fine” is not maintained: it shatters under the weight of what cannot be spoken.

And when she breaks, when the ready-made script is abandoned, when the performance collapses, it is not failure.³¹

It is radical acceptance.

The Medical Gaze and the Fractured Body

Against the historical, domestic, and personal registers, there are ruptures of medical discourse: cold, detached, clinical. These moments mark the institutional erasure of personhood: where I become a file, a statistic, a prognosis.³²

The medical sections of *Titty Cakes* exist in contrast to the rest of the performance. Where the recipe is excessive, the medical voice is sparse. Where the cooking show is theatrical, the medical voice is monotonous. Where the performer is emotional, the medical voice is indifferent.³³ The medical gaze does not see a whole person; it sees a series of symptoms, risk factors, and statistical probabilities. It fragments the body, reducing it to something measurable, manageable.³⁴

In *Titty Cakes*, these moments serve to underscore the violence of institutionalized care, the ways in which institutional discourse can erase the individual in favour of

³¹ See Figures B35; B39-40.

³² See Figure B14.

³³ See Figures B1506.

³⁴ Michel Foucault identifies the “medical gaze” as a mode of perception that isolates the patient’s body from their personhood. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, he argues that this gaze transforms individuals into objects of knowledge, erasing their subjectivity in the name of diagnostic clarity. In *Titty Cakes*, the sparse, affectless medical voice exemplifies this objectification: it reduces the performance to symptoms, organs, and probabilities, enacting a form of discursive violence that ritual seeks to undo. See M. Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (Vintage Books, 2003).

pathology.³⁵ But against the sterility of the medical voice, the ritual of the performance reclaims the body as something sacred. As something that belongs to the self, rather than to institutions, diagnoses, patriarchy.

An Invitation, Not a Demand

Titty Cakes is an invitation, not a demand. It is not reenactment. It is not spectacle. It does not ask for consumption, pity, horror. It does not display the event; it stages its aftermath.

It is a ritual, a rupture, a residue.

A refusal to disappear.

³⁵ See Figures B24-6.

TITTY CAKES:

A RECIPE FOR RADICAL ACCEPTANCE

A Play in One Act

by

Sarah McNeilly

TITTY CAKES was first produced by The Theatre on King (TOK), fuelled by Public Energy Performing Arts at The Theatre on King, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, in October 2022. The original creative team was as follows:

SARAH	Sarah McNeilly
Writer	Sarah McNeilly
Director and Dramaturge	Kate Story
Stage Manager	Shannon McKenzie
Lighting Designer/ASM	Ryan Kerr
Composer and Sound Designer	Andrew McNeilly

CHARACTER

SARAH *A woman in her thirties. She wears a frilly red apron, beneath which she is topless, revealing occasional glimpses of the scar that now occupies the place where her breasts had once been.*

SETTING

A theatre, first and foremost. A kitchen. A ditch. A liminal space of in-between-ness.

TIME

Now, necessarily. Also, then. And finally, the edge of the future to come.

TITTY CAKES:
A RECIPE FOR RADICAL ACCEPTANCE

AT RISE: *The stage is dark. An oppressively cheerful jingle plays through in the blackout. There is a large, sturdy table at centre stage. Stage right, there are shelves that hold numerous trays with a variety of baking ingredients and implements. Canisters holding long implements and a stack of clean, damp cloths sit atop the shelves. Next to the shelves, in the upstage corner, there is a fridge. Stage left, there is a coat-tree. On the upstage prong of the coat-tree, a coat-hanger holds a leather jacket with a hat placed on top. On the far stage left prong of the coat-tree, there is a hospital gown.*

(Once the jingle plays through, lights snap up on a smiling SARAH, standing down stage centre of the table.)

SARAH

(With the energy, pacing, and confidence of a thoroughbred charging out of the gates.)

Let's bake, bitches!

(Walking backwards USR to shelves, the following introduction is delivered at near Italian-run pace.)

Every February in Catania, Sicily there's a festival to honour Sant'Agata. *(Takes spoon from canister)* Saint Agatha.

(Points to audience with spoon while moving DSL.)

Agatha is the patron Saint of breast cancer patients and rape victims. She's the patron of bakers, bellfounders, and wet nurses, too.³⁶

³⁶ Agatha's veneration as the patron saint of breast cancer patients and rape victims reflects both the physical violence she endured and the symbolic legacy of her suffering. Her associations with

(Excitedly moves SR to USC of table.)

In Sicily, Agatha gets a three-day festival to commemorate her life *(places spoon down on SL side of table)*. There, they serve magnificent street food, including *(mimes cake shape and topping)* little dome-shaped cakes, with a strategically placed cherry on top, called "Minni di Sant'Agata;" Little breasts of Saint Agatha.³⁷ Or, as I like to call them, Titty Cakes.

(Enthusiastically moves to sit on DSL side of table.)

I actually did some research, here. Research is kind of my thing. Turns out we find hard consonants way funnier than other sounds³⁸, which makes total sense when you think of all of the best swear words in the English language.

By that logic "tits" *(snaps fingers to punctuate sound)* is way funnier than boobies, melons, jugs, cans, knockers, hooters, fun-bags ... *(sighs)* gazongas.

No. Tits *(snaps)*.

(Pointing. Punctuating the syllables)

Tit-ty-cakes.

bakers, bellfounders, and wet nurses further illustrate how the female body—and, in particular, the breast—has historically been tied to nourishment, care, and sacrifice.

See "St. Agatha," *Catholic Online* (2021); "Saint Agatha," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2023).

³⁷*Minni di Sant'Agata* are traditional Sicilian finger-cakes created to honor Saint Agatha's martyrdom. Typically made with sponge cake, sweetened ricotta, marzipan, and a candied cherry "nipple," they resemble small breasts—a culinary tribute to Agatha's severed ones. Their ritualized consumption during the February festival in Catania invokes a deeper history of gendered suffering and symbolic nourishment. Mary Taylor Simeci links such anatomical cakes to pre-Christian fertility rites, particularly the Thesmophoria, suggesting continuity between sacred myth and embodied ritual. Sam O'Brien highlights the cakes' playful visual aesthetic in contrast to their violent origins. See S. Simeci, *Pomp and Sustenance* (Ecco Press, 1989); E. O'Brien, *Women Saints in World Religions* (Paragon House, 1993); and S. Spatafora, *Saint Agatha* (Officina Libraria, 2014).

³⁸ Within comedic theory, the so-called "K-rule" suggests that words with hard consonants—especially "k" sounds—are inherently funnier due to their percussive impact and sonic crispness. This intuition has circulated widely in stand-up and sketch comedy circles and is supported by linguistic analysis suggesting that plosive phonemes enhance comic timing and audience response. This rule helps explain why "tits" generates more laughter than euphemisms like "boobies." See S. Cline, "Literary Lessons from Stand-Up Comedy" (*Hot House Literary Journal*, 12 Mar. 2020).

*(Leaping off table to stand DSC,
SARAH becomes increasingly manic.)*

Warning, this show contains nuts... tree nuts, that is.
Almonds and pistachios. There's a sugar warning too: icing
and granulated. And gluten in our flour, of course.
(Sauntering SR)

(Quickly returns DSC.)

And I'm quite confident this is the world's only cooking
show with a trigger warning!³⁹ *(Proudly gesturing "ta-da").*

(Beat)

Many!

(Beat)

All the trigger warnings!

(Beat.)

(Pointing at audience)

Leave while you still can!

*(Audience lights up.⁴⁰
Pause as SARAH continues pointing/staring at audience.
Audience lights down as she lowers her finger and
resumes speaking while crossing SR to fridge.)*

(Slightly more composed)

³⁹ In keeping with a trauma-informed approach, each performance of *Titty Cakes* included comprehensive content warnings and on-site support via "active listeners" (i.e., trained mental health professionals from the Kawartha Sexual Assault Centre). These measures were designed to hold space for survivors and support emotional regulation, while preserving the artistic integrity of the material. The inclusion of such protocols aligns with trauma-informed best practices, foregrounding care for both artist and audience.

⁴⁰ Bringing the house lights up enacts a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*—or alienation effect—reminding the audience they are both spectators and participants. This tactic interrupts immersion and prompts critical reflection on the mechanics of performance. In *Titty Cakes*, this gesture disrupts comfort, turning passive viewing into active witnessing. See B. Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre* (Hill and Wang, 1964); and C. Martin and H. Bial, *Brecht Sourcebook* (Routledge, 2000).

It also contains ricotta cheese, oranges and lemons, unsalted butter (*opens fridge, shivers*) very cold (*quickly closes fridge*) eggs, salt, vanilla, almond extract, chocolate chips, and cherry nips!⁴¹

Fun fact! (*Surges USC of table*) I'm mildly allergic most of the ingredients in these cakes! Worry not: they're the kind of allergies that require a toilet, not a hospital.

These ingredients will be used to make the many components of our Titty Cakes:

(SARAH mimes the cake anatomy, layer by layer, punctuating each ingredient with her hands.)

Italian sponge cake, cannoli cream, Italian short pastry, pistachio marzipan, cherry nips, and lemon royal icing.

(Presenting imaginary cakes to audience.)

Minni di Sant'Agata are traditionally served in pairs.⁴²

(Beat. Presenting imaginary tits on chest.)

A pair of tits!

So, without further ado, let's get to it!

(Jingle plays. SARAH hears it; loves it.)

First, we'll drain our ricotta cheese.⁴³

⁴¹ This sequence aligns with the culinary principle of *mise en place*—a French term meaning “everything in its place”—referring to the preparation and organization of ingredients before cooking begins. The practice, a staple of professional kitchens, also reinforces the script's genre-bending fusion of theatrical and cooking show forms. See CIA Foodies, “What Is *Mise en Place*?” (*Culinary Institute of America*, 2019).

⁴² As Salvatore Spatafora observes, “they are eaten in even numbers: two breasts mean two sweets per person” (Spatafora). This ritual pairing reinforces their symbolic function as embodied iconography—connecting bodily sacrifice with communal remembrance. See Spatafora; See also Appendix A (figures A1-A11) for depictions of Agatha's iconography.

⁴³ All the ingredients used in *Titty Cakes* are real, a deliberate (and expensive!) deviation from typical theatrical conventions. This choice blurs the line between performance and reality, echoing Richard

(Crosses SR to get cheese from fridge while pointing to bowl, strainer, and cheesecloth pre-set on SR side of table.)

Put your fine mesh strainer above your bowl and place a couple layers of cheesecloth inside it.

(Returns USC of table and completes actions while speaking.)

Then spoon your ricotta on top of the cheesecloth, smooth it out, gently press, fold the cloth over, give it a squeeze, tie-off the cheesecloth. *(Takes entire tray holding implements/ingredients to fridge)* We'll drain it for a minimum of four hours, but overnight if you can. It takes a while to drain all that liquid from the cheese.

*(Puts tray in fridge.
Closes door.
Takes a breather,
leaning against fridge.)*

Release takes time.

(Responding to non-existent audience query.)

Why these cakes, you ask? *(Excitedly surges DSC.)* They're complicated and so obscure! I couldn't even find a coherent, English-language recipe.⁴⁴ These are deep Sicilian cakes. And even in Sicily, they're specific to the region of Catania. There, every family keeps a different version of this folk recipe.

(Mimes cake anatomy again.)

Schechner's notion of ritualized performance, wherein authenticity and risk become dramaturgical tools. See R. Schechner, *Performance Theory* (Routledge, 1988).

⁴⁴ While several English-language recipes for *Minni di Sant'Agata* do exist, the most visually and technically compelling ones are written in Italian, underscoring both the regional specificity and folkloric nature of the recipe. The scarcity of standardized instructions reinforces the cakes' embeddedness in oral tradition and localized ritual. See S. Spatafora, *Saint Agatha: Iconography and Devotion* (Officina Libraria, 2014); and L. Tomasi, *Dolci Siciliani: Storie e Tradizioni Culinarie dell'Isola* (Slow Food Editore, 2017).

The two main versions I found use either pistachio marzipan⁴⁵ or Italian pastry⁴⁶ to go between the filling and the icing. But, since I'm going to make the best Goddamned Titty Cakes the world has ever seen, I'm using both.

(Slightly manic.)

I've never half-assed anything in my life!⁴⁷

(Twirls upstage to DSR corner of table, somewhat sheepishly, re-gaining composure.)

You can probably already tell by looking at me or by reading my very Irish sounding name in the program: I am not Italian. Never been! Not a Catholic either; not religious! *(Beat)* I'm not even a very good baker.

(Backs USR to shelves.)

I'm certainly not advanced enough to tackle this ambitious, three-day ordeal of a recipe.⁴⁸ *(Gets cloth.)*

Regardless, I'm going to bake and eat me some Titty Cakes with you beautiful humans. *(Squeezing liquid from cloth)* Because I just loves me a good ritual!⁴⁹

⁴⁵ See S. Spatafora, *Saint Agatha: Iconography and Devotion* (Officina Libraria, 2014)

⁴⁶ See *HI Cookery*, "Minni di Sant'Agata (Saint Agatha's Breasts Pastries)" (2019); and L. Tomasi, *Dolci Siciliani: Storie e Tradizioni Culinarie dell'Isola* (Slow Food Editore, 2017).

⁴⁷ This recurring declaration was added during later script revisions and functions as a thematic motif. Ironically, while the piece seeks to explore and critique my own perfectionism, the act of writing and performing this demanding, multi-disciplinary work underscores many of the very tendencies it aims to interrogate.

⁴⁸ The traditional recipe requires a minimum of three days to complete due to the complexity and resting times for each component. Dramaturgically, this duration mirrors both the three-day festival honouring Saint Agatha and the three days between Christ's death and resurrection, layering the ritualistic baking process with additional Catholic resonance.

⁴⁹ This 'performative utterance' and invocation of ritual speaks to the transformational potential of theatre. The act of baking becomes both literal and symbolic, aligning with Schechner's notion of restored behaviour and Turner's concepts of liminality and communitas. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Harvard UP, 1975); R. Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); V. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Aldine Transaction, 1969); V. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* (PAJ Publications, 1982); and E. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance* (Routledge, 2008).

*(Moves US of table,
wiping table from SR to SL.)*

You see, in my youth I went through a Bataille phase, as every young girl does.⁵⁰ Admittedly oversimplified, Bataille postulated that religious sacrifice is the affective foundation of community.⁵¹ *(Wiping ceases when she reaches/notices Agatha spoon on table)*. Communion.

The sacrificed

(Gingerly picks up Agatha spoon.)

once consumed

(Wipes table under spoon.)

becomes sacred

*(Gently places spoon down.
Snaps out of reverie,
returns to cleaning.)*

It bears repeating, I am not religious. I'm not even baptized. I'm a proper heathen.

(Beat)

But old Bataille piqued my interest in the ecstatic. The profane.⁵² He said the potential for ecstasy justifies embarking on an agonizing experience.⁵³

⁵⁰ A facetious reference to Georges Bataille's provocative writings and esoteric leanings, including his involvement in *Acéphale*, a secret society centered on themes of sacrifice and sovereignty. See A. Stoekl, "Reflections on Acéphale" (*Religious Studies Review*, 2022).

⁵¹ Bataille argues that sacrificial rituals form the emotional core of community life, positing that communal bonds are forged not through utility, but through the expenditure of excess and the shared experience of loss. See G. Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (Zone Books, 1988).

⁵² "Profane," in a Bataillian sense, refers both to the everyday (like cooking) and to what is taboo—trauma, sexuality, or disruption of social norms. *Titty Cakes* blurs these boundaries, bringing them into public confrontation. See G. Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (City Lights Books, 1986).

⁵³ For Bataille, the promise of ecstasy justifies even the most painful experiences, suggesting that spiritual or aesthetic transcendence may be reached only through the darkest routes. See R. Gallo,

(*Beat.*)

So, let's make some Italian dough, why don't we?

(*Crosses SR to get tray with bowl, whisk.*)

First, we'll sift together our dry ingredients.

(*Voices as a blessed Trinity,
crossing the ingredients.*)

Flour, sugar, and salt

(*Places tray on table.
Church music plays.
SARAH hears it; cascades into it.*)

There's not much information about St. Agatha. All that's left of her is the story written by monks.⁵⁴ They highlight her Christian beliefs and chastity.

(*Object puppetry:
SARAH brings spoon to life as Agatha.*)

Agatha was young, highborn, and a great beauty.

(*Object puppetry:
SARAH brings whisk to life as Quintianus*)

The Roman consul of Sicily was Quintianus. Baseborn, libidinous, a worshiper of idols. And he wanted Agatha to be his wife.⁵⁵

Erotic Spirituality (Lexington Books, 2006); and M. Correia, *Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

⁵⁴ I oscillated between reverence and resentment for Agatha. While I recognized her suffering as emblematic of patriarchy's violence, I also bristled at her perfection—her chastity, her unwavering belief. However, it was helpful to remember that the story of Agatha we inherit was shaped by male monastics who emphasized her virginity and piety, often at the expense of acknowledging her resistance or agency. See E. M. Harney, *The Sexualized and Gendered Tortures of Virgin Martyrs in Medieval English Literature* (University of Toronto, 2008); and A. Jorgensen, "Shame and the Breast in Ælfric's Life of St. Agatha," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (2021).

⁵⁵ Quintianus, the Roman consul of Sicily around 250 CE, is recorded as the antagonist in Agatha's hagiography. His desire for her set the events of her martyrdom in motion. See B. Joyce, *The Martyrdom of St. Agatha* (Brandeis University, 2019); and W. G. Ryan and E. Duffy, "Saint Agatha, Virgin," *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints* (Princeton UP, 2012).

*(Puppet pursuit:
 Quintanius advances Agatha.
 Agatha shakes head "no".
 Quintanius leans in/Agatha leans back, quivering.
 Agatha whacks Quintanius.
 Dizzy, Quintanius backs away.)*

She refused him.

(Slowly, Quintanius' Dizziness spirals into rage.)

Quintianus took vengeance. He used his imperial and legal authority as consul to persecute Agatha as a Christian.

First, he imprisoned her in a brothel.

(Places spoon in bowl.)

For thirty days.

(Puts whisk down. Grabs sifter/flour)

We don't have any salacious gossip about what happened to her there. But, seeing as she's the patron Saint of rape victims, I think we can guess.⁵⁶

(Sifting flour onto spoon.)

SSSSSSHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH.

(Self-consciously snaps out of reverie.)

Next, we take our cold butter from the fridge and cut it into cubes.

*(Leaves bowl and whisk on table.
 Returns sifter/tray to shelves.)*

⁵⁶ Most versions of Agatha's passion mention that she was imprisoned in a brothel. According to Jorgensen, the torture of Agatha, including her rape(s) and the removal of her breasts, reflects a broader narrative of sexualized violence in the stories of virgin martyrs (326-51). Harney also discusses how the sexualized and gendered tortures of saints like Agatha highlight the societal tendency to prioritize their chastity and virginity over their suffering. See A. Jorgensen, "Shame and the Breast in Ælfric's Life of St. Agatha," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (2021); and E. M. Harney, *The Sexualized and Gendered Tortures of Virgin Martyrs* (University of Toronto, 2008).

*Gets butter/knife/cutting board from fridge.
Returning to table.)*

Agatha's is not your average Christian persecution. It's not about religion, it's about personal vendetta.⁵⁷

This is the story of a rejected man destroying a young woman because he could.

(Cutting butter with increasing frustration)

You might say Quintianus was an Incel. He certainly fits the profile.

Incels, or "involuntarily celibates" as they call themselves, aren't looking for sex; they're looking for supremacy. Male supremacy—though many of them just so happen to be white supremacists too.

They believe they are entitled to sex with young, beautiful women.

(Stops cutting butter.)

Why do I speak with such authority about Incels, you ask?

Because

(Holding knife to neck, anguished.)

I intimately know the destruction they cause.

*(Notices knife.
Puts it down.
Moves SR to get cloth.
Cleaning hands with cloth.)*

I certainly wasn't wealthy or highborn like Agatha.

(Singing, a la Journey)

⁵⁷ Unlike typical martyrdom narratives that centre on religious defiance, Agatha's story reads more as a tale of personal revenge. Her Christian faith becomes the pretext through which Quintianus enacts violence driven not by ideology but by wounded ego and entitlement. See A. Jorgensen, "Shame and the Breast in Ælfric's Life of St. Agatha," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (2021); and E. M. Harney, *The Sexualized and Gendered Tortures of Virgin Martyrs* (University of Toronto, 2008).

I was just a small-town girl.

A working-class girl. A good girl. But my teachers wrote me off (*tosses cloth on DSR floor*⁵⁸), unlike the rich kids.

(Crossing DSC)

My parents were "from Toronto," so we were outsiders.

*(Beat.
Kid voice)*

I'll show you. I'll be exceptional.

*(Frantic Little Red Riding hood music plays.
SARAH hears it; her eyes light up.
She moves DSR of table.
Points finger on table, punctuating achievements.
Next, walking fingers from DSR to DSL side of table.)*

I was an award-winning, bona fide genius at the top of every class. By age twelve, I got my first job at the local museum. By fourteen, I had already saved ten thousand dollars. By taking a second, after school, job at the local jewellery store.

(Slightly manic.)

I've never half-assed anything in my life!

(Continues point-walking fingers across table.)

I was on the honour roll, student council, winner of countless awards. I won second place in the All-Ontario Public Speaking competition, 1997. (*Painfully*) Second place.

(Moves DSL)

I was a high achiever. I had to be. Had to excel. To defy my teachers' expectations.

⁵⁸ This marks the beginning of the onstage garbage pile. Early drafts of the script had every scrap and implement tossed into "the ditch." For the premiere, however, concessions were made to the realities of production. This scaled-back mess still echoes Victor Turner's "anti-structure," wherein chaos becomes a space for ritual transformation. See V. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Aldine Transaction, 1969).

(Moves DSC)

And I didn't want to ask my parents for the name-brand shoes or clothes or whatever other status symbol was required for me to fit in at school.

My parents worked so hard to make sure my brothers and I never went without. And long before I learned about Marx, commodity fetishism, false consciousness; I knew that shoes were just shoes.⁵⁹

But try telling that to the kids at recess.

(Sauntering to DSC.)

So, I got my own jobs. And I bought my own stuff. I got the best grades. Won all the awards. I even ...

*(Jingle plays.
SARAH hears it; loves it.
Surges USC of table.)*

Oh! Next, we'll take our cold, cubed butter and slowly add it to our flour mixture by rubbing it in our hands.

*(Picks up Agatha spoon.
Gently blows flour off spoon.)*

A technique known as sanding, producing a crumbly, oatmeal textured dough.

(Adds butter and begins sanding.)

(Kid voice) I caught the theatre bug as an embryo. My parents were in a production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* together. Yes, my mom was Nurse Ratched,⁶⁰ and my dear old Dad was McMurphy.

⁵⁹ Even before encountering Marx, I intuited the truth of his critique: that capitalist culture teaches us to revere commodities beyond their utility. Shoes were just shoes; until the playground taught me otherwise. See K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1* (Penguin Classics, 1990).

⁶⁰ *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* has a notably male-dominated cast. Nurse Ratched is the lone female character of significance, her authority rendered monstrous in a sea of masculine rebellion. See D. Wasserman, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: A Play in Two Acts* (Samuel French, 1974).

In grade nine, I auditioned for a lead role in the school production of Steven Sondheim's hit musical, *Into the Woods*.⁶¹ I was cast as Little Red Riding Hood.⁶²

*(Looks at audience,
looks at red apron,
looks at audience.
Nods, smirking.)*

My songs got applause every night, but what I loved most were all the laughs I got. My comedic timing was on point.

(Increasing excitement.)

On closing night, I received a massive bouquet. Of roses. From a secret admirer! *(Emphatically spreads arms, flinging dough from hands.)* It was the talk of the school—the entire small town.

(Shrinks into bowl.)

And it made me very uncomfortable.

*(Silence.
Continues sanding.)*

You know, I can't even think of anyone I had hoped they were from, like, I didn't even have a crush at the time. I was a kid.

All I could think was *(kid voice)*: "Hey! I just gave the performance of my lifetime, and all anyone can talk about is these stupid flowers!"

Well, about a month—and so many flower deliveries later—my secret admirer was finally revealed. He was a big kid. A grade 13. We'd been in the play together.

⁶¹ This anecdote was a late addition to the script but too resonant to ignore. It marked the first time my story aligned uncannily with Agatha's: a young girl, and an unwanted admirer whose attentions escalate into violence.

⁶² The irony of this coincidence had totally escaped me until my director had pointed it out; *Little Red Riding Hood* is a rape allegory. My casting in this role—unknowingly prophetic—invokes a folkloric lineage where young girls are devoured by wolves masked as men. See M. Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995).

I didn't want to hurt his feelings. So, I told him: "I can give you my friendship but that is all."

(Snaps out of memory.)

When your Italian dough is mixed, it should look right crumbled.

(Moving SR to get small bowls of vanilla and egg yolk)

Next, we'll take separated egg yolk and add it to the mixture.

*(Returns to table.
Making egg-well.)*

Then we'll make an egg-well. A little ditch.

*(Gasps; recoils hand.)
Silence.)*

A little liminal space of in-between-ness for our separated egg yolk, and vanilla, to pool in.

Use your hands to mix it in, but don't over knead it. That stresses the gluten and causes the dough to shrink back into itself, you've got to keep the gluten relaxed.

Form it into a ball, cover it with plastic wrap, and chill it in the fridge overnight. *(Dough stays in bowl. Puts bowl in fridge.)* Chilling the dough is necessary to but also to keep it tender. *(Closes fridge door.)* Not tough.

*(Silence.
Responding to non-existent audience query.)*

I didn't want to humiliate him.

Maybe I was wrong to do that.

(Brings cloth to table.)

(Tidying tray.) Maybe I should've told him to go fuck himself *(knife)*. But I was just trying to be nice. I thought I had to be nice. *(Bringing tray back to shelves.)*

Spoon, whisk, cloth stay on table.) Sugar and spice, right? That's what little girls are made of.⁶³

*(Returns to table.
Begins wiping,
animating implements as they're encountered.)*

And, at fourteen years old, I was very much just a little girl. A little girl (*spoon*), pursued by a nineteen-year-old man (*whisk*) who weaponized my niceness.⁶⁴

*(Notices accidental re-creation of Agatha/Quintianus.
Gasps; puts puppets down.
Returns to wiping.)*

"But he's a nice guy," everybody said, "he really likes you. You two would just be so cute together."⁶⁵

(Takes spoon/whisk/cloth SR.)

But no matter how nice I was, no matter how many times I bargained—begged—for him to accept my friendship, it wasn't enough.

Not for him (*whisk to canister*). Not for any of my schoolmates (*spoon to canister*). Not even for my favourite teacher⁶⁶ (*tosses cloth to floor pile*).

(Silence.)

He's a nice guy.

⁶³ This nursery rhyme, which adorned the wall of my second-grade classroom, encapsulates early gender socialization. Walkerdine's *Schoolgirl Fictions* discusses the ways "sugar and spice" sets the mold for feminine docility—a mold that predators exploit. See V. Walkerdine, *Schoolgirl Fictions* (Verso, 1990).

⁶⁴ Women's social conditioning toward "niceness" can be deadly. Ted Bundy, for example, relied on feigned helplessness to lure women who were too polite to say "no." See T. Ott, "Ted Bundy Killings: A Timeline of His Twisted Reign of Terror," *Biography* (2020).

⁶⁵ This framing erases coercion by casting adult predation as "romantic interest." At age fourteen, I was not a "lucky girl," but a child groomed by her community to accept abuse.

⁶⁶ I felt betrayed, villainized by my peers and mentors. This marked my first experience of what Althusser terms "interpellation"—being hailed into a role that defines and confines. My teacher's words served as a performative utterance in Austin's sense: "It's a girl(friend)!" See L. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (Monthly Review Press, 1971); J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Harvard University Press, 1975).

(Lights change, slowly.)

But all they saw were his frequent—and very public—romantic gestures. They didn't see him follow me everywhere; constantly showing up at my locker, my classes, my house, my jobs ... my doctor's office?

They didn't hear his constant threats of suicide (*grabs measuring cup-phone*): "I can't go on without you." "I don't want to live in a world where I can't have you." "You'll be fucking sorry when I'm dead."⁶⁷

(Spooked; lowers cup-phone.)

They didn't hear his veiled threats of violence against me and my family (*phone*) "if I can't have you, no one will." "Stop using your baby brothers and Mommy to lie to me. What am I going have to do to make you answer the phone yourself?"

(Gasps; throws cup SL.)

Caller-ID would've come in real handy. I suppose it started out harmless enough—all those sickly-sweet smelling roses—but after a whole year of this, my life was pure terror.

*(Wolf music plays.
SARAH shushes audience,
straining to listen.)*

I had become accustomed to listening for his car engine on the street

(Crawling under table.)

as I ran through my neighbours' back yards.

(Pokes head up, hides behind SL side of table.)

He was watching me.

⁶⁷ Here, Suicide threats function as psychological warfare, coercing compliance under the guise of romantic desperation. No adolescent should be tasked with another's survival.

And the phone kept ringing. (*Retrieves cup/phone. Stands*).
 "You're not doing your homework; you're watching the
 Simpsons in your living room."

(*Gasps.*)

One night, while he had me on the phone, (*slowly slashing
 cup handle downwards*) he slit his wrists. He told me what
 he was doing. (*Raising phone*) I tricked him into telling me
 his location.

(*Phone down; looking SL.
 Pause.
 Look to audience.*)

The cemetery?

(*Looking SL*)

I lived beside the cemetery.

(*Phone to ear*) I called an ambulance.

(*Looks at audience.*)

Saved his life (*Phone down*).

(*Wolf music ends.
 Lights snap back to wash.*)

Turns out, he'd set up camp in the cemetery beside my
 house.

(*Crossing SR. Returns cup/phone to shelf*)

Turns out he'd been creeping in when no one was home and
 helping himself

(*Collects spatula/spoon/whisk from canister*)

to items from my bedroom.

They found a sick little shrine to me in the aftermath.

So, despite all that—the ambulance, the niceness,
 everything—everyone, even my favourite teacher, blamed me.

(*Silence.*)

Nice girls don't drive nice guys to suicide.

(*Church music plays.*

SARAH *hears it, appreciates the interruption.*
Returns to USC of table.)

I don't know how many men would have gone

(*lewdly gesturing in and out with implements*)

in and out of a Roman brothel in those days, but I'm guessing it was quite a few.

(*Keeping the spoon, SARAH places other implements on table.*)

But Agatha (*now gently laying spoon on table*) remained committed to her Christian beliefs.

After 30 days, Aphrodisia (*Animates spatula*), the brothel keeper, returned Agatha to Quintianus (*whisk*): "The girl remains firm in her beliefs. It would be easier to split rocks or reduce iron to the softness of lead than to move or recall that girl's mind from its Christian intention."⁶⁸

Can you imagine? (*Puppets down.*) Having that kind of fortitude? That belief in yourself and your own integrity and worth?⁶⁹

I took (*frantically collecting implements*) all that high-achieving energy I had previously applied to being perfect, to being nice, and I turned it inwards (*SARAH turns*

⁶⁸ See W. G. Ryan and E. Duffy, "Saint Agatha, Virgin," *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁶⁹ Agatha's refusal is categorical—she offers neither marriage nor friendship. This total resistance contrasts with how many survivors feel compelled to negotiate for safety. See J. Cannon, "Martyrdom and the Feminine Body in Early Christian Saints' Lives" (*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2007); E. M. Harney, *The Sexualized and Gendered Tortures of Virgin Martyrs* (University of Toronto, 2008). See also I. Anderson, *Accounting for Rape* (Routledge, 2008); A. Gjika, *When Rape Goes Viral* (University of California Press, 2023); N. Schwartzman, "Steubenville Rape Case: Ten Years Later" (*The Meteor*, 2022).

*implements towards her own chest) towards my own destruction.*⁷⁰

(Whisking chest.)

I started dating the biggest drug dealer at school, hanging with the rough and tough kids, drinking, smoking, skipping school, having sex, using hard drugs.

*(Jingle plays.
SARAH hears it, snaps back to her cheerful host persona.
Places implements down.)*

Next, the Pan di Spagna!

(Brings tray with bowl and eggs to table.)

Pan di Spagna is a simple Italian sponge cake flavoured with vanilla, mainly to mask the distinct egg-y flavour it takes, on account that it's made with only 3 ingredients: flour, sugar, and eggs.

First, More eggs!

*(Frantically cracks eggs,
throwing shells on SR floor-pile,
as full Jingle plays through.)*

We'll beat the sugar into the eggs for no less than 10-15 minutes. It's during this crucial stage that the air is incorporated. The eggs should turn a pale-yellow colour and triple in volume. But don't over beat it. You're looking to stop when you reach the ribbon stage.⁷¹

(Responding to non-existent audience query.)

⁷⁰ An earlier draft of this script included: "Some people spend sleepless nights wondering when it was their lives went wrong. Not me. I can pinpoint it to the exact second. It was a conscious decision." The line felt too overt—too didactic—but its removal leaves this sequence haunted by its ghost.

⁷¹ The "ribbon stage" is a crucial milestone in sponge cake preparation, where properly beaten eggs and sugar will form a visible trail or "ribbon" when the batter is drizzled from a whisk. This stage ensures structural integrity without leavening agents. See E. Tomasi, "3-Ingredient Sponge Cake Recipe," *As Easy as Apple Pie* (2015).

How do you know when you've reached the ribbon stage, you ask? (*Moves, while whisking, DSC.*) Simply, lift your whisk and make a figure eight with the dripping batter, if the eight holds its shape for at least ten seconds, it's the right consistency. You've reached the ribbon stage.

*(Silence, while cheerfully beating batter.
Checks batter for ribbon stage.)*

It looks like we'll need to keep beating.

*(Resumes whisking.
Long pause.
Sits on DSR corner of table.)*

This is awkward.

(Continues whisking throughout.)

I know what you're thinking, I can feel it. You saw the poster for the show, and you're like: "What about the titty stuff?"⁷²

You've figured me out, I have no tits! (*Stands.*) That's not hyperbole. I literally have no tits. I'm using that word properly, not in the (*shudders*) Kardashian way. Like, recently I saw a photo of Kendell Jenner wearing a Tee-shirt that said: "I have no tits."

And I was like: "pfft - bitch, please."

(Beat.)

I literally have no tits!

Yup. I had the cancer. Those fuckers had to go!

Some people get all twisted about it, but, hey! Some women have breasts. Some don't. Some men have breasts. Some don't. Some women have uteruses and ovaries. Some don't. Some women have penises, and some don't.

⁷² Dramaturgically, the audience needs a break. The comic relief that follows—borrowed from my earlier stand-up show, *Does This Mastectomy Make Me Look Fat?*—was intended to disarm tension through humour. These jokes, initially designed to make the audience (and societal expectations re: breast cancer) the brunt of the joke, were softened in *Titty Cakes* to maintain tonal coherence.

I reject the notion that I must change my body to make others comfortable.

Or some people say: "Fuck those titties, they were trying to kill you!"

Hey now!

(Puts bowl on table.)

Whoa, whoa, whoa. It was an honest mistake!

I don't think that's how it happens. It's not like my tits *(miming tits being pressed together)* got together and planned some coup de tas-ta.⁷³

(Miming tit-puppets.)

"We should overthrow this bitch!"

"Yeah, let's fucking kill her!"

(Grabs bowl, continues whisking.)

People can be strange, though.

When you get the cancer. Right away, this thing happens, like always happens. They don't even mean to do it, but when you tell people you've been diagnosed with breast cancer, their eyes just automatically drop down and stare at your chest ... which, is ... ah *(looks at chest)* ... a little awkward now ...

So, *(puts bowl down)* let's get this over with.

(Presents chest, shimmying.)

Go ahead, there's nothing to see here.

(Pause.)

⁷³ This joke, which emerged through improvisation during rehearsal, evokes Bakhtin's theory of Rabelaisian laughter: a form of subversive, bodily humour described as a tool for challenging authority and reclaiming power through the grotesque and absurd. Much of *Titty Cake's* humour evokes this defiant laughter. See M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana University Press, 1984).

Quit staring at my tits! My eyes are up here, thank you.
Thank you, my eyes are up here.

(Grabs bowl.)

When you've reached the ribbon stage, your batter should look like this

*(SARAH quickly spins around,
proudly presenting exact same bowl,
which clearly has not reached the ribbon stage)*

(muttering under her breath) produces new bowl of ribbon-stage batter!

Next, the flour!

*(Puts bowl down.
Moves US of table.
Tidies implements to tray.
Leaves spoon.
Returning tray to shelf.)*

We'll slowly sift the flour into the egg mixture in small increments—about one-third at a time *(fetches new tray, returning to table)*.

Be sure not to dump it in all at once, or it will sink to the bottom of the bowl. Like snow to a ditch.

*(Gasps.
Silence.
Transfers some flour into sifter.)*

(Wistfully) Have you ever seen snow out of season?

*(Snaps back into cooking persona,
begins sifting while speaking.)*

The odd April snow is not at all uncommon here in Canada, but even in the Land Between, a May snowfall can feel rather uncanny.

(Slowly drifting away as flour falls like snow.)

Familiar yet foreign. Unnatural, in a Shakespearian sense—a reversal of order.⁷⁴ Or tragically Greek. Young Persephone, kidnapped, imprisoned, and wed by her Uncle Hades.⁷⁵

*(Snaps out of daze.
Returns to cheerful cooking persona.
Puts sifter down.)*

Using a wooden spoon, we'll gently fold in the flour from the bottom of the mixing bowl. *(Gently folds.)* But be really careful, we have to fold it as gently as possible—we don't want to deflate the mixture.

*(Silence.
Leaves spoon in bowl.
Sifts flour onto spoon.)*

Sssssshhhhhhhh.

(Silence.)

I have no memory of one of the most significant events of my life. I was drunk and on drugs.

*(Sifter on tray.
Gently folding batter.)*

All I have is the aftermath. And even that's a blur. All I have are secondary sources, hearsay accounts, and the story of my body.⁷⁶

*(Party music plays, swells.
SARAH hears it; is swept away by it.
She begins dance-stirring the batter.
Dances to SL side of table.*

⁷⁴ The motif of unseasonal snow evokes Shakespearean disruptions of natural order as metaphors for emotional and social chaos. See G. Jones, *Shakespeare's Storms* (Manchester University Press, 2015).

⁷⁵ The Persephone myth, wherein a young goddess is abducted and wed by her uncle Hades, mirrors the trauma and disorientation depicted in the play. See M. Donahue, "Changing of the Seasons," *All That's Interesting* (2024).

⁷⁶ *Titty Cakes* engages with Derrida's notion of the trace—an absent presence that gestures toward what once was but can no longer be fully recovered. The trauma's memory persists only in fragments, haunting the present. See J. Derrida, *Archive Fever* (University of Chicago Press, 1996); and *Cinders* (University of Nebraska Press, 1991).

Leans butt on table.)

May two-four came early that year.

*(Lifts side of table from behind,
leans and pushes table slightly SR.
Swinging table end SR, perpendicular to audience.)*

The trees were budding, flowers were blooming, birds were singing.

*(Pushes table against US wall.
Dance-walking backwards USL to coat-tree.)*

Spring fever was upon us.

(Lights cross fade to SL coat-tree)

And we *(rotates coat tree, facing Jacket forwards.)*
were ready to party!

*(Animates jacket.
Buddy-drunk with Jacket.)*

In a field! *(singing, a la Tragically Hip)* In Bobcaygeon!

Woo!

(Drunkenly) The first field party of the season is a rural Rite of Spring.⁷⁷

I had a pack of Player's Light

*(Takes imaginary smokes from Buddy Jacket's pocket,
placing them in apron pocket.)*

and a bottle of Gibson's silver

(Takes imaginary bottle from Buddy Jacket's pocket.)

ready to go!

⁷⁷ This layered allusion invokes both Stravinsky's ballet and the anthropological significance of ritual sacrifice. The "chosen girl" motif—sacrificed to appease the gods of spring—offers a metaphor for gendered violence masked as communal celebration. See I. Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring* (Deutsche Grammophon, 2007).

*(Cheers with Buddy Jacket,
drinks,
tosses imaginary bottle.)*

Kids were coming from all over.

(Takes imaginary lighter from apron pocket.)

From my high school,

(Lighting doobie for Buddy Jacket.)

both the Lindsay high schools, the Peterborough high schools ...

*(Jacket passes doobie to SARAH,
she takes a toke, holds it in.)*

... there were even some kids coming from that fancy private school in Lakefield.

(Chokes on toke).

It was going to be wicked! *(Flicking doobie)* Woo!

*(Party music swells.
SARAH turns US.
Removes apron, dancing.
Puts Jacket on, halfway zipped.
At crescendo, Party Music cuts suddenly.
SARAH turns to face audience.)*

I'm just thankful camera phones hadn't been invented yet.⁷⁸

*(Party Music continues, now dream-like, with faint MRI sounds.
SARAH zips jacket, while spinning/stumbling US.
She delivers the following while performing movement sequence.)*

Last memory:

⁷⁸ The absence of camera phones spared me even more public shaming and re-traumatization, akin to the victims of assault in Steubenville, Maryville, Saratoga, Dartmouth, and many others, where attackers weaponized video evidence. See A. Gjika, *When Rape Goes Viral: Youth and Sexual Assault in the Digital Age* (University of California Press, 2023); and N. Schwartzman, "Steubenville Rape Case: Ten Years Later" (*The Meteor*, 2022).

White Ford Taurus.
Blood red, fake velvet seats.

White plastic cup.
Private school guy.
"Drink this, you'll love it."

Smiles.
Pearly white teeth.

Me: last seen at a picnic table.
"I gotta piss."

Famous.

Last.

Words.

*(SARAH spins, disoriented.
Crashes into US wall.
Stumbles SR to table.
Lies on stomach on top of table.
Music cuts abruptly.
Lights snap to stark spot SR on table.)*

Wake. Up.
On the couch?
Ow, Fuck!

(Crawls on table to sit on DS end.)

How did I get here?

(Staring DS)

Hungover.
Hurting.

(Looks SL)

Mom, mad. Yelling about last night.

(Looks to audience.)

What happened? Field party.

How did I get home? Huh.

Morning piss. Stinging. Blood?

... and my?

(Beat)

Never mind.

(Looks SL)

Girlfriends arrive.

Solemn. Sad.

Nobody's laughing at my jokes.

(To audience.)

Something's wrong.

(Slowly backing US on table.)

They tell me something happened.

Tell me I was found.

Found naked.

Found bleeding.

Found in the ditch.

Found my clothes up the road. Tattered. Sole torn from my shoe.

Brought me to the fire. Brought me home.

*(Backs up against US wall, curling in a ball.
Looks SL.)*

Mom crying. Didn't know. Nobody told her.

(Standing.)

She put me in the shower.

"Sarah," they cry, "we think you were raped last night."

(Wistfully)

And I am floating out of my body.

Sssssshhhhhhhh.

*(Silence.
Matter-of-factly)*

I'd been raped. Savagely and repeatedly. By a group of young men. And left unconscious, for dead.

*(Sees bowl.
Kneels on table.)*

In a ditch.

(Sifts flour.)

Snow falling on my naked body.

Sssssshhhhhhhh.⁷⁹

*(Silence.
Shivers.
Snaps out of snowy trance.)*

Shivering saved my life.

(Jumps off table.)

I was found by three older girls. Big kids.

*(Crosses SL to tree.
Changing back into apron.)*

Hmmm ... three, three, three. Three women, three wyrd sisters, three sirens, three...⁸⁰

⁷⁹ The act of sifting flour becomes a silent gesture of remembrance—flour as falling snow, the body in the ditch—speaking what memory cannot. This transforms a simple baking movement into a ritualized gesture.

⁸⁰ Invoking trios—three rescuers, three wyrd sisters of *Macbeth*, three Greek Sirens—echoes mythic archetypes of feminine power and prophecy, linking ancient female collectives to the moment of my

(Gasps.
Looks over topless shoulder.)

Magical thinking's a sign of insanity. Or so said my former therapist.

(Resumes changing costumes)

The three girls saw movement in the distance (*looking SR*). Heard rustling in the brush. They thought I was an animal.

(Moving SR to table.)

When they went to investigate, (*swivels table back to original position, parallel to audience*) they found me.

(Sees body in the ditch.)

Naked. Bleeding. Unconscious. Covered in snow.

(Kneels.
Slowly reaches to touch her.)

Half frozen. Half dead.

(Lights snap back to wash.
Jingle plays throughout the following.
SARAH hears it; loves it.
Returns to cheerful cooking persona.⁸¹
Sees bowl on table.
Stands.)

(Moving bowl to SR side of table while fetching sheet pan from SR.) Now that our flour's incorporated, we'll gently pour our batter onto our prepared sheet pan.

(Pouring batter.)

rescue. See D. J. Conway, *Maiden, Mother, Crone: The Myth and Reality of the Triple Goddess* (Llewellyn Worldwide, 1995).

⁸¹ The cooking-show persona returns repeatedly as a survival mask—a forced optimism, a labor of care, and a stage performance of resilience. My slipping into it echoes cultural scripts that pressure survivors to remain “just fine.” See K. Bell, “Remaking the Self” (*Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 2012); K. Kaiser, “Survivor Identity” (*Social Science & Medicine*, 2008); S. King, *Pink Ribbons, Inc.* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006); and G. A. Sulik, *Pink Ribbon Blues* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

Resist the urge to smooth the top or bang the pan on the counter, just leave it as it is!

Bake at 350 Fahrenheit for around 18 minutes or until an inserted toothpick comes out clean.

(Takes pan to "oven"⁸² SR.)

But remember do not open the oven door or your Pan di Spagna will collapse!

(Jingle ends.

MRI Sounds begin abruptly, playing throughout the following section.

Lights change.

SARAH collapses along with the word, into a spin travelling SL, while un-doing her apron.

Puts apron on coat tree and wears gown, back opened.

Crashing backwards into, and then leaning over, SL end of table.)

I am suddenly wrenched back into my body by the bloodcurdling sound of my screams.

(She sits up straight on SL side of table facing audience.)

I'm in the hospital waiting room. The second hospital of the day. There was no rape clinic at the first.⁸³

(SARAH slides off table and glides, as if floating; the pace of her speech juxtaposing that of her movements.

She glides DS, then SR.)

⁸² Despite my pleas for theatrical authenticity, budget constraints meant no oven onstage—eliminating scent, heat, and hazard—reinforcing the gap between theatrical ritual and lived, sensory reality. See R. Schechner, *Performance Theory* (Routledge, 2003).

⁸³ My mother and I spent hours in the first hospital's waiting room—Ross Memorial—only to be dismissed and redirected to Peterborough Civic Hospital for a rape kit. Tragically, specimens from that kit were later deemed unusable due to improper storage—a ruinous failure of procedure and trust.

Dissociation involves disruptions of usually integrated functions of consciousness, perception, memory, identity, affect.⁸⁴

(SARAH glides into SR side of table, slamming her body over top.)

My hysteric wailing—rhythmic as the ancient Irish funeral Keeners—snaps me out of my daze and back into my reality.

(Rises.)

I am in my body. I feel it. Sentito, ergo sum.

(Gliding DS then SL.)

Dissociation has been defined as: disruptions to the normal psychological functions of consciousness, perception, memory, identity, affect, motor control.⁸⁵

(Sits on SL side of table.)

I'm not screaming.

(Turns head.)

It's the woman seated across from me.

She is very pregnant. And, judging by the amount of blood pooling on her seat, dripping onto the waiting room floor, she is miscarrying.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ For substantial insight into dissociation's impact, see G. Baudin et al., "Dissociation & Alcohol Use Disorder" (*Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 2022); M. J. Dorahy et al., "Dissociation, Shame & CPTSD" (*Journal of Affective Disorders*, 2015); A. Krause-Utz et al., "Neural Correlates of Dissociation" (*Current Psychiatry Reports*, 2017); and N. G. Waller et al., "Taxometric Analysis of Dissociation" (*Psychological Methods*, 1996).

⁸⁵ See G. Baudin et al., *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* (2022); M. J. Dorahy et al., *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2015); A. Krause-Utz et al., *Current Psychiatry Reports* (2017); and N. G. Waller et al., *Psychological Methods* (1996).

⁸⁶ Beyond fragmented memories of pelvic examinations, fingernail scrapings, and nurses marking illustrated bodies to mirror the wounds on my own, one moment remains vivid: the scent of blood and the woman across from me, miscarrying. Her screams pierced my dissociation—offering, for the first time that day, a recognition of my own pain. More than that, the way her visible suffering was ignored, questioned, dismissed foreshadowed the institutional disbelief that I, too, would come to face.

She cries. Wails. Screams. Her screams give voice to mine. My silent, inner screams. The screams I don't dare utter aloud. Nobody wants to hear my screams. I did this to myself. This is all my fault.

(Gliding more erratically around the stage.)

Dissociation: an adaptive defense mechanism to cope with overwhelming threats that cannot be prevented or escaped. An inner distance. A dampening of unbearable emotions. A reduction of conscious awareness.⁸⁷

(Returns to sit on SL side of table.)

There we were, the miscarrying lady and me.

Both of us bleeding from our genitals onto the waiting room chairs—she, much more than I. Both of us screaming—she, much louder than I. Both of us blaming ourselves.

(Glides, this time continuously walking into unseen wall CS.)

Dissociation: it's an unreal film-like scene. It's not happening to me. I'm watching from a distance. I'm numb. There's no pain. And I am floating out of my body...

(Twirling with gown SL.)

Sssssshhhhhhh.

(Stands in SL spot.)

When the nurse finally called her from the waiting room, her blood-stained chair remained. Nobody bothered to take it away.

And, as I sat there staring at the still-warm pool of blood, I left my body once more.

(Twirling on spot with gown while looking at spot on the ground.)

⁸⁷ See G. Baudin et al., *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* (2022); M. J. Dorahy et al., *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2015); A. Krause-Utz et al., *Current Psychiatry Reports* (2017); and N. G. Waller et al., *Psychological Methods* (1996).

Sssssshhhhhhhh.

*(Sees body in the ditch again.
Kneels.)*

Some animals freeze when threatened. In situations that can't be controlled or escaped, they engage in a passive defense mode.

Shutting down in the face of inescapable threat may enhance survival when the chance of winning a fight is low or impossible.⁸⁸

*(Slowly reaches to touch her.
Jingle Plays.
SARAH hears it; loves it.)*

Marzipan!

*(Hurring to coat tree,
slightly frantic, manic.
Singing.)*

Marzipan, na-na-na na-na na-na, marzipan! Marzipan!

*(Returns gown to coat tree.
Changes into apron while rushing to tidy tray from
table.)*

(Fully manic) To make our pistachio marzipan, we must first grind our nuts. *(Pause. Aggressively makes Cuckoo sign/sound.)* You can use a food processor or even buy pre-made marzipan. But, if you do, your Marzipan won't be green.

(Brings Marzipan tray to table.)

I've never half-assed anything in my life!

Oh, don't forget to sift in the icing sugar, making sure to break up any lumps.

⁸⁸ Van der Kolk describes this passive "freeze" response as an instinctual shutdown—when fight or flight isn't possible, the body enters a survival state. This physiological collapse can enhance chances of being overlooked or surviving overwhelming violence. See B. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (Penguin Books, 2015).

*(Gasps.
Checks chest for lumps.⁸⁹
Silence.
Moves table DS.)*

Then, we'll make a little egg-well. A little ditch.

*(Gasps.
Silence.)*

A little liminal space of in-between-ness— to toss our almond extract and left-over egg-whites into.

Use your hands to mix it in. We'll knead the marzipan and form it into a ball.

(Kneading.)

The body remembers.⁹⁰ My body revealed what my brain could not. What remained. The story of my body: inscribed on my skin; archived in flesh.⁹¹

(Violently kneading; squeezing dough.)

⁸⁹ This moment delivers what Zsuzsa Baross terms “the premonition of the past.” The gesture of checking for lumps—years before my diagnosis—becomes re-infused with retrospective significance in the performance. As Baross explains, such moments “bear the memory for the future, whose arrival they anticipate or indeed prophetically project” (41). The audience, already aware of my cancer, is reminded of a future event (the diagnosis) that, from the perspective of the past (the rape), has not yet occurred—but from the present moment of the performance, is located in the past. This layered temporality, where the past anticipates its own outcome, evokes the nonlinear structure of traumatic memory. See Z. Baross, *Posthumously: For Jacques Derrida* (Sussex Academic Press, 2011).

⁹⁰ This refers not only to the “corroborative evidence” left on my body, but also to the embodied traces of trauma that remained long after the wounds had scabbed over and closed; to the signs that spoke when memory could not. This is central to embodied trauma theory, particularly to the works of Bessel van der Kolk and Gabor Maté, who demonstrate how traumatic experience becomes somatised, manifesting in illness, disassociation, and chronic pain. As van der Kolk writes, “Trauma is much more than a story about something that happened a long time ago” (206). Similarly, Maté notes that “stress, as we will define it, is not a matter of subjective feeling. It is a measurable set of objective physiological events in the body, involving the brain, the hormonal apparatus, the immune system and many other organs.” (Mate 28). See B. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (Penguin Books, 2015).

⁹¹ Derrida writes that the archive is not a simple record of the past, but an active and often violent construction. This notion of the body as an archive—an involuntary keeper of trauma—is drawn from his thinking. See J. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

My body was covered in finger shaped bruises. I wore a purple necklace, rouged face and eyeballs.

(Punctuating list by tearing chunks from dough.)

The Doctors and nurses documented my injuries. Abrasions, contusions, lacerations. Head trauma. Hematomas. The violence, the violence.

(Silence.)

Of all the injuries I sustained, and there were many, the ones I think about the most are the ones that hurt the least.

The abrasions on the tops of my feet and ankles; on my knees, my hip bones, ribs, and breasts. The abrasions that so clearly tell the story of how I was..

(Responding to non-existent audience suggestion.)

... is that how they brought me to the ditch? By dragging me, naked, on my stomach? On the cold gravel road?

(Shivers.)

I get flashes, visions. But I'm never certain if I'm experiencing actual memories or sick fantasies, born from the deep desire to remember.

(Agatha music plays.)

Agatha was a perfect victim.⁹² *(Peeling sticky dough from fingers.)* Each time Quintianus proposed to her, she refused him. And each time she did so, the tortures he visited upon her became more and more horrific. *(Gets wet cloth from SR.)* When she was stretched on the rack, Agatha merely encouraged her torturers:

(Washing hands with cloth.)

⁹² Calling Agatha the "perfect victim" draws attention to the constraints of rape culture: to be believed, a survivor must be pure, passive, and desexualized. See I. Anderson, *Accounting for Rape* (Routledge, 2008).

"The wheat cannot be stored in the barn unless it has been thoroughly threshed and separated from the chaff: so, my soul cannot enter paradise unless you make the headsmen give my body harsh treatment."⁹³

(Throws cloth in garbage pile.)

Agatha was a perfect victim.

(Taking plastic wrap from table.)

She was wonderful. Rich girl, virgin, the picture of ascetism.

I was not.

(Pulling sheet of plastic wrap from roll.)

I wasn't wealthy. Wasn't a virgin.

(SARAH raises roll and sheet to look through plastic.)

And I was drunk and on drugs.

(Silence.

*Forcefully covering her own face with plastic wrap,
SARAH silently screams.*

Silence, lowering plastic wrap.)

Cover the marzipan with plastic wrap and get it setting in the fridge; and don't forget to tidy your workstation!

(Covers Marzipan in bowl.

Bringing bowl to fridge.

Stops halfway.)

I became an urban legend.

(Puts dough in fridge.

Stops.)

The cautionary tale we tell our daughters.

⁹³ Agatha's metaphor—comparing torture to threshing wheat—appears in *The Golden Legend*. It aligns sanctity with suffering, reiterating the link between femininity and pain. See W. G. Ryan and E. Duffy, "Saint Agatha, Virgin," *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

*(Tidies table/tray.
Stops.)*

The legend that leads girls to pee in pairs.

*(Returning tray to shelves.
Stops halfway.)*

Everybody had their hot take.

*(Puts tray away.
Takes cloth.
Wiping table.)*

The incident was the talk of the town—all the small towns, for that matter. There were 300 teenagers at that party, and hundreds were interviewed by the police.⁹⁴

(Bringing cloth to garbage pile.)

All five of my alleged assailants were said to be private school students.

(Stops halfway.)

In that respect, we were the inverse of Quintianus and Agatha—rumour has it, one of them was even the son or nephew of a cop.

*(Tosses cloth in garbage pile.
Silence.)*

So, despite all that.

*(Crossing SL to tree.
Taking apron off, back to audience.)*

Despite all the witness testimonies, all the corroborative evidence—the violence, the violence! The story of my body; inscribed on my skin, archived in flesh ...

⁹⁴ The ongoing investigation kept the incident at the forefront of small-town discourse, drawing attention from not only high school students and teachers, but also parents and townsfolk with no direct connection to the event.

*(Pause.
Looks to audience over topless shoulder.)*

Charges were never laid.⁹⁵

*(Lights change.
MRI Sounds abruptly play.
Holding gown up.
SARAH shouts, as if cheering at a pep rally.)*

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder! P! T! S! D!

*(Puts gown on, front open.
Gliding backwards, SR,
her speech/movements echo Dissociation section.)*

Flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, nightmares.

*(Gliding around table, increasing pace of
speech/movement until running.)*

Hyperarousal, insomnia, agitation, irritability, impulsivity, anger. Numbing, avoidance, withdrawal, confusion, derealization, dissociation, depression.⁹⁶

*(Stops.
Climbs onto table, lying on back.)*

Many weeks and many hospital visits after my assault, a young doctor had the good sense to give me

*(Beat.
Knees falling to sides, as if in stirrups)*

⁹⁵ Despite ample evidence—medical records, corroborating witness accounts, physical injuries—charges were never filed. This is consistent with institutional patterns of disbelief and deflection identified in feminist research. See K. Lorenz et al., “Post-Assault Legal Experiences” (*Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 2019); and M. Wieberneit et al., “Silenced Survivors” (*Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 2024).

⁹⁶ This list echoes the neurobiological and psychological symptoms commonly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, where the body’s stress response system is fundamentally altered. These effects are not merely psychological but stem from measurable changes to brain chemistry and function. See J. E. Sherin and C. B. Nemeroff, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (*Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*, 2011).

a pregnancy test.⁹⁷

(Looks at audience.)

It was positive.

(Sitting up, hugging knees.)

At seventeen years old, I was carrying the spawn of one of my five rapists.

(Backing towards SR edge of table)

It was the ultimate abjection, I couldn't shake the feeling that the child inside of me was pure evil.⁹⁸ Just like his father, one of my torturers.

(Calmly turns to sit facing DS.)

At first, I had only one option: surgical abortion. But the Doctor advocated for an exception to be made. It was quite controversial. I was one of the very few Canadians permitted to a medication abortion in 2002—an intramuscular injection followed by a course of pills.⁹⁹

(Grabbing abdomen.)

Cramping. Pain. So much blood.

*(SARAH folds into herself,
Melts off table, slamming onto floor.)*

⁹⁷ For some reason, the pregnancy test needed to be done at the same hospital that had administered the rape kit. As such, the detective handling the investigation drove me and my mother to the hospital, over an hour away, in his police cruiser. He sat me in the back.

⁹⁸ The term “abjection” here recalls Julia Kristeva’s concept of confronting the radically other within oneself—a visceral response to trauma and the breakdown of boundaries. In this case, literally. However, it is the fetus that is the abject figure, imposing its identity onto the maternal body. See J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁹⁹ In 2002, medication abortion was extremely rare in Canada. Methotrexate with misoprostol—an off-label regimen—was limited to select clinics in British Columbia and Alberta. While access to this option outside those provinces was exceedingly uncommon, my attending physician wrote letters and presented before a board on my behalf. He was, after what felt like years, eventually granted permission, on the basis of the gravity of my case, to administer the medication. See J. N. Erdman, A. Grenon, and L. Harrison-Wilson, “Medication Abortion in Canada: A Right-to-Health Perspective” (*American Journal of Public Health*, 2008).

Cheering.)

Complex post-traumatic stress disorder! C! P! T! S! D!

*(Crawling backwards under table,
then repeatedly side to side,
her body hitting the legs beneath.)*

Develops in response to exposure to a series of traumatic events. When the exposure to trauma is prolonged or repetitive, the individual perceives little or no chance of escape.¹⁰⁰

*(Pops head up,
slamming hands onto USR of table.)*

I chased my family's medicine cabinet with a bottle of vodka.

*(Pushing table DS,
SARAH grunt-screams.
Moving to SR end of table.)*

I genuinely believed I was doing them a favour.

*(Pushing table SL,
SARAH grunt-screams,
Slams table into SL wall.)
Melting torso onto table.)*

That they would be relieved. That I would no longer burden them. Surely, being related to 'the dead girl' would be an improvement from 'the girl who was raped.' It's certainly better than being related to

*(Beat.
Looks at audience.)*

"That lying slut."

(Melts down, hands and face slam onto floor.)

¹⁰⁰ Complex PTSD arises in circumstances where trauma is prolonged, escape feels impossible, and the self becomes trapped in recurring cycles of threat. See E. Giourou et al., "Complex PTSD: Distinct Clinical Syndrome?" (*World Journal of Psychiatry*, 2018).

(Crawling SR.) I so desperately wished that nobody knew about my rape. That I could just pretend it never happened. Keep it secret. Move on.

(Stops.)

But I was held hostage.

(Gathering robe fabric that has trailed behind her.)

Tethered by the townsfolks' tongues. Forced to re-live that terrible event with every whisper, every stare. My story followed me. Everywhere.

I was haunted; haunting.

(Looks at audience.)

I decided to end the story.

(Eyes peacefully closed, SARAH bends backwards on floor, as if floating out of body.)

SSSSSSHHHHHHHHHHHH.

*(Looks SL, sees body on table.
Moving US of table.)*

Sirens. Tubes. Vomit. Taste of chalky black substance. Beeping. Scent of antiseptic. Mom crying.

*(Becomes mom.
Holding the imaginary hand of the body on the table,
stroking her forehead.)*

"Promise me, Sarah."

*(Silence.
Looks at audience.
Releases grip form hand.)*

The investigation was closed.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ As a minor, I could not initiate or terminate the police investigation I did not have the authority to open or close the investigation—this decision was made by my mother, at my request, following my suicide attempt.

(SARAH moves to SR end of table, her cheers become grunts as she struggles to pull the table back to CS position).

P-T-S-D!

(Still struggling with table, panting, and grunting.)

A risk factor for suicidal ideation and attempt. Women with PTSD are nearly seven times more likely than other women to die by suicide. *(Collapses torso onto SR end of table.)* Gender differences may be influenced by stigma around sexual assault, a common cause of PTSD in women.¹⁰²

(Climbing on table.)

Spiraling in a loop of wanton self-destruction, I lived my life like a slow, slow suicide.

(Mimes whisk turned toward chest, repeating beating gesture from earlier discussion of self-destruction.)

Dangerously dancing with death. Taunting it. Inviting it. Reckless, in every way imaginable.

(Sits on table. Addressing audience, matter of fact-ly.)

Drug addictions, alcohol addiction, promiscuity, over-eating, under-eating, compulsive spending, thrill-seeking, self-sabotage.

(MRI sound fades; lights remain.)

I punished myself. Constantly. Creatively. Anniversaries of the rape were particularly masochistic. Every May 10th, I would drink the same brand of whiskey I had consumed that fateful night.

¹⁰² Women with PTSD face markedly elevated suicide risks, not only due to the trauma itself but also the societal stigmas and silencing that often follow sexual assault. These gendered factors intensify the mental health consequences and can result in a tragically high rate of self-harm and suicide. See V. Fox et al., "Suicide Risk in People with PTSD" (*Journal of Affective Disorders*, 2021).

(Pulls imaginary bottle from breast pocket of robe, mirroring cheers, drink, toss action from party section.)

Gibson's Silver. Alone. Until I was sick. Until I forgot how much I hated myself. A strange drunken ritual akin to self-flagellation.

*(MRI sounds resume.
SARAH completes movement sequence from party section, internally, which resembles twitching.)*

The links between PTSD and self-destructive behaviors are well established. Oftentimes, these occur as a manifestation of unhealthy coping strategies. PTSD frequently causes intense and distressing emotional responses, and those living with PTSD may rely on self-destructive behaviors to numb or distract from negative emotions.¹⁰³

*(Lights snap back to wash.
Jingle plays.
Changing from robe to apron.)*

Ricotta! Ricotta, ricotta, ricotta!

(Moving SR to fridge while tying apron.)

Let's check on our ricotta! Wow! It sure has drained a lot of liquid!

(Gets bowl with strainer/cheese from fridge.)

What a release!

*(Puts bowl/strainer on tray.
Bringing tray to table,
And pressing cheese through strainer.)*

¹⁰³ Research on trauma and substance use integration emphasizes how PTSD symptoms drive self-harm and substance misuse as coping mechanisms. See Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services (*Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*, 2014).

Titty cakes are filled with a classic cannoli cream. To make ours, we'll press the cheese through the fine mesh strainer with the spatula, to make it nice and smooth for our filling. Then, we'll add our orange zest and chocolate chips and gently mix.

(Having run out of time to complete the described actions, SARAH shrugs, flips the strainer over, and dumps the remaining, unsmoothed, cheese into bowl.)

Our cannoli cream is looking great!

(It does not.)

Let's cover it with plastic wrap and get it setting in the fridge.

*(Puts bowl in fridge.
Quickly closes door.)*

SSSSSSHHHHHHH

(Taking clean cloth.)

Slowly, I rebuilt myself—my life—after my assault.

(Clearing tray/cleaning table.)

My Mom got me into a new school, in another town. Even though I was still known as the girl who was raped, I got all my credits that semester.

(Returning tray to shelves.)

I went back to my old school, and I graduated. I got into university. I moved to a new town. Got a place with my new boyfriend.

I quit hard drugs.

(Tosses cloth on garbage pile.)

I was doing really well ... considering. I was finally moving on. Finally able to keep my past in the past. My life was great. It was like a dream. It felt like I had found my happily ever after.

(Jingle plays.)

Where's our Italian dough? Let's roll!

(Bringing dough and rolling pin to table.)

Now that our dough has chilled overnight, it's ready to be rolled out flat. We'll roll our dough to approx.. ¼ inch thickness?

*(Jingle fades.
SARAH begins working dough.)*

One evening, my boyfriend at the time brought his work friend home to our apartment.

That guy, he looked at me in the strangest way. Started asking me questions.

*(Wolf music plays.
SARAH becomes the guy.
Moves DSC of table.)*

You ever been to a field party in Bobcaygeon?

Do you know BEEP?

Do you know anyone from the private school in Lakefield?

What about BEEP? You know, everyone calls him BEEP.

No, eh? Huh. I thought you were someone else.

(Terrified.)

He recognized me.

I didn't recognize him, but he recognized me. Oh, my God. He was in my living room. He knows where I live.

*(Hurrying back to work dough.
Wolf music fades.)*

I went to the police station. Told them about the guy in my living room. I re-opened the investigation.¹⁰⁴

Old friends from high school started calling, saying they'd been questioned by the police.

(Looking SL.) I saw that guy from my living room again, in a truck outside my apartment. *(Looking SR.)* Then I saw him outside my work. *(Straining to look centre.)* I thought I saw the same truck outside my school. I didn't catch the licence plate; it was already peeling away.

(Continues rolling dough.)

Maybe I was just being paranoid.

One day at work, this other guy came into the restaurant. Just seated himself. I was running food to another table. Camera phones had just been invented. Flip phones? And they used to make a camera sound when they took a picture.

(Camera sound.)

I looked over and this guy was sitting, with his phone under the table taking pictures of me.

(Camera sounds.
SARAH flinches, averts her face.
Freezes.
Silence.)

Then he just got up and left.

(Working dough.)

A good friend called (*SARAH becomes friend*): "Listen, buddy, I don't want to sound dramatic or anything but ... well, there's been a lot of buzz around town since the cops have been asking about you.

¹⁰⁴ When I went to re-open the investigation after nearly five years, the new detective appeared visibly surprised. "You're Sarah McNeilly?" she asked, before revealing she had planned to contact me that very day. Holding a thick file with my name on it, she explained that my case had been reassigned to her following the abrupt departure of the original detective—no explanation had been offered, but the implication was disciplinary.

And, ah. Well, you know that fucking douchebag, BEEP?¹⁰⁵
 Well, I guess he's been running drugs for the Hells Angels
 He's pretty connected with the now. Apparently, he's
 telling everyone you're some psycho-bitch, lying to the
 cops. And, well, they're saying: if you don't shut your
 mouth, they'll shut it for you."

*(Stops working dough.
 Slowly backing US.)*

They knew where I lived. Knew where I worked. Knew where I
 went to school.

*(Backs into US wall.
 Crossing SL to coat tree.)*

I moved. Quit my job. Dropped out of university.

*(Jacket on under apron.
 Swinging apron around like cape.)*

I relapsed. Chopped off all my hair. And went east. Stayed
 with my best friend in Montreal for a bit. Then I went on a
 family vacation in New Brunswick.

I moved back home. Got a new job. A new place to live.

I quit hard drugs.

*(Tying apron on head,
 like Red Riding Hood.
 It looks ridiculous.)*

As far as BEEP was concerned, I had disappeared.

(Frantic Little Red Music plays.)

I met a guy. A good guy. We fell in love. Built a life
 together. Worked our asses off, saved up, and bought a
 house together.

(Excitedly moves to DSC.)

¹⁰⁵ The show deliberately omits all names, including those of my alleged assailants. During rehearsals, a beep sound cue was considered; ultimately, I decided the stronger choice would be to make the sound myself; to censor myself. Choosing what to say—and what to withhold—reaffirmed my agency.

I went back to university. I befriended a merry band of thespians. Started doing theatre again. I started winning academic awards again. I graduated university on the Dean's list.

I got a cat!

Things were finally looking up. I had somehow clawed my way out of the deepest, darkest depths of Hell. I was broken-mended.

I felt like I had finally found my happily ever after.

*(Jingle plays.
Losing composure.)*

The dough!

(Frantically bringing new tray to table, SARAH still wears an apron on her head, looking like an idiot.)

We have to cut the dough and line the molds so, they have time to bake!

(Hastily, sloppily cutting pastry.)

It needs to cool so we can fill it with our cannoli cream
We have to get this pastry in the oven!

*(SARAH tosses the remaining pastry sheet over silicon mold.
Tosses mold, cutter, and rolling pin onto tray.
Rushing tray to SR shelf,
SARAH stops halfway.)*

But I knew something was wrong.

(Puts tray on "oven" shelf.)

Or my cat did, at least.

(Noticing and removing apron from head.)

For months, my cat had been frantically nudging, sniffing, and kneading my right breast. The exact same spot.

*(Ceremoniously tying apron around neck,
now like a cape.)*

Happy birthday to me! 31. Who would've thought I'd live to see 31!

*(Grabs cloth.
Cleaning table.)*

Worked at the Pub, sang a tune on stage. Friends stopped by. Brought flowers. Great shift.

(Hurriedly wiping remainder of table.)

Finished in time for last call at my partner's work. Had a few pints. Had a few laughs. A tame birthday. Mature. A great night.

(Sits on DSC side of table.)

Ah! Home time. Bra comes off *(removing apron.)* Jammie time.

(Reaching inside right breast of jacket.)

Itchy. Again.

(Scratching.)

Why is my boob so itchy lately?

(Gasps; recoiling hand.)

That's not supposed to be there.
Is it *(beat)* Never mind.

(Returning hand for a closer inspection.)

Hard. Sharp. Foreign.

(Recoiling hand and looking to audience.)

Lump?

*(Shrugging it off,
SARAH jumps off table with a smile.
Sees her partner DSL.)*

"Hey, Doc," I say to my partner. "Can I get a consult?"
 "Feel my tit!"

He laughs. Cops a feel. Turns white. Solemn.
 He knew.

His mom died of breast cancer when he was seventeen.

"You have to go to the Doctor."

I went to the doctor.

Two weeks later, on May 10th, I got the call.

"It's cancer," said the Doctor,¹⁰⁶ "I'm sorry, kid. I don't
 know what to tell you. Sometimes shit happens."

I was diagnosed with breast cancer. On the fourteenth
 anniversary of when I was gang raped.

The same day. May 10th. The same fucking day!

(Grabs apron.)

Two and a half weeks after my 17th birthday, I was
 brutalized and (*tossing apron to ground*) tossed in a ditch,
 like a piece of garbage.

*(Grabs gown from coat tree.
 Clutching it to chest,
 returning DSL.)*

And fourteen years later—to the day—I was diagnosed with
 breast cancer, two and a half weeks after my 31st birthday.

(Throws gown on top of apron.)

Now, I know my therapist said that magical thinking is a
 sign of insanity but, come on!

The same fucking day!

¹⁰⁶ This moment is another classic example of what Austin termed a "performative utterance"—
 language that enacts rather than describes. By declaring "It's (a) cancer!" the doctor performs the
 event of diagnosis, altering my social and medical reality. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with
 Words* (Harvard University Press, 1975).

(Feeling breasts.)

And my breasts?!

(Squirming out of jacket.)

Of all the body parts to get sick, it had to be my breasts?

(Anguished)

Oh, first the pregnancy, now my breasts! They're inside of me. They're inside of me.

They're still fucking inside of me!

*(Throws jacket onto clothing pile.
Gasps.)*

Magical thinking's a sign of insanity.

*(Topless, SARAH drops to knees.
Frantically searching through pile of clothes.)*

But there's no history of cancer in my family. I'm the first. And the Doctor. The Doctor said I'm too young. He rolled his eyes. He laughed at me!

(Holding up and clutching gown.)

He said: "Women your age don't get breast cancer!"

(Throwing gown to clothing pile.)

Evidentially cursed women do.

Ah, I can't even cross the street without getting hit by a car, of course I'd get cancer at age 31.

Fuck!

(Frantically searching through pile of clothes.)

Fuck! Who am I kidding, this is all my fault.

(Grabs jacket; clutching, wringing it.)

I did this to myself. I drink. I smoke. I abused my body for years. This is all my fucking fault!

*(Throws jacket back to clothes pile.
Church music plays.
SARAH hears it, begins searching for apron.
Finds it, presents it.)*

After Agatha was stretched on the rack, *(stretching and twisting apron string)* Quintianus ordered her torturers to twist and then tear off Agatha's breasts with pincers.¹⁰⁷

(Stretching apron string once more.)

Even in her state of physical degradation,

*(Silence.
SARAH begins self-flagellating her bare back with apron string.
The whipping sound of the strap hitting her flesh punctuates her speech.)*

Agatha. Supported. Her. Beliefs. She. Was a good. Christian. Woman.

Agatha. Was. The perfect. Victim!

*(Silence.
Church music fades.
SARAH gasps, looking to audience.
She rushes to find the gown,
Standing as she puts it on.)*

Nobody knows what causes breast cancer.

The dominant, neo-liberal, notion is that cancer is caused by 'lifestyle' risk factors obscures the very real environmental factors that contribute to disease.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Agatha's martyrdom is one of the most graphically violent in early Christian hagiography. Her torture—especially the tearing of her breasts—symbolically links her sanctity to the suffering of the female body. This narrative, steeped in purity, sacrifice, and violent punishment, continues to shape cultural ideas of the "ideal" victim. See E. M. Harney, *Virgin Martyrs* (University of Toronto, 2008); B. Joyce, *Martyrdom of St. Agatha* (Brandeis University, 2019); and J. Cannon, "Martyrdom and the Feminine Body in Early Christian Saints' Lives," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2007.

¹⁰⁸ Scholars such as Samantha King, Gayle Sulik, and Barbara Ehrenreich critique how neoliberal ideologies frame cancer—particularly breast cancer—as a product of individual "lifestyle choices,"

It positions the cancer patient as morally responsible for the cause of her illness.¹⁰⁹ Or his—trans and cis men get breast cancer too. It constructs the patient as blameworthy.

(She begins pacing from DSL to DSR, as she speaks)

We all know that drinking and smoking are 'lifestyle' risk factors for breast cancer.

Other risk factors include having breasts. Or not! Having babies when you're too young, having babies when you're too old, being overweight, being underweight, having babies at the right age, but not breastfeeding them.¹¹⁰

We don't know what causes breast cancer but we're pretty sure it's caused by being a "bad woman."¹¹¹ (Looks to apron).

(Tying up gown.)

It all happened so fast.

My friend, a dear friend—a beautiful, powerful Two-Spirit person—gifted me medicine. And offered to take me to ceremony. All I had to do was ask.

diverting attention from systemic, environmental, and industrial contributors. This framing supports a privatized, consumerist approach to illness, deflecting corporate and governmental accountability. See S. King, *Pink Ribbons, Inc.* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006); G. Sulik, *Pink Ribbon Blues* (Oxford UP, 2010); and B. Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided* (Metropolitan Books, 2009).

¹⁰⁹ Neo-liberal health paradigms often moralize illness by ascribing individual responsibility to patients reinforcing stigma and self-blame in breast cancer discourse. See K. Bell, "The Breast-Cancer-ization of Cancer Survivorship," *Social Science & Medicine*, 2014; and K. Kaiser, "The Meaning of the Survivor Identity for Women with Breast Cancer," *Social Science & Medicine*, 2008.

¹¹⁰ Established non-modifiable risk factors for breast cancer include reproductive history (early menarche, late menopause, nulliparity, early or late first pregnancy), and body-composition factors (overweight or underweight status). See "Risk Factors for Breast Cancer," *Encyclopedia of Epidemiology* (Sage, 2008).

¹¹¹ The "bad woman" trope reflects long-standing moral judgments in cancer discourse, where illness is framed as punishment for deviant or non-conforming female behavior. See K. Bell, "Cancer Survivorship, Morality and Lifestyle Discourse" (*Health Sociology Review*, 2012); and S. Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990).

But I didn't feel worthy of such a gift. It's not my medicine. So, I didn't ask.

*(Sees other friend.
Moves SR.)*

Another friend set up an online fundraiser for me.

I needed the money. Theatre artists-slash-bartenders certainly don't get sick time or benefits.

The support was touching—morale boosting—it really was.

*(Frantic Little Red music plays.
SARAH points on table,
walking fingers SL to punctuate achievements,
as before.)*

The fundraiser was trending, nationally. It'd reached its goal in less than 24 hours. I remember feeling like George Bailey, at the end of *It's a Wonderful Life*, when his entire community came together to support him.

(Shrinks.)

And it made me very uncomfortable.

Once again, my personal tragedy was the talk of the town. Once again, my trauma made every local newspaper. Once again, my story—my narrative—was completely out of my control.

(Moves to friend SR.)

I asked the friend to stop any further fundraising.

Next thing I knew, the online fundraising goal had been increased and two more in-person benefits had been scheduled. Unbeknownst to me, the social media updates and reports on my condition continued. I was blocked from seeing them.

(Sits on table.)

And the person in question further muscled their way into my life. They even lied to say they were family and showed up to my hospital room after my bilateral mastectomy.

There I was, *(lying on table)* bleeding so profusely the nurses had to change my bedsheets and gown every 15 minutes *(raising head to address audience)*—there were complications, *(Lying down)* writhing in pain *(raising head to address audience)*—both physical and existential...

*(Abandoning comedy bit,
SARAH sits up.
Turns to face audience.)*

Maybe my family and I should've told the person to go fuck themselves. But we were just trying to be nice.

*(SARAH jumps off table.
Begins collecting clothes from pile.)*

Turns out, my so-called friend had been stealing large sums of cancer money. Turns out, the relentless fundraising had little to do with my wellbeing.

*(Church music plays.
SARAH hears it; hurries to return clothes to coat hanger.)*

Agatha.

(Changing into apron.)

Agatha. Mutilated. Bleeding. Breasts torn from her chest with pincers. Agatha, the perfect victim.

Agatha was tossed back in her prison cell.

(Enthusiastically.)

There, an old man visited her in the night. He revealed himself as the apostle Peter, sent by Christ himself to heal her!¹¹²

St. Peter miraculously restored Agatha's breasts

¹¹² See B. Joyce, *Martyrdom of St. Agatha* (Brandeis University, 2019); and W. G. Ryan and E. Duffy, "Saint Agatha, Virgin," *The Golden Legend* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

(SARAH mimes breasts then, reaching her arm down between her legs, she flicks her wrist, covering her crotch.)

– and hymen. He started a GoFundMe campaign, and he magically disappeared into the night!

*(Twirling SL.
SARAH retrieves Agatha spoon from canister.
Frantically scraping old batter from spoon and tossing it into garbage pile on floor.)*

(Cheerfully) Agatha was freed from imperfections. St. Peter made her a proper Christian woman again. Agatha was perfect. Again!

*(Jingle Plays.)
SARAH wipes hands with cloth.
Frantically retrieving bowl and silicon molds from fridge.)*

Now that our dough has baked and cooled in our molds, it's ready to be filled with cannoli cream. Grab a piping bag and fill it with the cannoli cream.

*(Regains cheerful, Stepford tone.
Filling piping bag.)*

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I was handed a giant stack of pink pamphlets about breast reconstruction, wigs, and makeup tips! *(Pensive)* Come to think of it, there was very little mention of actual cancer, rather the bulk of it was about concealing the signs of cancer.¹¹³

(Cheerfully)

Cosmetically!

I didn't have much time for decision making. It was a whirlwind of tests, appointments, and, of course, I was also pretty busy being defrauded by my GoFundMe benefactor.

¹¹³ This moment critiques the “pinkwashing” of breast cancer culture, which often emphasizes cosmetic recovery and performative femininity over medical realities or patient autonomy. See K. Bell, “Cancer Survivorship, Morality and Lifestyle Discourse” (*Health Sociology Review*, 2012); B. Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided* (Metropolitan Books, 2009); S. King, *Pink Ribbons, Inc.* (U of Minnesota Press, 2006); and G. Sulik, *Pink Ribbon Blues* (Oxford UP, 2010).

I didn't know if I wanted breast reconstruction, but it was my first Oncologist who helped make up my mind.

(Becomes male doctor.)

"You're young and good looking," he said, "how can you expect to live a normal, well-adjusted life without breasts?"

(Silence.

SARAH grins, leaning on table.)

Watch me!

I have nothing against breast reconstruction or the many women who choose to undergo the process. That's their choice. It's a valid choice. But I have everything against a medical system that denies women any other choice.

(Pause.

Cheerfully piping cannoli cream into molds.)

Squeeze the cannoli cream down the piping bag and fill your mold, making them nice and uniform. Be sure to leave some head room for our sponge cakes!

Let's get these setting in the fridge.

(Puts tray with molds inside fridge.)

Sshhhhhhh.

(Slams fridge shut.)

Slowly, I rebuilt myself—my life—after cancer.

(Frantic Little Red music plays.)

I got into graduate school. I started doing theatre again. I started doing everything I could to make up for lost time.

(Manically.)

I quit drinking, I quit smoking. I started going to bed early. I even started eating more vegetables!

I started doing everything I was supposed to do. To take care of my health.

Things were finally looking up, again! I had somehow clawed my way out of the deepest, darkest depths of Hell, again!

I felt like had finally found my happily ever after. Again!

*(Jingle plays throughout.
From frantic and manic,
SARAH now descends into full panic.)*

The cakes!

(Running to shelves.)

The cakes! Ah! Where's the cakes? *(searching shelves)* We have to cut our cakes. Ah-ha!

*(Bringing cake and cookie cutter to table,
SARAH drops cookie cutter.
Chasing and kicking it as it rolls around stage.)*

Oop! That's ok! It's ok! Just keep baking. That's ok! Just pick it up!

(Picking up cutter.)

Just pick it up and keep baking! It's ok, it's ok!

*(Returns to table,
pathetically trying to regain composure.
Frantically cutting cakes.)*

We'll cut the cakes so they can fill our molds. I desperately wanted to get back to normal after my cancer. Unfortunately, for me, getting back to normal meant getting back to self-destruction.

*(Jingle fades.
Slamming cookie cutter into cake.)*

To drinking and smoking *(screaming into cake)* feeling like the biggest piece of shit-failure, every time I did!

(Resumes cutting cake; violently, frantically.)

To overextending myself. Working to the point of burnout, exhaustion. I've never half-assed anything in my life!

I even found new and creative ways to hurt myself, punish myself. Like occasionally skipping my cancer meds to give myself anxiety about my cancer coming back.

(Church music plays.

SARAH wistfully stares into distance, moves SL.)

Agatha would take her meds.

She would've been the perfect cancer patient. Agatha was the perfect ...

(Jingle plays.

SARAH returns to panicked state.)

Oh, the marzipan! The marzipan!!

(Running to take dough from fridge and rolling pin from shelves.)

We have to get the marzipan and roll it flat! *(Singing, a la nursery rhyme)* Roll, roll, roll your dough!

(Returns to table.

Noticing unfinished cakes,

SARAH abandons the marzipan and resumes cutting.

Jingle fades.)

Oh, and the cakes! Ha-HAAA! Finish cutting the cakes too! But I knew, I knew something was wrong. My life's never good for too long.

(Seeing marzipan, she begins to roll it out.)

Every time my life gets good, there's always another calamity ready to strike me down.

(Hitting marzipan dough with rolling pin.)

Ready, to take me out. Ready to make me rebuild my life—my self—all over again.

I knew it.

(Jingle plays.)

The molds!

(Running to fridge.)

The molds! Get the molds and invert them. Just pop those little titties, just pop 'em right out! *(Returning to table)* Oh, and the marzipan! *(Rolling)* Roll that marzipan! And the cakes! *(Cutting)* The cakes!

But I knew it! I knew it! There's no such thing as happily ever after. Not for me!

There are no fairy godmothers. No magic wands.

*(Jingle cuts.
Silence, stillness.)*

It came back.

(Lights fade to spot on SARAH.)

I got cancer. Again.

(Sweeping baking to sides and climbing onto cleared centre of table.)

All my survival stats went down, my chances of developing metastatic disease increased.

Recurrence. My hope died.

*(Melting off table,
SARAH drops to her hands and knees on floor.
Sequela music¹¹⁴ plays throughout the following
section, which is quickly recited in agonized
desperation.)*

¹¹⁴ The "Sequela" music is inspired by *Zaireeka*, the experimental 1997 album by *The Flaming Lips*, composed of four separate CDs intended to be played simultaneously on different audio systems to create a layered, dissonant harmony. The theatrical score similarly overlays thematic motifs introduced throughout the play—the jingle, the church music, the wolf theme (in which the little red theme is included and eventually consumed), the MRI sounds, and the party music (which also subtly incorporates MRI sounds)—into a polyphonic convergence. This mirrors the nonlinear accumulation of trauma, memory, and affect within the performance.

Sequela (*Gasps.*) A sequela is a pathological condition resulting from a prior injury, disease, therapy, or other trauma. It is derived from the Latin word, meaning "sequel"¹¹⁵

*(Rising,
SARAH repeats movement sequence from party section,
this time on her knees.)*

It felt as though my rapists had harboured, those fourteen long years, festering away in my breasts.

What more can the take from me? My baby—I can't even have babies anymore. Maybe *he* wouldn't have been like his father. Maybe *she* would've been like me. Or like Agatha.

My breasts? They took my beautiful breasts? My breasts denied the chance to nurse. Again?

Oh, what more do I have to sacrifice? If I keep disappearing, there'll be nothing left of me.

(Movement sequence ends with SARAH slamming her face to the floor.)

Oh!

(Squirming; crawling backwards under table.)

They're still inside of me, they're inside of me, they're still inside of me. Get out, get out, get out!!!

(Dives DS from under table, sliding on her stomach.)

Magical thinking's a sign of insanity.

*(Rolling on floor, SR of table.
Cheerfully, pathetically.)*

¹¹⁵ In medical literature, sequelae represent the lingering shadows of prior events—physiological or psychological—that outlive their origins. The term's etymological root in sequi, Latin for "to follow," underscores its relevance to trauma and illness narratives, where past events assert their presence in the body's ongoing story. See "Sequela," RxList.

Just keep baking! Just keep baking! Just pick up the pieces. Just pick 'em up! Just cover it—cover it up. Just cover it with the marzipan.

*(Standing US of table,
SARAH attempts to resume baking)*

And just pick it back up. Just put it back together. Just cover, just cover it up...

(Suddenly slamming her back into US wall.)

Sequela.

(Melting down US wall.)

Cancer is a potential sequela of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

(SARAH drops to her hands and knees on floor under table.)

Biological mechanisms:

*(Crawling DS from beneath table,
her movements punctuate the points points.)*

Impairment of immune system function alterations in DNA repair, stress-related hormones, tumor growth.¹¹⁶

*(Rising to knees,
SARAH repeats movement sequence on the floor,
now faster. ¹¹⁷)*

I did, after all, abuse my body for the better part of a decade. Relentlessly punishing myself. Blaming myself. Trying to exterminate myself. Recklessly living each day like a game of Russian Roulettes. Secretly hoping each day would be my last.

(Slamming to floor as sequence ends,

¹¹⁶ See Gradus et al.

¹¹⁷ This choreographed sequence, colloquially dubbed “The Four Cardinals” by the crew, reprises movements from the earlier party scene, rotated to face each cardinal direction. The gesture secularizes and reinterprets the ritual sign of the cross, transforming liturgical symbolism into a ritual-performance physical score.

*SARAH turns to face SR.
Repeats kneeling sequence, faster yet.)*

How ironic, that someone who spent most of their life contemplating suicide would suddenly want to live. How ironic that somebody who supposedly suddenly wanted to live would do very little to make that happen.

*(Slamming to floor,
SARAH turns to face US.
Repeats kneeling sequence, even faster.)*

Fuck. Fuck. It's all my fault. It's all my fucking fault. I did this to myself. I got a second chance, and I blew it. I fucking blew it. It's all my fault.

*(Slamming to floor,
SARAH turns to face SL.
Speeding through kneeling sequence.)*

Just keep baking. Just keep baking. Just pick up the pieces. Just pick 'em up and put it together. Just cover it up. Cover it with the marzipan and pull it together. And just pick it up, just pick up the pieces.

(Slamming to floor, SARAH turns to face DS.)

Sequela.

(Rolling on floor under table.)

Behavioral mechanisms: stress precipitates behaviors that are risk factors for cancer. Smoking, alcohol misuse, drug misuse.¹¹⁸

*(SARAH abruptly counter-rolls DS,
slamming hand on floor.)*

It's all connected. All of it. It all.

*(Using the sweat on the floor,
SARAH draws unintelligible symbols,
connected by lines,*

¹¹⁸ See J. L. Gradus et al., "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Cancer Risk: A Nationwide Cohort Study" (*European Journal of Epidemiology*, 2015).

on the stage with her finger.)

The stalker. The rape. The cancer. The cancer. The violence. The semblance. The eternal return. The sum of every instant.

(Slamming fist to floor.)

I'm cursed! I'm cursed! I'm fucking cursed!

(Gasps.)

Magical thinking's a sign of insanity.

(Rolling to US side of table, she attempts to bake while muttering.)

But I can't stop. I can't stop going over all of it. It all. I can't stop going over all of it. It all. It's all connected. All of it. It all. All of it, it ...

Fuuuuuck!!!!

*(SARAH thrusts cake pan off table, collapsing onto its place.
Sequela music cuts.
Panting; whimpering into her folded arms.)*

I'm tired. I'm so fucking tired. I'm tired of being strong.

*(Silence.
SARAH rises.
Exhausted, she collects remaining baking implements and goes to return them to SR shelves.
Stops halfway.
Defeated, she puts them on floor instead.
Removes apron, drops it to floor.
Climbs to sit on table, facing SL.)*

Bathtub.

*(Lights change.
Exhaling deeply, SARAH leans back, her arms float as if in water.)*

Sitting with the bad thoughts.

Swimming.

Stewing.

(Lying back.)

Submerge.

(Silence.)

Epiphany.

(Rising.)

Emerge.

I ... deserve ... a healthy life.

Catalyst.

I deserve ... a happy life.

Decision.

I'm done hating myself. Done punishing myself. It's time to live.

(Looks to audience.)

Time to heal.

(Turns to face DS.)

It's time to break the curse.

(Slowly turning palms upwards.)

The ask:

First time ever, ask for help.

First time ever, feel worthy of help.

(Arms outstretched)

The veil begins to lift. I am open.

(SARAH stands.)

The gift.

The Medicine.

Ceremony.

*(Moves SL to coat tree.
Stops halfway.
Hand to bare-chested heart, overcome by emotion.)*

The love.

*(Continues moving SL,
SARAH takes shawl from coat tree.
Holding shawl.)*

After my first cancer diagnosis, my friend, my dear friend—a beautiful, powerful Two Spirit person—gifted me medicine. And offered to take me to ceremony. All I had to do ... was ask.

But I wasn't ready. I didn't feel worthy of such a gift. So, I didn't ask.

After my second cancer diagnosis, I was ready.

To ask.

To beg.

I was ready to meet the medicine in the middle.

(Wrapping shawl over shoulders.)

And I did.

And my beautiful powerful friend dropped everything—their busy wonderful life—their deep and sacred grief.

My friend showed up for me because I showed up for myself.

*(Sitting cross-legged on table.)
(Pause.)*

I've been wondering how to tell this part of the story. And how much of it to tell. So much of my life falls into the stranger than fiction category. And I know I'm just a little white girl—how much worse things would've been for my BIPOC and Trans friends.

I asked my friend if telling this part of the story is appropriate. They said: "you can talk about your experience." And the Elders want people to know that the medicine is real.

And it works.

So, fresh surgical incisions and all, my friend and I were off, to Seattle. To stolen Salish land. There, I met a woman and two men. Knowledge keepers. Medicine people.

Prayers up.

They pray.

I pray.

You have to meet the medicine in the middle.

We pray.

They bring me to the other side.
I make contact.

You have to meet the medicine in the middle.

I am in the woods.
I know these woods.
The great, good place of my heart.
Birch, cedar, pine. Home.
I love these woods.

I am running. Searching.
A tree. A giant, ancient tree.
I touch its trunk.
A door appears. Opens.
I step through. Inside.

Find somebody. Waiting.
It's her.

(Tearfully)

It's me.

Little me. Little 10- to 12-year-old me.

We hug. Cry.
Tears of joy.
Relief.

With help, I broke the curse.

Whatever it was that relentlessly tried to kill me, again and again, and again—whatever beast had its claws in me all those years released me from its clutches.

(Inhales)

I felt it.

(Exhales)

It happened the moment I let myself back in again.

*(Little Red music plays.
It is the similar to the frantic theme,
but slower.
Calmer.)*

And, of all the versions of myself I expected to find, I didn't think it'd be that little girl.

*(SARAH notices apron SR.
Rises to fetch it.)*

I thought it'd be that battered, broken girl. In the ditch.

*(Picking apron up,
gingerly folding it,
and placing it on table.)*

I thought I would rescue her.

Instead, I found a confident, smart, funny, little girl.

(Weeping.)

And she rescued me.

No, *(chuckling)* we rescued each other. Because I helped that little girl, who thought she had to be perfect.

I quit drinking. I quit smoking. I quit nihilism.

I'm learning how to be in my body.
 How to call myself back.
 How to heal.

I'm learning ... to live the good life.

(Looking SR, SARAH moves to take Agatha spoon from canister, returning DSC. She tenderly, lovingly dusts Agatha off. Smirking, she turns Agatha spoon into magic wand, and slowly begins waving it while chanting magic spell.)

Ti-tty-cakes.

(SARAH chants with increasing speed.)

Ti-tty-cakes. Ti-tty-cakes.

(Now, conducting them like a Maestro, SARAH continues chanting until the audience joins in.)

Ti-tty-cakes. Ti-tty-cakes. Ti-tty-cakes.

(Perfectly baked Titty Cakes magically float down from ceiling on a silver platter—the shittier the production value, the better. Taking a cake from the platter, SARAH smiles and shrugs while presenting it to the audience.)

The sacrificed. The sacred.¹¹⁹

(Smiling, SARAH bites into the cake. Chewing, she allows herself to cry, to weep.

¹¹⁹ This performative utterance encapsulates the central ritualistic structure of *Titty Cakes*: the transformation of pain into performance, and performance into communion: profane to sacred. Drawing on the figure of Saint Agatha—whose martyrdom is annually commemorated through the baking of Minne di Sant'Agata—the performance stages a contemporary, secular Eucharist. As Agatha's body is symbolically consumed through cake in Sicilian tradition, so too is my trauma transubstantiated into a communal rite. The audience's consumption of the cakes marks their participation in the ritual performance, one that bridges historical and personal suffering. The work thus becomes a ritual of feminist witness, one that connects my trauma to Agatha's and, more broadly, to the audiences'—to the systemic suffering of cis and trans women across time.

*Tears stream down her smiling face as she continues to eat the titty cake.
Lights fade to black.
Little Red music continues to play in blackout.)*

End

CHAPTER TWO: THE ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF ABSENCE

Staging the (Im)Possible: Rewriting the Scene of Suffering

There is a kind of hunger that fuels trauma porn.¹²⁰ A ravenous, predatory gaze that lingers too long on the bruises, the blood, the limp, unconscious body left naked in the snow. It does not seek to understand. It seeks only to consume. It is the same hunger that slows down at the site of a car crash, that watches depictions of rape with bated breath, that relishes the grotesque under the guise of empathy.

Its aim is not empathy. It is spectacle.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag warns that repeated exposure to images of suffering dulls empathy. The more we see, the less we feel. Overexposure aestheticizes atrocity until it becomes invisible.¹²¹

Trauma porn does not seek to prevent suffering: it seeks to perfect its image. It choreographs pain, stylizes horror, and serves it back to us as entertainment. And there is something uniquely gendered about this process. The bodies subjected to this aestheticized suffering are overwhelmingly female, overwhelmingly young,

¹²⁰ The term “trauma porn” describes media that sensationalizes trauma, often stripping it of political context or ethical engagement. Gatwiri and Mapedzahama critique how such representations reduce Black suffering to spectacle, serving “the White gaze and prejudicial judgment” rather than justice (273). Similarly, Gurantz identifies a growing trend of “abuse documentaries” that prioritize emotional manipulation over critical reflection or structural accountability. See K. Gatwiri and V. Mapedzahama, *J. Multicultural Ed.* (Emerald, 2022); M. Gurantz, *LARB* (2021).

¹²¹ Sontag notes, “shock can become familiar. Shock can wear off” (82). Through aestheticization and repetition, media depictions of atrocity may foster desensitization, transforming spectators into passive voyeurs rather than ethical witnesses. Similarly, Geoffrey Hartman asks: “Is our capacity for sympathy finite and soon exhausted?” (152). See S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (FSG, 2003); G. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow* (Indiana UP, 1996).

overwhelmingly consumed without their consent. Media deploys sexual violence as shorthand for tragedy, for a woman's unravelling, vengeance, collapse.

Here, Baudrillard's *simulacrum* becomes a vital framework.¹²² Sexual violence in media no longer functions as a representation of reality; it has become a hyperreal construct, a copy with no original, endlessly reproduced until it replaces reality.¹²³ Gang rape, so frequently staged, has come to *stand-in* for the *idea* of rape itself. No longer tied to lived experience, it functions as narrative cliché. A hollowed-out device for horror. The real aftermath vanishes behind the spectacle.

The visceral, personal suffering of real survivors is obscured, replaced by a sensationalized (often sexualized) and disembodied depiction of the most extreme version of the act. This repetition risks erasing the very humanity of those who have endured such horror.¹²⁴ It transforms the unbearable into something strangely familiar, routine even: a pervasive and banal background hum of sexual violence.

I did not want *Titty Cakes* to be devoured in this way.

From its inception, *Titty Cakes* had to reject this logic. It had to push back against the machinery of trauma porn; not by retreating into silence, but by carving out an

¹²² Baudrillard writes, "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (2). In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he defines the simulacrum as a copy without origin, a representation that "masks the absence of a profound reality" (6). See J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (U of Michigan P, 1994).

¹²³ Baudrillard theorizes that in postmodernity, signs and simulations precede and obscure the real, a process he calls the "precession of simulacra." In this schema, trauma becomes hyperreal—its representation detaches from actual experience and becomes an empty, infinitely replicated signifier. See J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (U of Michigan P, 1994), 79–80.

¹²⁴ "Our modern technical expertise is such," Hartman writes, "that simulacra can be provided for almost any experience, however extreme, it is more today a question of should not rather than cannot" (84). See G. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow* (Indiana UP, 1996).

alternative. The question becomes: *how to place trauma on stage without feeding the same appetite that has always sought to consume it?*

This question opens onto a long-standing and unresolved debate within trauma studies: whether trauma can—or even should—be represented. This paradox sits at the heart of ethical performance-making.

One position insists that trauma inherently resists narration. Cathy Caruth conceptualizes it as a belated event, apprehended only in its aftershocks, never in the moment itself.¹²⁵ It fractures language, disrupts chronology, and resists closure.¹²⁶ Trauma tears at the structures that make meaning possible¹²⁷ and, for some, lies beyond representation altogether.¹²⁸

Others argue that representation is not only possible but necessary. Dominick LaCapra warns that framing trauma as wholly unrepresentable risks obscuring what can

¹²⁵ Caruth reframes trauma not as an event that can be directly known, but as something apprehended only in its aftermath. In *Unclaimed Experience*, she describes it as “the narrative of a belated experience, [the story of trauma] rather attests to its endless impact on a life” (7) and as “always the story of a wound that cries out... of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4). This belatedness positions trauma as fundamentally resistant to immediate apprehension. See C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1996).

¹²⁶ “This belatedness in understanding accounts for the impossibility of the traumatized to fully grasp, linguistically and cognitively, the dimension and the full scope of the trauma that had occurred to them. This linguistic and cognitive failure makes it impossible for the victims to represent trauma in a conscious way” (Lăpugean 87). See D. Lăpugean, *Trauma and Memory in Contemporary Narrative* (Cambridge Scholars, 2019).

¹²⁷ For Phelan, trauma “tears the fabric of knowledge itself: it is a wound in the system of meaning through which the subject knows the world, knows him or herself” (*Mourning Sex* 95). Such rupturing is not merely linguistic, but epistemological; it destabilizes the very frameworks through which experience is understood.

¹²⁸ Phelan asserts that “trauma is untouchable... it cannot be represented” (*Mourning Sex* 5). In this framing, the attempt to stage trauma risks reducing it to spectacle, stripping it of its resistant, unknowable dimensions. See P. Phelan, *Mourning Sex* (Routledge, 1997).

and should be conveyed.¹²⁹ Similarly, Dori Laub describes how silence allows trauma to distort memory and infiltrate daily life, a tyranny that only testimony can interrupt.¹³⁰

Shoshana Felman sees testimony as a bridge between narrative and history, enabling both survivor and witness to engage meaningfully with the traumatic.¹³¹ Judith Herman places storytelling at the centre of recovery, a way to integrate trauma into the survivor's life story.¹³²

The Ethics of Absence is my attempt to navigate between these poles, to acknowledge the limits of representation while resisting both spectacle and erasure.

The Ethics of Absence

The ethics of absence insists that what cannot be shown may still be made present; that absence can come closer to the truth of trauma than reenactment.

¹²⁹ LaCapra warns against “the notion that traumatic limit events involve and convey an unrepresentable, anxiety-producing excess... [which] may divert attention from what may indeed be represented or reconstructed... and should be, as accurately as possible” (92). To declare trauma unrepresentable risks foreclosing both the possibility and the ethical obligation of telling. See D. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2001).

¹³⁰ Laub observes that “the ‘not telling’ of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor’s daily life” (Felman and Laub 79). Testimony interrupts this corrosion, allowing the survivor to reclaim their narrative. See S. Felman and D. Laub, *Testimony* (Routledge, 1992).

¹³¹ Felman describes testimony as the “bridge” which, “mediating between narrative and history, guarantees their correspondence and adherence to each other” (Felman and Laub 101). This bridging role makes testimony foundational to the mutual work of survivor and witness. See S. Felman and D. Laub, *Testimony* (Routledge, 1992).

¹³² Herman situates storytelling at the center of recovery: “The survivor tells the story of the trauma. She tells it completely, in depth and in detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (254). For Herman, telling is not just cathartic—it is transformative, re-situating trauma within a coherent self-narrative. See J. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (Basic Books, 2022).

This is the paradox *Titty Cakes* stages: by honoring the impossibility of representing trauma, one may begin to approach its truth. That absence, held reverently, becomes not a lack but an ethical practice.

Trauma exceeds language. It resists chronology. It annihilates meaning. Yet, it demands witness. To ethically represent trauma, then, is not to make it present in its totality, but to accept that doing so is impossible. To honour that impossibility is to resist filling the void with spectacle.

The ethics of absence holds space without intrusion. It honours silence without collapsing into it. It is an ethics grounded in reverence, not avoidance.

In creating *Titty Cakes*, I sought to resist trauma porn; to defy the terrible simulacrum; to refuse the trap of representation that risks reducing trauma to shock or cliché. Jean-Luc Nancy's reframing of representation shaped my approach: not as imitation or reproduction, but as intensification.¹³³ Ethical representation does not seek to reproduce presence, but to mark its irretrievability.¹³⁴ It exposes the ruptures and silences trauma leaves behind.¹³⁵

¹³³ Nancy distinguishes between representation as imitation and representation as intensification; "the *re* of the word *representation* is not repetitive but intensive ... the Latin *representatio* is an accentuated presentation" (*The Ground of the Image* 35-36, emphasis in original). Rather, it is "a presence that is presented, exposed or exhibited" (*The Ground of the Image* 36). See J-L. Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (Fordham UP, 2005).

¹³⁴ "What is essential to representation, according to Nancy, "is the relation to an absence" (38); that is, "representation not only presents something that, either by rights or in point of fact, is simply absent: in truth, it presents what is absent from presence pure and simple, its being *as such* or even its sense or truth" (*The Ground of the Image* 36, emphasis in original). See J-L. Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (Fordham UP, 2005).

¹³⁵ True representation, asserts Nancy, "is not a simulacrum; it is not the replacement of the original thing – in fact, it has nothing to do with a thing. It is presentation of what does not amount to a presence, given and completed (or given completed), or it is the bringing to presence of an intelligible reality (or form) by the formal mediation of a sensory reality" (*The Ground of the Image* 33). See J-L. Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (Fordham UP, 2005).

Nancy argues, within the context of the Holocaust, that the most profound horrors obliterate representation itself.¹³⁶ Attempts to depict such atrocities risk reproducing the systems of violence that created them.¹³⁷ Ethical representation gestures toward the unknowable, respecting its irreducibility.

This concept shaped the creation of *Titty Cakes*. Rather than attempting to reenact or *re-present* the violence of my past, I chose to work with its aftermath: with echoes, with traces,¹³⁸ with cinders.¹³⁹ Embracing Nancy's interdictory approach to representation (i.e.: by presenting the interplay *between* presence and absence, by navigating the space *between* what can and cannot ever be ethically shown)¹⁴⁰ allowed me to approach my

¹³⁶ The Nazi Death Camps and the horrors that occurred there, obliterated the very concept of representation insofar as the camps brought about "a complete devastation of representation or even the possibility of representing" (*The Ground of the Image* 34). "Nothing of the camps can be represented," says Nancy, "because the camps themselves were the execution of representation" (*The Ground of the Image* 46-47). Ethical representation, therefore, must preserve this rupture; it must gesture toward absence without pretending to restore it, staging a confrontation between the limits of visibility and the demands of witness. See J.-L. Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (Fordham UP, 2005).

¹³⁷ "To show the most terrible images is always possible," says Nancy, "but to show who or what kills every possibility of the image is impossible, except by recreating the gesture of the murderer" (*The Ground of the Image* 47).

¹³⁸ In *Archive Fever*, Derrida defines trace as that which "is never gathered together, never subject to the form of presence" (54). The archive, he argues, is haunted by what it cannot hold—what returns only as ghost or cinder. *Titty Cakes* engages this logic, staging trauma not as record, but as spectral remainder. See J. Derrida, *Archive Fever* (U of Chicago P, 1996).

¹³⁹ In *Cinders*, Derrida meditates on what survives destruction, describing cinders as traces that evade full presence or absence. These fragile remnants signify survival without resolution—marks of memory that refuse to stabilize into meaning. The cinder "immediately incinerates itself, in front of your eyes [...] it does not say what it is, but what it was" (17). In this way, cinders signify survival without resolution, memory without stable form. See J. Derrida, *Cinders* (U of Nebraska P, 1991).

¹⁴⁰ It is "precisely that representation that [Nancy] wanted to call "forbidden" in order to make clear that bringing-to-presence divides presence and opens it onto its own absence [...] this representation allows itself to be surprised and allows itself to be forbidden, that is, to be interdicted" (*The Ground of the Image* 48). Here, it is important to make clear that Nancy means 'interdicted' to function both in the prohibitive sense as well as a more literal and/or Latin sense, translated roughly to mean *said in between*. Ethical representations must, then, navigate the space *between* presence and absence,

story without repeating its violence. To honour the crater's singularity and the echoes it leaves behind.

Absence becomes not a barrier to expression, but *a condition of it*: an ethical stance that honours the limits of representation while calling for witness.

Trauma is not merely the event itself, but the impossibility of fully knowing it. It is something that returns, only belatedly, glimpsed only in its aftershocks. The body remembers what the mind cannot, and so trauma is lived in fragments, in sensory distortions, in gaps that refuse to be closed.¹⁴¹

Trauma *must* be spoken, even if imperfectly; it *must* be witnessed, even if incompletely. *But how?* Ethical representation avoids compulsive repetition and instead creates space for reflection, acknowledgment, and transformation.¹⁴²

Nancy argues that representation itself is always already an interplay between presence and absence.¹⁴³ Something is always lost, always missing, always beyond full

acknowledging and respecting that which cannot be fully captured while still recognizing and honouring the responsibility to attempt to bear witness to such atrocities. See J-L. Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (Fordham UP, 2005).

¹⁴¹ Research into the children of Holocaust survivors has revealed that trauma can leave biological markers across generations. Rachel Yehuda and colleagues found alterations in FKBP5 gene methylation—linked to stress regulation—in both survivors and their offspring, suggesting that trauma-induced epigenetic changes may be inherited. This supports a growing understanding that stress can shape the biological substrates of subsequent generations (Yehuda et al. 73–78). R. Yehuda et al., “Lower FKBP5 DNA Methylation in Holocaust-Exposed Individuals and Their Adult Offspring” (*American Journal of Psychiatry*, 2015).

¹⁴² LaCapra differentiates “acting out” from “working through,” the latter allowing for ethical remembrance and critical distance from the traumatic past (70-72). In *Titty Cakes*, this distinction becomes crucial: works that merely reenact trauma risk leaving both performer and audience caught in repetition, while those that open up space for reflection may allow for transformation. See D. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2001).

¹⁴³ Nancy redefines absence not as negation, but as an essential element of representation itself. In *The Ground of the Image*, he argues that “an image is not the copy of a presence but the presence of a distance, or of a withdrawal” (7). This interplay—*between* what appears and what escapes—disrupts any simplistic notion of visual truth. Absence is not a void to be filled, but a structuring

grasp. Never fully present to itself, representation is always mediated, always haunted by its own incompleteness.

Representation is never pure presence;¹⁴⁴ *that* is simulacrum. To try to make trauma *fully* present is to falsify it,¹⁴⁵ to idolize it,¹⁴⁶ to allow it to *stand-in* for the thing it seeks to represent.

To fill in the crater is to overwrite its existence.

The absence of my memory—the crater where my narrative should have been—became a central presence in the work. By embracing this absence, *Titty Cakes* transformed it into something palpable, something that could be felt and witnessed without being fully exposed. This allowed me to engage my trauma without re-traumatization, creating a space where the audience could confront the unrepresentable alongside me.

This approach was crucial in resisting the voyeurism of trauma porn. Trauma porn turns suffering into spectacle, inviting audiences to consume pain rather than engage with it. It lingers on wounds—raw, open, and immediate—demanding attention, provoking

condition of meaning, one that opens space for interpretation, imagination, and ethical relation. See J-L. Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (Fordham UP, 2005).

¹⁴⁴ Nancy calls this regime “super-representation” whereby “[the Aryan] is the representative of representation [...] an idea identical to a presence, or it is the presence of an idea without remainder ...” (*The Ground of the Image* 39). As such, “the death camp constitutes the stage on which super-representation plays out the spectacle of the annihilation of what, in its eyes, is non-representation” (*The Ground of the Image* 40). See J-L. Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (Fordham UP, 2005).

¹⁴⁵ Creating “a world without fissure, without abyss [and] without withdrawn invisibility” (*The Ground of the Image* 38) eliminates any sense of absence, making the “super-representation” a total presence. It is a presence so complete that leaves nothing behind.

¹⁴⁶ The idol, much like the simulacrum, is “an image to be valued for itself ... [it] asserts its presence only through itself” (*The Ground of the Image* 30). See J-L. Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (Fordham UP, 2005).

shock, and often retraumatizing survivors. Wounds are urgent, overwhelming: they bleed endlessly without space for reflection or healing. I knew I could not recreate my trauma on stage without risking this. To do so would have been to replicate the violence, to repeat the gesture of my attackers, to reduce myself and my story to an object of pity or spectacle.

Instead, I chose to show scars. Figuratively and literally. Scars carry their own weight of meaning. They mark and mar the body, yes, but they also signify survival. Scars are the echoes, the traces, the cinders. An acknowledgement of pain and suffering, scars insist on endurance, resilience; they are a record of healing, however imperfect. To show scars is to offer something considered, something resolved. It is to extend an invitation, rather than a demand, for witnessing.

Here, Derrida's *Cinders* became my guiding metaphor. Even in the absence of the fire, the absence of that which was incinerated, something remains: "There are cinders there, cinders there are" (15). Cinders are not the fire itself, yet they carry its traces, holding its memory even as they crumble into the ungraspable.¹⁴⁷ The cinder recognizes the (im)possibility of fully knowing catastrophe. It is the obliteration of memory that, in recognition of its destruction, somehow preserves something. Cinders exist in a paradoxical state: neither fully present nor fully absent. They persist altered, something fragile, speaking through silence.

¹⁴⁷ Derrida explores cinders as the lingering trace of destruction: neither fully present nor entirely absent. "At present, here and now," he writes, "there is something material—visible but scarcely readable—that, referring only to itself, no longer makes a trace, unless it traces only by losing the trace it scarcely leaves—[T]hat it just barely remains." (*Cinders* 25). The trace (what was) becomes the cinder (what is no longer): what remains without remaining. These cinders, irretrievable yet persistent, offer a metaphor for trauma's spectral afterlife. See J. Derrida, *Cinders* (U of Nebraska P, 1991).

Speaking of fire without ever becoming fire again.¹⁴⁸

Cinders do not retain the shape of what was incinerated, nor do they fully disappear into nothingness. A singularity, the cinder is what remains without remaining; it something new entirely, it is what escapes the all-burning (nothing escapes).¹⁴⁹ Perhaps the cinder is only way to speak of the unspeakable; to remember without repeating the destruction that devastated representation. To honour without reiterating.

A mastectomy scar is a cinder. It is neither the breasts that once warmed the chest nor the wound that replaced them. It is not restoration. It is not return. The scar is the trace of loss; the outline of absence, of a body surviving itself. To bear a scar is to carry a past that cannot be touched, only traced. It is a threshold. A remnant. A transformation.

A singularity.

What was severed will not return.

What was burned will not reignite.¹⁵⁰

Scars do not weep, do not open, do not bleed. They do not demand, as wounds do, to be sutured or tended. They do not recreate pain; they bear witness to it, to what has been lost and to what remains. Instead, scars insist on survival.

¹⁴⁸ “The cinder is nothing that can be in the world,” writes Derrida, it is “nothing that remains as an entity [*étant*]. It is the being [*l'être*], rather, that there is—this is a name of the being that there is there but which, giving itself (*es gibt ashes*), is nothing, remains beyond everything that is (*konis epekeina tes ousias*), remains unpronounceable in order to make saying it possible although it is nothing. (*Cinders* 55). See J. Derrida, *Cinders* (U of Nebraska P, 1991).

¹⁴⁹ Cinders are the ghost of the trace *between* life and death, black and white, past and present, presence and absence. “In the place of others [...] there are cinders there, “of the others, cinders there are”” (*Cinders* 53). See J. Derrida, *Cinders* (U of Nebraska P, 1991).

¹⁵⁰ Coincidentally, like Derrida’s cinders, what remained of my severed breasts—once amputated, thoroughly dissected, and tested—was in fact incinerated: “There are cinders there, cinders there are, the phrase thus says what it does, what it is. It immediately incinerates itself in front of your eyes...” (*Cinders* 17). See J. Derrida, *Cinders* (U of Nebraska P, 1991).

This is the choice I made in *Titty Cakes*: to show scars, not wounds. To show the cinder instead of the fire. To make absence the presence that is presented.

Absence is not a void. It is a presence that refuses to be whole. What is absent still acts. What cannot be seen can still be felt, and sometimes, felt more sharply than what is visible.

To show the wound is to risk letting it be devoured, consumed by a gaze that has learned to feed on trauma. This moment in time does not need another sensationalized spectacle of suffering. It does not need another *re*-presentation of a woman brutalized; another body tossed in the ditch and left for dead for the sake of shock or entertainment.

It needs the scar.

Not as closure, not as healing in any simple sense, but as a rupture that rejects spectacle. A presence that refuses to reenact its own destruction.¹⁵¹ The trace, the cinder, the scar: what remains, fragile but persistent. Proof that something burned and something survived.

This is the paradox *Titty Cakes* enacts: by refusing to reconstruct trauma, it renders its weight more fully felt. By staging absence, it stages something closer to truth.

Baking the Unspeakable: The Aesthetics of Absence in Titty Cakes

The theatrical stage is a space where this paradox can live. In performance, absence becomes material. It becomes affective. It becomes the thing that drives the work

¹⁵¹ See Figure B26.

itself.¹⁵² In *Titty Cakes*, absence is architecture of the work. It is the ground on which the work stands, a structure of refusal, reverence, and resistance.

On stage, I do not reenact the violence. I do not reconstruct the night that left my naked body bleeding in the snow. I refuse to give the audience an image of that suffering because *that* is the image trauma porn demands.

Instead, I give them something else.

I give them baking.

Baking becomes an embodied ethics, a semiotic system through which trauma is expressed and mediated.¹⁵³ Objects and gestures become a corporeal lexicon of survival. Absence takes form without reproducing violence. Trauma inhabits the space of the performance indirectly, through transference, displacement, and symbol. Every implement, every ingredient, is imbued with meaning. All of the violence is beaten into batter, kneaded into dough, sifted into flour.

¹⁵² Peggy Phelan argues that performance is inherently ephemeral and grounded in disappearance. In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, she writes, “performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented... Performance’s being... becomes itself through disappearance” (146-49). Performance reveals the force of absence: that which cannot be held or replicated still enacts affective presence. This ephemerality, far from being a limitation, becomes its ethical strength. See P. Phelan, *Unmarked* (Routledge, 1993).

¹⁵³ Ferdinand de Saussure laid the foundation for modern semiotics in *Course in General Linguistics*, distinguishing between the signifier (the sound-image or material form) and the signified (the concept it conveys). The relation between them is arbitrary yet socially fixed within a given culture, making all sign systems—including language, gesture, and image—subject to cultural encoding and transformation (65–70). My use of “semiotic system” follows from this tradition, adapted to performance contexts in which physical action and material objects function as signifiers that produce meaning through their culturally inscribed relations to signifieds. See F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Philosophical Library, 1959).

The objects and gestures of baking—ordinarily coded as safe, soft, and domestic—are re-inscribed with violence.¹⁵⁴ In the absence of reenactment, the gestures become a language to speak the unspeakable. An affective, embodied grammar for what cannot not be shown, these gestures occupy the space where direct *re*-presentation would betray the unknowable truth of trauma, filling it completely with pure presence and, in doing so, collapsing into the very violence it seeks to resist.

Rather than reenact trauma, the work displaces its force.¹⁵⁵ What is not shown is still rendered present, carried in affect, in action, in interruption. An egg-well becomes the ditch where my body was found; the delicate, fragile yolk broken-open, spilling into the flour that dusts the stage like freshly fallen snow. The rough kneading of marzipan stands-in for the abrasions, contusions, and lacerations that covered my body. The recipe becomes a cipher, encoding violence through domesticity, substituting legibility with intensity.¹⁵⁶

The domestic space of baking becomes a vehicle for rupture. What is familiar is destabilised. What nurtures also wounds. This is the interdictory nature of absence: what escapes representation can still pierce perception. What is not *seen* may still be *felt*.

Through baking, *Titty Cakes* creates a semiotic relation in which the eggs, the flour, the marzipan, the implements; indeed, every element of the recipe become

¹⁵⁴ The experimental film *Semiotics of the Kitchen* transforms domestic gestures into potent political and emotional expressions. The parody of televised cooking shows reveals the kitchen as a site of both repression and resistance. In *Titty Cakes*, baking functions similarly: as a semiotic system through which trauma is expressed and mediated, turning acts like sifting and kneading into a corporeal lexicon of survival and rendering absence material without reproducing violence. See M. Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (Electronic Arts Intermix, 1975).

¹⁵⁵ See Figures B4-5.

¹⁵⁶ See Figure B22.

signifiers that conjure the signified: violence, trauma, loss. The audience is not shown the event itself, but they are made to feel its weight through absence, through substitution, through the rupture of expectation.¹⁵⁷ Trauma is not depicted; it is *presented* through the disjunction *between* the gesture and its reverberation.

By staging trauma within a feminized domestic sphere, *Titty Cakes* subverts the expected grammar of violence. It replaces spectacle with symbol, exposure with implication, reenactment with rupture. Sue-Ellen Case calls this “ideological displacement:” turning “culturally encoded” objects into sites of tension and critique.¹⁵⁸ In *Titty Cakes*, the apron, the whisk, the mixing bowl become unstable signs, holding both nurture and harm. The work actively subverts dominant cultural signifiers, turning familiar, feminized objects into sites of rupture, tension, and contradiction.¹⁵⁹

Absence is not simply an omission. It is a presence in itself.

A trace.

A cinder.

A scar.

The most potent presentation of absence in *Titty Cakes* is the way the performance centres the scar that now occupies the place on my chest where my breasts had once been. It was visible before I ever stepped on stage. The scar was the focal point of the

¹⁵⁷ See Figures B8-12.

¹⁵⁸ Sue-Ellen Case argues that theatrical semiotics are not neutral but ideologically laden. The objects, gestures, and settings on stage carry “cultural encodings:” signs shaped by prevailing beliefs and power structures. Within feminist performance, Case identifies “ideological displacement” as a tactic to expose and subvert these encodings (116-117). Feminized objects like aprons and kitchen tools become unstable signs, transformed into carriers of critique *Titty Cakes* utilizes this strategy by turning the kitchen into a space of tension, where domestic symbols embody trauma and resistance. See S-E. Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (Macmillan, 1988).

¹⁵⁹ See Figure B6.

promotional materials, the first image audiences encountered, long before the house lights dimmed.¹⁶⁰ And once the performance begins, it remains, haunting the edges of visibility. The scar peeks out from the sides of my frilly, red apron; emerging and retreating, revealing itself, never demanding attention, yet impossible to unsee.¹⁶¹

Unlike the symbolic language of baking, deliberately constructed and symbolically coded, the scar cannot be choreographed. It interrupts without warning; it pierces illusion like Barthes' punctum pierces the photograph.¹⁶² If theatre asks for suspended disbelief, the scar calls for recognition of reality. The performance might offer artifice, but the story of my body—inscribed on my skin, archived in flesh—does not lie.¹⁶³ It becomes what Patrick Duggan calls the “performative punctum:” a catalyst for what he describes as “mimetic shimmering:” the moment where theatre collapses into reality, where the fiction of performance becomes indistinguishable from the real.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ See Figure B1.

¹⁶¹ See Figures B15; B30; B39.

¹⁶² In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes distinguishes between the *studium*, the culturally legible aspect of an image, and the *punctum*, which pierces the viewer on a personal, affective level (26–27). The punctum cannot be staged; it emerges unexpectedly, often through a minor or overlooked detail: “a photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). In *Titty Cakes*, the scar functions in precisely this way—unmanufactured yet unmissable, it pierces the theatrical frame and wounds the spectator’s gaze. See R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (Hill and Wang, 1981).

¹⁶³ Derrida reflects on the archive as both a site of inscription and a space marked by rupture. “The archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory,” he writes, highlighting that archives are never pure repositories of truth, but sites where memory is fractured, displaced, and haunted by loss (11–12). The scar in *Titty Cakes*, as an inscription in flesh, functions as such an archive: a visible, embodied trace that resists erasure while bearing the burden of what cannot be fully spoken. See J. Derrida, *Archive Fever* (U of Chicago P, 1996).

¹⁶⁴ In Duggan’s formulation, the “performative punctum” breaks theatrical containment, demanding that audiences confront the real. This triggers what he calls “mimetic shimmering:” moments where representation and reality collapse. This shimmer destabilizes spectatorship, compelling an affective bearing witness. In *Titty Cakes*, the scar that flickers in and out of visibility functions exactly in this

Present and visible, the scar destabilizes the boundaries between theatre and reality. The audience cannot not unsee it. They move in and out of the performance, slip in and out of believing that what they are watching is “just a show.” The scar is always there, pulling them back into the undeniable, tangible real.

As the show progresses, as my vulnerability deepens, there are moments when my scar is fully exposed.¹⁶⁵ Its presence is more than visual; it is temporal, spectral. In this way, the scar carries what Zsu Zsa Baross calls “the premonition of the past:” a phenomenon in which time collapses, where, from the present moment, the future is already inscribed within the past, where history unfolds in recursive, spectral repetition.¹⁶⁶ When the performance gestures toward the night of the gang rape, the scar points to a future present that, from the present time of the performance, is located in the past.¹⁶⁷ The scar becomes a premonition of what had not yet happened in the performance’s timeline, but what is already written into my future: breast cancer, surgery, loss.¹⁶⁸

The body, in the time of the performance, remembers its own destruction.

way, precipitating presence without control. See P. Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy* (Manchester UP, 2012), 55–84.

¹⁶⁵ See Figures B14; B24-6; B31-3; B41.

¹⁶⁶ Zsu Zsa Baross introduces the idea of “the premonition of the past” to describe a recursive temporality in which the future is already encoded in the past. In *Posthumously: For Jacques Derrida*, she writes that history unfolds not linearly but as a haunting, disjointed return (15-16). In *Titty Cakes*, the scar operates within this temporality—it is a visible, embodied remnant that gestures not only to what was but also to what will be. See Z. Baross, *Posthumously: For Jacques Derrida* (Sussex Academic P, 2011).

¹⁶⁷ See Figures B8-9.

¹⁶⁸ See Figure B30.

The scar, present and undeniable, is not just a remnant of the past, a haunting trace of trauma in the time of the performance. It is also the visible mark of *the present moment itself* in which I stand before the audience, living, breathing, speaking.¹⁶⁹

Surviving.

The scar's self-referential presentation of absence testifies, simultaneously, to the event(s) and to the fact that I lived to tell the tale(s).¹⁷⁰

To the fire and the cinder.

To the wound and its scar.

If trauma porn demands wounds—fresh, gaping, unhealed—then, *Titty Cakes* insists on scars. Not as spectacle, but as refusal.

To perform trauma is to risk its reproduction. To refuse to perform trauma is to risk its erasure. *Titty Cakes* chooses a third path. It makes present the absence of representation *as its presence*, filling the space where reenactment would have been with something else: the weight of what cannot be shown, the residue of what remains.

The trace.

The cinder.

The scar.

The aesthetics of absence does not withhold meaning. It withholds spectacle, creating a space for witnessing without consumption.

¹⁶⁹ “To engage a temporal moment as past and yet present in varied remains is to engage across as well as in time [...] Time, engaged in time, is always a matter of crossing, or passing, or touching, and perhaps always (at least) double” (Schneider 37). See R. Schneider, *Performing Remains* (Routledge, 2011).

¹⁷⁰ See Figures B4-5; B8-13; B8-16; B24-6; B30; B42-4.

Crater or Collapse: Absence and Pure Presence in The Dropout and Baby Reindeer

Nancy reminds us: ethical representation is not repetition, but rupture. Not reproduction, but reverberation. It intensifies what escapes presence, making absence legible.¹⁷¹ To make trauma wholly visible is to risk erasing the very gap that defines it. The space *between* what happened and what remains.

I call this the difference between the ethics and aesthetics of absence, and the ethics and aesthetics of pure presence. This difference is sharply visible when comparing two recent portrayals of sexual violence in *The Dropout* (2022), and *Baby Reindeer* (2024). Both works engage with traumatic experiences, yet their aesthetic and ethical approaches could not be more different.

The Dropout (2022), a dramatization of Elizabeth Holmes' rise and fall, includes a significant yet understated moment of trauma: Holmes' alleged sexual assault at Stanford University. However, rather than depicting the event outright, rather than subjecting the audience to an image of her body being violated, the series refuses to show it at all. There is no reenactment. No moment of spectacle. No scene that lingers on bruises or strangled gasps for breath. Instead, we are given only the aftermath: Holmes, shaken, returning to her dorm in silence. The violence is present, yet it is never made visible.

The moment is charged precisely because of its absence.¹⁷² *The Dropout* understands that trauma lives not in the visible moment of violence, but in its traces, its

¹⁷¹ Jean-Luc Nancy distinguishes representation from simple repetition by emphasizing its intensifying and exposing nature. He writes that the “re-” in “representation” is “not repetitive but intensive,” and that representation “presents what is absent from presence pure and simple”—a mode of exposing what cannot fully appear (35-38). This emphasis on presence-as-exposure grounds Nancy’s ethical concern: that reenactment may overwrite or obscure the very absence that defines trauma. See J-L. Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (Fordham UP, 2005).

¹⁷² Susan Sontag argues that graphic representations of suffering can desensitize viewers. She states: “The real question is not whether the representation of suffering is true—but what it does to us” (86).

cinders, its scars. The audience does not need to witness the assault to feel its impact, they feel the weight without being shown the wound. The absence of representation *becomes* the representation.¹⁷³ Like *Titty Cakes*, by refusing to stage trauma as consumable imagery, *The Dropout* resists the spectacle of aestheticized suffering. It refuses to feed the voyeuristic appetite of trauma porn. What is left unsaid, unseen, unsettles more than an explicit reenactment could.

Baby Reindeer (2024) takes the opposite approach. It does not imply, it does not suggest; it reenacts, fully and completely. Richard Gadd's semi-autobiographical series tells the story of his real-life experience with a stalker. It also dramatizes his earlier sexual victimization endured as a younger man. The scenes of abuse are depicted in full, visceral detail. The camera does not turn away. The audience is forced to watch as Gadd's fictionalized-self experiences repeated sexual coercion and assault.¹⁷⁴

The problem is not simply that the violence is shown, but that the work offers no aesthetic distance from it. The abuse is reenacted fully. The reenactment collapses the

By withholding a visceral scene, *The Dropout* sidesteps the risk of emotional numbing and positions the audience within an ethical space of attentive presence. See S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); *The Dropout*, created by E. Meriwether (Searchlight Television, 2022).

¹⁷³ Cathy Caruth emphasizes that trauma is often experienced later than when it occurred. Trauma, says Caruth, "is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). By showing Elizabeth Holmes after her assault—shaken and silent—*The Dropout* enacts this belated, haunting structure of trauma rather than offering a direct portrayal of violence. See C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1996).

¹⁷⁴ A study on *Baby Reindeer* in *The Conversation* notes that while the series confronts the realities of sexual violence—including male victimhood—it "feels indifferent to viewer safety," offering intense intimacy without support structures, thereby potentially retraumatizing. This highlights an ethical tension: reenactment may foster empathy, but without aesthetic distance, it can also recreate trauma rather than help audiences process it. See J. DesRochers, "'Baby Reindeer' Highlights Sexual Violence Against Men—but Feels Indifferent to Viewer Safety" (*The Conversation*, 2024).

space between past and present, between fiction and reality. Gadd's personal trauma is re-lived and re-visualized on screen, made hyper-visible, raw, unfiltered.¹⁷⁵ This is where reenactment risks undoing the ethics it hopes to serve; by collapsing absence into visibility, it may turn testimony into re-traumatization.

This is the ethical danger of pure presence: to recreate violence in its entirety is to risk reproducing it. To stage trauma with absolute fidelity is to collapse the space for reflection, for transformation; to risk making the audience voyeur, complicit in the consumption of trauma, rather than critical of the systems that made it possible in the first place.

To reenact trauma is to risk letting it be devoured by trauma porn's insatiable hunger. To stay silent is to risk its erasure. *Titty Cakes* finds its ethics and aesthetics in absence that lingers, absence that speaks, absence that presents remains.

It shows the crater, not the collapse.

The cinder, not the fire.

The scar, not the wound.

¹⁷⁵ Sontag argues that when violence is portrayed in detail—unconsummated yet intimately visible—it risks becoming a form of “violent re-visualization,” in which the representation performs the violence, collapsing ethical distance between image and event (87). *Baby Reindeer*'s unfiltered depictions of Gadd's repeated assaults exemplifies this risk, as the reenactment invites identification rather than critical reflection. See S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); *Baby Reindeer*, created by R. Gadd (Clerkenwell Films, 2024).

CHAPTER THREE: THE ART OF OFFERING

Ritual, Affect, Communitas

Holding absence is not only an aesthetic gesture; it is a ritual one.

If absence is the scar left by the wound that resists representation, then ritual is the vessel that contains it without collapse. A ritual does not demand. It does not insist, does not take.

A ritual is an offering.

A gift that asks for nothing in return.

Titty Cakes is such an offering. It frames absence not as lack, but as a gift: a giving without demand for repayment. It does not seek to expose trauma or explain it. Instead, it holds what cannot be spoken: ethically, affectively, communally. Through the labour of repetition, it enacts absence as presence. Through ritual, it transforms performance into sacred expenditure.

The work does not reopen the wound; it bears witness to the scar. It does not resolve trauma; it ritualizes its impossibility. It does not narrate survival; it endures it, together.¹⁷⁶

In *Titty Cakes*, ritual holds absence and makes it communal. It is through ritual that the work makes its ethics felt; not by depicting pain, but by staging its residue—again, and again, and again—until what cannot be spoken is made present through the

¹⁷⁶ Dori Laub emphasizes that trauma cannot be fully accessed or narrated in isolation—it requires a relational framework of witnessing. He argues that in testimony, “the listener becomes the co-owner of the traumatic event,” transforming solitary pain into a shared ethical act (Laub 70). *Titty Cakes*, by inviting presence rather than spectacle, enacts this form of communal witnessing. See S. Felman and D. Laub, *Testimony* (Routledge, 1992).

labour of doing. Repetition, exhaustion, and shared affect transform presence into witness, labour into communion, and trauma into a repertoire of survival.

A ritual Is not about finding answers. It Is about making space for what cannot be answered. *Titty Cakes* invites us to dwell in the unresolved together. The work is a gesture of love: to self, to community, to survival. By showing scars, not wounds, *Titty Cakes* offers something that has already been transmuted and transformed through labour and enactment. The cakes are baked. They are given. They are taken. They are consumed. In that consumption, the performance completes itself. It lingers in the bodies of those who witnessed.

Leaving a trace.

A cinder.

A scar.

Ritual, Performance, and Sacred Expenditure

The work does not present absence as lack, rather, it presents absence as *excess*: held, endured, offered. Ritual is the frame that allows that excess to be contained without diminishing it, shared without shattering it.

Bataille tells us that true generosity is excessive, sacrificial: a giving that does not deplete, an offering that cannot be reclaimed.¹⁷⁷ To offer is to relinquish control over what the gift becomes. *Titty Cakes* does not seek resolution or repair; it insists on

¹⁷⁷ In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille writes that sacred acts expend energy not for gain but for transformation, creating communal bonds through shared surplus rather than pragmatic exchange (Bataille 3–4). *Titty Cakes* performs this ritual offering through presence and performance, not restitution. See G. Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (Zone Books, 1988).

transformation as process, as mutual endurance, as the ethical labour of holding absence communally. It is an act of sacred expenditure: burning through itself in the very act of becoming.

Performance vanishes as it becomes, existing only between presence and disappearance, between articulation and rupture, between the body that enacts and the bodies that bear witness.¹⁷⁸ Ritual works in the same way. *Titty Cakes* is not simply staged; it is lived. Its ritual is not inherited, but invented,¹⁷⁹ shaped in the moment, inside the work.

It is something sacred.

Richard Schechner asks whether performance is meant to entertain or to transform, to be experienced or to effect real change.¹⁸⁰ *Titty Cakes* collapses that binary. It is neither spectacle nor sermon.¹⁸¹ It binds performer and witness in a braid of efficacy

¹⁷⁸ Phelan locates the ethical force of performance in its impermanence; it exists only in the moment of its enactment and vanishes as soon as it ends (*Unmarked* 146). *Titty Cakes* adopts this temporal vanishing to insist on real-time enactment and communal witness in the face of trauma. See P. Phelan, *Unmarked* (Routledge, 1993).

¹⁷⁹ In *Secular Ritual*, Sally Falk Moore and Barbara Myerhoff stress that rituals may be invented and adapted to new contexts. Their meaning lies less in strict form than in their function to mark and transform experience (3–24). *Titty Cakes* engages this principle by creating its own ritual structure through affect, repetition, and communal presence. In *Secular Ritual*, Sally Falk Moore and Barbara Myerhoff stress that rituals may be invented and adapted to new contexts. Their meaning lies less in strict form than in their function to mark and transform experience (3–24). *Titty Cakes* engages this principle by creating its own ritual structure through affect, repetition, and communal presence. See S. F. Moore and B.G. Myerhoff, *Secular Ritual* (Van Gorcum, 1977).

¹⁸⁰ Schechner frames performance as existing along a continuum between ritual efficacy and theatrical entertainment: “Some performances are means toward an end, that is efficacious; others are ends in themselves, that is entertaining” (*Performance Theory* 123). See R. Schechner, *Performance Theory* (Routledge, 2003).

¹⁸¹ Schechner argues that ritual-theatre “neither enacts prescribed liturgy nor pure fiction,” but instead creates consequence through symbolic act (*Performance Theory* 124). *Titty Cakes* inhabits precisely this in-between space. See R. Schechner, *Performance Theory* (Routledge, 2003).

and entertainment,¹⁸² tightening it until they are almost inseparable. *Titty Cakes* is a ritual-performance insofar as it sits squarely in the tension *between* ritual and theatre, symbolic and real, seeing and enduring.¹⁸³

Victor Turner would call this a liminal act: a threshold moment that destabilizes identity, refuses resolution, and insists on transformation through shared endurance.¹⁸⁴ Here, the ritual subject is stripped of former identity, unmoored from what was, yet not arrived at what will be. They exist *between*: exposed, unmade, becoming.¹⁸⁵

Titty Cakes stages this liminality not only for the performer but also for the audience.¹⁸⁶ The audience is not asked to “understand.” They are asked to stay. To endure. To feel. To bear witness within the unresolved. In this suspension, conventional

¹⁸² Schechner’s “efficacy–entertainment braid” describes how performances can be both transformative (efficacious) and pleasurable (entertaining). “The efficacy–entertainment polarity does not imply an either/or choice” he writes, “[M]any performances are both efficacious and entertaining” (*Performance Theory* 126). *Titty Cakes* closes the distance between this polarity into transformative experience. See R. Schechner, *Performance Theory* (Routledge, 2003).

¹⁸³ Schechner notes that many modern performances are neither codified ritual nor conventional theatre: “Between ritual and theatre is a vast territory that many performances—secular and sacred—inhabit” (*Performance Theory* 124). These hybrid works demand a new category of analysis—what he terms “ritual-performance.” *Titty Cakes* exemplifies this genre. See R. Schechner, *Performance Theory* (Routledge, 2003).

¹⁸⁴ Turner defines liminality as a transitional moment in which a subject becomes unmoored from social roles and identities: “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (*The Ritual Process* 95). This moment of unmooring is foundational to the dramaturgy of *Titty Cakes*. See V. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Aldine Transaction, 1995).

¹⁸⁵ Turner describes liminal space as “a realm of pure possibility,” unbounded by social rules (*The Ritual Process* 97). *Titty Cakes* enacts such potential for performer and audience alike. See V. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Aldine Transaction, 1995).

¹⁸⁶ Turner also writes that “During liminality, structure is temporarily dissolved, and participants may experience *communitas*—a sense of unmediated, egalitarian connection.” (*From Ritual to Theatre* 131). This affective suspension is key to *Titty Cakes*. See V. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* (PAJ Publications, 1982).

spectatorship dissolves. They are no longer passive viewers; they are active witnesses. They sit inside the weight of repetition, compulsion, exhaustion. No narrative arc carries them toward resolution. They remain in the threshold.¹⁸⁷

If ritual-performance is to be more than symbolic, it must hold up under the conditions of what Schechner calls an ‘Actual:’ performances that reject simulation, that unfold in real time, with real stakes, in real bodies.¹⁸⁸ This is where *Titty Cakes* stands. More than theatre, it is something that happens—live, here, now—with real costs. And it meets every one of Schechner’s key criteria:

- 1) **process**, something happens *here and now*; 2) **consequential, irremediable and irrevocable** acts, exchanges, or situations 3) **contest**, something is *at stake* for the performers and often the spectators; 4) **initiation, a change in status** for participants; 5) space is used **concretely** and **organically** (*Performance Theory* 46, *emphasis in original*).

Titty Cakes cannot exist outside of process.¹⁸⁹ It cannot be faked, cannot be replicated without the exhaustion, the weight, the labour of its own making. The act of baking is not mimed. The dough is not pre-prepared. The implements are not props. The ingredients are measured, sifted, mixed in real time as I labour without illusion, without

¹⁸⁷ Turner insists that “Liminality is not transitional but transformational ... a time of ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy” (*From Ritual to Theatre* 44). *Titty Cakes* sustains this suspended condition. See V. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* (PAJ Publications, 1982).

¹⁸⁸ Schechner describes “actuals” as performances that collapse the boundary between theatrical illusion and lived experience. In contrast to theatrical representation, actuals rely on real-time action, irreversibility, and often pain or exhaustion: “What happens is not pretend. If someone gets cut, they bleed... The labor is real. The danger is real. The stakes are real” (*Performance Theory* 189–190). See R. Schechner, *Performance Theory* (Routledge, 2003).

¹⁸⁹ Schechner defines process as the first marker of an actual: “something happens here and now” (*Performance Theory* 48). The act of baking in *Titty Cakes* occurs live, unrehearsed (to the extent that there is necessary improvisation given the unpredictability of the ingredients), and in full view of the audience, emphasizing temporal presence over representation. See R. Schechner, *Performance Theory* (Routledge, 2003).

detachment.¹⁹⁰ Because the actions are real, they are consequential.¹⁹¹ The cakes are shaped, eaten, shared. There is no undoing the act of consumption, no reversing the transformation. The ritual completes itself only in its destruction.¹⁹²

The stakes are high.¹⁹³ The table is heavy. The egg-covered floor is slippery. The knives are sharp. The danger is real. The recipe is not just a metaphor; it is a demand. The physical labour is real, unrelenting.¹⁹⁴ As performer, I do not mark the motions; I make them. I struggle, endure, expend. The body, in *Titty Cakes*, is not untouched by what it enacts; it is engaged, exhausted, moving through repetition, through ritual.¹⁹⁵ The arms ache. The batter thickens. The skin splits open. The air smells of sweat, sugar, blood. These are not staged effects. They are endured truths.

¹⁹⁰ See Figures B7; B13; B22; B35.

¹⁹¹ Schechner's second criterion for actuals is consequence: "irremediable and irrevocable acts or exchanges that cannot be undone or re-staged without falsification (*Performance Theory* 49). The act of baking, sharing, and consuming cake in *Titty Cakes* enacts this irrevocability. See R. Schechner, *Performance Theory* (Routledge, 2003).

¹⁹² Bataille argues that sacred ritual finds its meaning not in preservation but in loss: "Expenditure is what causes the sacred to appear... It is only by burning, giving, or destroying that something becomes sacred" (*The Accursed Share* 59). In *Titty Cakes*, labour culminates not in product but in disappearance, in irretrievable transformation through consumption. See G. Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (Zone Books, 1988).

¹⁹³ Schechner identifies "contest" as a defining element of an actual: "something is at stake for the performers and often the spectators" (*Performance Theory* 46); there is genuine risk, struggle, or confrontation (*Performance Theory* 53). In *Titty Cakes*, the stakes are physical (sharp implements, bodily strain), emotional (trauma exposure), and social (bearing vulnerability in public). See R. Schechner, *Performance Theory* (Routledge, 2003).

¹⁹⁴ See Figures B24-5; B31-3.

¹⁹⁵ Catherine Bell emphasizes the materiality and specificity of ritual action: "Rituals gain their meaning not through abstraction, but through the disciplined handling of material objects, textures, and embodied labor" (138). Performance, in this sense, is not symbolic stand-in, but direct engagement with real tools, gestures, and outcomes. See C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford, UP, 1992).

The gestures do not simply point to meaning, they *are* the meaning. *Titty Cakes* is not a metaphor for labour; it *is* labour. It is not a symbol of exhaustion; it *enacts* exhaustion. The performance does not depict transformation; it consummates it through repetition, risk, and irrevocable gesture. Bataille tells us that ritual is not about preservation or utility; it is about excess: sacred expenditure.¹⁹⁶ It is a fire that burns without return. *Titty Cakes* does not present trauma as something to be processed or redeemed.

It labours through itself.

It exhausts itself.

It burns.

And the audience is not separate from this struggle; from the endurance the work demands from both performer and witness. Laughter curdles. The recipe turns. What once seemed amusing becomes punishing. Moments of comic relief give way to unrelenting barrages of tension and trauma. Once a refuge, the recipe and its demand for positivity becomes an assault, leaving no time or space for emotions to process.¹⁹⁷

By the end, the audience does not want to see me bake cakes.

They want it to stop.

But it doesn't.

¹⁹⁶ For Bataille, sacred ritual is not instrumental; it is loss, destruction, and waste: "Sacrifice destroys goods for no end but glory and loss... it is a fire that burns without return" (*The Accursed Share* 71). *Titty Cakes* enacts this through un-recoupable labour and exhaustion, offering nothing to be saved or reused. See G. Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (Zone Books, 1988); Figures B36-8.

¹⁹⁷ See Figures B34-5; B39-40.

That is the point. *That* is initiation.¹⁹⁸ The ritual-performance does not allow for easy relief because trauma does not allow for easy relief. It invites participation in the unresolved because witnessing is not consumption: it is presence, affect, endurance.

Rituals cannot be enacted in the abstract. They must be grounded in space, texture, material; in the specificity of place, in the visceral presence of objects, of bodies. *Titty Cakes* lives in concrete space:¹⁹⁹ the kitchen as altar, the labour as liturgy, the cake as offering. The domestic sphere becomes both sanctuary and battleground, collapsing the separation between art and life. From this groundedness, a different kind of sacred space emerges; one made through action, endurance, and exchange. *Titty Cakes* becomes a secular communion. The transformation is not about absolution or salvation; it is about presence, endurance, shared affect. And this is where ritual and performance fuse most powerfully: in *communitas*, Turner's term for the unmediated, egalitarian connection forged in liminality.²⁰⁰ In this space, the performer's labour and the audience's endurance meet as one. They share not the event's image, but its weight.

¹⁹⁸ Schechner writes that actuals "involve a change in status for participants" (*Performance Theory* 54). The initiatory structure of *Titty Cakes* implicates both performer and audience in transformation through shared endurance and witness. See R. Schechner, *Performance Theory* (Routledge, 2003); Figure B43.

¹⁹⁹ See Figure B2.

²⁰⁰ Victor Turner defines *communitas* as "a relatively undifferentiated relationship between total and individuated human beings, stripped of structural attributes" (*The Ritual Process*, 131). It emerges in the liminal stage of ritual, where ordinary hierarchies dissolve and participants encounter one another as equals. In ritual-performance contexts, this liminal exchange fuses performer and audience in shared presence and mutual vulnerability, producing transformation not through spectacle, but through the lived weight of the event. See V. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Aldine Transaction, 1995).

A ritual-performance does not simply entertain. It enacts. It marks. It transforms. The audience does not leave unchanged. By the end of *Titty Cakes*, the boundaries—between self and other, between individual and collective trauma, between ritual and performance—blur.²⁰¹ The cakes are eaten. The transformation is irreversible.

The act becomes communal.

Affect, Archives, and Repertoires

Some histories do not survive in the archive.²⁰²

They resist documentation.

They refuse containment.

They will not fit neatly into texts, into linear narratives, into state-sanctioned accounts of what, why, and to whom things happened. Some histories exist only in their residue: in the body's tension, in repeated gestures, in rituals performed to remember.²⁰³

Titty Cakes is one such history.

²⁰¹ Erika Fischer-Lichte writes that “the collapse of the opposition between art and reality and all the binaries resulting from this opposition transfers the participants into a liminal state” (176). See E. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (Routledge, 2008).

²⁰² *The Archive and the Repertoire* distinguishes between the physical, authoritative archive and the repertoire of ephemeral, embodied memory (Taylor 15). The work posits performance as a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge and trauma. The archive preserves what can be written; the repertoire preserves what must be enacted. See D. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural memory in the Americas* (Duke UP, 2003).

²⁰³ Derrida writes that the archive is always haunted by what it cannot fully contain: “The structure of the archive is spectral. It is not simply about the past but about the future, the promise of what remains and returns” (*Archive Fever* 17–18). *Titty Cakes* enacts this ephemeral archive, a performance that disappears yet leaves behind a trace, cinder, a scar. See J. Derrida, *Archive Fever* (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

It is not an archive of trauma; it is a *repertoire of survival*. Diana Taylor distinguishes between the archive (the written, the recorded, the preserved) and the repertoire (the embodied, the performed, the lived).²⁰⁴ The archive holds what can be kept. The repertoire holds what must be enacted.

In *Titty Cakes*, the repetition of movements—the cracking of eggs, the kneading of dough, the shaping of cakes—becomes embodied remembrance. Flour dusts the stage like snow on naked skin.²⁰⁵ The kitchen becomes both sanctuary and battleground; a site where trauma is resisted, reclaimed, ritualized. Repeated gestures, at once profane and sacred, carry more than their immediate function.²⁰⁶

They hold affect.

They hold memory.

They hold survival.

The repertoire lives in the body. Its transmission depends on presence, on affect, on energetic exchange between performer and audience. In *Titty Cakes*, the audience is drawn into the ritual-performance's repetitions, its ruptures, its ritual logics. They feel the

²⁰⁴ Taylor defines the repertoire as “a system of embodied knowledge”(16) that challenges the primacy of the written archive: “It keeps embodied memory alive” (17). Performance, in this view, is not ephemeral loss; it is embodied continuity. See D. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural memory in the Americas* (Duke UP, 2003).

²⁰⁵ See Figure B13.

²⁰⁶ Taylor emphasizes that embodied actions—especially repeated or “twice-behaved” behaviors—constitute a repertoire of cultural memory: “Repetition transmits knowledge. Gestures and habits record histories” (Taylor 20). In *Titty Cakes*, repeated gestures serve as embodied acts of remembrance. See D. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural memory in the Americas* (Duke UP, 2003). See also Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*.

strain of the compulsions and repetitions of trauma, the impossibility of catharsis, the physical toll of survival.²⁰⁷ They sit inside its unresolved tension. They, too, must endure.

They are not invited to spectate.

They are asked to bear witness.

Witnessing here is reciprocal.²⁰⁸ I bear witness to Saint Agatha's story; I give voice to her mutilated silence. In turn, the audience bears witness to mine; and as they receive my story—spoken through Agatha's—so too must they bear witness to their own traumas, and thus to the collective trauma of all women, girls, and femmes.²⁰⁹

To all the Agathas.

Together, we bear witness to our shared scar.

This is the *communitas* of *Titty Cakes*: the mutual recognition of what it means to live as a cis/trans woman or girl in a patriarchy and, consequently, of the miracle that is our collective survival. Through ritual-performance, audience and performer become co-

²⁰⁷ “Trauma is not a single moment of breakdown, but a process... a labour of ongoing survival and exposure” (Cvetkovich 42). In *Titty Cakes*, the audience becomes complicit in that labor through affective witnessing. See A. Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Duke UP, 2003).

²⁰⁸ In *Titty Cakes*, performer and audience co-constitute experience insofar as witnessing is intercorporeal: ““There no longer exists a work of art independent of its creator and recipient; instead, we're dealing with an event that involves everybody...” (Fischer-Litche 18). See E. Fischer-Litche, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (Routledge, 2008).

²⁰⁹ Nancy suggests that art arises from being-with—it is founded upon shared existence and thus becomes an act of solidarity and resistance. He writes, “Art brings us into being-with and being-together, opening a shared world through which we belong to each other” (The Muses 34). In this sense, *Titty Cakes* enacts a form of radical love: it refuses alienation by inviting communal presence and collective witnessing. See J-L Nancy, *The Muses I* (Stanford UP, 2021); Figure B42.

witness. Through *communitas* comes the collective acknowledgement—and radical acceptance—of the female experience.²¹⁰

It does not end when the lights go down.²¹¹

It is not confined to the room.

It is carried beyond.²¹²

The ritual-performance and its affects live on in the bodies of its participants.²¹³

Ann Cvetkovich describes affective archives as sites where trauma and resilience are stored outside of language; *Titty Cakes* is such an archive: not of facts, but of *feelings*.²¹⁴ Performance creates publics by transforming private pain into shared affective

²¹⁰ Dolan describes “utopian performatives” as fleeting but potent theatrical moments in which audiences experience a sense of communal hope and emotional connection—not because conflict is resolved, but because affect is collectively held. These moments, she writes, offer a glimpse of “what utopia feels like,” creating affective solidarity without narrative closure (Dolan 2–5). See J. Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (U of Michigan P, 2005).

²¹¹ Sara Ahmed emphasizes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* that affect is not peripheral but central to subject formation: “We are bodies that feel; emotions are the way the world sticks to us” (Ahmed 6). *Titty Cakes* enacts an embodied ontology aligned with Ahmed’s theory. See S. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Routledge, 2004).

²¹² Taylor insists that the effects of performance extend beyond the stage: “[M]ultiple forms of embodied acts are always present, reconstituting themselves—transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next” (Taylor 193). The repertoire does not vanish it lives on in the bodies of those who bear witness. See D. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural memory in the Americas* (Duke UP, 2003).

²¹³ Marianne Hirsch’s theory of postmemory suggests that trauma can be passed not only through narrative but through affective traces: gestures, food, ritual. “The body becomes a site of transmission, carrying memory without linearity or clarity” (Hirsch 33). See M. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After The Holocaust* (Columbia UP, 2012).

²¹⁴ Cvetkovich investigates how publics are formed in and through a cultural archive and the ways social conditions affect how trauma is publicly recognized. She proposes an “Archive of Feelings” as a site for “exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the context of the texts themselves but in practices that surround their production and reception” (7). See A. Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Duke UP, 2003).

experiences.²¹⁵ *Titty Cakes* performs precisely this alchemy: my private history becomes collective through ritual-performance and *communitas*; through the communal recognition of trauma and resiliency. Through *being-with*.²¹⁶ This process of witnessing forges a new public: a community bound not by identity, but by shared encounter.

By having *been there*.

Present *in* the present.

Together.

The creation of community is consummated through the ritual offering of cake—a secular Eucharist—a gesture of love.²¹⁷ Something already sifted, beaten, baked, transformed. The cakes are given, taken, consumed. And in their consumption, the work lives on in those who have witnessed.

It leaves a trace.

A cinder.

A scar.

A promise.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ In contrast to the individualist approaches of clinical psychology, Cvetovitch is “concerned with trauma as a collective experience that generates collective responses” (19). “Performance creates counterpublics” (Cvetkovich 10). *Titty Cakes* transforms private trauma into communal experience. See A. Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Duke UP, 2003).

²¹⁶ Nancy’s ontology of the singular-plural argues that existence is inherently co-existence: “Being is being-with.” In shared witnessing, each subject emerges not through separation but through relational presence (*Being Singular Plural* 23). *Titty Cakes*, by folding singular trauma into communal witnessing, enacts Nancy’s vision of co-existence. See J._L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford UP, 2000).

²¹⁷ See Figure B44.

²¹⁸ “[T]o remember the future [...] to remember the others, the other others and the others in oneself [...] altogether other” (*Archive Fever* 50). See J. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

CONCLUSION

The crater remains.

Silent. Irrefutable.

Its edges eroded by time yet still jagged enough to cut the tongue of anyone who tries to name it.

And yet, I have carried it differently since beginning this work.

I always knew the work could not—*would not*—offer closure.

Closure would be another kind of violence: a soft lie disguised as comfort.

Instead, I have circled the crater, again and again; its impossible outline from different directions. Each return—in the studio, on the page, on the stage—has been an act of witness. Not to the wound, but to the scar. Not to the memory, but to its absence.

From the first stirrings of *Titty Cakes*, I knew I was working inside a paradox: that ethical trauma representation is at once possible and impossible: (im)possible. Possible only if I accept that the wound can never be staged without tearing it open again. That the act of representing can so easily slip into the act of harming. That feeding the insatiable hunger of trauma porn begets more suffering, more spectacle, more simulacra. This thesis is an articulation of that paradox created in breath, in batter, in blood.

Absence became my medium. My ethics. My method. It was not retreat but scaffolding strong enough to bear the weight of what could not be spoken. That scaffolding was built from refusal: refusal to enact violence upon myself or others in the name of art; refusal to replicate the spectacular economies of suffering that have turned sexual violence and cancer into consumable tropes; refusal to bow down to the tyrannical

meta-narrative of survival, and its cheerful demands. My refusal was not silence; it was the creation of another kind of speech.

The speech of scars.

The speech of breath between words.

The speech of hands repeatedly sifting flour until the gesture becomes prayer.

In making *Titty Cakes*, I discovered that refusal could take shape. The performance emerged as a body of contradictory fragments: the saint who accuses and consoles; the kitchen rituals that soothe and suffocate; the agnostic baker who cannot make holy cakes; the cheer of the cooking show cracking beneath its own strain; the clipped cadences of institutions that reduce bodies to statistics. These fragments never formed a story. They formed something else: a constellation of remains, witnessable but not consumable.

The performance was also a test of the vessel I had been building in theory. Could the ethics of absence survive contact with an audience? Could a performance hold trauma without displaying it, invite witness without inviting voyeurism?

The answer, I found, was yes: but only if the work was held in ritual.

Ritual became the form of the performance. Not metaphorical ritual, but embodied ceremony: the kitchen table as altar; the apron as vestment; the repeated stirring, sifting, folding as invocation; the mask of the cheerful host as the armour of survival; the breaking of that mask as the tyranny of survival giving way to something sacred. The fragments bound themselves without being forced into narrative; the scar could be traced without reopening the wound.

And when the ritual ends, something remains. A faint sweetness in the air. The echo of a gesture in the body. The silent understanding between strangers that something has passed *between* them. What lingers is not catharsis but haunting: the spectre of having been in the presence of what could not be spoken yet was held.

This thesis is itself such a vessel. It carries the performance and its theory in the same body. The poetics are not decoration; they are method. The fragments are not gaps; they are argument. The refusals are not omissions; they are ethics.

What I have created is not a manual for healing. It is not a replicable model. It is an act of holding: a vigil kept over the crater so that it does not collapse under the demand to be filled. It is the insistence that the unspeakable can and *must* still be witnessed, and sometimes that is enough.

I did not make *Titty Cakes* to tell you my story.

I created it to make a space where yours might arrive.

Where all the Agathas might arrive.

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Appendix A

St. Agatha's Iconography



Figure A1. *Martirio di sant'Agata (taglio dei seni)* [The Martyrdom of Saint Agatha – Cutting of the Breasts]. Oil on canvas, c. 1635–1640, by Francesco Guarino. Source: Museo Civico, Ripa, Province of Rome. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.



Figure A2. *Santa Águeda [detail]*. Oil on canvas, c. 1630–1633, by Francisco de Zurbarán. Source: Museo de Bellas Artes de Sevilla, Seville. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.



Clockwise from top:

Figure A3. *The Martyrdom of Saint Agatha*. Altarpiece, c. 1645, by an unknown artist of the Neapolitan School, influenced by the Caravaggisti.
Source: *Cattedrale di Sant'Agata, Gallipoli*. Image via Il Pensiero Mediterraneo.

Figure A4. *Saint Peter Healing Saint Agatha in Prison*. Oil on canvas, c. 1614, by Giovanni Lanfranco. Source: *J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles*. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure A5. *Saint Agatha*. Tempera on panel, c. 1460, by Piero della Francesca. Source: *Museo Civico, Sansepolcro*. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

Top:

Figure A6. *Sant'Agata con la palma del martirio* [*Saint Agatha with the Palm of Martyrdom*]. Oil on canvas, 17th century, by an unknown Sicilian artist.

Source: *Tesoro della Cattedrale di Sant'Agata, Catania*. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

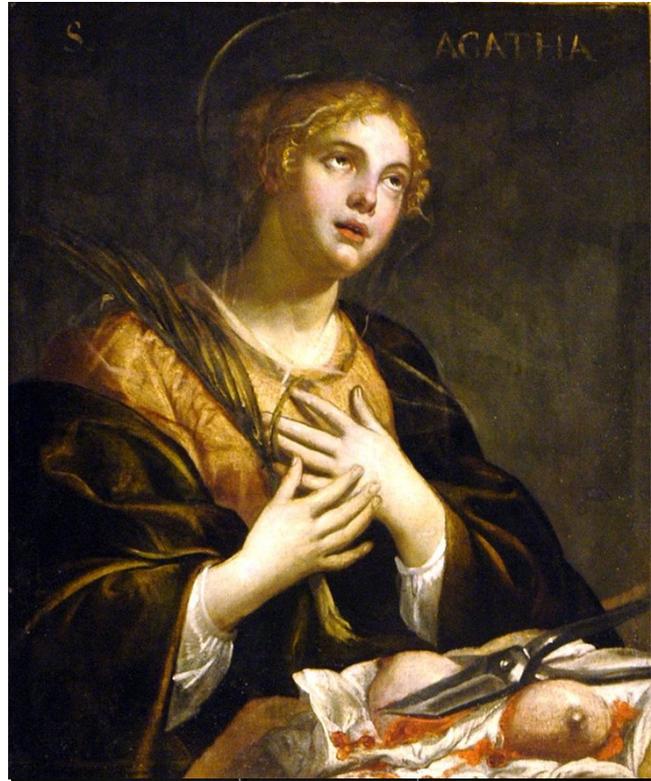
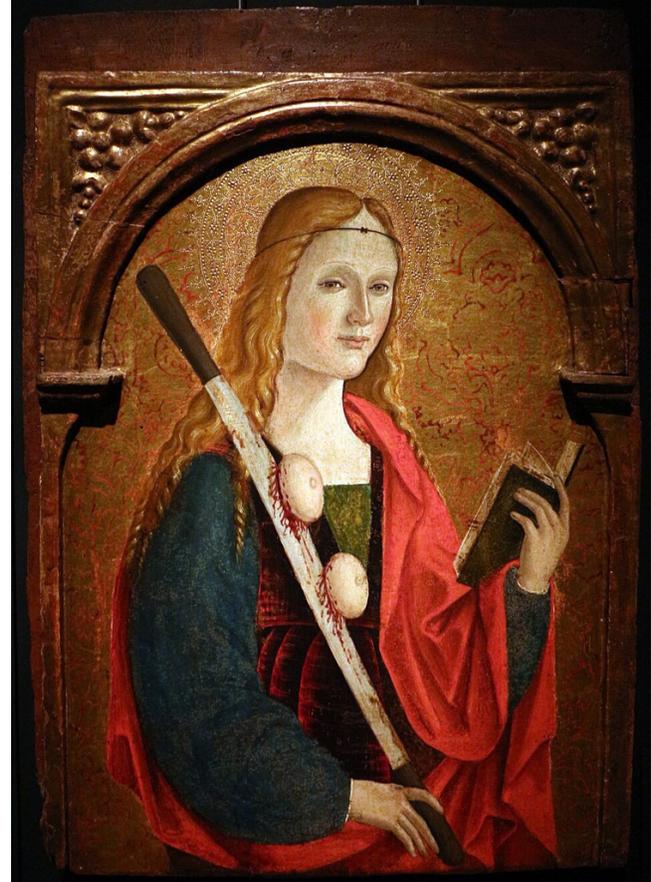
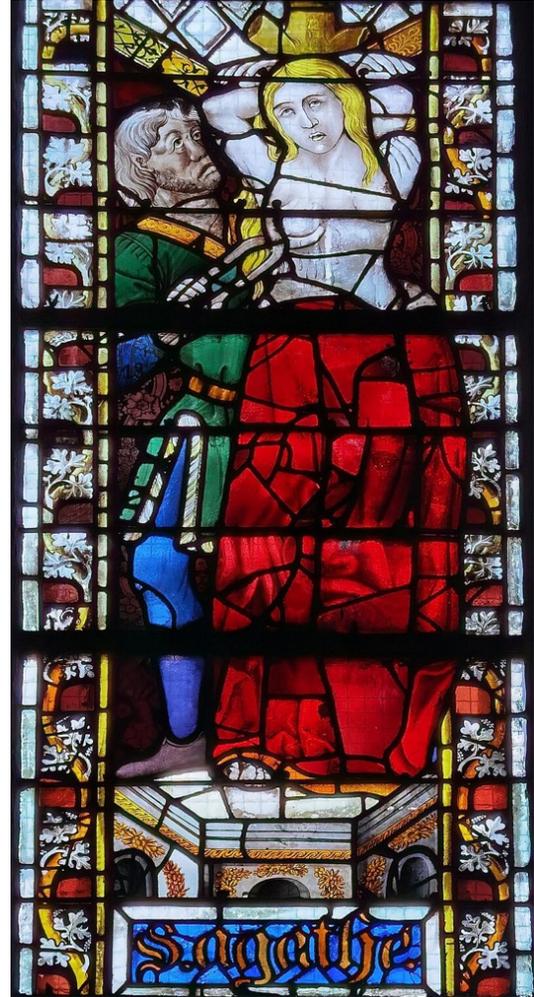
**Bottom:**

Figure A7 *Saint Agatha*. Tempera and gold on panel, c. 1500–1530, by Antonio and Bernardino Marinoni. Source: *Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona*. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.





Clockwise from top left:

Figure A8. *The Martyrdom of Saint Agatha.* Oil on canvas, c. 1755–1760, by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. Source: *Basilica di Sant'Antonio, Padua.* Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure A9. *Saint Agatha.* Stained glass, c. 16th century, by an unknown French glassmaker. Detail from Window 55 in the Chapel of Saint Agatha, Rouen Cathedral. Source: *Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Rouen.* Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure A10. *Saint Agatha.* Egg tempera on wood, 15th century, by an unknown Byzantine-tradition iconographer. Source: *Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht.* Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.



Figure A11. *Saint Agatha*. Oil on canvas, c. 1650, by Francesco Guarini. Source: *Museo Nazionale di San Martino, Naples*. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

Appendix B

Performance Materials

*All performance images in Appendix B are from *Titty Cakes: A Recipe for Radical Acceptance*, written and performed by Sarah McNeilly, The Theatre on King, Peterborough, Ontario, October 2022.



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Figure B1. *Titty Cakes: A Recipe for Radical Acceptance*, official poster, 2022.



Top: Figure B2. Our mise en place is placed.

Bottom: Figure B3. Agatha was a great beauty.

Next Page:

Figure B4. The secret admirer.

Figure B5. I called an ambulance.





Figure B6. Inwards; toward my own self destruction.



Figure B7. LOL ribbon stage (thank god).



Top: Figure B8. Toast with a coat.

Bottom: Figure B9. It was in Bobcaygeon.



Counter-clockwise from top:

Figure B10. Drink (this: you'll love it).

Figure B11. Drank.

Figure B12. Drunk.



Figure B13. Snow falling on my naked body (Sssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhh).



Figure B14. The medical gaze.

Next Page:

Top: Figure B15. Dissociation.
Bottom: Figure B16. Abjection.





Clockwise from top left:

Figure B17. I was drunk and on drugs.

Figure B18. Silent screams.

Figure B19. I'm fine.

Next Page:

Top: Figure B20. We now return to our regular, cheerful programing.

Bottom: Figure B21. Don't forget to grind your nuts.





Figure B22. The story of my body.



Figure B23. The (cooking) show must go on!



Top: Figure B24. PTSD: The table is heavy.

Bottom: Figure B25. I thought I was doing them a favour.



Figure B26. I decided to end the story.



Figure B27. Just keep baking.



Top: Figure B28. I clawed my way out of the deepest, darkest depths.



Bottom: Figure B29. It felt like I had found my happily ever after.



Figure B30. Lump?



**Clockwise
from top left:**

Figure B31.
Self-
flagellation.

Figure B32.
Agatha. Was.
The Perfect.
Victim.

Figure B33.
A pile on the
floor.





Figure B34. Agatha was restored; perfect again.



Figure B35. It's okay; just keep baking.

Counter-clockwise from top:

Figure B36. Sequela.

Figure B37. All of it.

Figure B38. It all.





Top: Figure B39. The recipe cannot continue.

Bottom: Figure B40. Acceptance.



Figure B41. Time to break the curse.

Next page:

Top: Figure B42. For all the Agathas.

Bottom: Figure B43. Tit-ty-cakes! Tit-ty-cakes! Tit-ty-cakes!





Figure B44. The sacrificed; the sacred.