

prayer for death and bicycle
connor shioshita pickett

(480) 206-2565
connorpickett@gmail.com

prayer for death and bicycle first received an audience at a Performance Collaborative staged reading on March 1, 2012. The reading was directed by Brian Pope and the cast was as follows:

Q	Ben Kaye
O	Ellen Michelle Connally
R	Sarah Ivins
W	Adam Ross Hubbell

The play received its first full production through the Oakland Shakespeare Company. It was paired with “Kiss Imprint” by Matt Russak, directed by Jordan Matthew Walsh.

Director	Shannon Knapp
Asst. Director	Andrew Mozdy
Combat	Shane Jordan
Lights	JC Bardzil
Props	Julie Anne Evans
Music/sound	Nick Stamatakis
SM	Kait Samuels

Q	Dylan Marquis Meyers
O	Chelsea Faber
R	Brennan Walsh
W	Tara Velan

The production ran May 24-26, 2012.

synopsis

The character Q must find the glasses lost in the first scene. Characters O, R, and W wish Q to embrace his heroic role and essence, but Q rejects it. In attempting to do so, s/he learns the traditional lesson: destiny is inescapable.

characters

Q

O

R

W

properties

Ghost lamp

Two labels

Apple pie

Office-chair

IV bag with medical tubing

Scalpel

Dark glasses

Chess piece

Bucket

Canvas

Brush

Blood

Desk lamp

Telephone

Spray bottle

Cigarettes

Lighter/matches

prologue for thebes and paint-bucket

*Q's hands are bound. Dark glasses are on his/her face.
O removes the glasses.*

O

Paint you.

Q's eyes are open.

Q

Please.

O

Cover you. Two illustrious and supple dimensions.

Q

Yes.

O

Let me paint you.

Q

Cover me.

O approaches Q and runs his/her hands across Q's face.

Q

You smell like music. You smell as a harp sounds.

O

Liquid.

Q

Liquid and wound.

O

And living, in the spirit of color and revelation.

Q

What color am I?

O

Let me paint you. The color of knowledge. The color of lust.

W and R bring out a paint-bucket and a brush. They give these items to O. They move aside and watch.

Q

A canvas.

W and R look at Q.

Q

A canvas!

W and R retrieve a canvas and become O's easel.

O approaches, about to paint upon the canvas.

O tears the canvas from them and hurls it away. O beats W and R, then drags them aside.

O strips Q's clothes away.

O
(softly)

Let me paint you?

Q

With knowledge. Desire.

O

A permanent and liquid wound.

O takes the brush and bucket and paints Q's body.

The paint is blood. Q moans with pleasure. O grasps Q's throat.

O

I shout your name in the streets and I am the shadow in the temple windows.

Can you hear your own voice?

Q

I speak with my hands.

Q touches O's face. O releases Q.

Q

And I went to Thebes. But I was born in Argos. And I'll die in Troy.

O

Welcome to Paris.

As they speak the following exchange, W and R approach Q until they are wrapped around Q's body.

W

Hades.

R

Rome.

W

London.

R

Cairo.

O

Verona.

W

Mantua.

O

Chicago.

R

Stalingrad.

W

Singapore.

R

Atlantis.

O + W + R
(in unison)

Troy!

Q

I remember the infinite arch of a proscenium hell.

W + R
(in unison)

The infinite arch of a proscenium hell!

As they speak, O takes Q's hands and plunges them into the bucket.

Q holds O's face while W and R repeat the names of these cities.

O retreats. W moves downstage and faces the audience.

W

There lives here a question!

The action behind W becomes extremely slow. R sits in the chair.

W

The strange. The life! The cancer and isolation—because this is the year of Q.

The post-messiah. The plague, and collision. And we move in translation, from action to word to action again, then and forth, flesh from flesh, we breathe. We breathe through our fingertips with a monstrous touch, our hands on downtown's marble pillars and the sunlight strokes our skin as it strokes these towering ghosts.

Come and realize this city of wrath: hear the city and question of Q.

Places.

O and R begin to clear the stage. Q is left alone in a daze.

They are not moving quickly enough for W.

W

Places!

O and R return to their places.

W

Lights up.

arrest for pie and ghost-lamp

The sound of switches thrown and fluorescent lights waking.

Q awakes as though from a trance. Q notices the blood upon him/her. Q panics.

W takes Q's discarded shirt and puts it on Q.

W removes his/her own shirt and helps Q clean the blood off his/her hands.

Zeppelins?

W

Zeppelins.

Q

The Oxford comma?

W

Yes.

Q

You're back.
Welcome.

W

I remember such things as zeppelins and the Oxford comma.

Q

W retrieves the ghost lamp.

But those were only the shapes of old constellations.
The stars look different now, friend.

W

This?

Q
(looking at the lamp)

This.

W
(indicating the lamp)

W puts an adhesive label on Q.

This.

W

W extends a hand for a shake.

This.

W

They shake hands.

W

Wait.

W retrieves a giant chess piece and carries it out to the stage.

W

This--

It is too heavy for W to move.

Q

No.

W

(a smile and a shrug)

No.

I'll handle this for now.

W gestures to R. R sits in the office-chair.

W

This.

W gestures to O. O looks away.

W leers at O.

W

This.

This and cocaine, and stove-top popcorn? Zeppelins and the Oxford comma?

Q

I remember such things as cocaine and stove-top popcorn. I remember a dining room with a window that looked out over a busy street, a street with a crooked crosswalk that lay down across the downtown afternoon—I remember black tea, and modern art, and—I once met the man who invented the bicycle, though that was long before he was famous.

W claps for Q, slowly.

W

It's a fine night.

Q

Yes.

W

It's a fine city.

Q

Thebes.

W

Baghdad.

Q

Miami.

W
(softly)

Troy.

Q is silent.

W

It's a fine night.

This is a city of wrath, isn't it?

Q

Yes.

W

A ghost town, with the lights left on.

God loves this city.

That's why he emptied it of people.

Q

I'll never leave it. I weep for this city.

W

You. I love this city! I washed each brick with my tongue. I forged those glass panes with my naked hands. I pieced together every tower. And I'm not tall enough to reach the top—so I built them lying down, at first, and I raised them to vertical splendor with my own muscles and desire

and fine metropolitan lust.

I prayed for this city's birth. Do you think you can love this city like I do?

Do you pray?

Q

Pray? No. The city is dead.

W

Dead.

Q

Forgive me.

W

It's okay. I'm still a stranger here, in my own home. I don't pass judgments.

Q

Do you have a name, stranger?

W smiles.

W

It's something beautiful.

And the city isn't dead.

Q

It is. But it's something beautiful.

W

Have you been to the temple?

Q

I--

W

You remember the temple.

Q

I remember a temple with thirteen windows.

W

What did those windows sound like?

Screams.
The screams of women with slender hands.

A pause.

Welcome.

O and R enter, R on the office-chair.

(Reads aloud a loading-dock sign.)

(Reads aloud a loading-dock sign.)

Now.

Q is still.

What sort of pie?

What?

What sort of pie do you want?

What sort do you have?

We have apple.

I don't particularly like apple pie.

W and O seize Q. Q struggles.

O strikes Q savagely. O, W, and R beat Q. In the midst of the beating and dragging, they speak:

R

Yet upwards, into the house of Kafka.

W

And I'd just as soon forget it.

O

I think airships are terribly underrated.

R

Upwards. Into. The house. Of Kafka.

W

The record-keeping, the record-keeping.

O

And I don't believe in bicycles.

W + R
(overlapping)

There is no such thing as a bicycle.

There is no such thing as a bicycle.

There is no such thing as a bicycle.

There is no such thing as a bicycle.

There is no such thing as a bicycle.

There is no such thing as a bicycle.

There is no such thing as a bicycle.

Q submits. A fork is placed in his/her hand, and a plate with a slice of pie before him/her.

W
(gently)

Eat your pie.

O and W force Q to eat the pie.

Q is suddenly enthusiastic about the pie.

As s/he begins to eat voluntarily, it is snatched away and placed at the edge of the stage.

R

Days of painting tall trees!

*R rolls away. O exits. W picks up the chess piece and starts to exit.
Q reaches for the sticker.*

W

You're not supposed to read it yet.

W goes to Q and removes the sticker, then puts it back on upside-down.

W

This side up.

W grins and exits.

prayer for safety and desire

*Q removes the sticker and looks at it. O is watching.
Q turns it over. Q turns it over again.*

Q
(reading)

"This side up."

O

It's a fine night.

Q

What?

O

Do you pray?

Q

What?

O

Do you pray, I said.

Q

No. I don't think so. Not on purpose.
Do you?

O

Yes.

Q

Why?

O

I think it's fun. When I was little I would pray for all sorts of ridiculous things.

Q

Like what?

O

Like a bicycle I could ride on water. Like for the world's telephones to play nothing but hold music. To meet herds of buffaloes with purple fur.
Buffalo. Buffaloes. Buffalloads.

Q

Did you?

O

Did I what?

Q

Did you get any of these things?
Did you meet the buffaloes?

O

No.

No, never.

Well, once. It was August.

I lay in bed in the dark and prayed for the next morning to be Christmas. It snowed while I slept. And the next morning I leaned out of my window, on the fortieth floor, in the dark before dawn, and called out: Today is December 25. How beautiful this city is.

Q

It's still snowing out there.

O

You can't turn a prayer off.

And I was lucky. Praying for something doesn't mean you'll get it. It's like buying a lottery ticket.

I bought a lottery ticket. Q

What numbers did you choose? O

W. R. O. Q. Dot com. Telephone. Q
I didn't win.

You might win next week. Keep your ticket. O

Okay. Q

Okay. O

I think I once saw a bicycle like that. That could go across water. Q

O is silent.

I'd have brought it back for you if I had known. Q

It probably had someone else's name on it. O

I saw it from far away. Q

Oh. O

Silence.

Where are my glasses? Q

O turns away. Silence.

O

I am sorry I hurt you.

Q

It's nothing.

O

It isn't.

Q

It's nothing, and it also isn't.

O

Like most things?

Q

Like most things.

Will you hurt me again?

O

Yes.

But I only want to hurt you. Never to harm you.

Q

I don't believe you.

O

I'm sorry.

Q

I'll fight back.

O

God willing.

Q

Pray for it?

Q touches O's hand. O winces.

I'm sorry-- Q

My hand-- O
My hand hurts.

From-- Q

From O
hitting you.

I am sorry I hurt you. Q

It's nothing. O

It isn't. Q

It's nothing, and it also isn't. O

W enters.

Like most things? Q

O moves away from Q.

wish for weather and more wishes

W
It was better when men only prayed for rain.

Q
Yes. It was.

O
Good night.

Q

I'll pray for rain.

O exits. Silence.

W

Cynicism, mannerism, neologism, rectangular prism. When you drink.

Q

I remember the death—when I drink, I remember the death of Jane Austen. To close my eyes, and turn my head, I remember days of painting tall trees, in long and imperfect rows.

R rolls in on the chair.

R

It won't rain.

W
(to Q)

It won't rain.

R

I remember when men only prayed for rain. And you could count the droplets on your fingers.

R reveals a pack of cigarettes, and offers one to Q. Q takes it. R lights it, then takes it away mid-puff and gives it to W. R lights a cigarette for him/herself as well. W and R smoke.

W

Turkish royals?

R

Turkish royals.

W

Are you royalty?

R

No.

Are you?

W

Ha. No.

W takes the cigarette from R and smokes them both.

A phone rings. R rolls offstage, then returns with a corded telephone, still ringing. R picks up the handset and holds it out to Q.

Q takes it. Hold music plays. W unplugs the handset from the phone and exits, leaving Q holding the phone up to his/her face. Hold music continues.

Stillness.

Music.

Q

Hello?

The music ceases. W enters and puts down a potted tree. W exits.

R

You'll be up to see the sunrise today.

Q

Will I?

R

Look forward to it. Aren't the sunrises always beautiful when you're still awake to see them?

Q

Yes. But the afternoons are only bearable--

R

--when they're choking under gray weather, and there will be no clouds tomorrow. But it will be a lovely sunset. And it will be a fine night. It is always a fine night.

R rolls to the pie and picks it up, then begins eating it with his/her fingers.

R

And how is Penelope keeping?

Q

Fine.

It's been a long time.

R

No longer in her employ.

Q

No, but--

R

She appreciated you. Delivering letters. Taking him the last bottle of wine from his own cellar. And not many couriers went to the moon, even in those days.

Q

He was happy to receive it.

R

Was he?

Q

Well. No.

R

Yes and no?

Q

Right.

R takes the phone away and speaks while he exits. S/he returns with a desk lamp, which he places on a rehearsal block and points at Q's face. R turns the lamp on. It does not turn on.

R

Well. Well!

When you came home, and the tapestry was finished? Did you walk to Thebes?

Q nods.

R

And did you riot with the chorus on the steps of the palace?

Q nods.

R

Did you swim to France, to shine the shoes of Godot?

Q nods.

R

And you counted the raindrops. And found that the figures all added up.

Q looks at R for a long time.

Q nods.

R

And still you prayed for more.

Q nods.

R

And you breathed, together, both of you, and tangled up your burning, imperfect lumpy bodies because you thought that's what lovers do? Yes?

And you turned the gears that force the sun to rise!

Q is silent.

Q

No.

R

No!

Q

No. I left the sun where it is. And it is a fine fucking night.

R

It is. And I believe in you.

R puts down the pie and stands.

R

I believe in you, foul hero.

Q takes the lamp and attacks R with it. R falls. Q stands over R, then replaces the lamp.

Q restores R to the office-chair. Q finds a small spray bottle, and sprays R's face with it. It is blood.

R bleeds.

Q

I once met the man who invented the bicycle.

W enters with the chess-piece, whistling—then stops upon noticing R's body. W puts down the chess piece and goes to R. W tastes the tiniest bit of blood.

W

You kill this fucker?

Q shows W the spray bottle. W nods.

W

Huh.

You probably didn't kill [him/her]. [S/he] actually died of natural causes at the moment just before you bludgeoned [him/her] with the desk lamp. And no witnesses?

Well, you probably didn't even see it happen, yourself.

Still haven't found your glasses?

Q

No.

W

Well. I'll keep an eye out for them.

W begins to roll R's body away.

Q

Wait. Leave it.

W grins.

W exits.

funeral for fortune-teller and chariot

Q

I promise not to buy socks in even numbers.

I promise not to upset the chessboard in anger. I promise not to stray too close to the moon. I promise not to exacerbate international nuclear tensions. I promise not to harm the people I love. I promise not to love. I promise not to people.

Q unscrews the top of the spray bottle and pours the blood out onto R.

Q

Like the strings on a violin. Like the space below a bridge.

W and O come to the stage edges.

Q

(to O) Like the strings on a violin.

(to W) Like the space below a bridge.

O

I promise not to stray too close to the moon.

W

I promise not to upset the chessboard in anger.

Movement.

Q

Like the strings on a violin. Like the space below a bridge.

O

I promise not to stray too close to the moon.

Overlapping speech.

W

Upset the chessboard in anger.

O

The moon.

Q

Like the strings on a violence.

W

Upset the chessboard in anger.

O

The moon. Stray too close to the moon. The moon.

W

Upset the chessboard in anger. I promise.

O

Like the space below a bridge.

W

Harm the people I love.

Q

Promise.

O

Promise.

W

Promise.

O

Promise.

W

Promise.

O

Promise.

R's eyes are open.

R

Promise like the strings of a violin. Promise to buy socks. Promise the chessboard in anger and promise the people you love. Promise too close to the moon and promise the space under a bridge. Promise like the strings of a violin. Promise like the strings of a violin. Harm the chessboard in anger and harm the people you love. Harm the strings of a violin. Harm the moon. Harm the people you love the people you harm.

O closes R's eyes. R dies.

W

I imagine that's how Oedipus murdered his father. Bludgeoned him with a desk lamp.

Q

I don't know. I wasn't there.

W

You were. Your eyes have healed, but you still need glasses.
Are you nearsighted or farsighted?

Q
Yes.

A long pause.

W
Still haven't found the glasses?

Q
No.

W
I'll keep an eye out for them.

Q
Thank you.

A long pause.

W
Get it?
Eye out.

A long pause.

Q
No. I don't get it.

W
That's fine. Then we can talk about the weather.

Q
What weather?

W
What did the fortune-teller say the weather would be today?

Q
I don't know, what?

W

It's not a joke. I don't have a punch line. Let's begin again.

Exactly as before.

W

What did the fortune-teller say the weather would be today?

Q

I haven't decided yet.

W

Well. I do like the snow.

W rolls R away in the chair. On their way out, O takes the cigarettes from R's pocket.

prayer for warmth and population control

O offers a cigarette to Q. Q takes it. O takes one.

O

Turkish royals.

Q

Are we royalty?

O

I'm not. Are you?

Q thinks.

Q

Not on purpose.

O

If we're not royalty, then.

Q

Then?

O

Then we must be turkeys.

Q eats the cigarette. O watches, distressed, and puts his/her cigarette back in the pack.

Q picks up the pie and begins to eat it. Q hates the pie.
Q retrieves the ghost-lamp and huddles next to it like a feral animal.

I'm tired of the snow. Q

I am too. O
Pray for it to stop.

No. Q

You don't know how? O

Don't be stupid. Everyone knows how. Ask someone else to do it. Q

Who else? I thought the city was dead. O

Of course it's dead. Q
Just because it's dead doesn't mean there are no people.

Emptied of people. Not dead, though. O

O approaches.

Just me. And you. O

Q looks at the audience. O turns Q's face away.

Just me. And you. O
Pray for the snow to stop.

Q touches O's face. O shivers.

Q

I don't know how.
I don't think I can.

Q looks at his/her hands.

Q

I think I am the snow.

O

Can you hear your own voice?

Q shakes his/her head.

O

Listen.

O gestures outward.

O

Your voice is the sound of snow. But it makes your hands cold.

Q brings O's hands to the bulb of the ghost lamp to warm them.

Q

Paint me.
Warm you.

*O smiles. O and Q are together for a long time.
O takes out a label and puts it on Q. Q looks down at it. O lifts Q's chin.*

O

Not yet.

Q reaches for the sticker. O grabs Q's hand and forces it behind him/her.

Q

No.

O

No. Patience. Grow up.
Pray.

O exits. Q is alone. Q looks after O.

Q

I won't. I am the snow.

Q goes to the exit and looks.

judgment for luminance and wrath

W enters. They sit together. A long pause.

W

I hold two completely contradictory ideas at the same time.

A long pause.

W

I also don't.

Q

Sorry I killed the weatherman {weatherlady?}.

W

No you're not.

A long pause.

Q

I hate apple pie.

W

I do too.

A long pause.

Q

I hate soothsayers.

W

I noticed.

A long pause.

I hate this city.

Q

No you don't.

W
(flippant)

You were born here. And you will die here.

A long pause.

I hate you.

Q

I hate bicycles.

W

W goes to the chess piece. W picks up the piece and moves it.
Q looks at the tree. Q does not move.
O enters. O moves.

These gears force the sun to rise.

W

Just me and you.

O

The chess game continues with the following dialogue. O moves the tree from point to point, eventually taking W's chess-piece.

Have you been to the temple?

W

The sound of snow.

O

Are you royalty?

W

Days of painting tall trees.

O

W

It was better when men only prayed for rain.

O

Can you hear your own voice?

W

Have you been to the temple?

Q

I remember the temple.

Q steps in and forces W to move.

Q

Checkmate.

W, down, looks up at Q. W stands and shoves Q to the ground. O watches. W advances toward Q; Q backs away.

Q

My eyes have not healed completely.

W

Grow up.

W spits.

W

Hero.

W strips off Q's label and puts it on Q's mouth. O comes to them with the ghost-lamp. O helps Q stand. W begins to exit. Q takes up the chess-piece and strikes W down. Q bashes W's body over and over. O watches. Q throws the chess-piece away. O burns the chess-piece. O kisses Q on the label.

O

Your eyes.

O and Q pick up W's body. They carry W into the audience and place the body in a seat. While speaking, O straightens up W's clothes.

O

The death of Jane Austen.
 The house of Kafka.
 Upset the chessboard in anger.
 We are royalty.

W's eyes are open.

W

Grow up, Q. We are the proscenium hell, we are the proscenium hell and I don't believe in bicycles.

O closes W's eyes. W dies.

prayer for you and me

O

Did you steal my bicycle?

O gets an IV bag and a scalpel. O hangs the IV bag on the ghost lamp.

O

Give me your arm.

Q extends an arm. O cuts an incision into it with the scalpel, and stabs the IV into the wound.

O

For the stranger. For the fortune-teller.
 For Argos. For Thebes. For Troy.
 Home.

O touches Q's label.

O

Read it.

*Q shakes his/her head in refusal. O nods.
 Q removes the label and sticks it over O's lips.*

Q

(reading)

"Actual size."

Q kisses the label over O's mouth. O removes the label and puts it over the IV incision.

O

I think you stole my bicycle.

Q

I thought you didn't believe in bicycles.

O

You saw it. You said you saw it.

Q

The one that worked on water?

O

Yes.

Q

I saw it. But I didn't steal it. And it was on land when I saw it. And it looked just like a normal bicycle.

O

Oh.

Q

You don't believe me.

O

I think you're being honest. I think you believe yourself.

The problem is, we can only be honest with one person at a time. Even including ourselves.

O begins to draw the sign of the cross on Q. Q stops O's hand.

Q

What color do you dream?

O

The color of fire.

Q

What color is fire?

O shows Q his/her hands.

O

Like this.

And Q's own hands.

O

And like this.

Q

This is the fire of the earth.
And what shape do you dream?

O touches the ghost-lamp.

O

Like this.

O reveals Q's glasses.

O

And like this.

Q

You found my glasses.
This is the shape of the sky.

O

I dream in the shape of constellations, the colors of fire. The sound of snow. The smell of a harp's music. The infinite arch. The city and question. The strange, the life.

Q

Where did you find these.

O

How did you lose them?

Q

I took them off to go to sleep.

O

You shouldn't.

Q

Because then I wouldn't have lost them?

O

Well, yes. But no.

Q

Because I have to see.

Because I have to see.

O

Yes, again. But no. You should leave your glasses on at night.

Q

While I sleep.

O

Yes. Because it is a fine night. And you should leave your glasses on, to see better in your dreams.

O puts the glasses on Q and strokes Q's hair.

Q blows on the bulb of the ghost-lamp as though extinguishing a candle. It goes out.

Q grasps the scalpel.

Q plunges the blade into O's stomach.

Q

Hero.

They kiss.

O dies. Q sets down O's body.

Q rips out the IV.

Q prays.

Q

I stand on the temple steps and I hear you shouting my name in the streets. Hero. Hero. I take my lonely torch and I burn the city down but I leave the temple standing and pray for infinite snow.

I promise to extinguish the world. I promise to furnish the stars. I promise to pray, with my shaking voice and my dirty hands. I promise to paint the colors of my dreams.

I promise to dream.

Glory, hallelujah.

Glory, glory, hallelujah.

Q kisses O's wound again and again. Q picks up the body of O.

They exit.

Blackout.