

Nina Gonzales Silverstein, senior recital, voice

Dr. Sarah Johnson, piano
Vincent Varvel, guitar

Program

Original songs by Nina Gonzales Silverstein

Haunting Mess of a Life I Once Knew

Ghosts That Change You

In My Heart

Turn the Tide

As an actor, singer, and lover of music theater, I have long desired to write a musical of my own. For my senior capstone, I composed multiple songs that belong in a musical that I am writing. I developed a plot that deals with themes of censorship, growing up in an abusive household, tremendous imagination and imaginative relationships, deceit by those in power, environmental destruction, and community building. I then chose powerful moments in the plot that could beget song, and I wrote the following songs which I will be performing today.

These songs are titled *Haunting Mess of a Life I Once Knew*, *Ghosts That Change You*, *In My Heart*, and *Turn the Tide*. The first three are written for voice and piano, and the last song is written for voice and guitar. In these program notes I will describe the plot of this musical in greater detail to add context to the songs I will be performing. I will also delve into a detailed musical analysis of each song as it relates to the journey of the piece.

The story is set in the near present. Actors are dressed in modern clothing and the set feels current, although I would be open to exploring more abstract or metaphorical interpretations. The world is not based in complete reality. The key element to this world is that it lacks social media and smartphones. It does not necessarily lack other modern technology. This society has decided that it prefers unhurried, in-person communication. If there is a need to communicate with someone far away, people will either call or write.

The musical opens to two rows of three desks, staggered. It is silent. At each desk sits a person reading a letter, redacting marker in hand. About ten seconds in, one actor draws their marker across the paper, making a dry, scraping sound. Then, a second actor does the same. The rest of the actors begin to use their redacting markers as well. A chorus of markers sliding across paper ensues. This opening is precisely choreographed to a score that lays out the rhythms of each marker. This chorus is interrupted by one of the redactors. The scene goes as follows:

REDACTOR A. This idiot asked their mom for chocolates...

REDACTOR B. (interrupting) They can't ask for food...

REDACTOR A. I know! They asked their mom for some chocolates but spelled the words and sentences backwards: "Esaelp. Etalocohc dnes. Eromyna siht eldnah tonnac htoot teews ym." Which translates to: My sweet tooth cannot handle this anymore. Send chocolate. Please.

REDACTOR C. Who talks to their mom like that?

REDACTOR D. Sherry says they've started collecting air and soil samples.

REDACTOR B. Did she discuss her location?

REDACTOR D. Not to my knowledge, unless this photo of the lasagna she made has some double meaning.

REDACTOR A. Sometimes I wish we were on the front lines.

REDACTOR C. And then you remember that at least the stench doesn't stick to you after a shower.

REDACTOR A. Well, that may be true, but sometimes I wish to do more.


REDACTOR C. But, we are still contributing to the effort. We are making an impact just by being in this room.

The opening number begins. It introduces the world, circumstances, and relationships between the redactors to the audience. The song explains that a horrible smell had emerged and had started spreading through towns. It was so bad that people were forced to leave their homes and livelihoods, becoming refugees. This miasma affected thousands, and it became worldwide news. There was an international urge, particularly among scientific and humanitarian groups, to discover the cause of the smell so that it could be eliminated and the displaced peoples could return to their homes. One humanitarian group in particular began to lead the charge. It recruited scientists to investigate the origins of the smell. It also recruited other (mostly young) people to help with the organizational efforts needed to run the investigation.

Given the serious nature of the crisis, six people were hired as redactors. Their role is to ensure that those working on the investigation communicate only what they are permitted when writing their friends and family. The on-site investigators never meet the censors and therefore do not know who they are. The main protagonist, Lillian Peters, is one of the redactors. She comes from a financially stable home but grew up as a single child with her mother and abusive stepfather. She had seen a notice in the paper looking for young workers interested in figuring out the cause of the miasma. Lillian decided to apply so that she could finally leave her house and contribute to an important cause. A common theme amongst the redactors is that they all had felt trapped and purposeless before joining the investigation. This, combined with the desire to help others in need and solve a problem bigger than themselves, drew each of them to be a part of the solution. This theme is unpacked in the opening number, which I am still in the process of developing.

The subsequent song in the musical, *Haunting Mess of a Life I Once Knew* introduces Lillian's backstory. I originally wrote it as a free verse poem. I then developed a melody that reflected the journey of the piece. As the song demonstrates, Lillian is an only child who is mostly left to her own devices. She finds comfort in the nature around her and the books in her mother's library, but she is lonely. The first line she sings goes as follows: "In the haunting mess of a life I once knew, I had no foes, but I had no friends." This speaks to the agony of not having relationships with other people, despite the highs and lows that come with these relationships.

The piece is in D minor, which expresses the somber mood of the piece. It begins in 6/8, an upbeat, dance-like time signature that juxtaposes with the melancholy feel.





There is a shift to cut time as Lillian begins to reveal her imagination and dreams. The pitch ascends while she crescendos. Despite Lillian's lack of interpersonal connections with anyone besides her immediate family, she reveals that she found the company of an imaginary friend. This imaginary friend helped her make her way through childhood to adulthood. She believes that this person is truly out there in the world, which also helps her persevere. The time signature returns to a brisk 6/8. Reflecting her excitement, Lillian describes this person while ascending in pitch. She then slows down, clarifying that she has never met this person but has dreamt of them. The mood quickly darkens as she describes how this person's figurative company distracted her while she would hear her stepfather verbally and physically abusing her mother.

The audience is then introduced to the character of Eddie. He evolves to be the person Lillian believes is the real-life embodiment of her imaginary friend. Lillian is assigned to redact his letters. She begins to get a sense of who he is and his relationships with his friends and family. Eddie had been in graduate school training to be a soil scientist when he got recruited to join the investigation. Now he tests soil and air samples for possible contaminants that could be contributing to the smell. Through his letters, Lillian finds him to be generous, thoughtful, witty, and profoundly concerned for the displaced people. She subsequently has a dream sequence where she "meets" Eddie for the first time, and he is everything she made him out to be in her head.

Lillian continues to read Eddie's letters and is struck by one of his stories. One day, while he is out collecting samples, he hears a loud noise. He goes to investigate if anyone is hurt, but in doing so steps outside of the bounds within which he is required to remain. There are very strict rules regarding where investigators can and cannot go on site. Eddie comes upon a shattered brick wall and a truck driving away in the distance. He finds this strange, so he brings it up to his supervisor, who says that they will write a report to the higher-ups and get back to him. Eddie never hears back about this occurrence, which he finds suspicious. Lillian finds this suspicious as well. However, she must censor this story before sending it to Eddie's family. Before doing so, she makes a copy of the letter.

Suspicious, Eddie decides to venture out at night to investigate the restricted locations. Eddie starts making further suspicious discoveries, which are all conveyed through letters to his family that Lillian reads and censors. He comes upon a dam in the process of being completed. He comes upon uprooted trees and demolished houses. Finally, he encounters a massive apparatus drilled into the ground. It becomes clear that the awful smell is a cover-up for the construction of a new site that drills for oil. He writes of this huge discovery in a letter to his family. In this letter, he also reveals that he now fears for his safety. He had told some of his colleagues what he had found, but no one was willing to go with him to see the evidence for themselves. Eddie is concerned that one of them will report his actions to their superiors. This is eventually what happens.






Aware of the danger he is putting himself in by disclosing his findings and unsure if he will make it out alive, Eddie starts singing *Ghosts That Change You*. This song is his plea, intended for whomever is censoring his letters (which is Lillian, although Eddie does not know that given that he has never met her). He includes this message with a letter to his family that discloses his discovery of the true reason for the miasma. He warns of the ghosts of the evil people who caused harm and suffering during their lifetimes. These ghosts haunt the living by acting as evil forces that push them to be malicious, perpetuating the cycle of hate. Knowing his end is near, Eddie urges the censor to be brave and reveal the truths he has discovered to the rest of the world.

Soon after, Lillian learns that Eddie has been killed in what is officially described as an "accident," although it is assumed that he was murdered. Lillian is heartbroken to learn of his death, and she faces a pivotal choice. Does she do as she has been told and censor the most recent letter Eddie sent right before his death? Or does she choose to reveal the truth to the world, even though it would put her life in danger? She confides in a friend of hers who is also a redactor. This friend tells the story of a forest fire that recently engulfed a tree that her grandfather had planted and that she cared for after he passed. This song, called *In My Heart*, speaks to the dire consequences of not caring for the planet. Lillian's friend had no choice but to flee in shame or else be killed by the forest fire. In contrast, here it is not too late for Lillian to choose to do something good with the information she has.

This story, combined with the note Eddie included with his most recent letter, convinces Lillian that she must be the whistleblower on behalf of the displaced peoples, of people around the world, and of the planet itself. She sends the letter to multiple news outlets, and one of them leaks the letter. The news begins to spread, and Lillian is portrayed as the hero of the story by some and as an alarmist by others. Some people begin to protest the new oil drilling site, although the show ends before it is revealed if these protests are fruitful. Lillian flees to a new country for safety and begins working for the newspaper that published the letter. In the last number, *Turn the Tide*, Lillian and the rest of the company reflect on the potential for change in a world saturated with evil and greed. Bravery is risky, and it can be life-threatening, but it also can spur positive change for people and for their environment.



Biography



Nina Gonzales Silverstein (she/her/hers) is a senior from Hastings on Hudson, NY pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Music and a minor in Spanish. During her time at Washington University in St. Louis, she participated in multiple productions with the Performing Arts Department, most recently playing the part of Cinderella in Sondheim's *Into the Woods*. This semester Nina was the Music Director for Cast n' Crew's production of *Something Rotten!*. She also worked as a Climate Associate with the Washington University Climate Change Program.

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