



*Before we get into the
event—I would like to
hear from you in what
way you think that my
love affected you*

(verbatim fragments on memory and loss—from
a piece that I have been working on my whole
adult life and may never write)

by Marcus Youssef

In 2003, I wrote a commission for CBC Radio's Sunday Showcase and the Banff Centre. It was about my mother and the eight months she spent living in Vancouver's 2400 motel, from October 2001 to June 2002. Called 3299, *Forms in Order*, the half-hour piece was co-created with Vancouver singer/composer Veda Hille. It blended reconstructed conversations I had while caregiving for my mother, as she attempted to move back to the city of her birth, with songs Veda constructed from yellow post-it note reminders that covered my mother's one-bedroom motel room walls.

~

SON: These are the notes from my mother's motel room wall.

VEDA (sings):

On Saturday

*work on 3299
forms straightening
them out*

today is Saturday June 29.

*get Documents for
Hansen's Forwarding in*

order

get 3299 Forms in Order

*Call Wilma back
go over
3299 go over*

*go over 3299
form,
Wilma called at 10:15*



Roleene Youssef, May, 2008.
Photo by Marcus Youssef

SCENE 1. MOTEL ROOM. “HOW MANY PAIRS OF SHOES?”

SON: How many pairs of shoes?

MOTHER: I’ve never found shoes like this anywhere. They’re extremely comfortable.

SON: Right. How much—were they?

MOTHER: (giggle) Expensive.

SON: Wow. That must be—thousands of dollars.

MOTHER: He was very helpful.

SON: Oh yeah.

MOTHER: Carried the boxes all the way down the street. I was parked on the next block. Took them right to the car. He was very friendly.

SON: I bet.

VEDA (sings):

*today is Monday,
Jan 28, 2002*

- 1) *Make Dental appt with Dr Card.*
- 2) *Call Zyrex and apologize
Tell him I’m apologizing for me
saying that he forgot to give me the
insoles in my shoes. That isn’t true.
They were there. Zyrex
called today I apologized
Tell him I’m sorry for that.
And the shoes are fitting fine now,
now that he (you) stretched them.*

*Tell him / I think he’s (you’re) a
good salesperson. You’re honest.
Tell him that the shoes are nice
keeping my feet nice and warm.*

*And tell him I hope he can
forgive me if I’ve caused him any
(emotional) pain.*

*

Thursday Jan 31/02

*to Zyrex
would you be willing to hear my
apology?
call him before I leave*

*

- 8) *stapler and stapler remover in small box*
- 9) *paper clips in small box*
- 10) *scotch tape in medium round box*

*

*Kim Ebbett
She will help me with packing
New with cleaning staff.
But done it for years.*

Her hip aches too.

*

*Call Wilma Tasker
3299 form
go over with her*

Call Zyrex eventually

*

The man wasn't there.

*

*Marcus arrives here tomorrow
He is
My son.*

SCENE 2. THE MOTEL. "RACE CAR DRIVER"

MOTHER: I should have been a race-car driver. That would have been fun, don't you think?

SON: I guess.

(pause)

MOTHER: I think I'd make a good race car driver. Though I guess it's a little late now, isn't it?

SON: Well, you never know.

MOTHER: I like going fast. I like the feel of the car on the ground. I think I have a feel for the road. Do you know that feeling?

SON: Sure, yeah.

MOTHER: I think I have an intuition for it. Do you agree?

SON: Yeah, why not?

MOTHER: Do you like that car? It has an interesting

rear end. Do you see, how it goes up high in the back? I wonder why they make them so high. I've noticed that the placement of the lights on the back of cars have really changed. Have you noticed that?

SON: Uh, not really.

MOTHER: That's the sort of thing I notice. I think it's very interesting how that red light is on the side of the trunk. It's an interesting design. I wonder why they do them like that.

SON: Yeah.

MOTHER: Do you know?

SON: Not really.

MOTHER: You don't know?

SON: No, Mom. I don't.

MOTHER: Well, there must be a reason.

SON: That's true.

MOTHER: Maybe it's the design. I think I have an instinct for that kind of thing. I've always had a feel for the way objects are placed. I find it very interesting. Do you?

SON: For sure.

MOTHER: (laughs) Cars are so big, now. The back of that one—it looks like a face.

VEDA (sings):

*Get 3299 form in
order
call Wilma*

*

*Read ... June 12/02
Call Travel Agency
I've got crutches
how do I transport them?
also the aluminum ones?
do I wrap and send thru PO?*

*also I have a walker
What to do with that
and my luggage.*

*

*KEEP OUT –
on door or something
Bedding Solution
– make plane reservation
– one or two days before flying—
 1 – pack up my bedding
 2. – get extras from motel
office
 3. ship my pillows a couple
one or two
 days before my
flight in
 tharko containers*

*

*go out – walk –
came back –
make plane reservation
call Marcus
He is.
My son.*

3299, *Forms in Order* was written in a place of deep trouble, and pain, not only in relationship to the difficulty of understanding my mother's strange and erratic behaviour but also the long history of our relationship, her depression and mental illness, and my own debilitating feelings of sadness, guilt, and self-blame.

GEIST Magazine produced a one-year long series of events about memory in 2008. On a suggestion from Theatre Replacement's James Long, the festival asked me to present something at a reading in the late fall. Weirdly, the festival's marketing image was the iconographic neon sign of the 2400 Motel, where my mother spent the eight months described in 3299, *Forms In Order*. I took this as a sign that, despite the fact that I had no idea what to do, I should say yes.

At the festival, in front of about 100 people, I played 3299, *Forms in Order* in its entirety, without explaining it. Then I read this:



Roleene's last photo.
Photo by Roleene Youssef

When people experience the first symptoms of Alzheimer's, they often feel a very strong urge to return to their childhood homes. It's the more recent memories that disappear first, so the further in the past an event or place lies, the more likely it is to be remembered. It's like the grooves are more deeply furrowed into the brain. In the case of early onset Alzheimer's, which is what my mother has, it's also pretty common for it to take years for everybody involved to figure out what's going on, because they're still so young. My mother contracted the disease in her fifties.

In California my mother quickly devolved to a motel not unlike the 2400. She lived there, just off a highway overpass, for about three years, until 2006, when she was no longer able to resist being moved back to Vancouver, where I installed her in a nursing home.

My most recent memory of her is from four days ago, when I went to visit on Saturday.

We called my biological sister Patricia, who my parents put up for adoption in 1963, and who established contact with us in the mid-1990s. My mum kept hanging up, so we put Patricia, who lives in San Francisco, on the speaker phone. "It's your daughter," I told mum, "Remember?" Through the speakerphone Patricia told my mother that she loved and missed her, but my mother didn't say anything. She just kept swatting towards the phone, shooing at it to go away.

"I'm sorry," I told my bio-sister, who I love. "This is kind of what it's like now." I think my mum has forgotten ever coming to know Patricia. And so when I tell her, "It's your daughter," I think she hears that from a world that is forty or fifty years in the past, when all mum knew about her daughter was that she had just given her away.

If that's true, it would be hard to blame mum for not wanting to pick up the phone.

It's the short-term memories that go first. Then the long. The kid that you gave away and then the one you didn't. Next it's motor skills and reflexes—walking, holding, then chewing. Coughing, swallowing. And breathing. Mum clutches at the air now, suddenly, for no apparent reason, like both my sons did, when they were infants, like baby monkeys who've slipped from a perch, in a tree.

On Sunday, just before I left her nursing home, mum and I were both standing, and I moved close, to help her reach her walker. Her eyes went soft, and she reached for my hand, saying, huskily, seductively, "I'm so glad we have this time together."

My relationship with my mother was often unhappy. And in this, its final phase, it's taken me a while to realize that when she acts as if we are lovers that it is not me she is with, but some other man, or boy, inside some kind of memory—real or imagined—that took place twenty or thirty, or now even fifty years ago.

The Q and A that followed went on for a long time. It was one of those rare moments in the theatre, when you feel like a minor rock star. I think the GEIST crowd is this subject matter's sweet spot demographic—highly educated, in love with words and, at fifty to sixty-five years of age, in the

middle of living through their parents' dementia, many of them also deep enough into middle age to feel the real and imminent possibility of it happening to them. That companion piece for the GEIST festival was written a year and half ago. My mother no longer treats me like her lover. She can no longer talk. By the time I figure out what to do with this project and its many pieces—whether it is a piece of performance, a lecture, a book ... or nothing—she will be dead.

Though she never published a word, my mother always wrote: journals, dream diaries, a 1000-page novel she threw in the garbage after many years of work, a (long) collection called "Men I have Known" (like me, my mother had a compulsive and narcotic relationship to sex). For her, like me, writing was not optional. Existential or not, it was a means of survival. Life and death. Last October, after an obnoxious, drawn-out six-year battle with a recalcitrant storage company (Bekins Moving and Storage, in Richmond, BC, boycott please), I finally gained access to my mum's worldly possessions, which we had put in storage before she moved back to California. In it I found six moving-size boxes full of her writing. It's hard going through it. It is, in many ways, the work of the neurotic and compulsive person who is (was?) my mother. It is also—I think—a remarkable archive. Because it was a matter of survival, she wrote through the disease, until she was physically incapable of remembering the shape of letters, of tracing them with a pen. Here's just a tiny piece of one of the thousands of entries made between 1999 and 2004. In it, my mother may be practicing for a return to the family therapy practice she never actually had, a plan she clung to long after she was capable of maintaining normal social relationships. She may be working on a course she attempted to develop during the disease, on communication skills. She might also be attempting to work through some half-remembered incident in her past. As the disease progressed, she began to "remember" incidents that never—as far as I know—happened, like being raped by my father.

Before we get into the event—

I would like to hear from you in what way you think that my love affected you.

- I want to say a few words to you about how we'll approach this.

- We'll approach this in a way that you are in control of the process.

- And if at any time we move too quickly or it feels like too much, I want you to say something about it.

Can you tell me what terror & panic felt like? Do you remember that? Have some sense of it?

Reflect. You had *the Thought Then*: "You were trying to get into the window.

What are you experiencing right now—this moment

Rikuni

story → (feeling) →

* You experienced a little piece of terror—gripping. Now you're back here. Telescoping: Unreality

Educate Common reaction after traumatic episode

The goal by now is to get some sense of more control about it.

How do you do that?

—how do you know that?

→ see image. describe every detail

just look

There's also this, from a tiny 3' × 5' spiral notebook I found in my mum's nursing home closet, one of the last coherent pieces in my possession. I read it, verbatim and unedited, at Leaky Heaven's BLiNk Festival ("an evening of acts one minute or less: performance for the modern attention span") in December 2009.

Tonight while I was out walking near the motel, I met Richard—also out walking on sidewalks (under night) & trees He seemed to like me – and talked a

bit. I'd like to see him again.

I've lost track of Days and months, in my Motel Room in Bakersfield, (Quality Inn)

January 2005, Quality Inn
Dear Barbara,
I'm sorry, ^{our} budding
friendship appears to have
come to an abrupt HALT.
What a shame! Because
I do love and like you – and
enjoyed your friendship. It's
unfortunate that we couldn't
find our way together through
the conflict, whatever it ^{is} was. Sad
that we couldn't arrange to
meet and talk "this" thru.
I'm doing my very best
to keep my door open for you
(literally & figuratively) as long
as I'm here. Love,
Raleena
P.S. Some event triggered
this letter – but I
don't recall what it was.

A letter to a motel housekeeper, Bakersfield, California.

I had a calendar
yesterday. One that
disappeared by Today.

I'm hoping my new
blue knit gloves don't
disappear like the others,
These are cashmere—
nice & soft.

I'm rapidly running
out of my ear plugs,

It's night time. I'm
tired & awaiting a
warm bath.

I need to buy another
diary Book

I got lost.

Today I bought
7 combs – to last—
till The end of my life.

When Bruce and Pil asked me to write about theatre and memory, this was my proposal: *"I'd like to write about a project I haven't started working on, the construction of a piece about my mum, based on the writing she did through Alzheimer's disease early / middle stages (she's now unable to speak). I'm looking at her writing, which at its end became a kind of unintentional poetry, and also my own—the many fragmented attempts I have made, and continue to make, to tell this story, over and over again, in a way that seems to me a lot like the attempts a person with Alzheimer's makes to keep hold of their disintegrating sense of self (as evidenced by my mum's writing)."*

I am also interested in the way all writing might be documentary, in the way I can write something and then look at it, an hour or a week later, and it can feel like a found document, an archive of another moment or thought process. I am interested in the way we construct our relationships with each other out of these unconsciously selected moments, and the ways in which my mother struggled to string them together into the kind of consequential narrative that feels like what I tell myself is the story of my own life.

I don't know what it will be. If anything.

story → (feeling) →

→

Story → stop here → become aware by—neck
terror comes back
fades

Marcus Youssef is Artistic Producer of Vancouver's Newworld Theatre, the author, co-author, or director of numerous shows of various sizes and shapes, and the recipient of both the Alcan and Chalmer's awards. He has taught, read, and lectured across the country, including an Assistant Professor stint at Concordia University. Marcus also sits on the executive of the Vancouver municipal party, COPE (The Coalition of Progressive Electors).

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