

# river, river, river

a solo dance text by s k stewart

1.  
THE SHOW



In this solo, I'm going to tell you what it's about but first:

apple  
peanut butter  
art magazine  
tote bag  
coffee cup  
water bottle from the lost and found box  
hipster beanie  
long list of random associations  
laptop  
laptop cover  
a 40 something-year-old body with some scar tissue.

I'm going to show you some of my patterns

I didn't want to make a solo but I decided to. There was an application and an invitation and like any artist that has a moment of feeling wanted, I decided to go for it.

I thought I would give my underpaid collaborator friends a break from being subjected to my ever-changing-but-not-really-ever-changing ideas and instead make myself responsible.

But then the problem of *moreobviousnarcissism*.

And all the other visible problems, like

another white woman doing a mashup of contemporary forms exploring something hard to pin down and looking for a particular kind of attention. Which is funny to think about the kinds of attention that are available within the conditions of performance. That we think we are seeing some things and not other things when in fact, we can see everything but just because the room is a different sized box and the lights are in different places we decide to focus on specific things like,

How much money trained this body?

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I thought about making something about something, or finding something to remake in order to have a "something" to be about--a famous play or musical, an IRL event, or a personal story like,

I'm on my knees in the dirt  
The road to my parents' house is behind me. Every now and then a car drives past.

I have recently eaten a salad at Panera Bread with my dad. After we ate, we drove back to the house in silence. When we pulled into the driveway, I got out of the car and started walking.

I had this same tote bag. I'm not sure why I brought it. I didn't need it but didn't know what to do with it.

The sun was setting on the houses in this particular housing development from the late 1990's. The house across the street from my parents house didn't used to exist.

No one is outside and I feel entirely exposed.

A strange woman walking around a suburban neighborhood with a tote bag,  
and not a dog,  
and not a husband or a kid,  
and not with yoga pants, running shoes, or an apple watch.

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When I'm on my knees, I'm on a dirt road that I walked down dozens of times when I was a teenager. We would carry beer and drugs into the Yakama River delta, not quite as afraid of being sprayed by a skunk, getting caught by the cops, or drowning as we should have been. We would talk too loud, build an obvious fire, and cross water on downed trees with a four hour buzz going.

Our cars would line up in the parking lot indicating

--> TEENAGE PARTY HAPPENING HERE<--

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Now the parking lot is empty except for one truck. I'm on the road that leads to the river. The light is fading the trees from green to grey and I realize, I really need to take a piss. I think about the student loans I will never be able to pay off. I think about the texture of a parent's disappointment.

I set the tote bag down and decide to squat off to the side of the road.

My mom keeps calling.

Where am I going?

I wrote an email to the curator of an artist residency about going to their annual fundraising gala and didn't realize it was in a completely different town or that Trump's former secretary of state was the guest speaker. I'm in Buffalo, Wyoming. They are in Houston--the city with the hospital where I was born by c-section.

What I'm doing is being paid for by an oil company.

On the ride from the airport the curator explained to me that we were on Crow and Sioux land and that the residency was started by an oil tycoon that decided to name his company Apache.

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The Yakima River flows for 214 miles from the Cascade mountain range on the westside of what is referred to as Washington State until it fans out in the high desert on the east side of the state. It's part of an intersecting river basin where indigenous people gather roots, hunt deer, and fish the salmon as they swim back home.

Wikipedia will tell you that it is entirely a recreational area used primarily for hiking and kayaking, however, when I was growing up, the Yakima River Delta was primarily used by groups of kids tripping on acid while drinking wine coolers.

The land around the river is covered in Russian olive trees which are not native to the land and have bark that doesn't break apart in chunks but kind of flakes like pieces of thick paper mache.

There was a day that I swam across that river. It was earlier in the day than when I saw the dead cow floating in it. I remember staring at that swollen body for a very long time. I remember driving my dog to the vet with her belly swollen like that because she was near the end of life and retaining water. She was in the passenger seat next to me and my bike was in the back of the car. As we were driving, a tire exploded and it scared her. To this day I think that might have been her last straw.

I moved away.

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One time I came back and had coffee with my friend Jessica at an all-night diner called Shari's in Kennewick. On the way home, we were driving through the parking lot of the mall where I had my first and my second job. Jessica actually worked at Hot Dog On A Stick and wore the hat. But that night we were being followed by this truck that started to flash their lights and honk at us. They pulled up next to us and a woman held up a baseball bat and started calling us dykes and smacking it against her hand. We were confused. Not quite scared. Then I thought *we should get the fuck out of here*. We tried to speed up but the mall parking is full of speed bumps. Jessica had a tiny Toyota hatchback and the American truck definitely had bigger balls.

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I remember my dad telling me about working with the Yakama Nations when he worked for the Department of Energy. He talked about sitting in a room with members of the tribes passing around a peace pipe and I used to think, oh, my dad must have been such a good person to be in that room. But I don't actually know how it was.

The US Department of Energy took Yakama land to build nuclear reactors, to enrich plutonium for weapons, including the atomic bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki. The reactors were kept operating until the area was declared a superfund site in 1989. The confederated tribes of the Yakama Nations demanded that the US government restore the land to how it was. Instead, there were some talks, and some studies, and more paperwork.

I think they sent my dad in there to negotiate because he has a small-town sweetness about him. He comes off as kind and a little bit simple.

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At Panera, my dad had just revealed that he had been keeping a ledger recording all the wrong choices I had made since I was a teenager. "I have a spreadsheet," he told me without moving his eyes. "We can look at it when we get back to the house."

Then I was on my knees in the dirt and then I got up off of them. I booked a hotel room with a credit card.

I thought about making a piece titled, "Hi Dad I'm a person!"

On behalf of all daughters...or on behalf of all artists, or daughter artists, or, on behalf of all non-doctors and non-lawyers and non-mothers, but also for the mothers!

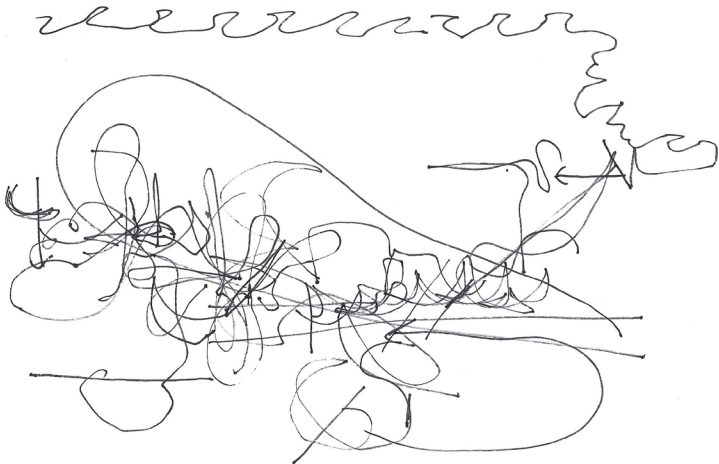
But then I realized that "Hi, Dad I'm a person!" didn't need to be a piece.

Just a sentence.

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The original idea was to replace the dance with the text, to choreograph her out of existence. Finally, a negative space dance. And finally, an inside joke for improvisational dancers. All 20 of us. But then I thought, shit, I can still move and might not be able to for much longer. So why not?

So, I decided I would learn the entirety of a Trisha Brown piece from YouTube so that I could keep working with this practice of "embodying-the-thing-that-I'm-supposed-to-be-that-I-never-have-been-but-it-doesn't-matter-because-enough-people-whom-I-look-like-or-have-come-into-contact-with-have-embodied-it-before-me-so-therefore-it-becomes-something-that-I'm-a-part-of-or-at-least-in-relation-to."



I remember being in college and feeling a little embarrassed watching dances like Trisha Brown's Set and Reset even as I was myself a dancer. Some combination of being from a small town, fear of abstract movement, and not enough exposure to understand it.

The dance was hard to learn but somehow felt natural to me even though the movement is entirely unnatural while pretending to be natural. The limbs swing loosely, effort appears to be used minimally, and emotion or identity is simply extracted in order to focus on physical tasks and visual patterns. Without having ever formally studied this technique, its imprint has reached me through dozens of teachers and experiences in what gets passed down through US institutions of dance. I find it quite beautiful and also feel there is a familiar hidden brutality to it--how much effort is given to seeming effortless and how much rigor is applied to make something artificial seem natural, which creates some sort of baseline by which to judge everything else.

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One summer when my dad was better, I tried to give myself a dance history education and went to the Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center in New York and watched everything I could think to watch from the few choreographers that I knew about.

I watched Trisha Brown dancing around with a projector strapped to her back at Dance Theater Workshop. Then I watched her do her famous accumulation piece. I think they were actual VHS tapes. I watched the first dance film made by Norman McLaren on a flatbed projector. I watched Merce Cunningham, Deborah Hay and Grand Union. Ralph Lemon, Neil Greenberg, Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, Meg Stuart, Wim Vandekeybus, Sasha Waltz, Jerome Bel, and Xavier Le Roy. I remember thinking about how interesting it is that there are so many men in the archive considering how relatively few there are in the field.

Afterward, I went outside and thought about the New York City Ballet rehearsing in the nearby buildings and felt like a failure in some ways but also very inspired and full of big-city-walking-through-an-open-plaza-to-the-subway possibility; like when you pick up rocks on a beach and think about how nice it will be to have them on your windowsill--the potential of having something not have-able.

The other way we could understand this dance is by its subtext which is a list that reads like this:

BODY PART  
SYSTEMS  
SMALL ACTS  
ME TIME  
SEQUES  
HOME DECORATING  
MAMMALS!  
BIRD WATCHING

I haven't gotten to the point where I actually do any bird watching, or what Jenny Odell refers to as "bird-noticing", but I can now acknowledge it as a thing worth doing which I used to not understand at all. This has largely to do with being introduced to my friend Nadir who is a bird watcher. Everything is more interesting to Nadir because of how he bird-notices and therefore how he notices.

Being around him is a little bit like having a kid around who has not yet practiced not seeing things. If I'm seeing a road, he sees a road and the fence and the nest on the fence. I see the fence but miss the nest and the bird standing a few poles down. I see a bunch of trees but he sees four different kinds of birds and explains their pattern of flight. He sees how one has a yellow belly and tells you where it is traveling from. And then he waits and listens to what they are saying.

In 1855, the Yakama Nations were forced off their land by the US government. In 1943, the Department of Energy took part of that land to start the Hanford Works project, a little sister to the Manhattan Project. In 1979, my dad relocated from Texas to rural Washington to work on renewable energy and ended up working on a nuclear waste cleanup site smoking peace pipes with representatives of those tribes.

Later, I would sit and write poetry by a little irrigation ditch that I thought was a beautiful natural stream and it very well may have been at one time. The house I grew up in would be behind me about a mile away on an empty cul de sac: a split level home with crocheted wall hangings that my mom would slowly replace with brass objects.

She was a scientist.

If I had to guess I would say she wanted me to be an artist/scientist/pageantqueen/feminist/supermodel/genius/piano prodigy.

I had flat feet and was the kind of pale girl that frightened people in the 1980's and 90's. My sister was a tan prom princess.

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There is an area of land around the Hanford Nuclear reservation that is called a "security buffer" and also an "involuntary park" In order to protect the nuclear reactors, the land around them has been undeveloped or touched by agriculture since 1943 and then it was turned into a wildlife refuge and national monument in 2000. The security buffer was designated to protect the technology or information or intelligence more so than the people or creatures that might come into contact with that life threatening contamination. But over the decades the birds gathered and now almost 50 endangered or threatened species of animals have taken refuge there.

So of course I wonder,

what has taken refuge in your involuntary park?

2.

## THE VARIATION

I'm 41 years old,  
with a tote bag and an iPhone,  
on my knees.

The truck drives by.

It's very likely that there is a bat or a gun in it.

My mom is on her phone in the house up the street.  
My suitcase is in the room that has the yellow furniture my sister and I  
shared.

The skunks are parading around in the grey trees nearby.

I think about how my dad's eyes were unnervingly steady  
as he held his sandwich and  
explained the calculations for burden and children.

The logic was simple,  
like how families get attached  
to one breed of dogs  
or the alcoholic fathers  
are always the ones to survive car wrecks;

like his own father--  
driving off the road  
with two un-seat belted children in the backseat.  
He was shitfaced.

It was the 1950's.

Looking at his hands holding the bread  
hovering above the fast-food tray,

the scene engulfed me.  
A crack in my own logic--  
silently waiting there for decades--  
said "I fucking told you so" and,  
like an atom, split open.

When we got to the driveway of their house,  
I got out of the car and started walking.  
I walked through the neighborhood,  
down the road,  
and into the Yakima River delta.

3.

# THE RESIDENCY

Today, a day in the year 2021, I found a page out of my dad's pocket calendar that documents him driving out of the South and into the Pacific Northwest by himself. It was an important moment. He left behind his wife and two children, generations of Scottish heritage settlers in Tennessee, as well as a church, a neighborhood, friends, a bridge club, a brother not too far away, and a sick mom who would die in two years.

Houston hadn't worked out. He took four days to make the journey: Lubbock, Gallup, Salt Lake City, and then his new home--Richland, WA--282 miles from Aberdeen, WA where Trisha Brown grew up.

Two days after arriving, written in the calendar in a different color ink and all caps was the word:

SNOW!

and on the next day:

MORE SNOW!

SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
			1		2	3 Going Away Party for me (office)
						4 10:00 am Rob Weichhagen coming over to make family pictures
5	6	7	8	9	10 Veterans Day [Holiday]	11 Veterans Day
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Kelli active 12:00 noon 1:00 pm	Leave Richland, Wash.	travel to Gallup	Drive to SL City	Drive to Richland stay at Nendels Bag	Report for work in Richland move to Nendel's Kitchenette	4-74-3176 SNOW! Nen-Kit
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
MORE SNOW!	Medical Exam 7:45			THANKSGIVING DAY		SKI White Pass stay at village Ivan white Pass
26	27	28	29	30	31	
SKI Drive back to Nendel's Res. Rm	Yfer to Nendel's Kit	Nen-Kit	Nen-Kit	Nen-Kit	3:00 IPMIS Briefing	

Aside from the shape of my body, the way I too can have moments of cruelty that surprise me and a propensity to be gullible, this day planner page is the clearest connection I have been able to find between my father and myself as of late.  
I can see it:

*There he is. Casting out on his own in a blue Oldsmobile, daydreaming about mountains, possibly feeling like he just escaped his life. Untethered. Another self emerging. A hero. A loner. A man in the west! And then it is verified by an act of nature—snow. It was pure and it was true. And the air was a cold shock in his lungs. The earth cracked down and up in the form of mountains instead of spongily slipping into the gulf of Mexico. He is so filled with wonder that he has to go back into his calendar and document this with one word, repeated. He was reborn.*



And so it happens that he disappears, re-merges, and disappears again. Where does he go?

When we are sitting at the table at the fast food restaurant after the salad and after the chicken sandwich, the sun is setting and starts to stream blindingly through the windows. We are silent and looking intently at one another, possibly mistaking sameness for love. You were supposed to be like me, I think he's saying. I am saying, I thought you were like me.

I arrived at the residency in Wyoming the day after my dad took 22 Oxycontin and tried to kill himself. It had been six months since our conversation at Panera. We had only talked once on the phone in a very stilted conversation. My family did not tell me right away and when they did, I had no space with which to make sense of the information. Somewhere between the kneeling at the delta and getting to Wyoming, pieces of myself had started to fit back together, and I let my grasp slip on a lifelong tether to my dad. I was even able to get on a plane and fly to Europe to work for a couple months. As I left Germany for Wyoming, I bought a copy of the art magazine Elephant, feeling kind of fancy and like it was part of preparing for having the residency. I also bought it because there was a series of articles called, "Me, Myself and Art: Creative Wellbeing." Once on the plane, I started to flip through the pages. While I was somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean, reading about artists' interpretations of self-care, my dad got out of bed, went downstairs, and took all the pills in the container. He survived but was institutionalized within a week.

Once in Wyoming, I started to write in the elegant negative space on the pages of Elephant. I had run out of room in my notebooks. In a small way, I felt like a graffiti artist protesting something about how empty white space is supposed to signify taste and importance.

At the residency, on the first day, I went into the giant barn studio to dance and instead sat down and started writing. After eight days, I stood in front of my new friends as well as the staff and curator and read every word, even ones that are no longer here.

At the same time, I had tried to learn Set And Reset off of YouTube. I would place my computer in front of a mirror and hit the spacebar and let the video advance a few frames. I would grasp what I could and move the cursor back and do it again. I did this for about two hours every day until I knew roughly one minute of material from 4 different dancers. This, of course, is nothing like how the dance was actually made or how it is transmitted to dancers when it is restaged. It was just the only thing that made sense at the time.

On my last night there, I walked around in the dark listening to the animals settle in for the night and the creek gurgling in the distance. It was so utterly dark that the stars seemed to drape like fabric across the sky in a way I can only describe as thick. I felt like I was home in the way I always do when I'm in a strange place by myself in the dark.

I could be anyone. And that person could be home.



The sun is hitting the pines and because there is a dust of snow and frost it looks like there are actual diamonds at the top of the grass roofs and on the road. The plumelets just appeared on the gutter road. There was I only thought there were two. Let's call them all CELINE. Celine one, Celine 2, Celine 3. I saw out of notebook paper and can't in good conscience let all the negative space in those beautiful mountains slip to waste. Last night at the gathering a man



want to reach down between your legs to pick up the ball" as he bend over to pick up a ping pong ball that landed near my feet. It was in the midst of a generally awkward meeting that got better as we all drank of cruise Maltys and Theresa lay on the floor underneath the ping pong table rolling a ball back and forth. The obvious progression to Hannah and Noelle's double oscillating paddle version. Tallmaize did