

Listen

a monologue

Speaker:

Female Yellow-Bellied Marmot, 12 years old (lifespan approx. 15 years). She is comfortable with herself and her accomplishments; proud, in a good way. She is sleek-furred, healthy, perhaps quite bunched. Costuming should not stress her animalness (no full-body fur suit), but suggest it.

Setting:

Location Head Smashed In Buffalo Jump.
Time Noon, late July, bright and hazy hot. The rear-projected landscape is grasses and blue sky. A large, elevated, flat rock is front and centre onstage.

Sounds:

Marmot alarm calls (actors can vocalise); Spotted Towhee song (recording)

Marmot speech:

Click-click-click: a 3-pattern “tooth chatter”

Smuck: open-mouthed front tooth suck (with tongue) & sudden release

Kiss-click: YBM's name

[Enter a female Yellow-Bellied Marmot. She moves not with stealth but with grace. She is comfortable in her skin and in her world. She is well-lit in warm light. She enters two-footed, but becomes a four-footed being, and comfortably establishes herself on the sunny rock, stretching/posing for a minute or five. She gradually notices the audience, with a steady, eye-meeting gaze; there is no shyness.]

Yellow-Bellied Marmot:

Oki. Tansi. Bonjour. Guten tag. [Ukrainian] Pryvit. [Tagalog - Filipino] Kamusta.
[Punjabi] Sat Sri Akal. [*Of course, use the languages of your area.*] Hello.

So. You've come to this World Heritage Site for an education. To read the signs and listen to the interpreters. Well, that's not the only way to learn, you know -- looking up to the folks wearing the official red vests, the ballcaps that say “Head Smashed In Buffalo Jump.” I can give you an education.

Don't look so surprised. You think I can't talk, you think I have nothing to say?
Smuck. Maybe you just don't listen well enough.

Let's do this right. I am a yellow-bellied marmot. My name is *Kiss-click*.¹ This is my home; this slope down from the tourist outlook. It stretches from the wild roses by the path, across the junipers, and up to the highest plateau of the rock, above the flowering lupins. It's a good home, and I'm a good mother; I've raised 8 sets of pups

¹ Note: Be prepared - the audience will laugh here. They're already laughing over the “I am a YBM” line. Maybe because I did it dramatically? I don't know, but it caught me off guard.

here, and the hawks have taken very few of them. I've slept through more winters than most marmots: eleven. That's right, eleven times I've bulked up on flowers -- that takes a lot longer than you might think -- but I've bulked up, and gone deep into my burrow with my sister wives and husband, and slowed our heart beats together while the cold descends. And then come back up into this world of the sky, to watch the flax and the buffalo beans blooming. Ah, that's a time! To smell the blossoms, to know the sap is running in the crab apple trees! [*sensual wriggle*] To know the sap is running in my husband! [*locks eyes with someone in the audience, sensual wriggle*] *Click-click-click*. You should come back in the springtime. I can give **you** a good education then! Ah, I'm just teasing!

Lots of people come here, from all over. I see you. I listen, I pick up a few things. That interpreter, Donovan Strikes With a Gun, he's a good one. He points out Vision Quest Hill, and those long porcupine grasses growing where Niitsitaapi used to render the buffalo fat. Important history. But he doesn't tell everything. He never points out my burrows, or the places where my pups play, so he knows what stories to keep secret. That's why I trust him; he knows **respect**.

Speaking of respect, this talking is making me hungry. Did you bring me a gift? A nice fresh egg? Some dried berries? You with the backpack, any apple slices, maybe? Those are all good gifts. A nice change from grass. [*waits, sniffs*] *Smuck*. I see. You're people who don't know how to behave. Well, listen closely. I'll tell you, but I'll only tell you once, and then it's up to you.

SOUND CUE: *Bird-song of the Spotted Towhee. Could have been quietly in the background before, but is now distinct.*

Wait, what's that now? [*listens, nodding*] She didn't! [*listens*] Oh, she **DID**! Yes, I can understand their songs. Some of them. I can't **sing** any Spotted Towhee myself, but I listen, and I'm still learning. It's important to know more than one language, you know. You learn someone's language, you get to know more about the way they see the world.

I know enough to know she has more than one nest, if you know what I mean. [*laughs*] Now you have a story to tell all those bird scientists who believe [*affects a human "scientist" voice*] *the Spotted Towhee takes only one mate throughout the entirety of its life!*

Ah, that's life though. [*looks off-stage*] Ah, there's my husband. Always so vigilant. He's *click-click-click*.² Okay, let me translate that. Remember this now, you may find it useful! How would **you** say *click-click-click*? Probably, [*affected "human" voice*] *I love them so much, I would marry them and spend forever together.* [*laughs*] You talk about love a lot, you people. [*In other "human" voices*] *I love this view! I'd love another coffee!* [*laughs*] But, back to translating. To us Marmot, it's about commitment and attraction, that spring heat. *Click-click-click* is more like: *You're welcome in my burrow even when you stink like shit.* [*laughs*] How was that? Too real for you? We

² Note: The audience intuited what this meant, which surprised me - it got a big "knowing" laugh.

marmots are a very down to earth people. Literally! [*smacks the ground with her front "paw"*] Those burrows are warm and cosy, but not much for air circulation, you know?

Enter pups, playful.

Hibernation is a long time. [*stretches, relaxed pose*]
So, where was I?

Pups approach, swarm about Kiss-click, saying her name. Grooming and nuzzling ensue. Number of pups can be anywhere from three to six.

Ah, my little ones! Not so little any more.

There should be a cuddle tableau, but it is broken when one or more of the pups start trying to breastfeed, even though it is mid-day and they are nearly weaned.

Go find your cousins, you. They're crunching on some grasshoppers down there in the lupins. [*To audience*] Motherhood. It fills your heart, you know. But it's tough on the **teats**.

[Pups begin to scramble away. Calls after] Don't go too far! I saw a coyote --

PUPS: [*alarm whistles, freezing, 1-2 upright - then disappearing during her next lines*]

YBM:

[Tries to calm them] AT DAWN, it's fine, you're safe, I saw the coyote at dawn, it's ok now, you're all safe - ah, they've gone. But they listen, my pups, they're learning, they'll be ok. They'll be ok. [*To audience*] That's the story I tell myself about my children.

Speaking of stories, want to hear what the scientists say about me? *Smuck*. I heard one say, *The yellow-bellied marmot communicates with exactly 6 distinct whistles, all for alerting the colony to dangers. They are also known to make teeth-chattering noises*. In other words, I'm either screaming in fear or stuttering out fucking nonsense. How's that for a story? [*on two feet*] **Imagine, being that arrogant, thinking you completely understand a people when you haven't listened to their stories and barely even recognise a word of their language.**

[settles back down onto rock]

Well, most of your group have moved on already. Thank you for listening. Maybe you can go get yourselves some of that hot coffee you love so much. I'm going to stretch out here for a while. See what I can learn.

[Stretches out; settles; spotlight fades]

Author Note: I wrote this monologue for DRAM 3850 in the summer of 2023 at the University of Lethbridge. The piece was submitted freely to the *Making Treaty 7 Cultural Society* for use in their upcoming Fall 2023 production, and my understanding is the piece has been incorporated into the play as written.

Here follows a closing reflection I submitted on the creative experience, and I include it here out of respect.

**Being Dramatic in a Good Way:
Building Theatrical Performance with *Making Treaty Seven***

Hearing about Métis and Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) culture, land, and language directly from Elders, artists, and knowledge keepers of Treaty 7 offered me a very valuable perspective. As a non-Indigenous, Ontario-born woman, I have lacked the deep knowledge and connections here to be a strong ally. Additionally, witnessing some of the dedication and vulnerability involved in crafting dramatic works, along with the mastery of lighting, sound, and theatrical staging, has enriched my understanding of theatre in ways I don't have the words to express. I am very glad that the University of Lethbridge trusted Dr. Shelley Scott's leadership in creating this unique bridging opportunity. Learning from Caleigh Crow and Marshall Vielle of *Making Treaty 7 Cultural Society* will empower me to approach my work as a university instructor and creative writer on Blackfoot territory with newfound understanding, compassion, and commitment to growing as an ally.

First and foremost, I heard about the value of the land; how it supports and nourishes all of us, from the smallest of our relations (insects, atoms?) to the largest (ancient trees, mountains?), and how we can and should acknowledge it every day. I learned how Blackfoot and Métis cultures recognise the world as a constantly-in-flux network of relations – not only to one another (ie., one's community) but to the land (including animals and plants) – and that many of the traditions are for perpetuating those relations to foster the ongoing health of all. By actively listening to the stories, lifestories, songs, and teachings while standing in sacred places like Head Smashed in Buffalo Jump and Writing on Stone, and in contrived historical spaces like Tzintland / Fort Whoop Up, I was invited to bridge the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, between past and present, and between stranger and ally. As a result, I leave this class with greater admiration and respect for Blackfoot territory.

But it was more than just being on the land. It was also story, song, and dance that helped me to learn. Our classroom was opened to several guests: Elders Joyce Healy, Harley Bastien, and Shirlee Crow Shoe; Actor Michelle Thrush, Artist Dr. Miguelzinta Solís, Knowledge Keeper William Singer III, Dancer Sandra Lamouche, Guides Donovan Strikes With a Gun and Blair Many Fingers, Singers Olivia Tail Feathers, Amethyst First Rider, and

Stephanie Brave Rock, and lastly Josephine Mills, Danielle Clarke, and Danielle Heavy Head of Mootookakio'ssin. All of these guests played important roles in building our understanding of theatre, cultural knowledge, or the two entwined. It helped me to understand that the expertise of an artist goes beyond their technical skill; it is a means of conveying a story, and can be used as cultural outreach for changing all who experience it and healing our relations.

My personal journey of working with MT7 has inspired me to find my own unique voice, which I can use to help create a safe space in my classrooms for recognising Indigenous voice and knowledge. This past semester was difficult, with Residential School denialist Frances Widdowson having been invited (by her personal friend) to speak at the University of Lethbridge. In order to address the issues, I pivoted my Academic Writing class to studying the writings of Dr. Leroy Little Bear and James Youngblood Henderson, and was lucky enough to get spirited, informed engagement from many of the students. I opened up successive spaces in class discussion and reflection writing for my Quest for Success class in the Indigenous Student Success Program, and again, students were engaged, but overall I felt inadequate as an instructor and worried that I could have done more in that situation. In short, part of what I have learned from this experience is a better understanding of my power as an ally, and am grateful for the opportunity to have worked closely with all of these remarkable individuals. I, too, am in flux - changing, growing, and not the same person I was even a few short weeks ago.

Last of all, a word to all of my newest relations. Each of my fellow students in this journey have shared of themselves and been open to collaboration beyond all my expectations. This course and this experience would not have been what it was to me if you had not been a part of it. Tracy, Robin, Schyler, Maya, Nic, Davina, Andi, Jackson, Desiree, Harley, Keely, and Tobi: you have my gratitude.