

TEETH
IN A HYENA'S FACE
ALWAYS SLIDE INTO PLACE

by
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Libretto and Dramatic Notes

The arc

The piece is in one gesture, in which Alvina changes her perspective from “I know what happened” to “You can’t make me look at this.” Dramatically it arcs from slowish-musing to faster, fortissimo dramatic sounds, to a thinned out, constrained and tense ending in which she is overwhelmed and trying to block out or manage the facts.

The plot

Alvina starts by stating a proverb – a kind of ‘wishful thinking’ that it might explain her situation, but which is just ‘well-dressed’ denial. As she says it aloud, she remembers / hears some of the deeply upsetting things that she needs to process: the disturbing truth surfaces from her memory, with all its pain and confusing attached. As the contradictions between what she would like to be true and all that she feels and remembers appear, she becomes more upset. Her emotional tension increases until she arrives at the key issue -- her relationship with her mother, and the possible causes of her mother’s death -- at which point she has to block out her memory of her mother’s pain and suffering.

Text and drama: detail level by rehearsal letter

BEGINNING: m. 0 – 18: There are 4 seconds of pick-up, marked by the click track, before the first note of the piece. Alvina starts with some introductory music and complaining sounds.

The performance space is fairly dark -- much darker than in a normal recital -- with enough desk lights on the piano so that it’s possible to perform.

Alvina walks onstage to the piano a bit slowly, with visible exhaustion. There is no ‘pep’ in her stride. She makes no eye contact with the audience. She slumps onto the piano bench and pauses for a bit longer than is comfortable, maybe 10 seconds. (The pianist must make a gesture to cue the audio operator to start the audio. She’ll hear 4 seconds of pick-up clicks, and then the first note of the piece on the fifth click.)

m. 1: With a snarl of disappointment on her face, Alvina leaps into action. She stops G5 and bangs on it.

m. 2: “Sh-oo!” (as if spitting out a bad spirit).

m. 5: “uhgh” (exhausted)
 m. 6 -9: she stands and scrapes a bass string, focusing intently on the dark sound.
 m. 9 - 12: She hears bamboo wood chimes and her mood quickly lightens. She sits, and plays some wistful chords and hums along, ending with a lovely auto-harp chord.
 m. 12 - 13: she hears an echo-y rattle which returns her to her prior dark mood. She stands and returns to scraping the bass string, even more intently.
 m. 13- 18: the scrape gets louder this time, slows down and reaches a sharp, very loud conclusion, which coordinates exactly with the sound of paper crumpling. She sits down, relieved.

A: starts at 1’ 12” m. 18 – 34.

She declaims the text in a neutral to cheerful tone, over the course of a 2nd minute. The tone of the passage is, that everything is in its place, there are no problems. She says, “Teeth in a hyena’s face always slide into place,” which might be the thesis of this piece.

m. 19: she says, “Teeth.” Confidently, almost cheerfully.
 m. 20 “I-n-nah”, and accompanies herself on the keyboard.
 m. 21: “uh”
 m. 22-23: “hy-e-na’s face”
 m. 24: “Hyena’s face”
 m. 30: (confidently) “Always”
 m. 31: “Sliiide”
 m. 32: “in-to...place.”

B: starts at 2’ 16” m. 35 – 45.

She riffs on the proverb, exploring small punning fantasies from the sounds, perhaps doubting the meaning, like when she says ‘to’ and in her mind hears ‘two, three.’ She hears small, syncopated & warped prepared piano sounds, plays small gentle phrases with them then expands the sound-world with ‘the autoharp’ and ends with a sweeping, dramatic rolled A minor 7 chord which launches the next section.

m. 35, “Teh!” (as in the first sound in ‘teeth’)
 m. 36: “Shh-UH, Teeth” (exhaling, restating the topic)
 m. 38: “Teh! Fuh!” then hum.... (re-trying the phonemes...)
 m. 39: “Teh! Uh!” (phoneme. The ‘uh’ is voiced in the throat, with air pushed up from the bottom of diaphragm; a sound like one might make from mild to moderate pain.)
 m. 40: “Puh! Suh-UH!” (The ‘Puh’ is airy. The ‘Suh’ is hissy; accent on the ‘uh’; crescendo into the ‘uh’)
 m. 41: hum.
 m. 42: “In!”
 m. 43: “to....Puh!”
 m. 44: “Place! Puh-lace” (now we know why she’s been saying ‘puh’)

C: starts at 3’ 00”. m. 46 – 59.

She resets herself, and recites the proverb a second time, reaching for the same confident, secure tone. She says, “Teeth, in a hyena’s face, always...” and mid-phrase the doubting voices in the fixed audio / her mind intrude. Instead of completing the proverb she flashes back to a hymn, sung by a female voice, with a wobbly distorted piano accompaniment. It is the traditional hymn ‘Open My Eyes’ by Clara Scott. The connection that triggers the memory is saying the word, “always.” It reminds Alvina of “Open,” the first word of the hymn. We in the audience can’t necessarily identify all the words – they’re too quiet and garbled.

Verse 1:

“Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key,
That shall unclasp and set me free;”

m. 46-7, She restarts, dramatically. “Teeeeeth!” A pitched downward glissando supports her effort to invest in the proverb. (as she is saying, “I NEED to believe in this, and so do you”).

m. 47: “iiinnn a” (her doubts surface in the fixed audio).

m. 48: “hyena’s face”.

m. 48-9: “always” (hymn starts, with the text, ‘Open my eyes...’)

m. 49 -50: “Sliii-Duh” (‘that I may see...’)

m. 51: “into”

m. 52: (‘glimpses of truth’ ... and she accompanies the hymn with autoharp) “puh-lace”.

m. 53: “Puh-lace” (hymn continues, and she continues to accompany it).

m. 55: “Puh-lease” (as in ‘lease’ – a contract).

m. 56 – 59: “Pah! Puh! Puh! Zzuh! Sliiiii—duh!” (while continuing to accompany hymn)

D: starts at 3’ 57” m. 60 – 72.

Alvina repeats, ”Free”, from the hymn. She is moving closer to the interior world, responding to it.

She reviews verse 1: (in the fixed media)

“Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key,
That shall unclasp and set me free;”

As the text goes by she wearily and perhaps reluctantly plays with the sounds, the phonemes, avoiding some upset. She makes more sounds inside the piano and incorporates some of the sounds from the proverb, but feels disturbed. She repeats the word “Free?”, inhales noisily, and then says, ‘Breathe’ to herself, coaching herself into calm.

m. 60 (tentative resolution: the hymn verse ends on the word ‘free’. Relieved, she says, “Free.” And secures the position with 2 Eb autoharp chords.

m. 61: “Free?” (she immediately questions it. The hymn resumes with ‘Open my eyes’ again.)
m. 62- 63: despairing, she says, “Eye, eye, eye, eye....” And makes a tense sound with the glass bottle on the strings.
m. 65: After the hymn says, ‘glimpses of truth’, she says, with coy sarcasm, “Sly!”, using a phoneme from the proverb to throw shade on the hymn that she cannot get out of her head.
m. 67-69: “Teh!” (distainfully), then “Eye, eye, eye” (wearily.), then ‘ALLways (resentfully).
m. 70-71: She expresses how irked she feels by squeaking the tuning rubber on the strings, and when the hymn gets around to the word, ‘free’, again, she asks, again: “Free?”

E: starts at 4’ 53.” mm. 73- 84.

The memory of the hymn comes closer – we can hear the words better.

Verse 2:

“Open my ears, that I may hear
Voices of truth Thou sendest clear;
And while the wave notes fall on my ear,
Ev’rything false will disappear.”

Alvina moans: she feels more tired and emotionally drained. She plays more inside the piano, making bigger sounds, recklessly. The happy optimism of the hymn she’s remembering grates, and contrasts too sharply with current world’s recent misery as Alvina has experienced it. Without looking directly at the current plague, she considers one slightly removed: Hookworm.

m. 73: emotionally exhausted, she inhales sharply and then coaches herself, saying, “Breathe....”, squeaks some more inside the piano, and the hymn returns with a clearer voice, which Alvina finds annoying: a song she cannot get out of her head is pursuing her attention.

m. 75: wearily, “Eye, eye, eye, eye, eye....” And annoyed, she switches to more percussive sounds,

m. 77: getting to scraping the credit card on the key edges, as loudly as possible. And saying, “Fffffuh!” This is completely unvoiced, just air.

m. 78: in response to the hymn’s ‘voices of truth’, she says, “uch!” (unconnected to the sound in m. 77!) the ‘ch’ is soft, and sounds like the first phoneme in ‘challah’. IPA: $\Lambda\chi$.
M 79: sim.

m. 80: she continues with an energetic, perhaps angry groan. She plays energetically and in m.83 says: “Sliiii-dz!” as the hymn’s verse ends, with a characteristically utopian, evangelical assertion. As the verse ends, she relaxes, and suddenly remembers that hookworm has returned in Mississippi.

F: starts at 5’ 36”. m. 84 – 96.

Seemingly out of the blue, Alvina exclaims ‘Hook!’ Her attention is shifting to her Mom, and Mom’s childhood -- in which the parasite hookworm played a key

role -- and hookworm's recent resurgence. She muses, plays inside the piano, and sirens seep into her memory. She groans under the weight of the suffering. As the memory of the verse rolls around to 'let me prepare' she relaxes enough to sit and play the piano keyboard, creating a contrapuntal accompaniment that continues past the last phrase of the verse.

Verse 3:

Open my mouth, and let me bear
Gladly the warm truth ev'rywhere;
Open my heart and let me prepare
Love with Thy children thus to share;

m. 85: she says, "Hook!" with a similar cheerful and reassured tone that she had for the proverb, at the beginning of the piece. We are learning that she finds cynical, dark thoughts reassuring.

m. 86-87: the hymn says 'Open my mouth' and she parodies it by saying, laconically, "Mow-ooth!", then she sings/ says "Teeth!" with relief. (She continues to remember the hymn, and comment on it, instead of feeling its contents.)

m. 88: "Hook!" (same way as in m 85, just a half-step lower)

m. 89: "Te, te, te, te TO" This can have the tone of a 'last effort' before giving up. The hymn's text is 'warm truth everywhere'. She is perhaps discouraged by the way that has not been the case around her recently.

m. 90-91: "ALL," and then "uch" and a final "uch". She is overwhelmed with discouragement and tries a new tack – playing the keyboard.

m. 92: she stops talking and muttering and just plays the keyboard along with the increasingly distorted hymn. She might focus intently on the keyboard as she does this.

m. 93-97: the piano part increases rapidly in volume and complexity as the hymn falls apart, crescendo-ing to m. 97.

G: starts at 6' 26" mm. 97 – 109.

As Alvina continues to play the piano she exclaims "Hookworm!" again, accompanied by sirens, then "Hookworm is back!". The siren is cut off by the sound of tearing paper or fabric, and Alvina switches to playing a sad tonal chord progression. She hears her Mom say, "She wrote, shoes on, shoes on..." and replies tenderly, "Shoes, Mom, Shoes, Shoes on, Shoes Mom, Shoes." (One wears shoes to avoid contracting hookworm from soil.)

m. 97: she arrives at a grand and dramatic Db64 arpeggio, after which she says, triumphantly, "Hook-worm!" but internally she 'plays' a siren in the fixed media.

m. 98-99: she plays gentle music on the keyboard, to go along with the crescendo-ing siren in her mind.

m. 100: she arrives at a particularly gentle passage and cheerfully announces, "Hookworm is back!" and the siren continues to get louder.

m. 101-102: as she plays gentle music, the siren crescendos to a 'FF,' she switches to an even more gentle thing on the keyboard and her mental audio switches to the sound of paper tearing up.

m. 102: The music she plays on the keyboard and that she hears in in mind is now nothing but soothing descending chords, paving the way for

m. 103: she hears / remembers her mom saying, “She wrote, shoes on, shoes on...” to which she replies
m. 104-107: as tenderly as possible, “Shoes Mom, Shoes...”. She and her mom exchange the words for a few measures.
m. 108: the chord progression ends, and she says, “Hook!, puh!” The ‘puh’ is almost just an exhale, as she transitions away from that topic.
m. 109: she says, “Shew!” with a lot of air and relief as she tries to get her mind off her mom. (and all that pain and suffering?)

H: starts at 7’ 14” mm. 110 - 127

Alvina switches topics slightly, perhaps remembering the pandemic, and says, “Mask, gloves” and remembers a too-sweet lullaby-like tune. She accompanies it on the keyboard. Mom’s voice, repeating “She wrote, shoes on, shoes on....” returns, but so does the ambulance siren. Agitated, Alvina whispers the text to the ‘lullaby’: “Close your eyes, and let them die.” (Which is what one must do, to let ‘the teeth slide into place’). As the sirens wail, Alvina rigidly and tensely comforts herself by focusing very intensely on playing the piano. The sirens sweep upward, as if ascending to heaven. This is the key moment of the piece.

m. 110: She looks up, perhaps directly at the audience, pauses and tries to be in the present moment, which is in the height of the pandemic, where she lives. (You might need a fermata here, to assist this transition, which will require the fixed media be paused.) With resignation and maybe a bit cautiously, she says, “Mask, gloves”. She could look directly at the audience to do this, or at a box of masks, and a box of gloves. If there is time, she could pick them up, pause and put them down. At the end of m. 110 the fixed audio resumes, with a new perhaps slinky tune. At this point she returns to playing the piano, numbly, without affect, disconnected, and continues through m.113.

m. 114 -115: she repeats, “Mask, gloves” a bit earnestly, and plays a more complex accompaniment to the tune in the fixed media, which is also more complex.

m. 116: she starts to whisper the text to the tune in the fixed media, “Close your eyes”, as Mom’s voice returns, saying, ‘She wrote, shoes on, shoes on.’

m. 117: the rest of the phrase, “and let them die.”

The sentence is a bit of a ‘death sentence,’ with an edge of repressed horror, that results from witnessing trauma without being able to take any action or prevent events – a bystander hurt.

m. 118- 120: she repeats the sentence, more forcefully, no longer whispering, while also crescendo-ing into a big cadenza-like phrase over the siren which is also getting quite loud.

m. 121-126: piano solo continues and eases up as the sirens in her memory sweep upward.

m. 127: a barely recognizable garbled recording of some Josquin fades up in the fixed media.

I: starts at 8’ 17.” mm. 128-147.

Alvina abruptly stops play the keyboard. Fending off terror, Alvina exclaims, defensively, perhaps a bit too loudly “Although Mother’s urn was heavy, I had to watch it

closely to make sure it didn't fly off the shelf." She stands and returns to playing the inside of the piano, with sharp bowed sounds. As she does so we hear the backdrop of some old warbly recording of Josquin, juxtaposed with (her memory of) the sound of her mom's last gurgling breathes. She returns to the keyboard, playing a soothing, if sad, tonal chord progression, saying again, "To make sure.... To make sure... it didn't fly off the shelf. Fly....." At the same time, her mother exclaims, "Oh! Oh!", "No, no, no", "Hurry up, hurry up!", "Hurry on, shurion, hurry on...", "Oh, hurry up....", The sirens and upward sweeping sounds return.

m. 128 - 129: she completes the phrase at the keyboard, and she says, in an officious and defensive tone, perhaps masking guilt, "Although mother's urn was heavy, ..." (The wobbly Josquin becomes clearer.)

m. 129-131: "I had to watch it closely," and bows Ab3, and squeaks the tuning rubber on the strings. In M. 131 we hear / she remembers her mom's guttural wheeze from her last days.

m. 132 - 133: she continues a bit more fondly, "to make sure...." Mom wheezes, and then she bows the Ab again, "it didn't..."

m. 134 - 136: "fly-y.... off.... the shelf" (the pitch of 'the shelf' can perhaps be a bit unnaturally higher, to unsettle the sentence, which describes a physically impossible / fantasy situation.). As she ends her sentence, she quickly scrapes some upper strings with a credit card to make a harsh sound at the very moment Mom wheezes again.

m. 137 - 138: she softens and makes 'sweeter' / tonal, more conciliatory, connected sounds, as the sounds in her memory crescendo.

m. 139 - 140: sticking to her story, she continues: "to make sure" with more gentle (sad?) chords...while Mom exclaims, 'Oh!' three times, loudly.

m. 141- 142: Mom exclaims, "No! No! No!" and Alvina continues her downward chord progression, saying, "it didn't... fly-y.... off the shelf."

m. 142- 143: Mom replies, 'Hurry up! Hurry up!' and Alvina ends her piano phrase with a single F natural, then stands, glisses on the strings and repeats, loudly, "Fly---off", as if restating it will make it true. The sound of sirens leaks in.

m. 144: Mom continues with some lovely made-up words, "hurry-in, shur-rion, hurrion."

m. 145 - 146: Alvina continues flatly, declaratively, "the shelf." While Mom says, 'shur-rion' and then, 'Oh! And 'hurry up!' We hear the swirl of approaching sirens and squealing birds, getting louder in Alvina's mind.

m. 147: the sirens get loud and Alvina plays a Bb (pizz) and says, with all her energy, (maybe with eyes closed?) "Fly—y", willing Mom onwards.

J: starts at 9' 49" mm. 148- 155 (end).

Alvina, stops the top note on the piano and plays it over and over again, as if to block out her mother's voice and all the other upset evoked by the sounds (and images). She stops tapping when her mom starts to speak. Mom's last words are, "I couldn't get an appointment."

m. 148-m 155:

as if she were holding her hands to her ears to block out the sound, Alvina goes to the highest note on the keyboard – a C -- and plays it as loudly as possible in exact sixteenth

notes, while also stopping the string, to make a choaked thumping sound. The damper pedal is down, providing resonance for the basically unpitched sound. She does this with terrified focus as the sirens and birds fade out, and stops on the 3rd beat of measure 154, at which point Mom says, somewhat matter-of-factly, ‘I couldn’t get an appointment.’ Alvina goes limp, expressionless, stares into the middle distance, drained, drops one of her tools – maybe a tuning wedge? - onto the strings, maybe takes off her gloves? and then wanders off-stage, stunned.

The back story on Hookworm: Hookworm was endemic in many southern U. S. rural communities starting from the time when that part of North America was initially colonized with poor people (‘waste people’) exported from England, and dooming many generations of people to anemia, respiratory diseases, intellectual disability and grinding poverty. It was a defining condition for Southern culture but was ‘eradicated’ in the early/ mid 20th century. One of the ways to avoid catching hookworm is to wear shoes rather than go barefoot.

Unfortunately, in the last decade it has resurged in counties in which the cost of a basic sewage connection has increased beyond working poor people’s means. The fee increases come from state government decisions to not provide funding for waste water treatment programs to poor counties. Without the state funding, the poor counties had to increase their connection fees drastically, forcing many poor residents to not have a connection at all, leaving many homes full of a wide range of dangerous parasites and bacteria, including hookworm.

Alvina experiences it as an example of “Teeth sliding into place.”

“The Heavy Toll of the Black Belt’s Wastewater Crisis” by Alexis Okeowo. New Yorker, November 23, 2020.

“White Trash: The 400-Year History of Class in America” by Nancy Isenberg. 2017.