

Thresholds, Episode Five – Dissonance

Dolly Menna-Dack: Hi I'm Dolly, the clinical bioethicist and the youth engagement strategy lead at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital. You're listening to *Thresholds*, a new Koffler Digital podcast produced by Maya Bedward, in collaboration with members of Holland Bloorview's Youth Advisory Council. Presented in five parts, each episode of *Thresholds* explores the experiences of these youth with disabilities as they transition into the adult world. In this episode, we'll be listening to Logan and Lexin in their piece entitled "Dissonance."

(pause)

Lexin Zhang: *There is a war, isn't there?*

Everything is okay the past was bombed

Is this joy? No happiness, no, no I don't think so

Can I belong to you? the child asks.

(slow intense music)

Logan Wong: So, my name's Logan and I'm commenting on Lexin's written piece. It's about the lying and shame and community and growing up in a world that isn't as accepting and comfortable as we'd hope.

(pause, slow music continues)

Lexin: (sounds of a forest, birds and insects chirping, light wind, a stream flowing)

'what is this' the silence asks

preservation, of course

clutched in my lungs.

I run my fingers through blustering wind, (wind sounds, rustle of woods)

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and the woods sway

'there is a war, isn't there?' everything is okay.

the past was bombed

'is this joy? no happiness, no, no I don't think so'

(woods ambience) "Can I belong to you?" the child asks "Nan said belonging is a home where you find love and safety. Can you be my home? Can I be yours?"

"You shouldn't be in these wild woods" I say, "go look for somewhere safe – not the village – a bird's nest perhaps, in the yolk of a speckled-shelled egg (bird sound subtle, crack of shell) do not destroy it. (fade in music) Do not create a new world. You will be safe then. Leave me be, I am searching for relief." I say the child wonders out loud "I think I'd be rather lonely, surrounded by soft yellow.

You speak like me - our voices must come from the same place! From whales deep in the ocean. Whales that want to be heard real badly. That's why my voice sounds like it's fighting its way out all the time."

I try not to choke my reality with angular wrists and focused fingers. The child exclaims "Your hands are like mine too! I've never met someone like me before! Do you get to do what everyone else does? Get a job in a tall city? Take the long train? (train, city sounds) Kiss a person you love? (silence) Do you get to be seen? I would like to be seen" (music fades into birds chirping and forest)

"What silly questions!" I say, "What silly questions" The village doesn't say out loud.

I have let the village determine me; I wear it like skin I hurt less this way, I think

I cannot look at the child just as I cannot watch myself in a river of white lilies.

'what is this? Is this chaos?' the silence asks I think it is dissonance, yes, I can hear it echo back. Like pie crust, my face crumbles (crumbling sound) from my face. A garden shucked; left with my body of rotten weeds. I desperately shove the hideous under a bursting tarp. The cave swallows.

(sounds intensify, thunder rumbles, a storm approaching)

I hold a crooked splayed hand to the air and wonder what the sky is still so upset about wonder why this crooked hand feels like a close enemy. The lonely whale in my throat

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swells, and wails. (whale sound)

I take out (noises calming) a stick of gum from my pants pocket, soft from the heat of my spasming leg.

Before me, the gum rested in the knothole of large old oak tree.

I forget for a moment, I don't do anything, I just chew, (silence) which is good, until I realize I can't chew forever.

Silence rips (woosh, rip sounds followed by moment void of sound) through the woods, *'Are you allowed to be human?'* It asks. (music picks back up) Does this pain make me more human or less, or is it too human and then it becomes alien? Am I what disables me? If not, who am I without it?

(music fades a little, soft ringing sound) "what is this screaming pain?" asks the child rubbing sleep from their eyes "what is this ebbing loneliness?"

Everyone is so far away, why am I still? oh, right, I cannot run anymore

"what is this screaming pain? I do not want it" the child says again "You need it to grow", I say.

The child scrunches their face, "What if I don't want to grow up? What then?"

(background sound stops, pause)

I look up at the child. Oh, there is a wildfire in these woods. (fire sound) I stumble out from the smoke to whispers of the barb-wired village sitting on the horizon. Only an alluring swamp (squelchy sounds) witnesses the child clutched in my arms. The swamp drags grief across my limbs, makes me want to fold towards the earth. I can feel the child's soft pants against my chest. The air presses on my skin. "What is this?" I ask the silence. *'This is shame.'* says the silence.

"What is shame?" asks the child. "I'm not sure," I say, "I think it is (music begins again) feeling like you need to be worth all the pain and suffering you cause – feeling like you need to be worth all the lives that weren't lived because of you. It's birthed from the village, before it's inside you. It grows in the space between words, stories of fear. It feeds on the fear of our different dance, and the whales in our throats. (whale sound) It's from being mistakenly held so tight that the world feels like a gun that's too loose. Then, you don't dare to hope, hope that you get to do what everyone else does; get a job

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in a tall city; take the long train; love deeply. It makes you feel wrong, like all you can do is make mistakes, like you are *the* mistake. It makes you feel worthless, I guess.” (music stops) “Shame hurts the people around you, and it hurts when people are around, which is why I wished for you to leave me. But, I think, isolation, that is death too.”

(eerie sound effect, whale sound)

Behind us the woods burned and devoured itself. (crashing branches, fire crackles)

The child heaves, thrashes, and sobs in my arms. I want to leave my skin, but I can't.

Where do we go from here? I think.

I shut my eyes and speak into the child's hair, "If you are my home and I am yours, and home is where you are loved and safe, then we will make a place that is safe for us. We will make the village safe for us. That is the only way."

(music effects slow, piano keys fade into birds chirping, gong sounds)

(a moment of silence)

Logan: My first impression of Lexin's work is that it's very emotional and very raw which I think is very important in storytelling but also it's supposed to be a metaphor for not belonging in a place and feeling like you should belong somewhere but you just don't and like feeling like those feelings and being able to talk to somebody that either understands those feelings or just have some type of solidarity within that experience. I feel like finding connection and community and any space, whether it be this metaphor of the wood and the village is very important. So, people could find their chosen family and friends relating it to like being trans, I think that if it wasn't for finding fellow trans people, I wouldn't have access to the same information and the same emotional and spiritual support in terms of shared experiences. I think this part about the village being unsafe reminds me of like how even in the queerest of spaces sometimes it can feel unsafe and having a community behind you and having chosen family and friends in that space can mitigate those feelings but also not always. So, it just felt like a reminder that not all the community spaces are going to be as safe as they say they are. Not everyone in society is going to be great and wonderful and understanding and accepting

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and I think that this piece shows that we're not always going to be faced with these like rainbows and sunshine. Sometimes it's going to be very difficult to be who you are.

(pause, music intensifies, echoes and fades out)

Dolly: Thank you for listening to *Thresholds*, this podcast is created by Koffler Digital. Produced by Maya Bedward. Ben Wood is our recording engineer. Music and sound design by Laura Dickens. I'm Dolly Menna-Dack, clinical bioethicist and the youth engagement strategy lead at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital. You can learn more about this project at koffler.digital/thresholds