

2022 Lofty's Speech

Smiling with no teeth

Charlie Freedman

At the start of this week a friend messaged me to say:

“Had a dream last night that you started a school for dentists at WTS because you had this really inspiring experience at the dentist.”

Short of asking my friend, I wondered how this would manifest in real life.

I've been desperate to find the romance but it's become a bit long in the tooth.

I messaged another friend who studied dentistry to ask “where is the poetry in a root canal?”

He never replied.

It is I would say unashamedly unpoetic. Entirely utilitarian, exceptionally painful.

Someone told me recently that it was common in Victorian England for many people, particularly young women, to have all their teeth removed and fitted with a new set of dentures, the cheapest way to smile a perfect smile.

On the other hand, my friend Lionel just simply has no teeth. Not by design, but from a lifetime of...

He calls me this morning as I'm writing this sentence.

“Can you tell that Darren guy that I can't meet up with him this morning, cos I'm going to the dentist today in Brisbane, I forgot I had this appointment.”

“I thought you were going to Cherbourg.”

“Na I can't because I'm getting my new teeth today. Well actually they don't call it new teeth, they call it dense”

“Dense, right. Will you walk out with them today?”

“Probably not. They just get you in because they wanna talk all the time. I miss my teeth.”

Lionel asks me, “do you notice the different between a no teeth speaker, a gum speaker and a speaker with teeth?”

Before I can answer he says, “I notice the windbreak and the soundwaves.”

“Yeah I’ve noticed how some people have just a couple of teeth, and you can hear a whistle when they talk, depending on which words they’re pronouncing. I think it sounds powerful, sometimes I think you just talked so much your teeth fell out.”

Lionel tells me about no teeth solidarity, he likes his soundwave too, he’s not sure about a new set.

“You know I’m writing a speech about teeth right now.”

“A speech? Well you know I wrote a poem about teeth.”

I think to myself wow, that’s dense. What a thick and heady morning, racking my brains for the poetry in a root canal.

And then I think again, wow, that’s precisely the problem, the poetry is not within you, it’s around you. It’s not something you can search for with intention like that, it’s something you have to just be open to.

Poetry doesn’t happen in isolation, it happens...

Well yes, firstly, it happens. It’s not written as we sometimes like to think it is, it is not the outcome of writing. It is not a poem.

Poetry is something that happens, it is in itself an act.

It is something that happens a lot when we are radically open. Open to the infinite possibilities, potentiality of poetics.

Here especially, to remain open is to feel all the complexity of being responsive to the conditions of existing here.

But equally, to be eternally and exclusively responsive is to absolve some of the responsibility of taking a position.

So when there’s an infected nerve in the root of the tooth, we respond by cleaning the canal.

I wonder if we shouldn’t just pull it out.

Lionel is often levelled as a radical in many ways.

His openness, more than his staunch politics, his speeches, relentless activism, or even in his poems, his openness precedes all of it.

A mouth without teeth is the most open of all...

Before I close I want to share a few thanks for those who've really shared this ride at the carnival that is WTS.

There is a kind of uncanny theme of partnership or co-directorship as we like to say here, to these thank you's so please be warned.

Firstly to Zoya and Frankie who's orientation was enormously generous, expansive and minutely detailed. All of their labour, emotionally and professionally is deep in the bones of this place and they guided my landing with a special grace.

Bec and Nelson found Marti and a home in the beginning, and took us in purely on the trust afforded to WTS recruitment. They are testament to an unspoken faith in WTS, that we rely on it in ways we don't always like to articulate. It holds, inspires, shapes and gives to a community here that for Marti and I was imagined until we got here, and then became explicit in ways we could never have imagined. Their openness to us is imprinted in our hearts forever.

Beth and Gabe

Your love and ideas, love of ideas, your ideal love has been as impactful as any relation I've known. It's completely held me, grounded my thinking and imagination and equally fired it skyward in opportune moments. I am and WTS will continue to be indebted to your care for this space.

Vito and Declan

Artists who consider the collective as central to their practice.

You bring a rare spirit to this place, to organising, making it feel whole in every way.

Hannah and Jorgen

Two radical geographer rat bags that taught me so much about the social function of a space like this. They came for lunch all the time when I started, long lunches that would inevitably sprawl into working bees, cinema building, gardening and letter writing. It was a really generative and informative time, their love and support for WTS is impenetrable. since my very first day have been ever-present in all the machinations of this place, great and small. For both of them their touch is light, by light I mean light in mind, it's delivery is thick and rich, dense. This cinema, and this garden, a new building. Little Bands, Board meetings and constant supporting of new staff structures and relationships.

Bridget and Kumalie

Kumalie for being ever-present, forever giving with language and counsel on how things work in here.

Forever welcoming us, hosting us, patiently in conversation.

The way you outmanoeuvre the colonial project is a dazzling dance, I hope we stay on hand to support you.

Thank you for bringing WTS along for that ride, as chair of our First Nations advisory group.

Bridget and I were the first co-directors of this place, an almighty administrative mess at times, but never a dull moment in programming.

Within WTS there's now a language school, a zine shop, travelling artist curriculums...

They're an inimitable force, much missed in this town, but a lasting impact that continues to inspire.

More recently Tim and Caddie for inspiring so eloquently, intelligently the articulation of a WTS future.

And to Saar for being so ready in their blue gown, ready to take the scalpel and facilitate the next generation of WTS dentists.

My biggest thanks goes to someone who is eternally giving. Not just to me or to our friend in her belly, but to WTS. Feeding everyone at the Walk-In every month, photographing every event and exhibition, packing up after every opening, she's a legend of the game, un or rarely sung heroism. The total inspirational force that is Marti.

This is inevitably incomplete, and I'm pushed for time only because I wasted so much thinking about the poetry in dental health.

To all of the studio artists, exhibiting and residency artists, curatorial and board members and volunteers, and the countless adjacents that have orbited WTS in the past three years, thank you for keeping WTS open, radically.

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So Saar, whenever you think this job is like pulling teeth, remember that that is the point. Pull them all out.

Teeth only get in the way of a good smile.

Finally, I like how Lionel introduces me,

“this is Charlie. He works at Watching this Space in Alice Springs.”

The doing becomes the thing you're doing it at.

All defined in itself as a place of activity, a place that's been completely joyous and radically imaginative, politically uplifting and socially crippling to work here. A school for dentists to practice a quick and painless, yet entirely poetic removal of all obstacles in the orifice, so that we

can enjoy this emotional and intellectual feast, but one that is so sweetly soft that we can chew freely without teeth.