

**Fire Flower:**  
**The Magic of the Narrative Space**

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## I. ABSTRACT

One of the most important and influential aspects of my life has been my relationship with a highly creative and magical girl named Kalyn, who I met when I was in preschool and have remained best friends with. The basis of our relationship has always been a fascination with magic, beauty, and storytelling. On almost every occasion, Kalyn and I could be found searching for portals to other realms, dreaming of dragons and ghosts, and creating new personas for ourselves.

These portals always seemed to ultimately evade us, so when we were about 12, we created our own portal. This came in the form of a story called “Into the Land of Brinn”. The story detailed our adventure into another dimension where we were princesses (and later goddesses) meant to save a magical world from destruction. The stories we wrote, especially “Brinn”, grew with us and changed. We continued to define our identities with our alter egos--a Tiger and a Wolf. These stories remained important stepping stones in our relationship as well as our personal growth.

I’ve attempted to take the story of “Brinn”, as well as Hi-8 video footage of other stories we created as children, and create an experimental vision of children’s narratives and the way that imagination changes over time. My goal with this piece is to remind viewers of the importance of fantasy and narrative, as well as provide a portrait of Kalyn’s and my relationship. I hope that this work can exist as a visual representation of not only the stories, but the elements existing beneath them. There is something particularly magical and powerful that happens when two children create together, and I aim to capture this magic visually and create an experience that is intimate, fun, and visually delightful.

The accompanying paper explores the way that these stories emerge as cathartic works. My research has focused primarily on the way that children use stories to cope with and control uncertain realities. It will also provide more insight into Kalyn’s and my relationship and our use of storytelling and “Brinn”. I’ve provided interviews with my family members to further the exploration of our home-movies. My process, which was an attempt to get into the spontaneous mindset of a child once again, is detailed here as well.

## II. A NARRATIVE SPELL

The power of narrative is undeniable, shaping our lives in ways that we do not fully recognize or appreciate. Since our realistic perception of time is focused within the present, with imperfect recollections of the past and ideas of the future, our movement through time is largely dictated by the stories we create in our minds. In *Narrative and the Self*, Anthony Paul Kerby asserts that “the stories we tell are part and parcel of our becoming. They are a *mode of vision*, plotting what is good and what is bad for us, what is possible and what is not--plotting who we may become” (54). Kerby’s idea of storytelling as a *mode of vision* strikes me as particularly powerful and applicable. Through the telling of stories, we are able to gain a second sight and learn more about ourselves, our pasts, and our futures.

Throughout my own childhood, storytelling was the primary mode of vision through which I was able to navigate the world around me. This mode was to be shared with an energetic little girl I met at preschool. Kalyn was the only person I had met in my short life who was able to imagine as vividly as myself, and who was able to not only follow me into my narrative visions, but help create them. It was because of this that our friendship blossomed and we remained close friends throughout our lives. We created films with my siblings and made up many stories. Some of these stories were captured on Hi-8 tapes. But the most notable was a book we wrote together when we were 12. It was called “Into the Land of Brinn”, and it told a story in which the two of us traveled to a magical land where we were princesses with magical powers. This story shifted and changed, growing with us and serving forever as an alternate plane where we could create ourselves as we wanted to be. We became goddesses, a Wolf and a Tiger who created a world. In “Brinn”, we gave ourselves the methods to face and conquer

trauma, mental illness, and political and social inequalities. We gave ourselves new names, goddess names; Emberwolf and Tigerlily.

This process of storytelling was and remains to us a *spell*, a ritualistic act with which we are able to restructure the world around us through symbolic narratives. In *Narrative Therapy in Wonderland*, several quotes are mentioned that evoke this sense of storytelling as a form of magic. Quoting Deborah O’Keefe; “Fictional characters who find marvelous places are like *participants in a religious ritual* going through ‘threshold’ activities. The most memorable scenes in fantasy stories are often the moments of transition: like C.S. Lewis’s children crawling into the old wardrobe and coming out in Narnia, Alice falling down the rabbit hole, or Dorothy flying through the cyclone in her house” (Marsten et al. xvi). For us, these “threshold” activities marked moments and situations in our lives that could not be crossed without the aid of our alternate personalities and the symbolic world they inhabited. We followed directly in the footsteps of the Pevensie children in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, a source of much inspiration, and decided to learn our lessons in a realm that we could understand. We yearned to become religious figures in our own lives, as “it is only when we replace our certainty with curiosity and our scientific mind ‘with the sense of wonder that might be evoked by the *Shaman*’ that our imaginations are unlocked and multiple expressions of identity become available for engagement” (Marsten et al. xx). For us, the idea of the “Shaman” was that of a figure who was able to traverse planes and who used magic to connect with a higher level of spirituality. In this way, we considered ourselves part of a *shamanic process*, using stories to connect with a higher power and traverse other worlds.

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Bearing in mind the relation we had to a spiritual process, the film opens with a “filmic spell”; a collection of items impressed onto film using a photogram technique. Photogramming involves laying items upon a film strip and then hitting it with light, so that the shapes of the items are captured in the emulsion and show up after processing. I went about collecting and arranging these items on the film in the same way that I would go about performing a spell. Because the energy of these items is impressed upon the emulsion, I can re-invoke its energy each time it is played. Here, it serves as an invocation to the Wolf and the Tiger--our alternate selves--to protect and bless viewers. Some of the pieces I used to create this spell were herbs and stones that hold specific magical properties, but other pieces were objects which held energy specifically related to Kalyn’s and my relationship as well as the creation of “Brinn”. Pieces of the original journal texts, gifts, and even hair from my dog compose the spell which is captured in emulsion.

### III. ANIMAL POWER

Animals have always been a vibrant part of Kalyn’s and my lives, and their influence can be seen in everything we create. Perhaps the most influential part of Brinn’s narrative has been the creation of alter-egos that rely on the power of what we called our “spirit animals”. By giving ourselves these archetypes of behavior, we were able to re-label ourselves as powerful, beautiful, and wise. Both the Wolf and the Tiger are known as heroes and creators. We furthered these personas by pairing them with what we considered to be our closest elements. The Wolf carried fire and the Tiger carried earth. It is clear that as children we were influenced by traditions and

ideas associated with animist and pagan spiritual practices, and animals proved to be conduits through which magic would flow.

As I considered the form I wanted my film to take, I had ideas of narrative function in my mind. A large part of what makes narrative so powerful is its ability to transcend time, to allow us to dictate a future as well as revisit and reform the past. Time becomes malleable--our story exists at once. The function of narrative as an escape from the traumas of life lay not only in its fantastical ability but also in its time-traveling capabilities. I wanted my form to echo this ability, weaving together moments in time so that the past, present, and evocative symbols of the mental and emotional world could be encountered almost at once.

I found inspiration for this weaving form in the work of Jan Brett, who creates a frame around each page of brilliant illustration, featuring alternative moments and stories which occur simultaneously or adjacent to the featured narrative. In *Annie and the Wild Animals* (1985), a young girl tries to lure her missing cat, Taffy, with corn cakes, inadvertently attracting all sorts of animals. While we watch Annie find a new animal at her door each morning, the frame of each page shows us Taffy's adventure in finding a warm place to have kittens, as well as depicting the animals who will show up at Annie's doorstep on the following page. This ability to weave together narratives while also providing an aesthetic frame was something I wanted to try to translate in my piece. I had been thinking about a tissue which could connect my pieces, and reading *Annie* not only introduced this idea of framework, but reminded me of the important role that animals played in Kalyn's and my personal narratives. Could the animals help provide a framework for my interweaving moments in time? Considering how much influence the animal

world had on our stories and our perception of magic, it seemed imperative to include them in the piece.

The animal influence was not only seen in the performance of our “spirit animals”, but in *familiars* which guided us through our lives and appeared in our stories. Throughout the piece, my childhood husky appears in different roles. My current familiar, Haku, also appears in pieces where the story references the present. The identity of the warrior or magician calls on the familiar, an animal which guides it and assists it. Which aspects of our familiars did we absorb into our own identities, and which aspects inspired our stories? The specific purpose of animals as spiritual representations and familiars was something I was aware of and tried to utilize as I connected the interweaving stories of the film.

#### IV. A CHILD’S PROCESS

As I began to explore the way Kalyn and I had used stories to understand and re-define our identities, I was very conscious of the connection between form and discovery. This new work was processed through the mediation of other pieces of media, such as “Brinn” and the Hi-8 tapes we made as children. How could I re-purpose these forms in correlation with new forms to express a sense of what this method of creation meant to Kalyn and I as we grew up together? I was aware of the fact that our stories as children were important because of the focus on *process* rather than focus on the finished product. “Whereas the young child does not set out to consciously narrate but only runs through sequences of images, adults are already well initiated into a broad semiological realm” (Kerby 45).



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As I selected the elements for my film, I wanted to not only comment on the spontaneous and creativity-focused process that we used as children, but try to emulate it as well. In a way, I would have to rediscover this method of artistic discovery, which relies on free expression. This requires being very open to change, which is somewhat counter-intuitive to the way adults are told to navigate the world. The ability to follow and create narratives without structure is something we admire in children, but have a hard time exploring ourselves. I maintained some structure to my piece, but I tried to leave many of the elements open-ended and exploratory in the moment of creation. I focused heavily on the importance of process in the new forms I added. I decided to seek out the help of my five year old cousin Bella to help me once again touch the open-ended creative process of children. As I explored new narratives with her, and watched her create, I was reminded of the free associations children are able to make. I also kept in mind these ideas of *visions*, *rituals*, and the process of creation as a *shamanic process*.

The Hi-8 tapes which I used to compose some of the film were recorded when Kalyn and I were 13 years old. We made up an overarching theme and then asked my younger siblings to help us to bring various characters and moments to life. I had not seen the footage since it was recorded, as the tapes have been lost until very recently when my Mom uncovered them. While I was reviewing the footage, I found way more content than I remembered. It was clear how much of a collaborative effort the artistic pieces were between us and my siblings. These creative pieces reminded me of the style of skit-television. They not only expressed, but mimicked the world around them. They became a mirror of culture as we consumed it, something which can be noticed in the way our Hi-8 film mimics the form of “ghost hunting” television shows.

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What these tapes reveal is the power of creating *only to create*, without regard to what the product becomes. If anything, we enjoyed recording these moments of play simply because it allowed *us* to re-live them over and over again. We were never trying to impress any audience outside of ourselves. I remember certain phrases being simply iconic when I was young (i.e. the Pig Ghost and Georgina Walters characters, who are referenced in the Hi-8 tapes), and we have grown up with them in our memories. Fascinatingly, we actually collectively remember things happening differently than they did, which proves that we have talked about them so much that we have actually re-created the way they happened in our memories. For instance, there is a moment when the Pig Ghost's ear pops off. I can clearly remember that moment happening when she is hanging in the tire swing. My sister (who plays the Pig Ghost) remembers it that way as well, very clearly. However, the footage shows it popping off before she is in the tire swing. The group of us have collectively shifted our memories of these events, which provides further evidence that the way we *decide* a memory played out can override the truth of how it actually went down. A new story may be put forth as reality.

As I moved forward with the creation of my own piece, I tried to keep in mind the importance of the *moment of recording*, treating that as the most important element. I wanted to touch that iconic magic that we had felt recording moments of play as children, and looked to other works as inspiration on how best to do this.

*Windy Day* (1968) is an animated audio recording of John and Faith Hubley's daughters playing together. In it, their forms change and new objects and animals appear as they dream them up. It exemplifies not only the focus on spontaneous imagination that I have tried to include in my own piece, but also the ability that animation and experimental narrative form have to

create a snapshot of real life experience. It also points out the importance of *sisterhood*, a clear thematic element throughout my piece as well. There is something particularly special about the creation of stories between sisters that I have seen in my life, especially with Kalyn's and my creation of "Brinn" as well as other stories. All of these creations, even as we have entered adulthood, are based on ideas that appear during spontaneously creative moments together which appear not only in the name of art, but also out of boredom. This may also be said for the creation of videos as children. They existed simply as something to pass the time and release our creative energy. The act of creating itself, in these instances, is done without agenda and has value regardless of product. The stories which the Hubley children create exist for seconds before they are completely wiped away by a new narrative. Rather than grieving over the story which was, the children completely embrace the story which presently is.

This important difference in narrative capability can be applied to the way that children and adults perceive events. As adults, we tend to require the "whole story" before taking a new path. We must be sure of each memory that led us to this fork in the road, and we focus on the way that the road will look down the line. As children, even in the narratives of our own lives, we are often more content to explore without regard to where we are going or where we came from. This ability can be invaluable in creative work as it allows for the creator to be free in their associations, and the story which appears is sincere and raw. It depicts only the truth of what exists at the moment of its creation.

## V. NARRATIVE THERAPY

Narrative therapy has gained attention as a particularly effective method for young people as well as trauma survivors to cope with identity and memory. Imagination is defined as the “ability to deal resourcefully with unexpected or unusual problems” (Marsten et al. xvii). By personally defining our own lives and identities, especially through the use of symbol and metaphor, we are able to contextualize ourselves within an event, memory, or situation. It could easily be argued that our personalities and identities are based upon our *perception* of ourselves much more than any empirical truths about ourselves. “It is no accident that the word *person* derives from the Latin *persona*, which has connotations of a character in a play” (Kerby 37).

This can be especially true for children, who are still building their senses of identity and are more sensitive to suggestion. For instance, if a classmate says “you are stupid”, a young child is much more likely to accept that label, as opposed to an adult. This might be because the adult already has certain characteristics that they have solidified as part of their *persona* (i.e. strength, intelligence, etc...). Narrative therapy, which utilizes storytelling to allow the patient to gain control of their story by telling it however they may choose, is really just a clinicalizing of something children have been doing all along. Although a child may be more susceptible to the idea of “I am stupid”, they also may find a strong defense in the creation of a fantasy identity who is all of the things they wish to be. For us, the Wolf and the Tiger were our chosen identities in the face of other identities being forced upon us. We considered these symbols more powerful than the symbols that other people pressed upon us.

Commenting on the value of narrative therapy when working with children specifically, *Narrative Therapy in Wonderland* points out “the problems children encounter can be recognized

for the threats they pose and the proving grounds they provide, upon which young people can establish themselves as meritorious” (Marsten et al. 7). The ability to re-contextualize an event or a personality trait is one of the great powers of the human race, and this ability is strongest in children. When we created “Brinn”, we exemplified this ability in two ways. First, our problems became physical, in the form of monsters and evil rulers which we would have to fight and overcome. Secondly, we gave ourselves new identities which were defined by strength and power and heroism. In our Hi-8 films, a constant re-defining of identity can be seen, as we try on various personas. Georgina Walters, Curly Sue, and the Evil Monkey Trainer are all identities that we were able to test out in hyperbolic form. When we entered these fantastical narratives, we were able to come out with newly formed identities.

## VI. INFLUENCES

As I went into the construction of this project, I had several influences in mind. Many of the important films which helped me to hone my piece stylistically and idealistically were discovered throughout the year as I was putting the work together. I have been drawn especially to work which feels to me like a “thought collage”; elements arranged according to association or world rather than a clear narrative. In these works, I found time being shaped in such a way that it almost ceased to matter within the space of the film. Perhaps one of the most notable pieces that I gained inspiration from as I created this work is Leslie Thornton’s *Peggy and Fred in Hell*.

In *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1984 -), two children explore an apocalyptic world. The vignettes are spontaneous, and the children create stories with little direction. As I began to work

with Bella and to explore the old footage from my childhood, I drew inspiration from Thornton's idea of approaching the recorded footage as "found footage" (Halter 517). While she provided a framework for *Peggy and Fred*, she allowed her child "actors" to move spontaneously within the world she had created. She provided the world, but they provided the story. Her work also led me to recognize the power that editing would have on my product; the moments in time which I chose to put together would transcend the moments themselves and create a new moment. This is ironic, since my films as a child were edited by stopping and starting the camera, a technique which created empty blue moments in between scenes. I decided to make this past editing technique a clear part of my new piece, pointing out the way that memories are separated. This stopping and starting echoes the space of the mind more clearly, I would argue, than my crisp editing techniques. My editing software allows full control of the moments, but the blue space forces me to pause and reflect on what has passed and what will come.

From the genesis of the project, I had in mind the stylistic influence of Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1967), which explores intimate moments between her, her partner, and their cat. While the relationships depicted in *Fuses* are not specifically of the same nature, I felt that there was a lot to be learned from the intimacy that was invoked by the work. My piece also aims to invoke intimacy, and the desire to include experimental works on 16mm was inspired by *Fuses*. I wanted to try to experiment with visual texture through manipulation of emulsion on 16mm film, and had in mind the textures created by Schneemann. I especially loved the way that shapes and colors would move through the frame, something I experimented with in my filmic photogram spell, as well as the layering of images on top of one another, creating visual interest. I had the idea of texture on film in mind as I hand processed the 16mm footage of us as adults,

allowing mistakes to appear and the image to move in and out of sight. This visual texture is something I tried to work toward as I created moments in this piece.

As I considered the influences I had had as a child, and the influences which eventually birthed “Brinn”, I remembered the stories contained in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1994) by C.S. Lewis. Elements of these stories had clear pagan influences, and featured instances of magic and spellwork. They also followed children finding new identities in a fantasy realm. The *ritual* was extremely important in these tales. There was a strong connection between Kalyn’s and my stories and those contained in the *Chronicles*. As I began to create and combine elements in *Fire Flower*, I wanted to keep in mind the symbolic nature that could be found in the creatures and characters of “Narnia”. While these elements appeared as random, there was a clear symbology behind the inhabitants of the fantasy world. What was the symbolic value behind the characters we created? And how could I express this while also maintaining a sense of play and adventure? I have always appreciated the *Chronicles* for the way that they depict children’s experiences and stories while also being mindful of the symbols and identities being built beneath the surface.

## VII. FOLLOWING US INTO THE PORTAL

As Kalyn and I created stories, we inevitably pulled everyone around us into those stories. My siblings can be seen in the old Hi-8 videos playing various characters we had created for them. Even in the world of “Brinn”, cameos were made by those around us. The music used in *Fire Flower* comes from the video game *Morrowind* (2002), which we stole from Kalyn’s brother and played in her shed. When her parents would walk in, we were always dressed up, ready for our own foray into “Morrowind” (and, later, “Brinn”). I was curious as to whether

these creative masterpieces and my family's inclusion in them are remembered the same way, and so I chose to include some ideas from my mother and sister.

What became for me a very evocative moment in the process of creating this film was the voice-over story my Mom sent me in response to asking what her perception of Kalyn's and my stories had been. I was very interested in how she viewed our stories, as she is a teacher and has studied child psychology. I discussed with her my thoughts on narrative as a way to maintain control and build identity, and asked if she would send a voice-over interview of her ideas. What she gave back to me was a deeply sincere and insightful narration about two little girls who created stories to explore identities which they valued as important and more special than what the world could see. She detailed what our reasons may have been for creating stories; most importantly a need to feel *seen*. However, she also expressed ideas about how we may have been affected by this fantasy desire as we grew into adulthood, suffering from our inability to save the day or find a hero in the real world. While the creative mind is valuable, she argues that the depression that results from not being able to save the world can be a real struggle. However, most of her thoughts revolve around our creative process and the way that we created together.

Her voice-over states, "They created an alternate world where all was beautiful and they were important, they were noticed. The princess, the warrior, the one that the hero saves. Or they became the hero themselves...Creating narratives first and foremost was about living in the narrative creations they dreamed about...the stories, the creating, made life so interesting, their minds free to explore fantasy in a way just reading about it never could."

I conducted a brief in-person interview with my sister, Mikayla, to see how she had perceived Kalyn's and my stories. Her view of the process was much different than my



Mother's, as she often got pulled into making stories with us. This was common for both of my siblings, and you can see her daylight as the enigmatic "Pig Ghost" in the film. I condensed some of her responses into the following statement:

"I don't think for us it was exactly the same as it was for you and Kalyn. It wasn't as important to me, but I always wanted to be part of it. You were always telling me what to do...If I didn't get to be part of it, I was sad. I felt like I was missing out on some crazy adventure. You two spearheaded everything but it was important to all of us...We wanted to be part of something important, and when we were part of your stories we felt really important."

## VIII. CONCLUSION

What made and continues to make Kalyn's and my relationship special, healing, and powerful is our ability to create stories together. The fantasy narratives we have built for ourselves continue to have a strong influence on our daily lives, giving us alter-egos to turn to when we feel voiceless or powerless.

The animative elements, which were created using a multiplane animation system which consists of layers of glass within a lighted box, began as being centered around the idea of the *Fire Flower*. As in the story recounted in the film, the creation of Brinn began with the combination of the Tiger's flower and the Wolf's fire, and so I wanted to create a representation of this synthesis. I felt that the collage-style of the multiplane system, which I have used to animate before, lends itself to the tone of the film as well as the process I had been exploring. By combining pieces in various ways, I was able to process thoughts and that processing was recorded.

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As I moved the pieces around, I began thinking again of the ways that this process mirrored the performance of another *spell*. I had always wanted to end the film with a spell, and so it felt right to perform a second spell within the multiplane box, using the cutouts of the Wolf and Tiger as players. As the spell ends, we see brief moments of Bella playing a game about a Wolf and a Tiger. The story has been passed on, and Kalyn and I have become adults. Our tattoos echo our alternate selves. We have found a space in which we are capable and strong, and one in which we are together.

The process of creating a film is always an adventure, with its own dragons and goddesses. The creation of this particular film was, for me, an adventure through time and imagination. My hope is that the viewer is able to undertake a similar journey, trusting the path as it carries them through the magical world of storytelling and play. I hope that as they watch, their own memories intrude upon the world that I have created, and that they are allowed to call upon their own alternate identities to battle and enjoy what those memories may hold.

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