

Thy light, thy flight

(Universitas21 AGM Gala Dinner)

ACT ONE

A1, Sc1 (birdsong intro)

(Out of sight, there is the tentative sound of one or two bird warblers around the space. This goes on for a bit, and then more bird warblers join one at a time, building to a choral bird song over a few minutes.)

A1, Sc2, (summoning guests to dinner)

(Track 0 plays: 'Feed the Birds' from Mary Poppins.)

(M.D. as MC takes the stage and invites guests to sit down. M.H. as recorder player makes her entrance into the space through the main doors, slowly processing towards the stage.)

A1, Sc3 (birds summoning)

(M.H. takes the stage and starts to play brief, bird-like tuns on the recorder, from "The Bird Fancier's Delight". Some bird warblers respond. The recorder playing summons the bird ensemble, who begin to appear around different parts of the space. After a final flourish, M.H. receives applause, bows, and exits.)

A1, Sc4 (bird poem)

(Once all guests are sat, Track 1 plays: 'Dawn' from the 'Four Sea Interludes' by Benjamin Britten.)

(The bird ensemble moves through the space, gliding, fluttering, perching, playing. They begin to deliver the first bird poem text.)

I: The Himalayan legend says
 there are beautiful birds
 that live completely in flight

Chorus: In flight, in flight, in flight, fliight... *(becoming increasingly like a bird call)*

H: They are born in the air,
 must learn to fly before falling
 and die also in their flying

Chorus: Flying, flying, flying, flyyyyy... *(as above)*

EH: Maybe WE have been born, into such a life
 with the bottom dropping out....
 Birds make great sky-circles of their freedom.
 How...?

Chorus: How, how, how, how, hooow.... *(as above)*

EH: How do they learn it?

Y: They fall
Chorus: They fall, they fall, they fall they faaall... (*as above*)
Y: And falling, they're given wings
Chorus: Wings, wings, wings-wings, wiiings-wiiings... (*as above*)

ALL: May our hearts always be open
to little birds who are the secrets of living,
for whatever they sing is better than to know!
And if one should not hear them, one won't glow...
May our minds flutter about - peckish, and hungry
and fearless and thirsty and supple and free...
And even if it's Sunday – may we be wrong
for WAR is an acronym – of We Are Right
and for whenever we are right
we are not young...

(*The bird ensemble defers/focuses/turns towards the stage for the welcome speech.*)

Welcome Speech by Prof. Adam Tickell, and Prof. Tan Eng Chye

(*Track 2 plays: fragment from 'Mad Rush' by Philip Glass.*)

(*M.D. as MC introduces A.T, who takes to the stage. A.T. delivers the welcome speech and then introduces and invites to stage T.E.C., who delivers U21 speech.*)

ACT 1, Sc5 (bird wisdom)

(*After the speeches, Track 3 plays: fragment from 'Mad Rush' by Philip Glass; with the first projection.*)
(*The bird ensemble starts to deliver the bird-wisdom text. ES brings in the bird balloons gracefully, placing them around the space. In the distance/balcony, a 'mother bird' appears with beating Isis wings.*)

N: The Master said: 'Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals?
Is it not a joy to have friends come from afar?'

H: Delight yourself in the little art you have learned, and acquiesce in it. And spend the remainder of your life, as one who with all their heart commits themselves entirely to learning; and neither acts the tyrant or the slave toward any of mankind.

EH: Every day examine yourself on three counts. In what you have undertaken on another's behalf, have you failed to do your best? In your dealings with others, have you failed to be trustworthy in what you say? Have you passed on to others, anything that you have not tried out yourself?

- Y: Make time for yourself to learn something worthwhile; stop letting yourself be pulled in all directions.
- N: But – make sure you guard against the other kind of confusion. People who labour all their lives but have no purpose to direct every thought and impulse toward are wasting their time—even when hard at work.
- I: I shall tell you: To love benevolence without loving learning - is liable to lead to foolishness. To love cleverness without loving learning - is liable to lead to deviation from the right path. To love forthrightness without loving learning - is liable to lead to intolerance. To love unbending strength without loving learning - is liable to lead to indiscipline.
- N: To live a good life: We have the potential for it... If we can learn to be indifferent to what makes no difference.
- H: This is how we learn: by looking at each thing, both the parts and the whole. Keeping in mind that none of them can dictate how we perceive it. It is we who generate the judgments—inscribing them on ourselves. And we don't have to. We could leave the page blank!
- EH: To be able, yet to ask the advice of those who are not able. To have many talents, yet to ask the advice of those who have few. To have, yet to appear to want. To be full, yet to appear empty. To be transgressed against yet not to mind.
- Y: The Master said, 'If one manages to correct themselves, what difficulty will they have to take part in government? If one cannot make themselves correct, what business have they with making others correct?'
- I: No carelessness in your actions. No confusion in your words. No imprecision in your thoughts. No retreating into your own soul, or trying to escape it. No overactivity.
- H: The more I look up at it... The higher it appears! The more I bore into it... The harder it becomes! I see it before me... – Suddenly it is behind me....

- EH: A society of equal laws, governed by equality of status and of speech, and of rulers who respect the liberty of their subjects above all else.
- N: There are, are there not, young plants that fail to produce blossoms, and blossoms that fail to produce fruit?
- I: The Master said, 'The flower that opens, the moment that passes, golden clouds in the distance, the ruin of everything, dust in the wind.'
- All: Startled, the birds rose up and circled round before alighting. The Master said, 'The birds on the mountain ridge, how gentle their flight, how timely their action is!' He cupped one hand in the other in a gesture of respect towards the birds who, flapping their wings three times, flew away.

(The birds make a ceremonial and reverential bird-like twirl, and exit.)

[STARTER IS SERVED]

[STARTER IS CLEARED]

ACT TWO

*(Laughter and rejoicement can be heard from afar, coming from different parts of the space.)
(Track 4 plays: fragment of 'Chasing Sheet is best left to Shepherds' by Michael Nyman; and the [second projection](#).)*

(The ensemble enters walking in a stately, processional manner, others in pairs perform a kind of Elizabethan court dance. M.B. takes the stage and delivers the Lear/HenryIV monologue. The ensemble retires.)

- M.B: I know you all, and will awhile uphold
The unyoked humour of your idleness:
Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That, when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted, he may be more wonder'd at,
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.
Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law

My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moon-shines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?
Who, in the lusty stealth of nature, take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,
Go to the creating a whole tribe of fops,
Got 'tween asleep and wake? Well, then...?
(M.B. bows and exits.)

[MAIN COURSE IS SERVED]

[MAIN COURSE IS CLEARED]

UNIVERSITAS 21 AWARDS, presented by Prof. Jenny Dixon]

(M.D. introduces J.D. who will present the U21 Awards.)

ACT THREE

A3, Sc1 (You tell us that...)

(Track 5 plays: 'Time Lapse' by Michael Nyman.)

(The ensemble members enter with a playful, cheeky and somewhat defiant attitude; some perform the sign language gestures for 'You tell us that...'. Then, with a variety of megaphones, the ensemble delivers the text.)

ES: You tell us education is fundamental. And that to have qualifications is even more so. You tell us to contribute, to catch-up, to get involved, to get in touch. You require us to support our arguments with research and evidence. You encourage us to be focused, and concise, and precise. You encourage us to be more specific. To do our reading, to read more, to read more widely. You set tasks to support our learning. You emphasise our learning is largely in our own hands.

N: You tell us there's no authority on Earth, except experience. You say there's a correct formula, a correct answer. You ask us to be objective, to take a balance view. To position

ourselves clearly. You ask us not to digress. To memorise, to remember. You remind us to follow the brief, that the instructions are clear.

Y: You mention terms and conditions. You assess us. You grade us. You encourage us to make better use of your feedback. You tell us you have a headache.

H: You tell us Darwin was probably right. That Einstein has never really been proven wrong. And that Copernicus got in a lot of trouble. You tell us chasing sheep is best left to shepherds. And that the Armada was not really Invincible. You tell us the young ones are hungry, their nets are so bare. You tell us that Virgil led Dante through hell. And that Beethoven never heard his final applause. You tell us an apple didn't really fall on Newton's head. And that Shakespeare might or might not have written *King Lear* during quarantine.

(As the text continues, members of the ensemble start to bring out chairs onto the stage. They turn them on their side, or upside down.)

EH: You tell us there wasn't such a thing as a round table. And that the slave trade operated in a triangle. You tell us the square root of X is rational – if and only if – X is a rational number that can be represented as a ratio of two perfect squares. You tell us we are living in the Anthropocene, and that we shouldn't rely on Wikipedia.

I: You tell us about social contract and social conflict. And about the Industrial Revolution. You tell us Birmingham was the city of a thousand trades, the workshop of the world. You tell us about poverty and hard work, dirt and sacrifice. About worker's movements, and social justice, and nonviolent action. You tell us about innovation, entrepreneurship, and philanthropy and exploitation. You explain that some things are beyond explanation.

ES: You point out there is misery amongst the pages of our history. You say it was a mistake. That it won't happen again. Never again Auschwitz, Sarajevo, Rwanda... You insist we must learn from history. That history repeats itself. That it is simplified to assign blame and credit. That history is a lie, to tell a deeper truth.

EH: You tell us someone once said history had come to an end. That we live in a simulation, in a Society of the Spectacle, in a hall of mirrors. That the author is dead. And grand narratives are equally deceased.

You reassure us it's possible. That we can understand.

N: You tell us to follow the rules, and that rules are there to be broken. You tell us it takes breaking eggs to make an omelette. That the answer isn't simple. That we should check the data. You say that's a silly question.

Y: You use words nobody says. And references we don't understand. You make jokes we laugh at, but don't actually get.

H: You forget to tell us what acronyms actually stand for. And about investment funds, and mortgages and pensions.

EH: You tell us you know the lyrics to 'Another Brick in the Wall'. You tell us we should listen. You tell us it's difficult to get your head around pronouns. You tell us to 'calm down'. You tell us to spell it out. You tell us we should get off our phones and look up. You tell us to form our own opinion. And that we are too opinionated. And that our opinion matters. You point out to us our privileges; how lucky we are.

I: You tell us everything we need to know about you, about what you are interested in, about what you know, about what matters to you... You emphasise the importance of ideals, and values, and ethics, and methodologies. You assure us you made the revolution. You go on and on about May 68, and about the 70s, and the 80s. And you tell us about the strikes, and the riots, and the marches, and the police charges. You tell us about the blackouts, and the shortages, and the rationing, and the scarcity. You tell us about the 90s, and about progress. How the air was filled with possibility. You tell us about free movement, the Millennium Bug, and how the weapons of mass destruction never really turned up.

ALL: Who? Who? Who is you and who is us? Who does the telling and who the listening? Who is learning, who is teaching?

ES: You want us to organise. To be more organised. To start a movement. You remind us we have a voice. That we can take action. You want us to be excellent. To be more excellent. You want us to internationalize. You want us to lead. You want us to pioneer. You reassure us you are trying. That it's possible. That we must be patient.

- EH: You tell us we are part of a wider story. That we shall inherit the Earth. You tell us there is a form we need to fill out about that.
- N: You say there are barriers. That resources are scarce and budgets are tight. We know about the glass ceiling. And about the greenhouse effect. We know the clock is ticking. You warn us there is plenty of time. That time is against us. We know it's not like the movies. That all things end. Irreversibly. You reassure us you've tried your best. That it's out of your hands. You tell us to be more like Greta, less like Greta, that Greta is a construct.
- EH: You encourage us to cut a small corner of the world for ourselves, to be someone, and have somewhere to call our own. To have a purpose, and aims, and goals. You insist the sky's the limit. That the world is our oyster. That if we work hard, we can achieve anything, do anything, go anywhere. We try. We fail. We fail again. We fail better... You say that's a pedagogical matter. We try again.
- ES: You tell us you are decolonising the curriculum. We know there isn't such a thing as a 'pure' culture, that everything is interlaced. You are increasingly mindful of our mental health. We are mentored, tutored, supervised and supported by you. You give us a helping hand. We use it to help others. You remind us to be safe. You encourage us to take greater risks. To be ambitious, and realistic. You warn us not to spread ourselves too thinly. We ask you for a reference, and you reassure us you'll write a good one. You tell us, above all, we must stay curious.
- I: We know the way you have shown us. And will ourselves forge paths anew. Why? Where? How? We take a critical stance just like you taught us. We question things. Even you. We polish our analysis, and structure and arguments. You've helped us improve. We have your guidance. We are ready and rearing to go. The seed you planted and tended, we now must continue to grow. We know the future is ours. You send us out into the world.

[DESSERT & tea/coffee served]

A3, Sc2 (pledge and promise writing)
(Track 6 plays: Another Brick by Pink Floyd.)

(M.D. takes to the stage and introduces the task: each table will receive cards and some pens; guests are invited to write down a promise or pledge to the younger generations during dessert. They will be collected later. The ensemble hands out cards and pens.)

[DESSERT & tea/coffee cleared]

(The ensemble picks up the cards with pledges and promises written by guests.)

ACT FOUR

A4, Sc1 (In the future...)

(Track 7 plays: The Departure by Michael Nyman; and projection three.)

(The ensemble enters with inflatable terrestrial globes and start to bounce them around, pass them to each other, roll them.... At two different mics, pairs of the ensemble gently deliver the text.)

- 1: In the future we won't have to memorise things, because we will be able to download any amount of information directly into our brains via some kind of USB port; and that will radically alter our understanding of both teaching and learning. There won't be any teachers anymore, just upload technicians.

- 2: Or maybe in the future, there will be some people who fulfil the role of what we might call teachers, but they will instead focus on un-teaching, on helping you remove unhelpful thought patterns or behaviours via some kind of deprogramming process.

- 1: In the future the young will teach the old.

- 2: Or in the future there won't be any old people as such, because we will have found a way to halt the aging process.

- 1: Maybe in the future we won't live in a prison of our own sins and won't be slaves to our own mistakes.

- 3: Maybe in the future we will decide to finally become.

- 4: In the future we'll come to realize that our financial system is not the source of everlasting wealth we had hoped, and that our governments and political systems are not as unshakable and incorruptible as we thought. So we will tear it all down and start again.

- 3: Or in the future there won't really be countries like there are now. No nation states, just one world big government.
- 4: Or in the future there will be a return to a more sort of feudal system.
- 3: Or in the future there won't be such a thing as governments. The world will be ruled by a single computer. And it will monitor, and indeed decide, our every move and action.
- 4: Though most probably, in the future, there will be no computers or any kind of digital technology - because the world will have undergone a radical environmental transformation that will have brought about the end of civilisation as we know it.
- 3: In the future we will have completely reconfigured our understanding of leadership, what it means to lead, and what leaders are for.
- 4: In the future the story will be written by a new people, different to us, and the future will be shaped by them, and the choices they will have to make.
- 5: In the future, civilization as we know it will continue, and things will be more or less as they are now. Except we will all live under water, in cities under the sea.
- 6: Or... In the future the seas and oceans and lakes and rivers all surface water will have boiled off.
- 5: Maybe in the future there will be more and more revolutions, populations will not put up with it anymore, rise up. And those in authority will be made to parade the streets with their heads shaved, and be made to sign long confessions concerning the events that they have caused.
- 6: Or in fact concerning events they had nothing to do with. People will be carried away on a tide of self-righteousness.

- 5: Or... In the future, we will develop a kind of hive-mind, allowing us to think more systemically and holistically, to easily and harmoniously take collective decisions and collective care, and think of our rights as our responsibilities.
- 6: Or maybe in the future when we say 'everyone is equal', we will actually mean it, and all kinds of inequality will have been eradicated.
- 5: And the future will be filled with unicorns and mermaids and beauty and little children smiling with joy.
- 1: In the future we'll fix what is broken in us. Or we won't.
- 2: In the future we'll become the people we dreamed of being. Or we won't.
- 1: Maybe... In the future we will end world hunger. Or maybe we won't
- 2: Maybe in the future we will have world peace. Or maybe we won't.
- 1: In the future the world will heat up.
- 2: Or it will cool down and freeze over.
- 1: Or it will dry up.
- 2: Or it will drown.
- 1: In the future there won't be many people, but there will be some people left.
- 2: Or in the future there will be lots, and lots of people, many more than there are now, far too many. And everybody will be kind of squashed in anywhere, with hardly any room to move, like on the tram at rush hour – but all the time.
- 1: In the future we will have radically different ideas about personal space, and there won't be such things as property or ownership...

- 2: Or in the future individuality and identity will be thought of as outdated concepts.
- 3: In the future things will get far, far worse, because we'll be contending with mass earthquakes and hurricanes.
- 4: Or in the future we won't need phones because everyone will have a small chip in their brain and you can do practically everything through that. But you'll need to make sure you have the latest update, otherwise your reality will start to glitch.
- 3: Or in the future people will care more for each other and the world than for their phones and which one is the latest update available.
- 4: Maybe in the future, nature will take back what is hers and leave humans and technology to slowly decay and fade away....
- 5: Or in the future we won't have a concept like nature, because we will have embraced the fact that we have become global geological agents, and there isn't anything that is not affected by human actions. So maybe in the future, there won't be any polar bears.
- 4: Or in the future we will have saved the polar bears, and they will inexplicably start to thrive and will actually take over the world. And eventually they will govern us and enact revenge on us via taxes and punitive legislation for having melted the ice caps in the first instance.
- 5: Maybe in the future there won't be any flowers, and only some rare specimens will be safely kept in controlled vitrines, inside specially built mausoleums.
- 4: Or there won't be any kind of mausoleums, or memorials, or monuments; because we will have completely embraced the fleetingness of our lives.
- 5: In the future we will definitely know what to do.
- 4: Or in the future we will most definitely mess everything up.

- 5: In the future, most adult dreams will be nightmares. Only children will sleep alright. Adults will increasingly find it difficult to go to bed at night or sleep at all. And children will have to sing them lullabies to reassure them that everything is alright.
- 6: Or kids will be so valued, so idealised for their wisdom and their innocence. So people will set up societies where children will make all the decisions. Children will run the government, and the legal system, and design the cities. Children will be the intellectuals.
- 5: Or in the industrialised world at least, people won't want to have children anymore.
- 2: In the future we won't have to do anything to prove ourselves. We won't have to anything we are not.
- 3: Or maybe the future will be a field, a fair field full of folk, of all manners: the poor, and the rich, and the mean... All simply wondering and wandering, as the world has been begging since time immemorial.
- 2: Or maybe... In the future, the future will be a thing of the past.
- 3: Or in the future there won't be a past, because the slate has been wiped clean.
- 2: In the future, time will stretch, so that a second becomes more like a minute, and a minute more like an hour, and an hour more like a day...
- 3: Or the expansion of the universe will slow down. It will be slower, and slower, and then stop. And then, slowly at first but then faster and faster, the universe will collapse backwards into to a single point. Galaxies, suns, planets, atoms, all hurtling back to where it all began.
- 2: Or in the future, time will speed up, and people's lives will be shorter and shorter. People will be like butterflies. Living only for a couple of days, first like a summer's day and then a winter's day, and then just a night. And their lives will continue to get shorter, and shorter, until, in the end, people will live for little more than a three-course dinner.

A4, Sc2 (pledges and promises reading)

(*Track 8 plays: Motion Picture Soundtrack by Radiohead.*)

(M.B. takes the stage and delivers the text.)

Friends, I sing out our epitaph,

in the hall, before the hearth.

Here, before the gathered throng

where our soldier-poets sang:

May ours be the glory of losing well, rather than the dishonour of winning badly!

Firewood burning, dusk to dawn...

The portal lit for a passing pilgrim...

Now is the time. Friends. Now is the time.

We must gather our tools,

fling open the gates with sickle and with scythe,

with pitchfork and ploughshare.

Now is the time, now is the time.

Now is time, for right to come.

Now. The time.

(M.B. reads a selection of the pledges/promises gathered from the guests Meanwhile, the ensemble hands the cards back to the guests, shuffling the tables so that everyone receives a different card to the one they wrote. M.D. delivers some final words of thanks and goodbye.)