

Andrew Morton – 2020 Kresge Artist Fellowship Application
Work Sample 2: Excerpt from CARE

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS:

ANGEL

A young Caucasian woman around 24 years old. A recent college graduate working as a youth specialist with eventual plans to complete their MSW. Had a very positive experience of foster care with a loving and supporting foster family, with whom she is still in touch with. Currently in a relationship and living with her boyfriend; recently found out she is pregnant.

LYRIC

A queer young person around 21 years old. Had a very negative experience of foster care; was ostracized from their family and moved around multiple foster homes. They stayed in one home for a while but left after they came out; ended up homeless for a brief period of time. Eventually found a supportive social worker, now trying to get back into education and/or training. Has siblings but has no contact with them. Identifies as non-binary; should be played by a non-binary or female-identifying performer of any ethnicity.

BRANDON

A young African American man in his mid-20's whose mother passed away at a young age. Was going to be adopted by his uncle, but his uncle ultimately chose not to. Entered the system at a young age and moved around a lot, ending up in a group home; Had a very negative experience with one caseworker and experienced a lack of positive male role models in his life. Is now in community college and still seeking various avenues of support.

JAZ

A young woman in her early 20's. Was left at a young age to care for her younger brother, who was ultimately badly burned in a kitchen accident. They were fostered together for a while, then separated. She feels responsible for harming her brother; has a history of self-harm herself. Became interested in comic books after taking an art therapy class; is now in college studying art and psychology; dreams of creating her own graphic novels. Can be played by a female-identifying performer of any ethnicity.

MICHAEL

A young Caucasian man in his late 20's. Was separated from his family at a young age, briefly reunited with parents, but ultimately separated again due to sexual abuse. Has no contact with his siblings; Aged out of the system and found themselves no longer eligible for support; was forced to make a lot of adult decisions without much guidance or experience; ended up briefly incarcerated but is now out and struggling to find steady employment.

HEATHER

A woman in her early 30's. Works as an MYOI (Michigan Youth Opportunity Initiative) Coordinator, supporting young people who are transitioning from foster care to adulthood.

NOTES ON STAGING:

This piece is intended to be played on a bare stage, unfurnished apart from five chairs. No props are needed.

Characters talk directly to the audience and to each other.

As the piece moves forward, moments can be 'set' in specific locations; a bedroom, a home, a coffee shop, on public transport, or in a more neutral space that characters can inhabit too.

A "/" indicates that the line of dialogue is continued by the next actor or follows immediately from the last.

As the audience enter the space, music is playing. As the final song plays, ANGEL, LYRIC, BRANDON, JAZ, MICHAEL and HEATHER enter and each take a seat. They face the audience. Once all are seated, they begin.

1.

A moment; a neutral space that all characters inhabit. Perhaps the words "What do you think of when you hear the word CARE?" are projected somewhere in the space.

ANGEL

Helping people... Loving others... and loving yourself.

MICHAEL

Anger. And pain.

BRANDON

What do I think of when I hear the word "care?"

JAZ

I think of the system. Obviously/

ANGEL

My foster family. They were amazing.

HEATHER

"Care" makes me think about our responsibility to one another/

LYRIC

People who exploit a system for their own personal gain.

HEATHER

And our responsibility to *care* for the most vulnerable people in our community/

LYRIC

A lot of people giving boring lectures/

They all laugh.

ANGEL

When I hear that word, my immediate reaction is *not* foster care. I think about the people I care about, and who care about me/

LYRIC

It has a stigma for me... That word.

BRANDON

I guess it has multiple meanings, you know?/

MICHAEL

I have like a strong, physical reaction when I hear it.

BRANDON

It makes me think about what we value. You know, what we care about...

ANGEL

I'm thinking about the many ways we show care to others, like making cookies for someone/

BRANDON

And self-care, I guess? I think it's important to take care of *yourself*. Whether that's physically...

ANGEL

Spiritually/

HEATHER

Self-care is very important. And something many young people I work with struggle with.

JAZ

I think about helping those who, for whatever reason, aren't able to care for themselves.

MICHAEL

It makes me think of abuse.

A beat. It's uncomfortable.

LYRIC

Okay, can we talk about something else?

2.

A slight shift. A different energy.

BRANDON

Hello. My name is Brandon.

ANGEL

Hi. I'm Angel.

LYRIC

I prefer to be called Lyric.

MICHAEL

Michael. Mike is fine too.

HEATHER

My name is Heather.

JAZ

Jaz. Like the music, but with only one Z.

A beat.

ANGEL

So, what would you like to know?

MICHAEL

Sometimes I don't mind talking about it, but other times, it's too...

LYRIC

Why do you want to know about my experience of foster care?

HEATHER

I work for MYOI, which is the Michigan Youth Opportunities Initiative.

JAZ

I actually think it's really important to tell my story. To tell our stories/

HEATHER

...which is a program that aims to improve outcomes for young people transitioning from foster care to adulthood.

BRANDON

Well, I was born in Pontiac, Michigan. On April 16th, 1992.

LYRIC

Detroit/

ANGEL

I was born on Christmas Eve, 1993. At Hurley Hospital in Flint.

MICHAEL

I grew up kind of Downriver? You know, south of Detroit?

JAZ

My birthday is in August. As a kid I hated having a birthday in the summer, but now I love it.

HEATHER

I was born and raised in Flint. *(beat)* Do I have to tell you how old I am?

She laughs.

LYRIC

Uh, I don't have a job at the moment. I did, but my boss was a jerk and it was kind of a, unsafe environment for someone like me? I never finished high school, so right now I'm in the process of trying to get my GED.

BRANDON

Right now I work at a well-known fast food chain. Uh, Taco Bell. Yeah. *(beat)* But I'm also taking some classes at the community college. I think I'd maybe like to do something in health care?

ANGEL

I'm currently a youth specialist at a crisis center for young women in Ypsilanti. I recently graduated with my bachelor's in Social Work. *(beat)* Thanks! And I plan on going back to school soon to start my MSW.

MICHAEL

I do a few things. Um, a lot of seasonal work, that sort of thing. I'm looking for something more stable, but it's hard-because I have a record.

JAZ

I'm in college. Yeah. I'm majoring in art with a focus on graphic design, and I'm doing a minor in Psychology. I work too. Part-time. Doing the barista thing...

BRANDON

So should I start from like, the beginning?

A shift. LYRIC, JAZ, & MICHAEL leave the space. They can remain visible on stage, but the focus shifts to BRANDON, ANGEL, & HEATHER.

BRANDON

I don't often tell people that I grew up in foster care, but I don't hide it either. But when it does come up, people often think this means I came from an abusive family. I want to be clear that this was not the case. For me, at least. *(beat)* While there were times I was like, neglected, emotionally. I am fortunate to say I never experienced any physical abuse in the system.

ANGEL

When I tell people I grew up in foster care, a lot of people are really surprised.

BRANDON

I went into care when I was around 5 years old, I think... My mom, who had actually been in care herself, was pretty young when she had me. Then she got sick and died. Cancer. *(beat)* A lot of people assume she was a drug addict, but she wasn't. Anyway, because of her being in care, she wasn't in contact with most of her family, except for one brother, my uncle, who lived in Indiana. So when my mom died, I went to live with him.

ANGEL

Most people assume I had a "normal" childhood (whatever that means) until I bring up the fact I was fostered.

HEATHER

Well there are a myriad of reasons why young people end up in the system. Abuse and neglect is definitely, sadly, very common, but it's not the only reason.

ANGEL

I think a lot of people assume that all young people who went through foster care are going to have all kind of issues. I wasn't abused. I just had parents who weren't fit to take care me.

BRANDON

I didn't stay with my Uncle for very long. I guess he started to go through the process of adopting me, but then backed out. At that point, I was sent to live with a foster family.

ANGEL

I lived with my mom until I was around 4. Then I lived with my Grandmother for a while before going into foster care.

HEATHER

It's quite common for grandparents, great-grandparents even, to take in their grandchildren. We see a lot of that. It's quite a task, you know? People who have already raised their own children, some are even retired, and then they have to go back to raising young children. It's not easy.

BRANDON

I had about 5 different placements before I finally ended up in a residential home, where I stayed until I turned 18.

ANGEL

I don't think my mom ever wanted to be a mom. And her boyfriend, who I don't really remember, never liked having me around. I guess at some point he wanted to move out of state, so my mom left me with my grandma, temporarily, but then she just never came back for me.

BRANDON

One of my first foster families lived in a pretty rural area, and they were all white. I was one of only two black kids in my school, and the other black kid also happened to be in foster care, just with a different family. That kid was always getting into trouble, so a lot of people just assumed I was like that too. Some teachers would even call us the same name. Even though we looked nothing alike. He was at least a foot taller than me.

ANGEL

I really loved my grandma, but she was already in pretty poor health when I moved in with her. Even though she loved me, she really couldn't take care of me very well.

BRANDON

In most of the places I lived I was definitely the minority, and most of my foster placements were white families. There was one home where I actually really liked the mom, but the dad never seemed to like me. One night I heard them fighting, and I heard him call me the n-word. He said he didn't want "one of them" in his home. A few months later I was told I was being moved again, and that's when I ended up in the residential home.

HEATHER

I think there is often an effort to try and place young people with families of the same race, and background. But sometimes it just isn't possible.

ANGEL

Eventually she-my grandma had a stroke. She had to go into a home. You know, an assisted living facility? Of course, I couldn't go with her, and by this point, no one knew where my mom was, so I was placed with a foster family. I was 6 years old. Honestly, that was probably one of the best things that has ever happened to me.

BRANDON

Living at the residential home was, okay, I guess. But there was a lot of turn over with staff, and as I was a kid that just blended into the background most of the time, I never really felt like I got much attention.

ANGEL

I was really lucky, I think, in that I was placed in a really great foster home and didn't experience the kind of things that a lot of other young people in foster care do. I always felt loved by my foster family, and in many ways, they were my real family, and I call my foster mom and dad Mom and Dad. They never asked me to. But they earned it.

BRANDON

I always enjoyed going to school, and while I did okay in some subjects, I really struggled in others, like math. So I just coasted through the last couple years of high school. I graduated, but I didn't have the grades needed to get into college. Not that I had ever really given college much thought, as no one ever really discussed it with me. I remember one meeting with a high school counselor who told me I should just join the military and refused to discuss other options with me. Honestly, I feel like they had already made their decision about my future before I even opened my mouth.

ANGEL

The rest of my childhood and teenage years were pretty normal, to be honest. I liked school, I went to Church a lot, and I felt like I grew up with a lot of people who loved me. When I was getting ready to graduate and think about college, I had a lot of support from teachers, and my caseworker told me about specific scholarships that foster care youth could apply for.

HEATHER

You know the transition from adolescence to adulthood, from high school to college, is hard for any young person, even those with a supportive household. For young people in the system, this transition is even harder. Some make it through, but a lot more don't.

BRANDON

I don't think I really realized it at the time, but I think a big problem for me was the lack of positive male role models in my life. Three of my foster home placements were single parent homes, all women. And when I lived at the home, all of the staff were women or old white guys.

ANGEL

So I went to college, not too far from home. I'd still go back to my foster parent's home during breaks and for the holidays. They're still very much a part of my life. I don't know what I'd do without them.

BRANDON

A couple of years ago I finally got the courage to ask my Uncle why he didn't want to adopt me. He said he was worried about all of the background checks that you have to go through when

you adopt. But he also told me that his girlfriend at the time didn't want him to do it. She made him choose between me or her, and he chose her.

A shift. BRANDON & ANGEL leave the space as LYRIC, JAZ, & MICHAEL return.

LYRIC

Uh, I entered the system pretty young and was in a ton of different foster homes.

JAZ

My mom had-and has, a lot of issues. She was an addict and would often be gone for long periods of time, so I was left alone with my little brother, Anthony. She would be gone for days at a time, and then would suddenly just show up with some strangers. It wasn't unusual when I was a kid to wake up and find some random person asleep on the sofa, or even my bedroom floor.

MICHAEL

My parents were..., well not parents. They were people who had kids, but definitely not *parents*. They were both drug addicts and I spent the first few years of my life living in a trailer park. It was *hell*.

LYRIC

Honestly, I feel like I raised myself. Yeah, there were "adults" in my life when I was a kid, but there was really no one, for a really long time, who really took care of me.

JAZ

I actually preferred it when Anthony and I were in the house alone. We'd watch a lot of tv together, a lot of cartoons, and just play. Eventually this started to happen a lot more though. So out of necessity, I figured out how to heat stuff up in the microwave or throw something together from whatever I could find in the kitchen, or what I had hidden away. We used to eat a *lot* of cereal and dry ramen noodles.

HEATHER

A lot of the young people I work with-even though they might be in their late teens and into their 20's, many of them were forced to learn survival... strategies, I guess? At a very young age. Hiding food, and hoarding food is something that I still see a lot of my young people doing. Even though they know where their next meal is coming from, there's sometimes still that little seed of doubt that suddenly, everything could change.

LYRIC

It's difficult to talk about, because so much of my experience of foster care was traumatic, and sometimes when I talk about it, it feels like I'm reliving it. I was moved around a lot from the moment I entered the system, so I never really felt I had one place that I could call home.

MICHAEL

My sister and I were first taken into care when we were in grade school. I think I was around kindergarten age? We lived in a pretty remote area so before we were the age when you were supposed to go to school, no one really gave a shit about us. Sorry, is it okay if I swear?

LYRIC

Because I was moved around so much I never did well at school and it was really difficult to make friends. Even now, it's hard for me to maintain healthy relationships.

JAZ

There was one day when Anthony and I had been left for at least 24 hours, if not more. There really wasn't much food in the house, but Anthony demanded macaroni and cheese and just would not eat anything else. I managed to find some dry pasta I had kept in my bedroom, and there was a can of that cheese-wiz stuff in the fridge, so I tried to improvise.

I really didn't know how to cook properly, but I knew I had to boil water to make pasta from watching my mom. I tried to get the stove on, but I couldn't get it to work, so I decided I'd boil the water in the microwave instead. I didn't know how long it would take to boil, so I think I put it in for something like 10 minutes. When the timer was up, I was standing on a chair to reach the microwave, and Anthony was standing on the floor next to me. I took the water out of the microwave and obviously it was really hot. I dropped it, and the boiling water splashed all over Anthony.

He started screaming immediately and I tried my best to calm him down, but nothing worked. I thought it would be best to try and get him in the shower and put cold water on him but that didn't help either. So eventually I left our apartment and found a neighbor, who came in and called the police. That's when Anthony and I were taken into care.

MICHAEL

When I was really little my sister and I would often just wander around our trailer park. There was an older lady who would sometimes feed us, so whenever we were hungry and there was no food at home, we'd go look for her. I think she might have made a complaint at some point, because I remember my parents told us we weren't allowed to visit her.

The state finally took more of an interest in us when my sister went missing and ended up in some random guy's house. He had no idea who she was, so he called the police. Then CPS did some more digging and we were taken into care. My sister and I were placed in a home together, and things got better. I think we were there about a year, maybe a little longer before it was decided that we could go back to our parents. Which was a terrible idea.

HEATHER

Obviously, the system is not perfect. Or anywhere near it. When children are removed from their family, it is often the ultimate goal for them to return. Sometimes this happens, and everything is okay. Other times... mistakes are made. Please don't take this as any kind of apology-that's not

what I'm trying to say. I've been working in the system for quite some time and while I have some *amazing* colleagues. But then I hear the stories of a lot of the young people I work with, and my blood boils. Like, how did *we* let this happen to them?

LYRIC

Being in foster care is hard enough for anyone, but when you are queer and in care, good luck!

JAZ

Anthony was in the hospital for a few weeks because his burns were really serious, so I was placed with a couple who had one other foster child. They let me visit Anthony in the hospital and promised that when he was well enough to leave hospital, he could come live with us. And eventually, he did.

LYRIC

I knew from the time that I was really young that I definitely wasn't straight, like I didn't behave like other kids, and most of the adults in my life just couldn't deal with that. They tried to make me be "normal". That meant having strangers praying over me like some weird kind of exorcism or being locked in the basement without food because I refused to wear a dress.

MICHAEL

When we went back to my parents, my sister was probably about 10, maybe 11? I think I was about 8. I don't know how or why my parents got us back, but they did. As they were addicts, I think they realized that they could use us to support their drug habit, so they cleaned up their act and put on a good show for the judge. By this point they had moved out of the trailer park and were in a house. I think that probably helped their case.

LYRIC

I was in one foster home where the family had two biological children, and I was like 12, and one of the boys started making me do stuff, you know, like sexually? I told him I was going to tell my social worker, so he told his parents I was the one touching him. Who do you think they believed?

MICHAEL

I didn't realize it until a lot later, but my Dad had been sexually abusing my sister, and my Mom knew the whole time. As soon as we were back living with them, they started to let friends and neighbors do things to her for money or drugs. And then pretty soon they started to do the same with me. (*beat*) This didn't last that long though. Someone my parents knew got in trouble with the cops, and when they searched their place they found, um, photos of my sister and me. So CPS stepped in again, and we became permanent wards of the state and my parents went to prison.

JAZ

After a while I started to have a lot of nightmares about what happened to Anthony, and I would wet the bed a lot. Now I understand that I was just processing what had happened to us, and I

internalized a lot of the blame for Anthony's injuries. As I got older I became super protective of him, to the point that I would fight a lot with the older foster kid in the house, and then I started to act more violently towards my foster parents.

Eventually it was decided it would be best if Anthony remained in that home and I was placed with a new set of foster parents. I was able to still visit him, but not as much as I liked. My behavior got worse and I would always get in trouble at school, and eventually my new foster parents had had enough of me too, so I was moved again.

MICHAEL

My sister and I were placed together again, but as she got older, she started to behave inappropriately. In a sexual way, you know? At that point she was moved to another home, and we never lived together again.

HEATHER

So most of the young people I work with are older youth, some even in their mid-20's. Many of them are incredibly resilient, they have to be, obviously. But one of the most common issues that I see many of my young people still struggle with is if they were separated from their siblings. Sometimes it needs to happen, but other times it can be incredibly traumatic.

MICHAEL

After that I got moved around a lot, probably to at least 8 different homes before I dropped out of high school and aged out of the system.

LYRIC

Now when I think about it, my next foster home really wasn't that bad, but by this point, I was just really fucked up and angry, and I had started doing drugs. Even though the foster parents were okay, when I finally came out I, didn't feel like they would accept me, so I left. I stopped going to school, and before I knew it, I was homeless.

JAZ

I was placed with one family for a few years, but at this point my mom had "cleaned herself up" and we started to have supervised visits with her. It became clear she wanted us both back, but I didn't want her anywhere near Anthony. Eventually she managed to convince a judge that she had changed, and she regained custody. I didn't want to move back with her, but at the same time I wanted to be closer to Anthony again. So eventually I agreed. I was about 10 years old at this point, and I would fight with my mom constantly. We were probably with her for six months before she drove me back to the place where we used to have our supervised visits and told them that my behavior was getting out of control. She even said she was worried about Anthony living in the same home as me. So, it was decided that Anthony could stay with her while I was placed somewhere more "suitable".

LYRIC

I've met people who have told me that I shouldn't "complain" about the experiences I've had, and that I should be grateful to the state for putting me in the system because at least that way I wasn't left in an abusive home. I was a baby when I entered the system, but honestly the only abuse I remember is the abuse I experienced *in* the system.

MICHAEL

Looking back now, aging out when I did was a terrible idea. I had no plan, and I soon learned that I was completely on my own and I had to figure out all kinds of things by myself. I didn't know at the time that there were all kinds of resources, grants and that kind of thing to help people like me. Because I chose to age out just before my 18th birthday, I wasn't eligible for any of this. I didn't have health insurance. Nothing.

HEATHER

You know the laws are different from state to state. When a young person emancipates or leaves foster care because of their age-which is usually around 18, sometimes 21-then it means that they will lose support from the State. Things that they have perhaps previously taken for granted such as housing support, living costs, and healthcare, suddenly disappear. That's why it's so important for all young people to have a transition plan in place.

JAZ

I hated my mom for doing this, but now in a strange way I'm actually grateful for what she did. Because at this point, I went to live in a residential home briefly. And for the first time I actually felt like I had people who looked at me and saw something more than just a "bad kid", you know? They helped me realize I wasn't at fault for what happened in my past, but I was in control of the kind of future I wanted to have.

MICHAEL

As I was totally on my own, so to speak, I started to make some dumb decisions. Hanging out with the wrong kind of people, drinking too much, stealing a little, you know? Nothing crazy, but my dumb ass got caught and the next thing I know, I'm locked up. I was 20 years old.

They all exit.