

# DIGITAL AGNES

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## **Sweet grass, boiled eggs and table manners**

*With Opened Mouths: The Podcast*

2023

### **SPEAKERS**

Qanita Lilla and Billie the Kid

### **KEYWORDS**

Poetry, practice, storytelling, performance, Kingston

### **TRANSCRIPT**

[Music]

**Qanita Lilla:** Welcome to *With Opened Mouths*, I'm your host, Qanita Lilla. Today we're joined by Billie Kearns, also known as Billie the Kid. Billie is a K'ai Taile Dené/Nehiyaw poet and storyteller. Born in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. She currently resides in Kingston, Ontario, the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe people. Billie holds a Bachelor of Applied Science in Electrical Engineering from Queen's University and has performed at spoken word events across Turtle Island such as CUPSI [College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational] and the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word.

In this episode we explore ideas of home and the playful necessity of creative practice.

[Sounds of Lake Ontario]

**Qanita:** Thank you so much, Billie, for joining me today. I think I've known you for about a year.

**Billie the Kid:** Yeah, about that.

**Qanita:** In November.

**Billie:** Yeah.

**Qanita:** I just remember there being lots of ice and it was the first time I experienced it. I met you at Agnes and you were dressed perfectly. [Laughs] You had very cool long boots and mittens and I thought, "This is a person who knows how to deal with the snow."

[Both laugh]

**Qanita:** Yeah. And since then, we've been meeting on and off. It's great to have you here. Thank you.

**Billie:** Thank you for having me. No, I quite like the winter. It's one of my favorite seasons. I think having the proper winter gear is the key to being happy in the winter, it's not feeling cold [laughs].

**Qanita:** Yeah, you told me that. [Laughs]

**Billie:** I did, I must have. [Laughs]

**Qanita:** You told me that and you spoke about layering, to just enjoy it. You said, "Enjoy it, the snow." That will stay with me for sure. [Laughs]

**Billie:** Thank you.

**Qanita:** So, can you tell me what led you to spoken word and to poetry and storytelling?

**Billie:** Yes, of course. I always liked narrative stories as a kid growing up. Whether it was reading books, reading books too late at night, or making up stories to tell my friends and parents. I always had this deep interest in writing and storytelling, like if you were to ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I always said, "I want to be an author." I was lucky enough in high school that I went to a school that had a literary arts program. I lived in Ottawa, and it was cool to be able to go where people wanted to be for the arts. There were other programs such as dance, drama, and music. I was in the tiny literary arts program, and it really helped me hone my writing skills. The first year was almost like a boot camp. [Laughs] You think you're good, you got in here. Now, let's actually teach you the foundations of imagery and structures, like different forms – not only of poetry – but prose, short stories and essays, etc. In my second year of the program, I think one of my classmates was interested in slam poetry, and I heard it, and I was like, "I don't know if this is for me. I don't know about it." And then, some time passed, and our teacher brought in a spoken word poet named Ian Keteku. And Ian absolutely blew me away when he was in the classroom. I saw this and, "Okay. I take back everything that I thought. I think this is it. This is the thing." It was just absolute theatricality. The expression, extended metaphors, the way that Ian stitched all of his stories together and intent into a singular, three-minute piece. It just absolutely blew me away. And then of course, at the end of the series he said, "Well, here are the places you can go in Ottawa if you're interested in more of this." So eventually I was able to -- and about a year later, I made it out to my first slam. I remember it was downtown Ottawa, so I couldn't go alone. One of my friends wasn't available, but his mom said, "I'll go with you." So, the two of us [laughs] went to the show at the Mercury

Lounge in Ottawa, and that was my first glimpse at the scene. It was totally spectacular. And then I just kept on going. That's really what got me into spoken word poetry because slam is the medium of competition. I've been performing and writing spoken word ever since. I don't compete as much as I used to, but I was for a very long time -- both with Ottawa, and a little bit with Queen's, also doing some organizing. That's largely how I got into spoken word. Now, I generally do identify more as a spoken word artist than a slam poet, but both are still part of me.

**Qanita:** How does poetry slamming and the competitions work?

**Billie:** So, a poetry slam -- the general format is you have about 12 poets. You get up on the signup sheet in a "first come, first serve" -- that sort of thing. Everyone's names get put into a hat and then you're all drawn at random. It depends on the show, but this is what I'm used to. And then you have three minutes to get up on the stage and say what you want to say. It doesn't have to be three minutes long, but it has to be a maximum of three minutes. Every 10 seconds you go over, there's a time penalty. You say your piece and the audience, who is highly encouraged to respond, either by snapping their fingers or saying "Mm-hmm" or vocally responding, giving energy back to this performer. Then, five judges are randomly selected from the audience, and those five judges, after the poem is done, will give them a score of zero to 10 to one decimal place. And then the top five poets of the first round make it to the second round, somebody wins, and it depends on the show. It could just be anything from saying, "I'm glad I won" to "Oh, I got this funny figurine from Dollarama" or getting \$100. It really depends, but that's the general format of the slam.

**Qanita:** Very cool.

**Billie:** Yeah.

**Qanita:** It's based within a community.

**Billie:** Completely.

**Qanita:** You feel supported.

**Billie:** I think slam generally is a useful vehicle for bringing people together. Once you're there, a lot of the time you're just excited to see the people that you want to see and hear what they've been writing. Sometimes as a poet you just go to the show because you want to go. You're like, "I'm not going to read tonight." Or you might sign up for the open mic and not be scored. There really is a big community and space where you're sharing a lot of your most vulnerable stories. A lot has to be said for where there is a space that's meant for people listening to each other, and again, enthusiastically supporting each other during the telling of that story.

**Qanita:** Yeah, I think that sounds like the most valuable thing. And I always tell you this, I find it interesting that you're an electrical engineer, your poetic and engineering practice sit side by side in many ways. Can you speak about that a bit?

**Billie:** That's not an uncommon observation. The combination is more common than you'd think. But largely, I came to the bitter realization that many teenagers have to come to when they think, "Okay, here's what I love to do, but I also am craving some sort of stability." I think a lot of this also comes from different financial backgrounds. There are different pressures that people will experience to either pursue their art form professionally or not. So, for me, I was very bitter about the decision at first. I was like, "Okay, I will go into some sort of STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics] field. I genuinely like math and science, they are puzzles. I like even making narratives out of logic; I think logic is a kind of narrative. And being able to use tools I have for math and science is to create something with that. Engineering to me was the most creative way to pursue something that was related to math or science. Queen's actually gave me a lot of flexibility because I had a general first year and I could figure out what I wanted to do, or what felt good. Electrical engineering was what I ended with -- it isn't what I thought that I would end up doing, but I think that once I looked at the courses, it was "Oh yeah, electronic circuits or digital systems. Those all sound so cool." [laughs]

**Qanita:** And robotics.

**Billie:** We had a little robotics course back then; I was not a fan of thermodynamics. I think that's what made me not do mechanical engineering. Fast forward to now, the two practices don't necessarily coincide with the work, like I'm not telling poems at work or anything, but it does help my communication skills. I think that's very valuable, especially being in the field of engineering where communication skills are --

**Qanita:** Rare?

[Laughter]

**Billie:** Yeah, and very important. Even talking to my boss sometimes, he's a total analogue electronics enthusiast and he is brilliant, and to him electronics is poetry -- the circuit tells a story and that's how he sees it. I think for me, my job, and the stability that I ended up achieving through it, really allowed me to have the energy to be creative. I didn't feel compelled to read at all during most of high school and during my undergrad, and I used to love reading. But then it just felt like a chore, it was always like homework. Even if it was to better my own practice, it didn't feel like it was worth it. Though it only took three or four months after finishing school to feel like, "Oh, I can just read what I want to now. I can build my own literary cannon." It's not what I should be reading, and do people think I should be?

It's, "What do I think is important? And what do I want to know more about? Who do I want to hear more from?" That was a big key point of framing my more recent artistic practice, I think. Choosing who is going to be influencing me right now and just having the energy to do that. Being able to support myself is huge.

**Qanita:** Yeah, I think it is. Did you grow up in Ottawa? You spoke about it.

**Billie:** I think I grew up in Ottawa. I say that because I've moved a lot [laughs], but I lived there for seven years. I moved there when I was 11 and it had a huge influence on me and the community there as well. A lot of the organizers and poets from Ottawa shaped who I am as a writer, as an organizer, and as a performer, fundamentally.

**Qanita:** Who were some of the people that shaped you?

**Billie:** I've already spoken about Ian Keteku. Rusty Priske and Brad Morton were huge influences from the Capital Slam Collective. Same thing with other poets like Apollo the Child or Prufrock. And let's see, one of the feature performances I saw -- and I thought, "This is how I want to do feature performances when I do them" -- was by a poet named Titilope Sonuga. She wasn't from the Ottawa scene, but she did a feature in the Urban Legends poetry scene. It was completely -- the way the stories float into each other -- she would tell stories in between the poems and then the story would become the poem.

**Qanita:** Wow.

**Billie:** And it was so magical.

[Laughter]

**Billie:** Yeah, there's so many others. There are teammates that I've had who are still either writers or journalists, community building people in other communities, and I think working together ultimately, they were all influential.

**Qanita:** Would you like to read us one of your poems, please?

**Billie:** Yes, I can. So, I'm going to pull out a poem that I usually use as an introduction piece. This is called *Habit(at)* -- with the at of Habitat in parentheses.

I come from Yellowknife and the Subarctic, the Athabasca, my Mother. We know the smell of forest fires in July, the flickering of the lights every time the power goes out. We come from the moss, the willows, the garter snakes, the fireweed, and foxtail.

I tell home

please don't forget me

I'll do my best not to  
let myself forget you  
I know where I come from  
I can feel home growing  
out of myself in every  
hair through  
scalp and skin  
I pull it out  
recursively become  
home when I suck  
on the roots  
reteach myself  
how to speak  
to the land.

[Fingers Snapping]

**Qanita:** Wow, that was beautiful.

**Billie:** Thank you.

**Qanita:** It was so beautiful -- home and speaking to the land -- that kind of feeling disconnected but coming back.

**Billie:** Yes. I'd say that is largely a fixation of my writing, among many. [laughs]

**Qanita:** Where do you feel this journey started or how do you feel it came about?

**Billie:** A journey feels... it feels like a multiple -- I'm trying to find the word here -- but there's multiple journeys, I think. I was born in Yellowknife and talk about it a lot. Growing up, my parents divorced when I was very young, so I moved around a lot with my mother across Canada, but I would always return to Yellowknife in the summer to spend time with my dad. Yellowknife to me was a constant. When I had all of these other changes happening, I could come home to the same apartment, to the same vines, and to the same art on the walls, the same view of the sunset. It was really grounding to come home -- be out of school [laughs] -- and spend time there. I would say that's where it started. I've moved to Calgary. I lived in Fort Smith -- a lot of my mom's family lives there -- a lot starts there fundamentally too, because again, as the poem says: I do very much come from my mother. I grew up with my mother, just me and her for 18-19 years. A big part of my story is her story, and they're largely intertwined in that way. Yeah, I lived in Calgary, Fort Smith, and then through work with Friendship Centres -- which is an Indigenous community centre. My family runs one in Fort Smith. So, my mom through experience there was able to find

work in Windsor, Ontario, and that's what moved us to Ontario. [Laughs] It was a six-day drive across the country, and we left on Boxing Day and got into Windsor on New Year's, and I thought, "There's grass here in January -- what's going on?" [Laughs] We lived in Windsor for a little while and then Walpole Island, Wallaceburg, and then Ottawa. Some of my dad's family was in Ottawa and it seemed like a relatively nice place to settle for a while. My mother made a really intentional decision to say, "We were staying here, no matter what happens." She wanted me to go to one high school. She definitely valued that I was going to a high school that had a literary arts program. I also think she very much understood that a lot of the people at the school were not only motivated in the arts, they were also motivated academically, so she also trusted that I was being challenged academically. From Windsor, I moved to Kingston to go to Queen's, and I'm still here, so I've been here just as long as I lived in Ottawa now.

**Qanita:** That's really amazing.

**Billie:** It truly is. It blows my mind every day.

[Laughter]

**Qanita:** What do you think it was about Kingston? How did you find community here?

**Billie:** I think being here over the summer was a big thing that allowed me to transition. Seeing the world around me as Queen's campus and being in school, to recognizing the city properly. [laughs] I think also a bit of anxiety washing away as well, so feeling more comfortable being out and about. I think Queen's Poetry Slam was definitely a gateway into community as well, because it was always open to anyone. As many Queen's clubs are, it's run by students but open to anyone. So that's how I met Bruce Kauffman.

**Qanita:** Yay, Bruce!

**Billie:** Yes!

[Laughter]

**Qanita:** Bruce is at the Agnes and he's fantastic.

**Billie:** Oh, Bruce is amazing. That's how I met a lot of people. And all it takes is just knowing one or two people to make you feel comfortable going somewhere else. I spend a lot of time in Musiikii -- I have a lot of friends who are musicians. I think even spending time with friends and then going to new places and feeling that calmness of the summer, and the excitement of movies in the square or going to different parks -- I think that allowed me to feel like I was living in Kingston, not just in whatever bubble the university was. Especially in

Engineering, everything's so all consuming. You've got a class at 8:30, and then you've got a lab that goes from 6:30 to 9:30. You're trying to do homework and then you have to go home and that's it, and you start the next day. I did an internship and that's how I started working at the company that I'm at right now. I really do value the work that that we do -- we make instrumentation for biologists and environmental scientists. Somebody's doing research with my equipment, it's exciting to think about that. So I think just being happy with my job, and I'm so grateful for my coworkers and being friends with them as well, I think nestling into the arts community here. I'll give a big shout out to my friend Haley Sarfeld, she connected me with a lot of the musical community here. Yes. [Laughs] She's a musician and also a poet, a storyteller and playwright. [Laughs] I think you just make friends with people.

**Qanita:** Yeah. I think what strikes me is that you really love your job, because it has to do with the land and about making change. I'm always amazed by how excited you get about engineering principles – no not principles – the machines and the functionality of them.

**Billie:** It's exciting. It can be very frustrating. I'm very frustrated with a specific pH electrode right now, but [laughs] -- so if anyone knows where I can get a derf at 3pH electrode, please let me know [laughs]. But no, it's still so much fun and challenging. You know, I get to do some problem solving. Yeah.

**Qanita:** How do you think Indigenous creative practice influences you? You spoke about how your family was involved in art centres.

**Billie:** So, I think there's a couple of facets to this. As a poet or rather as an Indigenous poet -- and I felt this from the start. There's a lot of pressure to write about, "Okay, I'm an Indigenous poet. I need to present myself as here are my poems about these social issues or this injustice." And for me, at least when I was in high school, I wrote because it was fun. And sometimes I would write, not necessarily to explore, "What is this complex emotion about colonialism." [Laughs] But just make up a story, and I wanted to share that instead. And I struggled with that for a while and being able to reconcile that, and I think as I got older, I realized that a lot of the stories that I wanted to tell were just about my life. And it became apparent, as some people would say, "This is a poem about residential schools. This is a poem about intergenerational trauma." Yes, but largely I'm just talking about my experiences and being an Indigenous person is inseparable from my art. Also, growing up, both of my parents were storytellers. My mom -- sometimes she'll tell me a story and it'll be the most fantastical thing. It'll sound almost too grand to be true. Maybe years later, I'll talk with a family member or something like that, and it turns out the story was even more bizarre than she had presented it. I won't get these stories necessarily in any, like you know, "this is what you need to know." My mother told me what I needed to know how to survive, I will put that out there. Certain things about her life were just so cool, she would sprinkle here and there and then, "Here's a story." And it's like, wow. [Laughs] So, you know what? I



think this is a good time for a poem about that. Let me pull up this poem. I'm pretty sure I have memorized it. But just in case -- [Laughs] I should have it pulled up. But this poem, these are some *Things that my mother has told me. It's an incomplete list but --*

**Qanita:** It's a long list.

**Billie:** No, that's a bunch of poems. Anyways, it's an incomplete list, but it's very important.

**Things My Mother Told Me**  
***(an incomplete list that is very important)***

When she was nineteen  
she lived by herself  
in Inuvik.  
She worked at a bar  
and in the winter  
she and her friends  
would drive south  
to see the sun.

I use this anecdote to justify living by myself one summer  
and she replies:

lol ya but ur my baby

On the subject of bread and Indigeneity:

My girl, we never depleted our resources  
to the point where we had to eat the grass.

It took me a while to process  
that by grass she meant wheat.

The subtext of this conversation was:

Billie, bread makes you  
and especially you fat.  
Trust me, it's in your genetics.

On the subject of eggs:

When I was seven she told me  
To shell an egg  
tap it lightly  
with the side  
of your spoon.  
Slip the spoon  
into the cracks

and gently lift  
the shell away.

She says she learned this trick at school.  
It was kind of like a boarding school.  
They taught you  
other types of tables manners  
and etiquette  
such as where to put your napkin  
which hand to hold your fork in  
and in what language to speak.

She said one of the eleven-year-old boys there  
had a moustache and they called him Macho Man.

My mother told me  
about the Indian Residential School system  
ever since I could remember  
but it wasn't until I was eleven  
that she told me she went to one.  
This was the same year we moved to Ottawa.

On the subject of Ottawa,  
she tells me that she hates this city.  
The summer air is too thick  
she doesn't like the way city Indians do things  
and she can't learn how to speak French  
no matter how hard she tries.  
That's what the nuns at her school spoke.

One night  
after tearing down  
the bilingual  
cue cards  
in our kitchen,  
she says  
    We're staying here  
    so that you don't have to move as much as I did.  
After six years  
I tell her that this is the longest I've lived in one place.  
She says  
    Me too.

On the subject of Christianity:

My girl, we never needed ten commandments.  
Our people have one golden rule  
that covers all of them and more.  
Be kind and help people.  
But don't be stupid.

Other advice:

Always back up your files  
If you lose your files  
because you didn't have a backup  
then you probably deserved it.

Never do a half-assed job.  
If you're not fully doing something  
then why are you bothering in the first place?

She told me this after I'd done a shitty job  
at sweeping the staircase.

My mother tells me  
that I don't know  
how to stand my ground.  
She tells me that I'm too soft  
and that I need to learn  
how to cook single sized portions.  
Whenever we speak these days,  
which isn't often,  
She always speaks to me  
as if she's trying to grant me  
instructions.  
These are the days  
when all I want is to hear my mother tell me  
Billie, I'm proud of you.  
Most days she says  
My girl, I miss you.

Thank you.

**Qanita:** Aww.

[Fingers snapping]

**Qanita:** That was beautiful. The relationship to your mother who had to take care of you by herself and endure all of these things. And now today in her mind, “you're still that person” and you're like, “I'm not.”

**Billie:** That's how it goes. [Laughs]

**Qanita:** Yeah, I know, and that's why I think it's so powerful, because it speaks to your personal experience, and also to a universal relationship. Parent and child. I think your mother sounds fantastic, and I wish I could meet her. [Laughs] I love the part of, “Back up your files.” [Laughs] If you don't, it's basically your fault. [Laughs] Yeah, but humour is a part of your work and who you are. You're --

**Billie:** Oh, completely.

**Qanita:** -- Light and joyful.

**Billie:** I think it's nice to balance that out, and I mean, that's also true to who I am and who my family is. Like speaking back to what it means to be an Indigenous artist, there's the real serious stuff and there's always humour with it. [Laughs] I mean, not always, but generally a lot of people are really funny, they've gone through a lot, and they'll be funny while telling you how they went through it. And that's just part of dealing with life, I think. Yeah.

**Qanita:** What do you feel compels you to write, to get it down in this form?

**Billie:** It really depends. Like I said, when I was younger, writing to me was something that was a recreational activity in the sense that it was fun, and it still is fun to me. I know that for a lot of people, writing is very therapeutic. For me, the process of writing was therapeutic, but it wasn't necessarily what compelled me. Especially over the past couple of years, while writing I will have complex emotions, or something serious might have happened, and I'll set forth to write because I'm doing an exercise and know in my heart what's going to come out. Even if I don't start writing about that thing. Let's say I want to start writing about how I ate a really good biscuit the other day, or something simple like that, something mundane like that. It will so often be pulled into whatever else is bubbling in the core of my being [laughs]. So, I think my motivation to write is largely because I enjoy it legitimately, I think there's joy in writing, there's joy in telling your stories, even the difficult ones, and especially those. Honestly, being able to tell your story with the aid of imagery or metaphor -- be it a short or a long one. It allows you to capture nuances that you normally wouldn't pull out in a conversation with a friend. And then you feel like, “Oh, I've captured that feeling that I've been having, but was not able to say before.” And I think that, for me, was a lot of the allure of spoken word and slam poetry. Like I have three minutes -- the slam format. I have three minutes to say exactly what I want to say, how I want to say it, and everyone's going to listen to me. And I was a very quiet person growing

up. I'm not good at improvisational things. I think that was the allure of having this pre-written thing. It's going to be articulate, nuanced, anything that I wanted or thought would be presentable and being heard. I think that was huge just being heard. Yeah.

**Qanita:** Yeah. And being in a transitory community. Growing up and then feeling like, "I'm like planting my roots."

**Billie:** Oh, completely.

**Qanita:** -- on the stage.

**Billie:** I think that's an exciting thing. A part of spoken word communities, and you get this with any sort of community or hobby that you do, but if you do it in one city, you can do it in another [laughs]. It's this gateway to a community at large. Not just the Ottawa or the Kingston communities that have influenced me, but the national or even international ones. I've been to the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word multiple times. Back when I was a youth poet, I went to the Canadian -- it was called YouthCanSlam at the time -- but it really connected a lot of youth across the country, and you could hear the different languages of poetry that people spoke. Even in my undergrad we took part in the College Union's Poetry Slam, and we put together a team from Queen's, we did it four times, I think, and we went to this competition that was just mostly American poets, but you also had some other people, I think from Ireland or Singapore, all over the world.

**Qanita:** Wow. Very cool.

**Billie:** Yeah. [Laughs]

**Qanita:** What is a poem that is especially close to your heart that you've written?

**Billie:** That's -- [Laughs]

**Qanita:** And that you might like to share?

**Billie:** That's also a transitory thing, I think. The thing with stories is that I think they live similarly to how we live, and our relationships to those stories change. There is a poem that is very near and dear to my heart, but I don't think I'm going to share it right now, if that's okay.

**Qanita:** Okay. That's fine.

**Billie:** I do like to intentionally choose what I share, and where. Also, what the arc of the story is that I'm telling for a given set. But, sometimes there's a poem that you're like,

“Yeah, this is my favourite.” And three years later I'll be like, “Oh, I don't want to say that again.” [Laughs] And you can still acknowledge and can still say, “That's a good poem, that was a good piece of work.” But also acknowledge that's not where I'm at right now.

**Qanita:** Yeah.

**Billie:** And to say that to a stage of people, “How true is bringing out that part of my being? How true is that to who I am right now?” And also, “What do I want to impart onto my audience? Is this what I want to communicate to the world right now?” You don't have to say it just because you think it's good or even that it's close to you. Part of spoken word is the speaking part of it. [Laughs] And having that reciprocity with the audience.

**Qanita:** Yeah.

**Billie:** And the relationship of, “What are they knowing now?” By what you've said to them, you have now said, “Okay, this is what you know.” And then take from it -- I know I'm quoting somebody from saying this, “Take from it what you will.” That sort of thing. I do have another poem though that is from back in the day, and it was like “This is the poem!” [laughs] that I'm going to share with you. This is a story, as many of my poems are, and I think that's all I really need to say about it. I just told you about my mother and now I can tell you a little bit about my father. This poem is called -- and if any of you know the finger game here -- I didn't know the finger games until I moved to Ontario -- and I didn't really understand the point of it -- but anyways, this poem is called --

**Joni, Johnny, Joni, Johnny,  
Whoops, Johnny, Whoops,  
Johnny, Johnny, Johnny, Johnny.**

Joni

I meet Joni in my father's oldest photo album.  
Joni Balances on the base of Cameron Falls in February  
her glasses whisper *eighties* and Joni grins  
at my father through the camera lens.

Johnny

My father texts me at work and has the nerve  
to ask if he's ever mentioned that I have a brother:  
Johnny is thirty, lives in BC, and his mother  
was a granola head with a goofy smile.

Joni

My father texts me a selfie Johnny sent him.  
Johnny has my father's eyes and they crinkle  
above the bridge of Joni's nose. Johnny's beard  
wraps around their features, holds them together  
and I think it must smell like oysters. I catch  
my reflection in the screen: see my flat nose  
my mother's eyes.

Johnny

Standard icebreaker: got any siblings?  
I pause for what I now realize is too long.  
I say that Johnny said he'd call me but hasn't.  
Until he does, I will call him nothing other  
than Johnny.

Whoops

I'm definitely not stalking him on Instagram.

Johnny Whoops

I definitely did not just accidentally like one of his videos.

Johnny Johnny Johnny

Johnny and I talk for what must be an hour, maybe more. Johnny's voice is higher  
than I was expecting? Haley says it's like my voice but cracked. Johnny asks me  
about my mom, I say Vina, about my dad, we say Billy, who is also technically his dad  
and then Johnny asks me how I love.

He says he asked Joni the same thing when they met three years ago and they've  
been close friends ever since. Johnny says *he* loves like Joni: fast and full – a  
romantic. I tell Johnny I love too quickly, I mean, I too love quickly. Cite how Billy

loves, and how Vina loves, how they met in a bar and flirted over a high stakes game of pool. I tell Johnny I am a poet and that I like the details – I love the details. I tell him that I make playlists for the people I love because Billy made me playlists on tape decks when I was six and I'd let Vikki Carr and Jimi Hendrix sing me to sleep. Johnny says he makes playlists for his loves too.

He looks like he's watching me when I say these things.

Okay it's a video call so of course he's watching me, but he's really watching me, like with all of his stare and a half smile swallowed into something like wonder and relief and I think maybe I've got him. Like you know when a first date goes really well and you think wow! we've got number two in the bag and neither of you can wait because you know that by some miracle, some magic, whatever you did worked and I think I might have a brother.

I think Johnny could be my brother.

Thank you.

[Fingers snapping]

**Qanita:** I want to ask you something.

**Billie:** Yes?

**Qanita:** About sharing very intimate details of yourself.

**Billie:** Yes.

**Qanita:** And [laughs] how do you manage to do that? Do you separate or don't you? Or is it just --

**Billie:** I don't know. It's just what I do. I think I always have a tendency to overshare. [laughs] For me, part of storytelling saying – again it's processing the complex things that happened to me in life. Like when I found out that I had a brother after identifying as an only child my entire life, I was literally in my bedroom screaming. [Laughs] I was like, "Okay, this has to be a poem. I know this is going to be poem. I just don't know when or where, but it has to be a poem."

**Qanita:** It changes the shape of you.

**Billie:** It does, it does, and this goes back to what I was saying earlier about being intentional with what you share, and in what spaces. So, a lot of my poetry is highly



personal, and I think that is largely – the “what will I want to leave with this space” definitely has to do with, “What is that story? What happened? Who did it happen to?” I name people in a lot of my poems and I'm not just sharing my story, but I'm also sharing their stories. I really do try to be intentional and responsible with that. That's part of honouring a story and whatever it imparts to the world.

**Qanita:** Yeah. I really like the idea of honouring a story as a living thing because it really is.

**Billie:** Truly.

**Qanita:** You're not only sharing parts of yourself, but also everybody.

**Billie:** Yes.

**Qanita:** I mean, wow. I know a lot about your dad now. [Laughs] I want to talk about -- you're going to be running a spoken word workshop with Agnes. I'd like to discuss that because so many people would really love to learn how to write and perform, and it's part of this larger process.

**Billie:** I really do like the way that we split up the workshop. You know, Qanita -- we've worked on this together, so you know a lot of this too. I think the conversations that we had were really influential to what I wanted to bring into a workshop. There's always, “Okay, here is the introduction to spoken word.” It is what it is. Creating something that can be over six different sessions, twice a month. Somebody can either pop in and say, “Oh, I can only make the Sunday or Tuesday session. Or “I have a really busy life right now, but I only want to go to this workshop because it interests me.” Or saying, “I have time for all of these, and I just want to learn how to tell my stories. What is spoken word and poetry? How do I tell a story?” All of this. I want to be able to equip people to value their stories and value the power in them. Of course, you can go through the nitty gritty of it. The poetic toolkit – imagery and wordplay. Either of the sound devices, rhythm and form. There's a lot to pack in there, the idea of, “What is a narrative in the first place?” And I'm going to bring this back to a couple of the authors that I was reading -- specifically, Leslie Marmon Silko and George Blondin, who is a Dene Elder, but who collected a lot of Dene stories – is this idea of what a story is and stories as a living thing, and once you say it, it's out there. And like Leslie Marmon Silko, her idea of ‘what is a story that was presented’ was that “It's out there, I can't take it back.” There was a gathering of witches, and one of the witches said, “I'm going to do this scary trick.” And the other said “Well, I can do a scarier trick.” The one which told the scariest -- instead of doing a trick, they just told a story about this horrible thing that was going to happen. Everyone said, “Ok, that's like -- You won the contest.” [Laughs] And then they said, “Okay, but please take it back now. The witch said, “I can't. It's out there. It's going to happen.”

**Qanita:** Wow.

**Billie:** And I think that's something that I've really tried to hold in my creative practice. More so in the positive sense. And this is something I like to bring into workshops, "How can we manifest what we want to happen?" One of my more recent poems that is close to me is exactly that: manifesting hope. Especially in the darkest of times when everything feels like it's falling apart. What I now try to do as an exercise for myself is write what I want to happen. Even if it feels totally unimaginable, or even if it is imaginable, just write the poem as if it's going to happen. Instead of wallowing about, "This happened, and this is never going to be this way."

**Qanita:** Woe is me.

**Billie:** Yeah. That is really how it feels, this thing is lost or this thing is impossible, "I'll never experience this again." Whether it's heartbreak or housing insecurity, it's being able to write through those moments and it's almost drafting a plan of survival [laughs]. That has been very valuable and something that I want to equip people with because writing as therapy is so important. I think it's easy to get stuck in dwelling on trauma, and then even commodifying trauma after that. When you really do get into writing, and you feel like you're good at it. Whether it's through a competition or getting published, it feels like there's pressure to sell your trauma. It's important to express that and to tell those stories, but also realize, "What do I need right now?" Sometimes even just having that hope, or even writing joy for the sake of it, is equally important. You need that balance. So anyways, all of that is to say, the general structure of the workshop. [laughs] "What is the story? Why are we here?" Trying to get a sense of what people are looking for, and then a couple of workshops later, giving them their poetic toolkits, be it the structure of a story – Oh yeah, I brought in George Blondin earlier because a lot of Dene stories don't necessarily feel like a story in the Western sense. Like it ends and you're almost trained to think "Well, what happens next? Or what does that mean?" And no, "That is the story. [Laughs] That is how it's told," and trying to say, "Okay, you don't need this whole structure of here is the inciting incident and this is the denouement." You don't need all of those things. Those are very valuable things, but every story doesn't have to follow that exact same cookie-cutter model. And moving away from that in a structural sense and just letting the story be what it is. Then the nitty gritty of the poetic toolkit. How to move away from saying, "Moving away from just the abstract things, but how can we bring in the concrete world around us to really bring forth that feeling?" And I think about that often, at least when we talk about land, that is where land is inextricably tied to poetry. What was happening to you at the moment, it was raining, and you felt especially sad. Well, that's because the land is now part of your poem. [Laughs] This is everything. Whether it's going to the water, feeling that, seeing the moon. Whether it's touching the grass or what you smelled from the flowers. This all totally influences how you're feeling and your being. Even what you were saying about how this summer versus the winter totally changes how your life feels. Again, that is

the land in poetry. I also want to explore the idea of the responsibility of the storyteller -- I didn't make that phrase up and I wish I could credit who it was, but I've heard multiple people give workshops on this, and so, I would like to impart my version of this workshop to sort of explore -- Now that we are telling stories, now that we do have audiences: how do we do that with intention and kindness? Also with respect, not only to ourselves, but our audience, the people in the stories and the stories themselves. And then exploring our inspiration. "What does home mean to us?" Is it a multiple or singular thing? Does it move? Do you even feel a connection to home at all? Other sources that people might have from inspiration. What drives you? And then, I'm hoping to end off with a workshop that will discuss how we can build community. The past couple years have been hard for a lot of communities. And with having this workshop series, I'm hoping to help build a little community. Be it connecting people who are around and have been [Laughs] or people who are totally new and want to experience sharing art with other people.

**Qanita:** Yeah, I think it's manifesting hope.

**Billie:** Yeah!

**Qanita:** I think it is very beautiful and a wonderful way to end. To invite folks to come to Agnes and take your workshops. It'll be fantastic; details will be on our website. Thank you so much.

**Billie:** Thank you.

**Qanita:** Billie, it's been fantastic and wonderful. Thank you so much.

**Billie:** Thank you, Qanita. This has been wonderful.

**Qanita:** Thank you. Bye-bye.

[Music]

Thank you for listening to *With Opened Mouths*. Special thanks to our guest Billie the Kid for speaking with us today. This podcast is hosted by myself, Dr. Qanita Lilla, and produced by Agnes Etherington Art Centre in partnership with Queen's University's campus radio station, CFRC 101.9 FM. The music is composed by Jamil 3DN and produced by Elroy "EC3" Cox III. Episodes of *With Opened Mouths* are released monthly, and you can find them on Digital Agnes, CFRC's website and on your favourite podcasting platform. If you liked what you heard, leave us a review and subscribe now so that you don't miss a single episode. We'll see you next time.

[Music]