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I'm Going to Go Back There Someday: Reading, Writing, and Directing Hauntings in Four American Plays

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I'm Going to Go Back There Someday: Reading, Writing,
and Directing Hauntings in Four American Plays
by

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Class of 2021

A critical essay submitted to the
faculty of Macalester College
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Project Advisor: Harry Waters Jr., Theater and Dance

I'm Going to Go Back There Someday: Reading, Writing, and Directing Hauntings in
Four American Plays

Roadmap

Introducing the 1997 edition of her book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, sociologist Avery F. Gordon writes,

What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely... ["Hauntings"] describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the presence of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. (xvi)

Theatre—as performance, as writing, and as a site—has long engaged with the ideas Gordon presents in her definition of haunting. In the death-obsessed works dramatic criticism scholar Marc Robinson calls “necrophiliac plays,” times and histories can collide and collapse, and spaces that should feel familiar are often rendered alien (314). Presence and absence are words as integral to hauntings and to theatre in general as they are to the plays in “Returning to Neutral”—the chapter from *The American Play: 1787-2000* (2009) in which Robinson both discusses the three playwrights this essay primarily focuses on and coins the term “necrophiliac plays.” MoMA Media and Performance curator Thomas J. Lax argues in *Ralph Lemon: Modern Dance* (2016) that “Performance is like trauma, ubiquitous and paradoxical; both repeat themselves and neither can be

fully held in language; each relies on the other” (26). Lax asserts the haunting nature of trauma and performance in response to the “grief-stricken” work of dance-theater conceptualist Ralph Lemon, *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?* (19). Grief, after all, is its own kind of haunting.

This is a formal essay on theatrical form and style. It is also a personal essay on a few of the plays and playwrights who inspire me, on myself as a playwright, and on my current experiences as a first-time director. Above all else, though, this is an essay on theatrical hauntings.

Lax’s chapter on Lemon, “For Starters,” is another formal yet personal theatre essay. By “personal” I do not simply mean that I, Asher de Forest, am “in” the essay. I will be discussing myself as a student theatre-maker, namely as the playwright of *I’m Going to Go Back There Someday*. I am currently directing the play in partial fulfillment of the requirement for Honors in Theater and Dance at Macalester College this spring 2021. The directing process so far will be a subject of particular attention in the concluding section of this essay. Additionally, this personal discussion will occasionally take the form of anecdotal sidebars I will call “Pitstops.”

That said, there are other playwrights whose work I will be examining on a personal level, as well. Here, theorist and critic Roland Barthes’s (1915-1980) famous—and often useful—assertion in his aptly titled 1967 essay “The Death of the Author” that “the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author” is relevant (6). Barthes explains, “Once the Author is gone, the claim to ‘decipher’ a text becomes quite useless” (5). While I will not attempt to decipher playwrights’ wills, I do intend to utilize the available and relevant context of their lives in order to interpret the choices made in

plays concerned with death, grief, trauma, and other hauntings. Although he is often misinterpreted in this way, Barthes is not arguing that authors be disregarded outright, but rather that they are not the end all be all in terms of access to meaning in a text. So, in the art about death I cite, I will keep “the death of the Author” in mind while still allowing writers to haunt my readings.

There are three main plays, all from the United States and the latter half of the twentieth century, that I set in conversation with each other and with my own decidedly twenty-first century American play in this essay. Coincidentally, the chronological order of these plays matches the order in which I originally read their scripts. I first read Lorraine Hansberry’s (1930-1965) drama *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) in a course on African American theater the semester before writing my play. In THDA242, Playwriting and Textual Analysis, I read *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977) by Maria Irene Fornés (1930-2018) while in the early stages of idea development and scene drafting for *I’m Going to Go Back There Someday*. Beginning just shy of a year after finishing my first draft of the play and less than a couple of weeks after submitting the latest version to a festival for the first time, I slowly made my way through *Angels in America*, Tony Kushner’s two-part work first staged in 1991 and 1992. Although in many ways these plays could not be more different, they bring forth hauntings, a theme expressed—“sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely”—through combinations of realism and aesthetic styles from theatre’s historical avant-garde (Gordon xvi).

The historical avant-garde developed in Europe from the late nineteenth into the mid-twentieth century. Although the avant-garde is composed of a broad swatch of artistic movements, in his critical anthology *Theater of the Avant-Garde, 1890-1950*

(2001), Bert Cardullo provides an encompassing definition which I will return throughout this paper: “avant-garde drama playfully calls attention to itself as drama, to its own artifice and spectacle” (29). The avant-garde movements and figures Cardullo details include the late nineteenth century Symbolists and their puppets; the Surrealists and Expressionists of the 1920s; Fillipo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1934) and his time-travelling Futurists; Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) and his Theatre of the Absurd peers; and the Dadaists (2-3, 6-11, 32). “All these modernist ‘-isms’ nevertheless react against the same common enemy:” Cardullo writes, “the modern drama of Realism” (5).

To Cardullo, realism suggests “the socially, politically, and psychologically oriented ‘problem plays’ of the twentieth century... [which are] occasionally influenced by ‘techniques’ from aberrant avant-garde movements” (1). The post-1950 plays I look at principally draw from the tenets of realism “influenced by ‘techniques’ from aberrant avant-garde movements,” although they all play a part in the continuing dissolution of stylistic divides (Cardullo 1). According to theatre historian David Graver in his “The History, Geography, and Heterogeneity of American Dramatic Realism,” detractors of dramatic realism often point to its “reverence for referentiality, order, and closure... its reliance on consistent subjects as an origin of meaning... [and] its rigid conventions, which favor the demands of mimetic representation over the wider possibilities of theatrical expression” (710). In realism, these attempts at “mimetic representation” include plot and dialogue, acting style, and sets, props, and costumes alike.

Like the historical avant-garde, realism has undergone several incarnations since its inception. In the early 1900s, dramatic realism began “shifting to an interest in broader social issues with plots that hinged on partisan politics” (Graver 711). After 1917, Graver

describes another shift towards “psychological realism.” As realism came to the United States, this shift towards psychology largely retained “dominance over the twentieth century American stage,” and stages elsewhere, as noted by Cardullo (Graver 713). More generally, Graver points out that, “Where expressionism or theater of the absurd arguably aims at strong theatrical effects, realism strives for accurate representation even when the forms used by these schools are rather similar” (713). Theatrical hauntings, then, straddle these intentions, aiming at strong theatrical effects *and* striving for accurate representation; “home,” or the boundaries and levels of a given “ism,” “becomes unfamiliar” (Gordon xvi).

Despite that realism was not mainstream at all in its beginnings, certain avant-garde theatre movements formed in reaction to realism because they saw a theatre world increasingly defined not by creation for creation’s sake, but for capital’s. The founding members of “these modernist ‘isms’” viewed realist theatre as the face of this oppressive capitalist shift away from experimentation and collaboration, the fine arts, music, and dance (Cardullo 5). To a certain degree, that was then, this is now. Building on early twentieth century realism’s “interest in broader social issues,” plays across movements and styles can fight oppressive systems. The ones I focus on certainly do. Cardullo’s claim that “avant-garde drama playfully calls attention to itself as drama, to its own artifice and spectacle” is another important aspect of these plays’ shared DNA with the historical avant-garde (29). A winking relationship with “artifice and spectacle” becomes increasingly obvious across the trajectory from *A Raisin in the Sun* to *Fefu and Her Friends* to *Angels in America* to *I’m Going to Go Back There Someday*, but it is evident in all four works.

I do not mean to suggest that these plays come together to form a cycle or that they can be grouped into some new theatre movement. Their styles are distinct; *A Raisin in the Sun* is a classic realist drama, *Fefu and Her Friends* combines hyperrealism and metatheatrical experimentation, and *Angels in America* takes an approach to magical realism that borrows from Bertolt Brecht's (1898-1956) Epic Theater. These plays certainly did not directly inform each other. Even my original script was not directly informed by the three others; as stated previously, I did not even read *Angels in America* until a year after beginning *I'm Going to Go Back There Someday*.

What connects these four plays is that they each respond to their respective moments in American history and their playwrights' lived experiences. Through style-crossing dramaturgies and the opportunities for directing these dramaturgies allow, Hansberry, Fornés, Kushner, and I communicate hauntings—personal and interpersonal, individual and communal.

Exploding the Dream Deferred: *A Raisin in the Sun*

A Raisin in the Sun is the most traditionally realist of these plays, but that does not discredit its text's potential for experimental staging choices, its emotional and political depth, or its radicalism. The play follows the Younger family, three generations of working-class Black Americans living in a Southside Chicago apartment. The Youngers are haunted by "Big Walter," the elder family patriarch who recently died, leaving behind an inheritance in the form of a \$10,000 insurance check. They are haunted, as well, by the legacy of American slavery through the present white supremacist systems which have

led to the poverty, misogyny, and structural racism—especially housing discrimination—they grapple with throughout the play.

Recent productions of *A Raisin in the Sun* and other plays by Hansberry have incorporated avant-garde elements to highlight the multiple hauntings at play in her work.¹ The playwright and director Robert O’Hara’s 2019 revival of *A Raisin in the Sun* takes this type of revisionism to an extreme and fascinating place.² O’Hara’s directorial additions include the appearance of the late Walter Sr. as “a silent, brooding ghost, rather like Hamlet’s father” (Brantley). Casting Mr. Younger in a role like Hamlet’s father, one of theatre’s most iconic specters, may be read as a reminder of the personal, family grieving taking place in Hansberry’s story alongside the broader American sorrows of white supremacy, patriarchy, and poverty. Alternatively, it could signal a more malicious presence. Big Walter’s widow Lena admits that he could be “hard-headed, mean, [and] kind of wild with women” (Hansberry 45). His ghost might underscore the consequences of these qualities as they haunt his surviving family members. Either way, O’Hara’s choice is reminiscent of phrases from both Cardullo and Robinson. Drawing an intertextual straight line from the Youngers of Chicago to the prince of Denmark “calls attention to [*A Raisin in the Sun*] itself as [a] drama” in a long tradition of “necrophiliac plays” (Cardullo 29, Robinson 314).

Robinson begins “Returning to Neutral” with Hansberry. He introduces her negative response to Jean Genet’s play *The Blacks* to probe her relationship with theatrical “style” in both dramaturgy and staging, and to explore her “defense of a more realistic and more sociable theater” (311, 312). We cannot know for sure what Hansberry would have thought of O’Hara’s stylized approach to her own most famous play, but in

her critical writing on *The Blacks*, she is not chastising the employment of avant-garde techniques as a general theatrical practice. For Hansberry, the problem lies in “The Blacks” of the play’s title not accurately representing Black people, or people at all. Hansberry comments that the play’s “absence of humanness” turns “the oppressed” into “shadows upon the windows” who “have been abstracted into ‘the style.’” (qtd. In Robinson 311). Robinson writes, “still faithful, as she [Hansberry] is, to a theater that invites our involvement by the credibility of its representations and that delivers us from confusion into useful knowledge,” *The Blacks* “exposed an aesthetic fault line” for her; “In her essay [on *The Blacks*], Hansberry stands at its edge” (311). Although subtle, this tightrope walk across theatre’s aesthetic fault line is not entirely detached from the avant-garde. Style alone does not by necessity dehumanize a character. Hansberry inviting *our* involvement and delivering *us* from confusion (to paraphrase Robinson) suggests a relationship to audience that falls surprisingly in line with Cardullo’s understanding of the avant-garde. Still, hallmarks of realism remain most at the forefront of *A Raisin in the Sun*, including a mimetic design (suggested by detailed stage directions), psychological and social interests, and the credible representation Robinson points out in Hansberry’s “characters’ vulnerability and honesty” (311).

When Hansberry was two months shy of sixteen, her father died of a surprise brain aneurism while away in Mexico. “I have no detailed record of his funeral services or the contours of Lorraine’s grief,” Imani Perry writes in her 2018 “third person memoir” *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* (22, 1).

But the return to her father—honoring him, arguing with him, thinking about the aftermath of his death—is all over her work as a writer. She remained unreconciled to his death, and most of us who have lost those we love dearly can feel this in our own chests and throats. (Perry 22)

My father died when I was eighteen. My brother, like Hansberry, was fifteen. The character Rachel is sixteen when we meet her in my play, *I'm Going to Go Back There Someday*, a year removed from her father's death, while Beneatha from *A Raisin in the Sun* is 20. I will leave the continued mining of my own biography and playwriting for later in this essay, and instead posit that facets of Beneatha can be found in Hansberry around this time. In a 1959 interview with oral historian Studs Terkel (1912-2008), Hansberry confirms that Beneatha is “very autobiographical, because the truth of the matter is that I enjoyed making fun of this girl, who is myself eight years ago, you know?” (Marcus).

Privileges differ—Hansberry was the daughter of middle class, college educated parents, while Beneatha struggles to navigate poverty as a first generation undergraduate. It seems that Hansberry wondered with Beneatha what her life could have been like if she had similar personal ambitions and griefs, but less fortunate circumstances. In the absence of her father, Beneatha tries to find herself anew, flitting from one hobby to the next while protesting, “I don't flit! I—I experiment with different forms of expression—” (48). Like Beneatha, Hansberry exhibited “the fickleness of youth” in college, testing the waters of journalism, applied art, and acting before discovering a passion for playwriting (Perry 28).

As part of a study abroad program in the summer of 1949, Hansberry lived in Mexico, “a place of mourning... as the place where her father had passed away, so distant from his family” (Perry 35, 38). Perry writes, “It is hard to avoid the sense that she had come, like her father, seeking answers that her home couldn’t provide” (38). Similarly, the end of *A Raisin in the Sun* suggests the possibility that Beneatha will soon seek a deeper connection to her heritage and all she has already lost in the United States by moving to Nigeria, in the spirit of the emerging Pan-Africanism movement. Alluding to this simultaneously burgeoning and long-gestating movement through Beneatha, the most contemporary character in the play, is like Gordon’s definition of a haunting in that it “alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future” (xvi). By seemingly bringing her own personal history into Beneatha’s character arc, Hansberry herself haunts the play.

Hansberry’s interest in creating realist theatre had already begun to develop during her formative college years, but the historic opening of *A Raisin in the Sun* on Broadway made clear just how necessary the play’s realism was. In college, Hansberry discovered Irish playwright Sean O’Casey (1880-1964) and “got a taste of realism” which “freed her from a sense that as a Black writer one had to constantly be worried about depicting characters who were ‘credits to their race’” (Perry 30). Likely inspired by O’Casey’s realistic poor Irish characters, the Youngers in *A Raisin in the Sun* are not “positive or negative representations” of working-class Black Americans, “but rather simply true ones” (31).

When *A Raisin in the Sun* opened, “Broadway audiences had never before seen the work of a Black playwright and director, featuring a Black cast with no singing,

dancing, or slapstick and a clear social message” (Perry 97). While the pre-1950 avant-garde movements Cardullo tracks responded to what they saw as the oppressive, constricting nature of realism, the artists in these movements were mostly white Europeans. Most mainstream American realist playwrights before Hansberry—like Arthur Miller (1915-2005), early Eugene O’Neill (1888-1953), and early Tennessee Williams (1911-1983)—did not *actively* degrade Black life. However, in their overwhelmingly white work, they did ignore it. Broadway before Hansberry was not perpetuating the oppression of Black people through realism, but instead through the grotesque minstrel tradition. Majority white and wealthy New York audiences were likely seeing poor, Black characters onstage as real people for the first time.

For some audience members, the social politics of Hansberry’s style decisions were complicated by moments in the play such as Act II, Scene One, an exception to Perry’s “no dancing” rule. Hansberry scholar Margaret B. Wilkerson describes this scene from the play in her introduction to Hansberry’s unfiled original screenplay adaptation (1992):

[In] the warrior scene... Beneatha and Walter dance to African rhythms and Walter, in a drunken speech to his “African brothers,” speaks in another, more subliminal voice as he momentarily identifies with the proud, militant heritage of his forebears. That moment was delightful to those who viewed it as innocent play, but was problematic for others. It seemed completely out of character for Walter, who constantly denigrates Beneatha’s identification with Africa. Because of Walter’s drunken state, his speech tends to undercut any serious notions of brotherhood among people of African descent. (xl)

Pitstop

I pay homage to *A Raisin in the Sun* Act II, Scene One in *I'm Going to Go Back There Someday*. As in *A Raisin in the Sun*, the siblings Garry and Rachel Feldman are separated by a significant age gap (ten years for Garry and Rachel, fifteen for Walter and Beneatha), and by very different approaches to life in general. Garry and Rachel are also, like Walter and Beneatha, haunted by their father's death in ways that both connect and divide them.

It is Saturday morning in Act I, Scene 4, and Garry wants to convince his travel companions, especially his younger sister Rachel, to go to a Shabbat service with him. Much to Rachel's chagrin, Garry references past synagogue experiences—his Bar Mitzvah and Rachel's Bat Mitzvah ceremonies, both celebratory occasions when their father was alive, as well as more recently their father's funeral. Like the Youngers' apartment in *A Raisin in the Sun* Act II, Scene One, through stage directions, the space in Act I, Scene 4 of *I'm Going to Go Back There Someday* expands beyond realist limitations to encompass the scope of the characters' imaginations:

The song ["Hava Nagila"] gets faster, and music comes in to accompany GARRY'S fantasy. JONI and MOHAMMED play along, and soon enough they're swept up in the dance as it gets faster and faster. They circle. They lift RACHEL up in the chair. Despite the intimate confines of the motel room, this dance is now big and joyous. (16)

The Feldman and Younger siblings are of different eras and different diasporas, but in both dance scenes, haunting's inextricable link to heritage yields an unexpected moment of joyful connection.

According to Graver, American realism's "combination of pedagogy and mimesis creates... [a] paradox of the genre: while mimesis demands that the audience be ignored, pedagogy requires playing to and for the audience" (714). Considering Act II, Scene One from this paradoxical realist lens of the passive yet receptive audience member, it is

either apolitical “innocent play” or, because of Walter’s inebriation, politically muddled and therefore unworthy of being taken seriously (Wilkerson xl).

Conversely, performance scholar Yi-chin Shih interprets Walter’s participation as genuine in her reading of this moment from the article “Dance Scenes in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*” (2014), writing,

[Beneatha’s] dance shows Africa as her heritage and her roots. Similarly, Walter also finds his roots through dancing with Beneatha... Through performing the tribal dance, Walter reclaims his masculinity as well as his cultural identity... his racial resistance thus develops through his transformation from an immature person to a masculine man. (279)

There is marked dissonance in Shih’s interpretation and the reactions to the scene Wilkerson describes. This speaks to the relationship between the play’s overall adherence to American realist modes and Hansberry’s diversions into more fantastical hauntings. Shih understands the haunting magic of this moment in her reading, explaining, “Beneatha and Walter’s hybrid tribal dance is imaginative, improvisatory... [Their] dancing creates, reaffirms, and performs... hybrid and diasporic identity, and... offers the possibility of liberation through the moving and dancing body” (279). This is a drunken affair for Walter, and a rare instance in the play of fun between the siblings, but it is also transformational.

Walter’s internal struggles—including with his Black identity and with the pressure from his mother Lena to assume the mantle of “man of the house” in the wake of his father’s death—are made external through some fantastical flourishes in the

dramaturgy. Gradually, the stage directions—theatre as text—take us from the outside in, both on the page and (when viewed as instructions for a director) the stage. At first:

(WALTER comes in during this [Beneatha's] performance; he has obviously been drinking. He... watches his sister, at first with distaste. Then his eyes look off—"back to the past"—as he lifts both his fists to the roof, screaming) (77)

Soon, we get closer to understanding Walter's visions, but our view is still somewhat distanced:

"(On the table, very far gone, his eyes pure glass sheets. He sees what we cannot, that he is a leader of his people, a great chief, a descendant of Chaka, and that the hour to march has come)" (78)

Finally:

"(And now the lighting shifts subtly to suggest the world of WALTER'S imagination, and the mood shifts from pure comedy. It is the inner WALTER speaking: the Southside chauffeur has assumed an unexpected majesty)" (79)

I read this moment as a bridge between Shih's and Wilkerson's interpretations. It begins comically, but as the last stage direction notes, "*the mood shifts.*" Throughout the play's mostly realist scenes, Lena delivers the most explicitly grief-centered dialogue about her late husband. The younger Youngers seem to be quietly haunted by their father, only sometimes recognizing the ways in which he haunts their other woes—money, masculinity, racial injustice. The siblings' experiences are different from each other, but via the haunting in Act II, Scene One, Walter and Beneatha are able to let go of their repression and temporarily grasp at a sense of ancestral freedom and power their father never got the chance to reach.

They soon crash back to reality when Beneatha's suitor George arrives for a date to see a show, but not without one last playful callback to the moment's "own artifice and spectacle" (Cardullo 29). "Look honey," George tells Beneatha, "we're going *to* the theatre—we're not going to be *in* it" (Hansberry 80). Eighteen years after the character George first delivered this joke in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Fornés *did* place her audience "in" *Fefu and Her Friends*, inventing a new kind of theatrical haunting.

Kill the Rabbit: *Fefu and Her Friends*

Pitstop

Professor Alayna Jacqueline's Playwriting course included regular assignments in which we would propose something we wanted to "steal" from playwrights and describe how we would apply what we had "stolen" to our own writing. After reading *Fefu and Her Friends*, I turned in a response pointing out "the stark contrast of living room play conversations" found in most of the text "and violent confrontation" in the final scene. I had two ideas at the time for the main play I wanted to write for the class. One was a realist road trip comedy, the other a tangled fable set inside a whale. In my response to *Fefu and Her Friends*, I had an epiphany: "these contrasting plays, if justified as Fornés does, can be combined into one..." The rest is history, still in progress.

Through the 1960s and 1970s, playwrights such as Edward Albee and Fornés, once firmly rooted outside the realm of realism, began to experiment with writing plays that engaged with but did not unequivocally subscribe to realism. One such play, Fornés' *Fefu and Her Friends*, played a key role in the origin of *I'm Going to Go Back There Someday*'s style. Despite the lineage from *Fefu and Her Friends* to *I'm Going to Go Back There Someday*, I was initially unsure of how to best incorporate Fornés' play into this essay. Professor Beth Cleary helped clarify the reason for my trepidation. "The compelling problem of *Fefu*... is that it refuses sense, it refuses easy understanding of

what is going on,” Professor Cleary wrote in a note on my outline. In the play, Fornés does not subscribe to realism’s “reliance on consistent subjects as an origin of meaning” (Graver 710). Still, *Fefu and Her Friends* merits inclusion beyond its status as a personal jumping off point for much of my interest in playing with style as a playwright and director. Compared to *A Raisin in the Sun*’s realism, and *Angels in America*’s extended flights of fancy, *Fefu and Her Friends* provides a case study in genuinely middle ground style-crossing.

The ways in which Fornés’ biography and identities inform her work are less traceable than with Hansberry, in large part due to deliberate choices Fornés made. Fornés was forthright in claiming herself as an immigrant who grew up in poverty. At the same time, she resisted the label “feminist playwright” (Reagan). Declaring one’s feminist politics was a far riskier act in the 1970s than it is today, and it is *still* a risky act today. Furthermore, as *Fefu and Her Friends* purposefully avoids explaining itself,

Pitstop

I have struggled with the question of labels myself since realizing I want to pursue playwriting professionally. Do I want to be pigeonholed as, say, a bisexual playwright or a Jewish playwright? *I’m Going to Go Back There Someday* is a distinctly queer, Jewish play, but I may eventually write a play exclusively about straight gentiles. Hansberry struggled with this as well when her play *The Sign in Sydney Brustein’s Window* (1964) was met with critical confusion due to its majority white cast.

Hansberry, Fornés, and Kushner—who I discuss in the proceeding section—each model alternatives to the ways in which I have cautiously approached speculation about my autobiographical connection to certain characters since I began sharing *I’m Going to Go Back There Someday* with others.

Fornés is under no obligation to explain herself either, in relation to the work or for any other reason.

Still, despite Fornés' objections to the label of "feminist playwright," she conceded—when prompted by interviewer Bonnie Marranca in 1978—that *Fefu and Her Friends* "is a feminist play. The play is about women" (109). Set in and around the title character's New England country house in 1935, the play features eight women gathering together over the course of a single day to practice for an upcoming fundraiser. In private conversations and public displays, the women simultaneously unearth and dance around traumatic pasts. The present (meaning 1935, 1977, and now) specter of patriarchal violence looms, as men haunt the all-female cast but remain just offstage. When repressed emotions and memories approach the surface for a character in the play, it is as if "what's been in... [her] blind spot comes into view" (Gordon xvi). As a result of the specific types of gendered violence the play alludes to—including physical and sexual abuse, lesbophobia, and gaslighting—the characters' "bearings on the world lose direction" (xvi).

Eschewing realism's emphasis on psychology, frequently remarked upon by Cardullo and historically contextualized by Graver, Fornés tells Marranca she set the play in the 1930s "Simply because it is pre-Freud... Before Freud became popular... if a person said 'I love so-and-so,' the person listening would believe the statement. Today, there is an automatic disbelieving of everything that is said, and an interpreting of it" (109). This is particularly relevant to the ways in which women's stated emotions and beliefs are so frequently misconstrued and discounted by men in our patriarchal society. The absence of men onstage in *Fefu and Her Friends* does not mean that men are absent

from these women's lives, but it does allow the characters a temporary respite from being stifled or ignored.

Expanding on this historical feminist reading of hauntings in the play, performance theorist Vivian M. Patraka writes in her article "Binary Terror and Feminist Performance: Reading Both Ways" (1992), "An expert in creating emotionally eloquent but inarticulate states of consciousness, Fornes gives her women a problem with no name... suggesting the erasure in the 1930s of American feminisms expressed at the end of the nineteenth century and into the 1920s" (168-169). Patraka's proposal about this erasure presents its own absence, a loss that haunts Fornés' characters. Even among other women, time and circumstance can block the way to understanding each other—or even understanding one's self—for the characters in *Fefu and Her Friends*.

"Reverence for... order," usually in the form of the forward momentum of time and carefully crafted buildup of circumstances, is another common feature of American realist theatre that Fornés dismantles, instead resisting linear, chronological order and emphasizing physical space as a narrative feature (Graver 710). Robinson writes:

Fornes... pays especially obsessive attention to the membrane separating theatrical presence and absence... Fefu and Emma begin one scene by emerging from a root cellar. Another character, Julia, seems to sink into the earth—the floor of her room is incongruously covered with leaves—before surfacing from her memory of sexual violence. (315)

Robinson sees presence and absence as devices through which hauntings can be staged.

As an extension of Robinson's observations, I read the "root cellar" functioning as a coffin and "the earth" of the bedroom functioning as a grave. Because of Fornés'

“obsessive attention to... theatrical presence and absence,” symbolic movement between death and life is physicalized in the literal movement between constructed and natural worlds (315).

The root cellar and bedroom Robinson mentions feature in Part II of the play, which is notably experimental in its use of space and time. In this section of the play, the audience is split into groups which cycle through four scenes all happening at once in different locations. Within this setup, audience members both haunt and are haunted by the play, as each group, typically in the other’s “blind spot, comes into view” (Gordon xvi). Per Patraha, referencing the final scene, the fundraiser practice, in Part II “the audience gesturally enacts the rehearsal... that occurs simultaneously onstage” (177). If the avant-garde encouraged fourth wall breaking, Fornés (who also directed the original production) both complies with and counters this encouragement in her style. By moving audience members through performance spaces and guiding them to a heightened awareness of “rehearsal,” *Fefu and Her Friends* “playfully calls attention to itself as drama” (Cardullo 29).

Still, these rooms are site specific domestic spaces and, arguably, more realistic than a typical proscenium stage setup, as actors and audience members find themselves contained within the same four walls, rather than separated by an invisible one. The acting style is meant to be “mimetic representation,” too (Graver 710). Marranca, in her interview with Fornés, notes the actors’ ““natural”—almost effortless—performance style” (110). Unlike realism, though, and in the tradition of avant-garde styles such as absurdism, temporal order is rendered meaningless. Because the audience groups cycle through each scene as the actors repeat them, one audience member’s first scene of this

section will be another audience member's last. It is appropriate that, as for these haunted characters, the experience of the play itself becomes disorienting and claustrophobic, like those "singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar" that Gordon describes as hauntings (xvi).

In the last scene of the play, following a sudden physical altercation between Julia (who uses a wheelchair) and Fefu (who is convinced Julia can walk), Fefu grabs her gun and exits the stage.³ The stage directions follow:

(There is the sound of a shot... Julia puts her hand to her forehead. Her hand goes down slowly. There is blood on her forehead. Her head falls back. Fefu enters holding a dead rabbit)" (61)

In Patraka's analysis of this moment,

"Julia first succumbs to a psychologically induced physical paralysis—her response to a phallogentric order she metaphorically experiences as an inquisition—and then is killed off by the terror expressed in her insistent, life-ending identification with the (offstage) hunter's gun." (168)

The blood that patriarchy has wrought is at last made visible for the audience in this final moment, not through the explicit staging of male violence against women, but as an idea manifested in memory. Violence against women haunts Julia's mind, and that haunting takes over and ultimately destroys her body.

Fefu and Her Friends is of its own moment, especially second-wave feminism, and purposefully removed from it in part because of its placement in the 1930s. With its inconsistent old-fashioned realism combined with the original staging device of Part II, and Part III's surreal, barreling descent into violence, the play itself functions like a

haunting. As Lax says, performance and trauma are repetitive, inexpressible through words alone, and reliant on each other (26). The same holds true for hauntings and history in *Fefu and Her Friends*. The women of *Fefu and Her Friends* wade through the mud of their moment. Conversely, in *Angels in America*, the dead ascend.

The Grief Work Begins: *Angels in America*

Of the plays in this essay, *Angels in America* contains the most literal hauntings: in it, there are actual ghosts and divine visions. Additionally, purely fictional characters interact with two fictionalized historical figures: infamous lawyer Roy Cohn (1927-1986), and Ethel Rosenberg (1915-1953), who Cohn claimed received the death penalty per his request. Through these historical characters, “the over-and-done-with comes alive,” as Kushner “raises specters, and... alters... the way we separate the past, the present, and the future” (Gordon xvi).

Angels in America Part One, Millennium Approaches begins with the familiar, familial grief of many American realist plays, the funeral of an elderly relative. Before long, however, more bodies start to pile up as the text’s relationship to reality approaches a tipping point. A few scenes after the mourning ritual that opens the play, in Act One, Scene 4, lovers Louis and Prior share a tragicomic moment outside the funeral home when Prior reveals his AIDS diagnosis.

PRIOR. I’m a lesionnaire. The Foreign Lesion. The American Lesion.

Lesionnaire’s disease.

LOUIS. Stop.

PRIOR. My troubles are lesion.

LOUIS. Will you *stop*.

PRIOR. Don't you think I'm handling this well? / I'm going to die. (21)

Pitstop

I turned in my proposal for my planned senior honors and what became this essay around the same time I began reading *Angels in America*. In the annotated bibliography section of the proposal, I wrote,

I'm finally reading this play... Talk about mixing realist and non-realist [avant-garde] theater devices. Talk about grief! Not to mention prophets and prophetic dreams, queer and Jewish identity, stories within stories... It's the perfect resource, and simply an incredible feat of playwriting.

The play had been recommended to me before by Jesse Claire, who played Mariner and understudied for Garry in an October, 2019 staged reading of my play's first act, and Rachel Warshaw, who played Prophet in the same reading and eventually lent me her copy as a friendly quarantine reading assignment. Still, it felt serendipitous each time one of *Angels in America*'s numerous connections to *I'm Going to Go Back There Someday* revealed itself to me.

The scene signals the onslaught of death that is to come in the play and had already begun in the mid-1980s when *Angels in America* takes place. Robinson describes the course of *Angels in America*: “[A] grave opens at the start... and never closes: the nation’s dead climb out of it to reproach or salute the living for their ethical choices; the living teeter on its edge defiantly keeping their balance” (315). Kushner responds to real life by drawing from realism at first, such as in Act One, Scene 4. Still, divine intervention is on its way, as if to say, “I will not allow so many people who did not need to die to lay still and silent.” The AIDS crisis fueled the deadly fire of American homophobia from the federal level down. Death haunts *Angels in America*, and grief—a grief rooted in an intense, righteous anger—takes on biblical proportions.

Much of this anger is leveled at Cohn. At the same time, Kushner exhibits a surprising amount of empathy for the historical character, who in his life did a great deal of harm to communities the playwright identifies or aligns himself with. In his article “Lifted Above Tennessee Williams’s *Hot Tin Roof*: Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* as Midrash” (2005), actor, director, and academic W. Douglas Powers writes, “Cohn is not merely Kushner’s whipping boy. While certainly depicted in all his villainous, repugnant glory, Cohn is also a character of great pathos. Shakespearean in size and deliciously vulgar, Cohn is a masterpiece of character construction” (130). Cohn the character is himself a haunting presence in the play; he is larger than life, and yet he is based on a person who truly lived. In a way, even as entrenched in an epic telling of history as *Angels in America* is, all of its haunting characters are rooted in real life.

In an interview, Kushner explained to television host Charlie Rose:

At the time that he died of AIDS, I was moved in a way I never expected to be by Roy Cohn. I felt a certain sense of sorrow and grief for him, even though he was a person that I detested most of my life... In a certain sense, his dying of this disease made him a part of the gay and lesbian community even if we don’t really want him to be... (qtd. In Powers 132)

In wrestling with his own complicated, surprising grief, Kushner syncretizes Cohn the myth and Cohn the man. As in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Fefu and Her Friends*, history haunts in *Angels in America*, but Kushner lets historical events and historical figures haunt us. Through the presence of *Angel’s in America*’s historical ghosts, Kushner implies that hauntings are political, especially for members of marginalized groups, who

are simultaneously haunted within their communities and by outside forces. Cohn epitomizes these hauntings.

The nuanced treatment of Cohn is made further personal for Kushner as a gay, Jewish man who has no qualms attaching these identifiers to his identity as a playwright. “I feel very proud that *Angels* is identified as a gay play.” Kushner proclaims, “I want it to be thought of as being a part of gay culture, and I certainly want people to think of me as a gay writer” (qtd. In Powers 121). Kushner goes beyond merely identifying himself in the abstract; he identifies himself in his own work. Kushner calls Louis—the only gay, Jewish man in the play besides Cohn—“the closest character to myself that I’ve ever written” (qtd. in Powers 134). Unabashed statements like these recall my reading of Hansberry in relation to *Beneatha* and contrast Fornés’ equally valid decision to let her work speak for itself without involving her personal life. It is worth stating Kushner’s position in being as open as he is without fear of career-affecting assumptions is that of a white male playwright in the 1990s, as opposed to a Black female playwright in the 1950s or a Latina playwright in the 1970s.⁴ Even so, it takes a healthy mix of self-awareness and *chutzpah* on Kushner’s part to openly invite association with Louis. While ultimately sympathetic, Louis frequently errs in his attempts to run from the grief and confusion that haunt him.

Cohn dies at the end of Act Four of *Part Two, Perestroika*. In Act Five, Scene 3, Cohn’s nurse Belize convinces Louis to recite the Mourner’s Kaddish, a Jewish prayer for the dead, for Cohn. Reflecting Kushner’s own reckoning with Cohn, Belize tells Louis, “A queen can forgive her vanquished foe. It isn’t easy, it doesn’t count if it’s easy, it’s the hardest thing. Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet.

Peace, at last. Isn't that what the Kaddish asks for?" (265-266). Louis, "an intensely secular Jew" in his own words, is assisted in reciting the prayer by Ethel Rosenberg's ghost (266). Here, rituals of mourning and forgiveness both haunt and heal across boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, and history. Kaddish becomes an act of solidarity. Belize, Louis, and Ethel's collective grief is, in part, for Cohn, but—because this trio includes two gay men, one Black and one Jewish, and the ghost of a Jewish woman—it rebels against much of the bigotry he stood for. Cohn would not want any one of these people to mourn him. He basically says as much by flaunting his racism, sexism, and internalized antisemitism and homophobia throughout the play. However, by enacting a sacred practice, these characters do genuinely mourn Cohn. Ethel and Louis conclude the prayer:

ETHEL. V'imru omain. [Translation: "and say, amen."]

LOUIS. V'imru omain.

ETHEL. You sonofabitch.

LOUIS. You sonofabitch. (267)

They genuinely mean this new addition to the prayer, as well.

Cardullo asserts that the avant-garde places characters in relationship with God, whereas modern dramatic realism places characters in relationships with personal psychology (5). The characters in *Angels in America* (like those in *I'm Going to Go Back There Someday*, Julia in *Fefu and Her Friends*, and Lena and Beneatha in *A Raisin in the Sun*), are grappling with both. Cardullo goes on, "avant-garde drama... exuberantly combines esoteric art with popular culture" (29-30). Alongside obscure religious and

literary references, Kushner sprinkles popular culture allusions throughout his play.

Powers quotes scholar James Fisher, who

proposes that Kushner leavens *Perestroika* with humor derived from camp culture, such as references to gay icon Judy Garland and *The Wizard of Oz* and Blanche DuBois from *A Streetcar Named Desire*... “to stave off the sorts of pretentiousness one can fall prey to in... attempting to address profound spiritual, philosophical, and political questions.” (121)

Pitstop

The commingling of popular culture and more enigmatic or “pretentious” references is another quality my play shares with Kushner’s. In *I’m Going to Go Back There Someday*, Pinocchio, the biblical Jonah, and Rudyard Kipling’s (1865-1936) mariner from *Just So Stories* (1902) are all characters in the same universe, while pop figures from Lizzo to the X-Men to the Muppets weave through road trip conversations.

Aware of the seriousness required to responsibly portray the AIDS epidemic and the darkness necessary to stage a proper haunting, Kushner retains a sense of humor. The fact that much of this humor is attached to gay iconography—that, in a way, someone as beloved as Garland (1922-1969) gets her moment to haunt the play—is a loving tribute to queer communities’ resilience, joy, and community building in the face of tragedy.

Into the Whale: *I’m Going to Go Back There Someday*

When I directed the staged reading of *I’m Going to Go Back There Someday*’s first act last fall, I advertised it as “a comedy about grief.” The black-and-white poster Angus Fraser designed for that reading depicted a small, simple, and cartoonish white car, its front bumper facing right, in the middle of a more realistic-looking black shadow

of a whale, its mouth facing left. In terms of the relationship between the avant-garde and realism in the script, there is some unintended irony in this poster.⁵ The shadow of the whale is a recurring visual motif and a haunting metaphorical presence throughout the play, but the scenes that are actually set inside of a whale—inspired by the character Mohammed’s in-progress graphic novel—made up approximately only twenty percent of the script’s page count at the time. This ratio likely shifted when I cut the play down for time, as required for the upcoming honors production, but the point still stands. A predominantly realist road trip, represented by the miniature car on the poster, constitutes the bulk of the narrative. The poster’s imagery flips my script’s contrasting styles. In the play, the car drives through the “real” world while the whale swims in a sea of fantasy.

As my “Pitstops” demonstrate, connections between myself, my work, and the lives and plays of Hansberry, Fornés, and Kushner continued to surprise me throughout my research process for this essay. My previous assertion that Kushner’s hauntings are political is true of the hauntings in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Fefu and Her Friends*, as well. In each of these plays, multiple examples of “repressed or unresolved social violence” haunt the stage (Gordon xvi). The implicit political declarations Hansberry, Fornés, and Kushner convey through theatrical hauntings lead me to consider the politics of my own piece more deeply. *I’m Going to Go Back There Someday* understandably does not have *Angels in America*’s reimagined historical figures or *A Raisin in the Sun*’s fury in response to marginalization. However, as Hansberry learned from O’Casey, I have learned from Hansberry the importance of writing realistic characters who inhabit marginalized identities. My play’s car contains a bi Jewish man, a gay Muslim man, and two women, one of whom is also Jewish. Like Fornés’ understanding of *Fefu and Her*

Friends as feminist because it “is about women,” I can recognize my own play as political because it is about people whose very existence in America is the subject of constant political scrutiny.

In my directing, the politicization of these characters and their identities has extended beyond the script. In regard to race (and to a lesser degree gender), I went into auditions in January with the mindset that—with the exception of the character Mohammed, who needed to be played by an actor of color—I would cast the parts without concern for realism. Thus, for example, a South Asian woman plays Abe, the biological father of both Garry, played by a Black man, and (spoiler alert) Simon, played by a white man. While, to a certain degree, these choices require the audience to suspend their disbelief, I realized early in the directing process that it would be irresponsible to treat these roles as entirely “colorblind.” By eschewing realism, I want the actors to be able to bring their whole selves to their parts and to the process.

This specific topic is not central to our rehearsal discussions, but it has not gone ignored either. As the white playwright and director of this production, it is certainly something I am still grappling with. An early decision made in relation to the racial makeup of the cast was cutting a joke that referenced the film *Get Out*. In that film, as in this production, a Black protagonist and his white girlfriend go on a road trip. The connection—an unintended haunting caused by one of the types of pop culture references mentioned in the last Pitstop—felt too distracting to keep in the production.

The politics of all of these plays are inseparable from one of the larger topics haunting this essay: death. I completed the first draft of *I'm Going to Go Back There Someday* on March 24th, 2019, and though it reads as a “full” play, it is still a work in

progress today. At the suggestion of the cast, I have made changes to the script as recently as March, 2021. Kushner spent five years writing both parts of *Angels in America* (Kushner 327). The AIDS crisis changed vastly between the late 1980s, when Kushner's great work began, and the early 1990s. I, too, live in a wildly changed world from the one I started writing my play in. My comedy about grief and death carries new weight in this time of racial justice protests and the COVID-19 pandemic. We are now haunted by constant reminders of death and loss, and the global grief and trauma that come with these reminders. I was acutely aware of this in January when my grandfather died of COVID-19 less than a week before auditions began. Like Fornés, I have historically distanced my play from the present; I realized this last summer that I needed to definitively set the road trip plot in 2019. However, in the same way that my play has grown and changed over the course of multiple drafts—into more of an ensemble piece and a blend of comedy and drama, for example—it will also need to keep growing and changing in order to speak to the historical moments it finds itself in.

I am not placing myself as a peer of Hansberry, Fornés, and Kushner, but rather a student. Through their lives and their writing, I learn more about my own. Even though I made the conscious decision to write about these playwrights and their plays in this essay, I know that they will continue to haunt me through their work beyond this point. Similar to the way Professor Cleary characterized *Fefu and Her Friends*, the experience of being haunted “refuses sense... [and] easy understanding of what is going on.” The variety and fluidity of Hansberry's, Fornés', and Kushner's styles—in dialogue with, but not restricted by individual theatrical movements—allows for an effective portrayal of haunting experiences. When we are haunted, our “bearings on the world lose direction”

and yet “what’s been in... [our] blind spot comes into view” (Gordon xvi). The experience can feel surreal and eerily mimetic all at once. Plays that recognize haunting as a multifaceted phenomenon are able to discover more of what theatre can be. Ironically, as a catalyst for the continuing exploration of theatrical forms, haunting keeps theatre alive.

Hauntings led me to write *I’m Going to Go Back There Someday*, and they continue to impact its direction. My study of the plays and playwrights in this essay informs my directing choices, as well. While I already noted how Hansberry’s realist writing style helped me write my characters, I have also taken what I learned about O’Hara’s major directorial revisions and applied some of that inspiration to this production. Now, even in my play’s more realist scenes, the set and costume designs are quite stylized, far from the realist depiction that the script implies. Like O’Hara’s ghostly Walter Sr., I include the whale as a haunting physical presence more often and tangibly than it appears in the script. The shadow of the whale is represented on two rolling panels, which appear to float—like ghosts and aquatic animals both do—across the stage throughout the show, finally coming together in a climactic moment in Act II, Scene Seven. In this moment, to quote Gordon, “what’s been in your blind spot comes into view” (xvi).

In my own production, I do not imitate Fornés’ novel use of space as the playwright and the original director of *Fefu and Her Friends* did. Still, I follow her lead by reimagining the spaces I am working with. Audience members will not travel room to room, but they will experience a similarly heightened awareness of each other and their relationship to the performers by virtue of the performances happening outdoors during

the day. I play with the ways the production leans into this, including moments in which performers make direct eye contact with audience members and exits in which offstage actions remain visible and relevant. Furthermore, although the audience does not “rehearse” movement alongside the actors as in *Fefu and Her Friends*, the narrative does literally move, on the road and in the whale. That movement, associated with rehearsal, will often be intentionally visible to the audience, as the car and the whale do not exist as fixed spots onstage throughout the show and actors simultaneously play and set their own scenes in the space. Like Fornés, I am asking the audience and the actors to constantly haunt each other and the play itself.

The historical context of this particular production will, similar to *Angels in America*, challenge realist expectations strengthen the play’s relationship to the avant-garde. As 2019, the year in which I started writing the play, grows further away, I continue to find current events and recent history haunting the text. Now, history will haunt the stage as well. While the events onstage may take place pre-pandemic, I am directing them during the present moment. Performers will wear masks and all blocking must account for physical distancing. For the majority of the process, rehearsals were held virtually, with actors “exploring the whale” (which emerged as a favorite warmup exercise) from separate rooms and Zoom squares. For a first-time director, all of this has brought challenges and surprises that are likely atypical of a rehearsal process. As with many of Kushner’s hauntings, the “unresolved... violence” of the past year “is making itself known... very directly” in this production (Gordon xvi). As I quickly approach our first in-person rehearsals, I realize that this production of *I’m Going to Go Back There Someday*—more than I could have imagined as a playwright in 2019—“alters the

presence of being in time” and “raises specters” from the past and present year and from our uncertain view of the future (xvi).

I desire to make theatre because theatre haunts me. Furthermore, I intend to continue experimenting with style and form as a theatre-maker because hauntings from my own life—some of which I am quite open about and some of which I choose to keep private—form who I am. I return, once again, to “For Starters,” and to Lax’s bold claim regarding performance and trauma: “ubiquitous and paradoxical... each relies on the other” (26). As they do for theatre, hauntings will always be redefining who I am, redrawing my boundaries and making me new.

I will end this essay with an anecdote on endings. Think of it as one last, extended Pitstop.

Over the course of its many drafts, the final moment of *I’m Going to Go Back There Someday* has changed four times. In the first three conclusions, Mohammed got the last word. On January 28th, 2021, shortly after casting and before rehearsals began, I met with playwright MJ Kaufman to discuss the script. One of his suggestions was that the play should instead end with the final conversation between the characters Joni and Garry. Through some tinkering and a couple of tries, I adjusted the script to include that change. Joni got the last word. The play, for now, seemed over-and-done-with, as Gordon would say.

But I knew I needed a new final moment. And I realized that, for some reason—perhaps related to the very personal connections to this play and its characters that I had been so nervous to address—I was afraid to leave Garry, the protagonist, alone onstage at

the play's close. While this scared me as a playwright, I knew as the director that it had to be this way.

So, I wrote a new haunting.

I have largely left the ways in which my autobiography informs this play outside of the rehearsal process. At this point, some cast members who do not know me outside of the context of rehearsal are probably still unaware that my father is dead. The cast often generously shares their own hauntings with the room during table work, discussions, and scene practice. They talk about the ways in which they feel close to and different from their characters. They let the insight and experiences of others inform their work, including in a meeting with Macalester chaplains Imama Hajara Shareef and Reverend Kelly Stone. (Rabbi Emma Kipley-Ogman has been involved, as well.)

In one rehearsal, during some tablework with the two cast members in the new final scene, the conversation naturally moved to brief, everyday kinds of haunting experiences like thinking we saw someone we lost, maybe out on the street or in a crowd. Here, I made an exception to the practice of removing my personal history from my role as a director.

"I see my dad all the time," I said.

I'm Going to Go Back There Someday now ends like this: Joni delivers her last line and exits. Garry is left alone onstage. "GARRY looks out into the audience, hoping he might find a familiar ghost" (68).

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¹ Reviewing a 2016 London revival of Hansberry's posthumously produced *Les Blancs* (1970), which National Theatre at Home streamed for a week in July, 2020, theatre critic Alexis Soloski noted, "Under [Yaël] Farber's direction, the play moves away from realism and toward expressionism... as it becomes a kind of ghost story, in the sense that no one participating in colonialism... can ever be fully alive" (Soloski).

² Unlike Farber's *Les Blancs*, which I watched when it streamed on YouTube in July, I did not see O'Hara's production of *A Raisin in the Sun* myself. I cite theatre critic Ben Brantley's review.

³ Checkhov's gun.

⁴ Sexuality is a relevant consideration as well. Hansberry and Fornés were both lesbians. Hansberry was never out.

⁵ This is not a dig at Angus, who did such a good job coming up with a design based on a vague prompt from me that the product is one of very few things I—a Jew, an actor, and someone who does not do well with physical pain—have even entertained the notion of getting tattooed on my body. I love that poster.

Appendix

I'm Going to Go Back There Someday

Asher de Forest

CHARACTERS

GARRY FELDMAN - 26. Jewish. Bi. Protagonist. Lost and searching. Often a mess, but he wants to get better.

RACHEL FELDMAN - 16. Jewish. GARRY's younger sister. Closed off and cynical to mask her pain.

JONI JOHNSON - 30. Agnostic. Straight. GARRY's girlfriend. Mature, organized, and deeply caring.

MOHAMMED BEN HALIM - 26. Muslim. Gay. GARRY's ex-boyfriend and longtime best friend. Loveable goofball. Unabashedly himself.

PUPPET - Inspired by Pinocchio. A character in MOHAMMED's graphic novel. Struggling with truth.

PROPHET - Inspired by the biblical Jonah. A character in MOHAMMED's graphic novel. Struggling with faith.

MARINER - Inspired by the mariner from Rudyard Kipling's "How the Whale Got His Throat." A character in MOHAMMED's graphic novel. Struggling with reason.

SIMON - Early 20s. A young man. Sweet and bro-ish.

ABE - Middle aged. GARRY's biological father. Shares some of GARRY's vocal and physical mannerisms.

SIMON doubles with PUPPET. ABE doubles with PROPHET.

TIME

Contemporary, ~2019

PLACE

The Pacific Northwest / The belly of a whale

Production Notes

This play takes place in a variety of indoor and outdoor locations across the states of Washington and Oregon, as well as in the more fantastical locations of Mohammed's graphic novel. Taking this into consideration, set(s) and related production elements may be fluid and somewhat abstract, though still recognizable. Especially in the graphic novel scenes, creative lighting, sound, and costuming can go a long way to convey location.

Despite this flexibility, two beds and at least four chairs will likely prove necessary. These should be able to easily move around the stage and in and out of the audience's sight. This can be achieved through a mix of actual physical movement and lighting, and potentially also through the use of curtains.

Like any good road trip, this script is full of music. All efforts should be made to include these songs, but they may be replaced with appropriate substitutions if copyright issues arise.

Act I

Scene 1

(A whale's belly. Dark. Damp. Distant sound of waves, drops of water in a cave, echoes. PUPPET, PROPHET, and MARINER sit. PUPPET has an extendable wooden nose. PROPHET is in wet rags. MARINER wears suspenders, with various small appliances tucked beneath them)

PUPPET and PROPHET and MARINER

Three men -

PUPPET

A puppet,

PROPHET

A prophet,

MARINER

And a shipwrecked mariner -

PUPPET and PROPHET and MARINER

Sit inside the belly of a whale

MARINER

Like cowboys around the fire.

PROPHET

Swapping stories,

MARINER

Just so.

PUPPET

Telling lies

MARINER

To each other,

PROPHET

To God,

PUPPET

To my father, who's somewhere in this whale!

(PUPPET gets up and starts searching)

Hello! Hello!

PROPHET

There he goes again. I just have to wait until God lets me out.

MARINER

I just have to reason with this whale.

PUPPET

Hello! Hello!

PROPHET (to PUPPET)

How did you end up in here?

PUPPET

I was looking for my father...

(Lights change to bright gray. The characters move accordingly. The scene transitions to a beach. Sound of waves hitting the shore)

... on the beach. Me and my cricket were determined to find him.

(PROPHET actor becomes the cricket)

PROPHET (as cricket)

I can't swim, but you're wood! You'll float!

(PUPPET starts to float out. PROPHET [as cricket] gradually moves upstage, staying on the beach)

PUPPET

Hello! Hello!

Right then, the whale came. I heard my father yell:

(The whale, a shadow, appears. MARINER actor becomes the father)

MARINER (as father)

Help! Help!

PUPPET

Father! Father!

(The waves grow louder. The shadow of the whale grows larger. It engulfs PUPPET, who swirls with the lights like he's in a whirlpool)

PUPPET

Heeelllp! Heee—

(Gulp! Blackout)

Scene 2

(In a car. On the road. MOHAMMED is on driving duty. He sings along to the radio, playing "Help!" by The Beatles. JONI uses her phone to direct MOHAMMED from the front passenger seat. RACHEL, behind JONI, is on her phone with her headphones in. GARRY, behind MOHAMMED, stares out the window)

JONI

And then you'll turn left right up here. No, not yet! Mohammed, pay attention!

MOHAMMED (breaking from singing)

I got it, I got it! We'll make it to your aunt's place. Don't worry.

(MOHAMMED returns to singing)

JONI (exasperated)

We're already late enough as it is. *Now* turn left.

GARRY (realizing)

Shit. I forgot to take my meds this morning.

(Beat)

It's fine. We aren't doing much I need to focus on today, anyways.

(GARRY looks around and sees MOHAMMED singing, JONI directing, and RACHEL on her phone. Realizing no one has been listening, he taps RACHEL on the shoulder. She takes her headphones out, annoyed)

RACHEL

What?

GARRY

I forgot to take my meds.

RACHEL (going back to her phone)

Okay, Garry.

(GARRY takes the hint and returns to staring out the window.

Beat)

GARRY

It's so normal now.

RACHEL (increased annoyance)

What?

GARRY

The meds and stuff. Like, I've spent almost two decades on them.

RACHEL

Oh my God, Garry, you're not a mental patient. You didn't overcome some great adversity to get to the point of ADHD normalcy.

(Beat)

Sorry. It's just... kind of boring. Can we talk about literally anything else?

GARRY (testing the waters)

Do you want to talk about... what you asked me earlier? About why we're going on this trip now?

RACHEL

It was a dumb question. I shouldn't have brought it up. You can do whatever you—

GARRY

I'm happy to tell you. It's probably a conversation we should have.

RACHEL (nervous, but still guarded)

Okay.

GARRY

I'd never really cared about meeting my biological father before. Dad was just my dad, you know? But starting a couple months after he died, I wanted someone I could—

RACHEL

Stop.

GARRY

What?

RACHEL

Just stop. I don't want to hear about how you're trying to replace Dad // with some random guy we've never met.

GARRY

I'm not trying to replace Dad! You didn't let me finish. I wanted someone who—

RACHEL

I said stop!

(JONI and MOHAMMED both start actually paying attention at this. MOHAMMED stops humming and turns off the radio.

Beat)

I changed my mind, okay? I don't want to talk about this.

JONI

Is something wrong?

MOHAMMED (crisis control. Barely discreet)

Garry, weren't you just talking about your ADHD?

GARRY

Not really. We'd kind of moved on from—

MOHAMMED

No, it definitely seemed like you had more to say about your ADHD diagnosis as a kid.

(MOHAMMED looks back and gives GARRY a prompting glare)

GARRY (scrambling)

Oh right! Yeah, I was just saying that how much I've changed from when I got diagnosed to now... Um, it's sort of like X-Men!

JONI (dubious)

What?

GARRY

Remember in the first *X-Men* when Rogue kisses that guy?

JONI

Yes!

RACHEL

I know what you're talking about.

MOHAMMED

Never seen it.

GARRY

Momo, you're writing a comic book—

MOHAMMED

Graphic novel.

GARRY

How have you not seen *X-Men*?

(MOHAMMED shrugs)

Anyways, there's this scene where Anna Paquin's character—

MOHAMMED

I love Anna Paquin.

JONI

I love Anna Paquin!

RACHEL

Hey, Anna Paquin fan club! Stay somewhere close to on topic, please.

MOHAMMED (to GARRY)

So, what's up with Anna Paquin?

GARRY

Right! There's a scene in the first X-Men where she kisses this guy. She's like a teenager. It's her first kiss or something, right? And she has this power where she can take other mutants' powers. Temporarily, you know?

RACHEL

Where is this going?

GARRY

I'm getting there, I promise. So she kisses the guy, and he's not a mutant. And I don't think she knows she's a mutant yet. She just thinks she's like everybody else.

(GARRY waits. Assumes they will all get it)

And that's what it was like.

(Now they'll get it! RACHEL, MOHAMMED, and JONI do not. Awkward pause)

RACHEL

Garry, I think you missed part of the story.

GARRY

I did?

RACHEL

Yeah, the whole point of her kissing the guy. He's not a mutant, so she just... sucks the life out of him. Puts him in a coma.

MOHAMMED

Weird but... hot?

(GARRY and JONI laugh)

RACHEL (slightly amused)

Ew, what the hell, Mohammed?

MOHAMMED

If I was a good enough kisser that I could fuckin' drain a man of his life energy? That would be dope!

RACHEL

What is wrong with you?

MOHAMMED

Who knows? Unlike Garry over here, there's been no formal diagnosis for whatever's going on up here.

GARRY

Diagnosis! Right! That's what I was trying to say. When I first got diagnosed with ADHD in fourth grade, it was like Rogue kissing the guy. *(To MOHAMMED)* But not hot! I just mean I had no idea what it meant. I just knew that I had thought that other kids thought the way that I thought. And now I knew they didn't.

JONI

Babe, this analogy is so much.

GARRY

It made sense when I... thought it.

MOHAMMED

I think I get it. It's that you have to figure out what being you means for you. And when what you thought it meant, or rather what you thought it meant in relation to others changes, you have to figure it out again.

GARRY

Right! Yeah, that's what I'm saying.

(MOHAMMED turns around to see GARRY. They share a look, appreciative and familiar)

JONI

Mohammed, watch the road.

(MOHAMMED turns the radio back on and goes back to singing along. RACHEL returns to her phone, putting her headphones back in. JONI reaches her hand across her armrest back to GARRY)

JONI (facetious but sweet)

I'm sorry I made fun of your dumb analogy.

GARRY (returning the sentiment, fake stuffy)
I'm sorry my astute observations about cinema are too highbrow for you to understand.

(They share a short, pleasant moment)

MOHAMMED (breaking from singing)
Wait. Was Anna Paquin the kid in *Léon: The Professional*?

GARRY
No, that was Natalie Portman.

MOHAMMED
Oh. Yeah, that's who I've been thinking of this whole time. I'm pretty sure I haven't actually seen Anna Paquin in anything.

(MOHAMMED goes back to singing, and turns up the radio. "Juice" by Lizzo. GARRY joins in, followed by JONI. RACHEL takes her headphones out and cracks a smile)

MOHAMMED, GARRY, and JONI
"Ya-ya-ee, ya-ya-ee, ya-ya-ee, ya-ya-ee
Blame it on my juice, blame it, blame it on my juice"

(The car hits a big bump. Singing abruptly stops. MOHAMMED stops the car)

JONI
Is everyone okay?

(Murmur of confirmation from all. MOHAMMED steps out of the car to check what happened. He checks all around the car, then comes back to the window)

MOHAMMED
It's one of the back tires. Something must have punctured it.

JONI
Crap. Alright, let's get out of the car.

(JONI, GARRY, and RACHEL exit the car)

I was really hoping we would make it to my aunt's today.

GARRY
We're not even out of Washington yet.

JONI
I know. But, how long could dealing with the tire really take?

GARRY

I feel like it could take a couple of hours at least. How do people feel about finding a motel tonight?

(Murmurs of assent from RACHEL and MOHAMMED)

JONI (hushed)

Gar, we've got an itinerary to follow. And a motel means money, which, on top of what dealing with the tire will cost—

GARRY (less hushed)

I've got it.

JONI (less hushed)

You're a 26-year-old substitute teacher, you have not "got it."

GARRY (more hushed)

Joni, do we really have to talk about money right now? It's not like they aren't paying you at Google.

MOHAMMED (stage whispering to RACHEL)

Do they think that if they talk like that, we can't hear them?

JONI

Okay, fine. We'll do a motel. I'll call Aunt Marilyn to let her know we won't be there until tomorrow.

(JONI pulls out her phone and starts walking off to call AUNT MARILYN as the lights begin to fade)

Aunt Marilyn? Hello? Hello!

(Something shifts in JONI. Very sad:)

We won't be there until tomorrow.

(MOHAMMED and GARRY follow JONI, taking the car off with them into the encroaching dark. RACHEL remains onstage, finding herself...)

Scene 3

(In the whale. Dreamlike. Fuzzier lights and heavier echoes. RACHEL stands to the side and watches PUPPET, PROPHET, and MARINER, sitting in their circle as we first met them)

PUPPET and PROPHET and MARINER

Three men sit inside the belly of a whale

MARINER

Like cowboys around the fire.

PROPHET

If only there were a fire. I'm freezing in here!

MARINER (to PROPHET)

I've got a box of matches somewhere in these suspenders.

(MARINER looks. Finds them and shows them to PROPHET)

PUPPET

My father is somewhere in this whale!

(PUPPET gets up and starts searching)

PROPHET (to MARINER)

What good will your matches do us without kindling?

MARINER (to PROPHET)

There must be wood in here somewhere. The remains of a raft, or—

PUPPET

Hello! Hello!

(PROPHET and MARINER look at each other, "A ha!")

PROPHET and MARINER

A puppet!

(PUPPET hears this. Turns around slowly to face PROPHET and MARINER. PROPHET and MARINER start to descend on PUPPET, backing him into a corner. RACHEL realizes what is happening. She is horrified, but for some reason, struggle as she might, she is unable to move or speak)

PUPPET (sputtering)

Me? I'm not a puppet!

(PUPPET's nose grows)

I mean, I am a puppet. But I'm not made of wood!

(PUPPET's nose grows longer)

Please! I have a wife back home! I have a child on the way!

(PUPPET's nose grows even longer. PROPHET grabs the nose, breaks it off, and snaps it in half. Hands the other half to MARINER. PROPHET and MARINER chase PUPPET offstage with their sticks. RACHEL breaks from her spell and runs after them but remains onstage. She watches in horror as we hear the sound of PUPPET's screams, accompanied by thumping and chopping. Screams stop. Chopping continues for a second more.

PROPHET and MARINER return, each carrying a substantial pile of firewood. They walk past RACHEL as if she is not there. PROPHET and MARINER place their piles down in the center. MARINER lights a match and starts a fire with the center pile. PROPHET and MARINER sit by the crackling fire. Blackout on all but RACHEL, who remains in a dimming light. She finds her way to a bed in the...)

Scene 4

(Motel room. Early morning. Natural light is starting to creep in. RACHEL sits up in bed, next to MOHAMMED who is also awake and working in his sketchbook. JONI and GARRY remain asleep in their bed)

MOHAMMED (quiet)

You're up early.

RACHEL

I had a nightmare about your dumbass comic book.

MOHAMMED

First of all, how dare you? It's a dumbass graphic novel, thank you very much.

(Beat)

What happened in the dream?

RACHEL

I was watching them inside the whale. Pinocchio, Jonah, and the other one.

MOHAMMED

Puppet, Prophet, and Mariner.

RACHEL

Okay, sure. The prophet and the mariner wanted a fire. So they killed the puppet and made one.

(She tries to remain collected but thinking about the dream is upsetting.)

(Beat)

All I could do was watch him die.

(Beat)

I can't keep having these dreams about...

(RACHEL trails off. MOHAMMED is at a loss for words)

He was just trying to find his dad. That's all. He told a couple lies, but it was only to protect himself. He didn't need to die.

MOHAMMED

Rachel... if it makes you feel any better, the puppet doesn't really die. In my book, I mean. Here, look:

(He shows her the sketchbook)

RACHEL (thumbing through MOHAMMED's sketches)

Do they find the father?

MOHAMMED (an obvious lie)

Maybe!

(Then, actually considers)

Maybe... Can I see that?

(He takes back the sketchbook and starts writing down notes in a focused creative fever.
GARRY wakes with a start. He rushes to the main light and flicks it on and off)

GARRY

Get up! Get up, get up, get up!

(JONI wakes, displeased)

JONI

Garry, what's wrong?

GARRY

We're going to temple!

RACHEL

We're doing what?

GARRY

You heard me! It's Saturday, which means it's... *(awaiting a response)*

MOHAMMED

The weekend.

GARRY

(Buzzer sound) Wrong.

RACHEL

Time to go back to bed.

GARRY

(Buzzer sound) Wrong again.

JONI

Garry, you're acting manic.

GARRY (Catskills comic voice)

You sound like my therapist.

JONI (serious)

That's not funny, Garry. We both know you don't have a therapist, and I've been trying to tell you for a while now, there's no shame in seeking—

GARRY

You're all wrong. It's Saturday, which means it's Shabbat, which means we're going to temple.

RACHEL

We never go to temple.

GARRY

That's not true!

RACHEL

Okay, fine. We never go to temple except for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, or when family members die.

GARRY

We have dead people, let's go to temple!

(RACHEL grimaces at this, but says nothing)

JONI

Gar, we've already put off going to my aunt's house once.

MOHAMMED

Joni and I aren't even Jewish.

GARRY (cute but cloying)

So? Plenty of Jews are even more agnostic than Joni. She'll fit right in.

(Beat)

(*Directly to MOHAMMED*) And you, sir, should expose yourself to other cultures! C'mon, let's go. I looked it up and there's one a mile away.

MOHAMMED (muttering)

"Expose yourself to other cultures!" says the guy who wouldn't ever go to the mosque with me when we were—

GARRY

Yeah yeah yeah, I was a jerk boyfriend, we shouldn't have dated, we're better off friends, yada yada yada, LET'S GO!

JONI (hard)

Garry, sit down!

(GARRY complies)

You're talking a mile a minute. What's going on?

(GARRY takes a breath)

GARRY (much slower)

I woke up early this morning from a dream.

MOHAMMED

You Feldmans and your dreams.

GARRY

We all were dancing at Rachel's Bat Mitzvah. Like, *(to JONI and MOHAMMED)* you guys too. But maybe it was also my Bar Mitzvah at the same time. *(To RACHEL)* And maybe it was also Dad's memorial.

RACHEL (quiet hurt)

Seriously?

GARRY

Except that he was there! And Mom, of course. All our relatives and friends from middle school and the cantor and the rabbis...

(GARRY grabs a chair. Slowly starts singing "Hava Nagila," in that unmistakable Reform Jewish mix of Hebrew and mumbling. He keeps singing it in between his lines)

C'mon, Rachel, get on the chair!

RACHEL

Garry, what the hell are you doing?

(GARRY playfully slides the chair behind RACHEL. She sits, begrudgingly)

GARRY

Joni, Momo, dance with me!

(The song gets faster, and music comes in to accompany GARRY's fantasy. JONI and MOHAMMED play along, and soon enough they're swept up in the dance as it gets faster and faster. They circle. They lift RACHEL up in the chair. Despite the intimate confines of the motel room, this dance is now big and joyous. As they dance, the beds are replaced by three more chairs, which are placed in a line in preparation for the next scene. RACHEL lands next to the line of chairs, taking us right into...)

Scene 5

(A synagogue. A few hours later. The early morning light has become midday light. JONI and MOHAMMED stand in front of the seats next to RACHEL, who also stands. GARRY sits, distant. JONI, MOHAMMED, and RACHEL start gathering their things and getting ready to leave. GARRY is still sitting, in his own world)

RACHEL

Well. We did temple.

JONI

That we did.

MOHAMMED

I thought it was nice.

RACHEL

I'll admit, it was fun. I feel way better than I did this morning.

(Expectant pause from RACHEL, JONI, and MOHAMMED. A bit too long)

MOHAMMED

Garry?

GARRY (only sort of listening)

Huh? Oh, it was fine.

(RACHEL and MOHAMMED walk ahead towards the car. JONI stays behind with GARRY)

JONI

Gar, what's going on?

GARRY

Hm?

JONI

You wanted to go to temple. You seemed in it at the start of the service. Then part of the way through, I saw you just sort of zone out. Like, *really* zone out, even for you.

GARRY (avoidant)

It was a long service.

JONI (incredulous)

Garry.

I'm okay.

GARRY

Are you sure?

JONI

I might have forgotten to take my meds again this morning.

GARRY

Garry.

JONI (scolding)

Forgive me?

GARRY (childish, joking)

You're forgiven.

(Beat)

Anything else you want forgiveness for?

JONI

Is this a trap?

GARRY

No. Never mind.

(Beat)

Just remember that I've been where you are now. Which means you can talk to me about it. People do that, you know. The people that sleep and live together? They also talk to each other.

JONI

Those people? Ew, it sounds so heteronormative.

GARRY (more comfortably humorous now)

That's what you get for dating a straight woman.

JONI (sarcastic)

I should know that by now!

GARRY

I mean, after all the experience you've had!

JONI

Are you talking about my harem?

GARRY

JONI

How could I forget about your harem?

(Smiles. Chuckles. Things are back on track)

Seriously. If you want to talk about what's going on...

GARRY

Yeah. No, I do.

(JONI waits, expecting more. Nothing)

JONI

A relationship requires more than flirty banter, Gar.

GARRY (feigns being scandalized)

You thought I was flirting?

JONI

See, this is what I'm talking about.

MOHAMMED (calling to them)

Hey, Joni, do you have the keys?

JONI (calling back)

Yes, sorry!

(She gives GARRY another worried look before running over to MOHAMMED)

Here.

(JONI whispers something to MOHAMMED. He responds, looks back at GARRY discreetly. JONI takes out the keys and talks to RACHEL, while MOHAMMED heads back to GARRY)

MOHAMMED (to GARRY)

C'mon, bitch, let's get some food!

GARRY

Yeah! Christ, I'm hungry.

MOHAMMED

Me too.

(Beat)

Guess we can check Shabbat morning off the ever-growing list of things to do, right?

GARRY

Right.

MOHAMMED

Not to be all “you people,” but Jew stuff is pretty fun. Good music, nice prayers.

GARRY

Yeah, I really should go to services more often.

MOHAMMED

Yeah? I know it’s obviously different, but in the last few years, getting back into going to Friday prayer when I can, and getting involved in other activities at the mosque... it’s been really good for me.

GARRY (genuine)

I’m really glad to hear that, Momo. I’m sorry I never went to any services with you when we were—

MOHAMMED

Girl, please. We were young.

GARRY

And now we’re old?

MOHAMMED

We’re... older than we were.

(Pause)

I guess we’ve grown up.

(Beat)

Just a little bit!

GARRY

Yeah. Still, even now – as your friend – I want to do things you want to do, too

MOHAMMED (unsure why GARRY is saying this now)

Thanks, Garry.

GARRY

Momo?

MOHAMMED

Yes?

(This is hard for GARRY to admit:)

GARRY

I'm glad we went to temple today, but it wasn't what I was looking for.

(Beat)

I thought it would... fix something? I'm just feeling... a way, I guess. And I thought it would help.

MOHAMMED

So temple wasn't what you were looking for. Why didn't you just tell Joni that?

(Beat)

You could have saved her the trouble of sending my ass over here to figure out what's going on with you.

(GARRY is clearly embarrassed. He says nothing. MOHAMMED starts walking to the car. GARRY stays behind for a second, then follows. RACHEL is on driving duty. JONI and GARRY sit in their spots from before, while MOHAMMED assumes RACHEL's previous position.

The lights start to change for scene 6 as MOHAMMED takes out his sketchbook)

JONI (anxious, but trying to relax)

Aunt Marilyn, here we come.

RACHEL

Mohammed, what happens next in your story?

MOHAMMED

Looks like someone's coming around to appreciate my craft!

RACHEL

Don't flatter yourself.

MOHAMMED

I haven't figured out the details of how, but just picture it: The puppet, the prophet, and the shipwrecked mariner find a way to make... a fire!

(This time, RACHEL, JONI, GARRY and MOHAMMED remain onstage in the car and watch the scene unfold...)

Scene 6

(In the whale. PROPHET and MARINER are as we last found them at the end of RACHEL's dream, by the fire. PUPPET enters)

PUPPET

Hello! Hello! (*Seeing the fire*) A real fire! Where'd you get the wood?

(PUPPET sits by the fire)

RACHEL

The remains of a raft!

(Beat)

Or whatever. That was just something the Mariner said in my dream.

PUPPET, PROPHET, and MARINER

Three men,

(Lights fade on RACHEL, JONI, GARRY, and MOHAMMED in the car)

PROPHET

Swapping stories,

MARINER

Just so. Tell us one.

PROPHET

What?

PUPPET (clapping, childish)

Tell us a story! Tell us a story!

MARINER

Just so.

(PROPHET thinks)

PROPHET

It shouldn't be too long, and I'll be out of this whale. I've already been here for a few days. How much longer do you think He'll make me wait?

MARINER

Who?

PROPHET

God.

MARINER

Right. You told me that.

PROPHET

When I'm out, I'll go to Nineveh...

(Lights change. Harsh sun. Dry wind. The characters, fire, and wood move accordingly.
The scene transitions to the desert)

... per God's command. I'll repent for my sins. All will be well.

MARINER

Your sins?

(PUPPET, PROPHET, and MARINER start to rock as if they are on a boat)

PROPHET

It's not important.

(Rocking intensifies)

PUPPET and MARINER

Your sins?

PROPHET (snaps)

It's not important!

(They all stop rocking)

PROPHET

Where was I?

PUPPET

Nineveh.

PROPHET

Right, Nineveh. I'll repent for my sins. All will be well.

MARINER

But you'll still be angry.

PROPHET

Me? Angry?

MARINER

At God. For what He put you through.

PROPHET

Never. All will be well. Nineveh will be saved. I will be saved.

MARINER

You know, it might take more than a trip to Nineveh to save you.

PROPHET

I *will* be saved. I will be out of this whale. I will be well.

(Beat)

All will be well!

MARINER

You'll stop in the desert.

PROPHET

Hey, whose story is this?

MARINER

You'll sit under a huge flower.

PUPPET

Ooh!

PROPHET

I'm the prophet here! You don't get to decide how this story goes!

(Like a magic trick, PUPPET pulls an oversized flower seemingly out of thin air. He holds it over PROPHET's head, casting a shadow. PROPHET lies down)

I suppose that does feel nice...

(PROPHET falls asleep under the flower)

MARINER

But God will send a bug (*MARINER takes a long bug out from his suspenders, shows it*) and turn the flower to rot.

(*MARINER places the bug on the flower. PUPPET throws the flower and bug offstage. PROPHET wakes up, but remains on the ground*)

PROPHET

It's so hot.

MARINER

Your sins.

PROPHET

I'm burning out here.

PUPPET and MARINER

Your sins.

PROPHET (understanding the prompt)

I should have gone to Nineveh before. That's why I ended up in the whale.

MARINER

And in the desert.

PROPHET

And in the desert. Am I going to die here?

(PROPHET moves onto his knees and assumes a position of prayer. Loud, performative, to God:)

God! Forgive me!

(No response. The soft desert wind is all that can be heard. PROPHET stands up. Quietly, to PUPPET and MARINER:)

Forgive me?

(PUPPET, PROPHET, and MARINER start to rock, as before. Sound of a storm at sea. Rocking intensifies. The shadow of the whale returns. PROPHET looks at PUPPET, and then MARINER, before diving off their invisible ship. Splash! Blackout)

Scene 7

(In the car. Later the same afternoon. GARRY is on driving duty, JONI remains in the front passenger seat, and MOHAMMED and RACHEL sit in the backseats)

JONI (to self, a sigh of relief)

Finally. *(To the others)* Here we are!

MOHAMMED (looking out his window, shock and awe)

Joni! Ma'am! Your aunt does not live in a house. This is a damn mansion!

(GARRY stops the car)

GARRY

You guys head up. I'll park.

JONI

I can wait for you.

GARRY

Joni, I know how important seeing your aunt is to you. Go.

JONI (happily surprised by this)

Okay.

(She gives GARRY a hug and a kiss on the cheek before starting to get out of the car. Then, peaking back in:)

Can we still find a time to talk at some point?

GARRY (assuredly)

Yes.

MOHAMMED (getting out of the car)

It's time to meet the queen of this palace!

RACHEL (getting out of the car)

You're a weird dude, Mohammed. You know that?

(JONI, MOHAMMED, and RACHEL exit.)

GARRY starts to drive. His cool, assured demeanor slips away. Deep breaths)

GARRY (to self. A consideration and reminder)

It's going to be okay. I'm going to be okay.

(Trying to calm himself, GARRY turns on the radio. “Baby Beluga” by Raffi. GARRY looks at the radio [“What the?”] but leaves it on. He pulls over, allowing himself to take the moment he needs. Maybe to panic. To cry. To process. To breathe.

Beat)

I need to get out of this whale.

(As the lights fade on GARRY, the song becomes louder. The blue-green light at the back of the stage from the start of the play returns and the whale’s shadow reappears. The song continues to play)

(END OF ACT I)

Act II

Scene 1

(In the whale. PUPPET, PROPHET, and MARINER sit around the fire. JONI observes)

MARINER (to PROPHET)

I've heard that story before. Tell us a new one.

PROPHET

I need to go.

PUPPET

Tell us a story! Tell us a story!

PROPHET (firm)

I need to go. To Nineveh.

(PROPHET gets up. MARINER follows him)

MARINER

You can't leave us in here.

(Beat)

You could die in the desert, remember? It won't be worth it! You won't be saved! God will abandon you.

PROPHET (considering)

Perhaps I won't be saved. God has already cursed me.

(Beat)

But it will be worth it. For Nineveh. Nineveh will be saved.

This trip to Nineveh—my *mission* to Nineveh—is about more than me.

MARINER

Then take us with you. We can save Nineveh, too.

(PUPPET, who has been sitting watching the exchange, remembers why he is here)

PUPPET

I can't leave.

(He stands now, determined.

Beat)

My father is somewhere in this whale.

(PUPPET begins to search around)

Hello! Hello!

PROPHET (taking MARINER aside)

We are from different worlds. I am a man of faith. You are a man of reason. (*Pointing to PUPPET*) That man—

MARINER (accepting)

He's just a boy.

PROPHET

Exactly. God needs me in Nineveh. He (*indicating PUPPET*) needs you here.

(MARINER understands. He nods at PROPHET. PROPHET nods in return. MARINER steps back and stands next to PUPPET, still moving around. He puts his hand on PUPPET's shoulder. PUPPET stops. Both men stand back and watch PROPHET)

PROPHET

God! God!

(Thunder and lightning. The ground seems to shake, with the drama of DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*. PUPPET, MARINER, and even PROPHET are startled)

PROPHET

Let me out! I repent! I'll go to Nineveh!

(Beat)

I'm ready.

(Sound of whale's mouth opening. A light shines in)

MARINER

Wait, really? That's all it took?

PROPHET (to PUPPET and MARINER)

This is my stop!

PUPPET

Wait! Tell us another story first!

PROPHET

I'm going to Nineveh. All will be well.

(PROPHET steps out of the whale and into the light. PUPPET runs after him)

PUPPET

Wait! Wait! You... um... You left your keys!

(PUPPET's nose grows with this lie. MARINER notices this)

Wait!

(But it is too late. PROPHET exits. The mouth closes. MARINER sits by the fire. PUPPET looks back and decides to join him. They sit in silence. Lights fade on PUPPET and MARINER, but remain on JONI)

Scene 2

(GARRY is where we last found him, alone in the stopped car. JONI approaches and knocks on the window)

JONI

Garry?

GARRY

Oh, hey. Sorry, I just needed a moment. I can come up to the house now.

JONI

Yeah, no, you're okay. Can I come in?

(GARRY nods. JONI opens the door and sits in the front passenger seat next to GARRY.
Beat)

Are you gonna talk to me about what's going on?

(Long pause)

GARRY

This trip is harder than I thought it would be.

JONI

Yeah.

GARRY

I'm not, like, sad *all* the time. Except I think maybe I am? And I've just been avoiding it, if that makes sense?

JONI

Yes. I know what that's like—

GARRY

And Rachel doesn't want to talk about any of this stuff, and I feel like it would be weird to talk to Mohammed about it, and you...

JONI

What?

GARRY

I don't know. It's just, I don't want you to think that I'm making everything about me.

JONI

Garry, I've told you that you can talk to me. I *want* you to talk to me.

(GARRY almost takes this opportunity, and it shows in his face, before:)

GARRY

How's Marilyn?

JONI

She's fine.

(Beat)

Well, no, she seems not great actually. Lonely.

GARRY (confused)

What?

JONI

It's... complicated.

(Beat)

But it's been so long since I've seen her. I feel bad.

GARRY

Yeah. You know, we should come see her more often. It's really not a bad drive.

JONI

Right.

(Beat)

Actually, I was thinking... You know how we were going to spend the night with her last night?

GARRY

Yeah.

JONI

What if... I spent the night with her tonight instead. To make up for the lost time.

GARRY

Joni, you wrote the schedule. We're going to Abe's tonight, remember?

JONI

No, I know. Although clearly we're not really following a schedule at this point.

GARRY

What's that supposed to mean?

JONI

Nothing. Exactly what it means.

GARRY

You're the one who's so Type 1 about this stuff.

JONI

Type 1?

GARRY

You know, everything has to go according to plan, and there's *always* a plan. Type 1 personality.

JONI

Type A personality. Type 1 is for diabetes.

GARRY

Oh. Well, you knew what I meant!

JONI

Why are you getting mad?

GARRY

Nobody's getting mad, I'm just confused. You want me to let Abe know we'll be coming to his place tomorrow instead of tonight?

JONI

No, the rest of you can go ahead. I can have Aunt Marilyn call me a driver.

GARRY

Can't you just call and check in with Marilyn along the way to Abe's with the rest of us?

JONI

Garry, please—

GARRY

We could even stop back at her place on the drive back from Seaside.

JONI

This trip *is* about more than just you, Garry!

GARRY (defensive)

I know it is!

(Beat. Confessional:)

I know it's not just about me, but I need you here with me for the parts that are.

JONI

I've been supporting you this whole time. I was there for you earlier today outside the synagogue. I agreed to delay visiting Aunt Marilyn *twice*, per your suggestion. I have been right here with you, even though you haven't been honest with me about what's going on in your head.

GARRY (snap)

I'm grieving! Your aunt will be fine; I'm the one who's grieving!

(Pause)

JONI (steady, but angry)

We're both grieving, Garry.

GARRY

You barely knew my dad—

JONI (fuming)

You *never* knew my parents! Oh my God. I've been grieving since long before I met you. You know that. You don't own grief.

GARRY (sheepish)

Shit. I didn't mean... I didn't mean that I'm the *only* one grieving.

JONI

All of us are. You and Rachel. Me and my aunt. When I tell you that you can open up to me, it's because I've been through a lot of what you're going through. But you need to think about more than yourself in all this.

(Pause. Calming down)

I'm worried about you. You're excited one moment and then totally closed off the next. You're forgetting to take your meds. You're not reaching out to anyone. You won't try therapy. Don't get me wrong, I'm still *really* mad at you right now. But I'm also concerned.

(Pause. GARRY says nothing)

Garry? Gar?

(GARRY turns away, embarrassed and angry. JONI gives up)

I'm staying with my aunt tonight. You're gonna go ahead to Abe's with Mohammed and Rachel.

(JONI gets out of the car and starts to leave. Stops and turns back to say:)

There. I made you a plan.

(JONI exits at this. All is silent but GARRY's heavy breaths. It's like he just ran a marathon.

MOHAMMED and RACHEL enter. They both see GARRY in the car and stop)

MOHAMMED

That doesn't look good.

RACHEL

No.

(GARRY notices RACHEL and MOHAMMED watching him. Still stunned, he gets out of the car and heads towards them)

MOHAMMED

Oh shit, here he comes. Act normal.

RACHEL

... I was.

(GARRY walks up to them. Stops)

RACHEL (hopeful)

Is Joni coming?

GARRY

No. She's staying with Marilyn.

MOHAMMED

I'm sorry, Garry.

RACHEL

Are you and Joni good?

GARRY

I think we just broke up.

RACHEL

You "think?"

GARRY

Neither of us said it, but... I tried to convince her to keep going on the trip. But she just said no. She said, "This trip is about more than just you, Garry!" And I said... I fucked up.

MOHAMMED

You said you fucked up?

GARRY

No, I know I fucked up now, because I told her "Your aunt will be fine; I'm the one who's grieving!"

(Once again, everything is quiet except for GARRY's breaths)

MOHAMMED

Let's get in the car. Rachel, can you drive this time?

RACHEL

Sure.

(They enter the car. RACHEL takes the driver's seat. GARRY takes his seat from before. MOHAMMED sits where RACHEL sat before. All three can't help but notice the empty front passenger seat. RACHEL starts the car. We are back on the road. Over the course of the following conversation, the lights change as evening turns into night. MOHAMMED speaks directly to GARRY)

MOHAMMED

Joni's parents aren't around, right?

GARRY

Right. She lost them both when she was young.

RACHEL

She was a teenager. She wasn't much older than me.

(Pause)

She talked to me about it when Dad died.

(GARRY is surprised by RACHEL's correction, both because he never considered this connection and because RACHEL is actually talking about their dad's death. MOHAMMED waits a moment to continue)

MOHAMMED

Well, Garry, saying that to Joni... wasn't your first mistake.

(Beat)

When Joni says this has to do with more than you... I don't think you understand that that has to do with things you think *are* just about you, Garry. (*Cautiously*) Like your dad.

GARRY (skeptical)

Elaborate?

MOHAMMED

I didn't just come on this road trip with you to support you in your mourning, Garry. I came because I'm mourning, too. You think we don't all still feel that loss? That's why Joni came. Not to be presumptuous, but I assume that's why Rachel came. He is... he was her dad, too. Sorry Rachel, I know you don't always like to talk about this.

(RACHEL still mostly keeps her guard up, but appreciates what MOHAMMED is doing)

RACHEL

You're okay. You're also right. You can keep going.

GARRY (to MOHAMMED)

I thought you wanted to come so you could work on your graphic novel.

MOHAMMED

I could work on my graphic novel at home! I can take a beach day any day; outside of picking up barista gigs when I can, I'm essentially self-employed. I might as well live at the beach! I needed to come to be with you and Rachel. And Joni.

(Beat)

I know he was your dad. But he was like a dad to me. You and I were together for over a year, he was basically my father-in-law. God damn.

(Beat)

I started writing this story and drawing these pictures after he died. What became the graphic novel. Or, is becoming the graphic novel. It wasn't only about losing him. But a lot of it was about that. Feeling lost. Waking up nights and looking for him. Being angry with God. Not knowing if I even believed in God anymore. Telling myself stories- no, lies. To make it feel better. I finally understood what people meant when they said they felt like they were drowning. Some days I wanted to breathe. Some days I just wanted to burn the water all around me. It didn't have to make sense. Nothing did. I wanted to do dangerous, impossible things. I got so angry. So goddamn angry. Fuck.

(Beat)

But one of the crazy things was, I never wanted to die. Like, I saw what him dying did to me. (*To both Garry and Rachel now*) And Joni, and you two, and your mom. And I couldn't fathom putting anyone else through that... especially again. Sometimes I couldn't think of a reason to live, but I never wanted to die.

(Beat)

There was this one time. It was just your dad and me. I don't know where you guys were. It was the first time I'd come home with you, winter break junior year. I was staying behind after dinner to help with dishes 'cause I wanted to impress my boyfriend's dad, you know? Especially 'cause I had just come out to my parents at that point, and things were still rocky there. And your dad could definitely tell I was nervous. A rare moment in my life where I didn't know what to say. I'd bought this dress shirt that I thought was real cute for the occasion. It was black with tight, short sleeves and these big silver stripes.

RACHEL

Oh my God, I remember it.

MOHAMMED

You were still just a kid at the time! You remember that shirt? Well, I thought I was the shit. Obviously, I know better now. I looked like Elton John. Anyways, I'm washing a pan or something, unable to speak 'cause I'm so nervous, and I spill on the shirt. There's water and soap and cooking oil all over me. That cheap shirt was clearly destroyed. And without a beat, your dad looks at my gay ass and goes, "Don't worry! Let me go to my room. I've got the exact same shirt."

(This breaks RACHEL and GARRY. MOHAMMED breaks, too. All three have a good long laugh, that carries for a second into MOHAMMED continuing:)

It wasn't just great 'cause it was funny. It was that he didn't get angry about the spill, or weird about the queen in his kitchen who'd caused it. He knew I was scared and he put me at ease.

(The mood shifts. The story's still funny, but RACHEL, GARRY, and MOHAMMED also must sit with the complications of this memory. It feels unjust that it can't be sweet, and just that. Now, it will always be sad too.
After a while:)

GARRY

I remember coming out to my dad. I was fifteen and he was just starting to teach me to drive. We were in this empty parking lot. I hadn't told my mom yet, and Rachel, you were still a little kid at that point.

(As the monologue continues, GARRY subtly plays his younger self and his dad)

I had finished backing into a spot successfully for the first time after a lot of tries, and I could tell he was proud of me. So I stopped, and I said, real serious, "Dad, can I tell you something?" And he said, "You're not pregnant, are you?" You guys know, he was always joking like that. So I said, "I'm bisexual. I think."

I remember him pausing. "I know, Garry.

(Then, with a smirk:)

No straight or gay kid has *that* Brad and Angelina cut out on his wall.

(Beat)

I love you."

"I love you, too, Dad."

(For a second, Rachel, Mohammed, and Garry especially, are lost in this moment. Then: GARRY's phone dings. He checks and starts to read through it)

GARRY (as he reads)

It's an email from Abe. Last-minute work thing way out of town. He's spending the night there, won't be home until late tomorrow morning. He says we can still stay the night at his place, though. There's a spare key and a guest room.

MOHAMMED

How do you feel?

GARRY

A little disappointed.

(Beat. Then, lightly sardonic:)

I got “Cats in the Cradled” by my sperm donor dad.

(After a moment:)

RACHEL (almost childlike)

Mohammed?

MOHAMMED

Yes?

RACHEL

When we get to Seaside, can you show us the rest of your graphic novel?

MOHAMMED

She’s pretty rough. There’s still a lot of sketches and scribbles. I don’t know if it’s ready for—

RACHEL

Please?

MOHAMMED

... Of course.

(Lights go out on the car and come up...)

Scene 3

(In the whale. PUPPET and MARINER sit by the fire)

MARINER

What just happened to your nose?

PUPPET

What? It's always looked like this.

(PUPPET's nose grows some more. PUPPET confesses:)

It happens when I lie.

(Beat)

Will you help me find my father?

(Pause. MARINER sighs)

MARINER

I don't think your father is... in this whale.

PUPPET

What are you talking about? I heard him yelling: "Help! Help!" I was on the beach with my cricket, remember?

MARINER

Yes, I remember. What I mean is, I don't think your father survived this whale.

(PUPPET is shocked. Then angry)

PUPPET

You're lying! We've survived this whale! Why wouldn't he?

MARINER

You're a Puppet. You have magic. The Prophet was... a prophet. He had God.

PUPPET

And what are you? What do you have that my father didn't- that my father doesn't have? What makes you so special?

(MARINER doesn't have an answer)

You're just a man! You're just some man from a so-so story no one's ever heard of!

MARINER

I mean, my author wrote *The Jungle Book*. He's very famous...

PUPPET

The Prophet had the Bible! My father and I have a Disney movie, which is basically the same thing! What do you have, huh? Some short story? Ha!

MARINER

You're in shock. You don't know what you're saying—

PUPPET

I don't need you! I can find my father on my own.

(His nose grows)

Shut up, nose, yes I can!

(His nose grows even longer)

You know what, I don't need you either!

(PUPPET snaps off his own nose, throws it on the ground, and storms off into the dark of the whale. MARINER looks down at the nose and picks it up)

MARINER

I could make something of this.

(MARINER removes his suspenders. He begins to work on some sort of contraption involving the long nose and the suspenders. After just a moment, he turns around and his work is done. Pleased with himself, he sits down by the fire.

And sits.
And sits.)

MARINER

One man, a shipwrecked mariner, sits inside the belly of a whale.

(Beat)

See what I made you? (*He points to the wood-suspenders contraption*) With nothing more than a piece of wood and my own suspenders, I made you a throat, you ungrateful fish!

(MARINER stands. Jumps, in a tantrum)

MARINER

Let me out! Let me out!

(The jumping becomes a furious, chaotic dance)

MARINER

I made you a throat so you can't eat man ever again! I'm the last man! Let me out! Let me out!

(MARINER keeps dancing. He kicks the fire. The fire grows and spreads. The whole stage, the belly of the whale, is ablaze. MARINER dances in shadow against the flames)

Scene 4

(Night. Inside a bedroom in ABE's house. GARRY, RACHEL, and MOHAMMED sit on the bed around MOHAMMED's sketchbook)

MOHAMMED

And that's as far as I've gotten. I still can't think of an ending.

(GARRY and RACHEL are at a loss for words)

Y'all, I just shared my work. I'm feeling hella vulnerable. Please say something.

RACHEL

Mohammed, that was amazing.

GARRY

I loved it, Momo.

MOHAMMED

Wow. Thank you, guys.

RACHEL

I mean it, Mohammed. When you first told me your idea, I thought, "What the hell is this?"

MOHAMMED

You said it, too!

RACHEL

But now I don't know what to say. It's so great, Mohammed.

MOHAMMED

Werk. Wow. Ooh, this is making me feel so good right now! You know when a big thing goes well for you, and suddenly you have all this energy?

GARRY

I love that feeling.

MOHAMMED

I'm getting it right now. Gurl! It makes me want to go dancing or something.

GARRY

You should do it!

MOHAMMED

You think so? Okay, yes, I'm going out dancing.

RACHEL

Sorry to burst your bubble, but I don't think there's any nightclubs around here.

MOHAMMED

Ugh, you're probably right. I love the beach, but otherwise this town is for the straights!

GARRY

I saw a few bars and pubs on the drive if you still want to go out for a drink.

MOHAMMED

Ooh, enticing. I'm in.

GARRY

Have fun, Momo.

MOHAMMED

Are you two not coming?

(RACHEL stares at MOHAMMED)

RACHEL

I legally can't drink.

MOHAMMED

Curses, why do you have to be so young?

RACHEL

Am I supposed to answer that question, or...

MOHAMMED

Garry?

GARRY

It's late. I'm feeling pretty worn out after everything today. I think I'm just gonna stay in and watch a movie before bed.

MOHAMMED

You're sure a drink won't do you some good? Might cheer you up!

GARRY

I'm really not feeling it. Sorry, Momo. Please go have fun, though! You deserve it.

MOHAMMED

I do! Alright, ladies, I'm leaving you for now. Too-da-loo!

(He pulls out his phone and speaks slowly and precisely into it as he begins his exit with a pep in his step)

“Siri: Find cheap but quality alcohol in walking distance.”

(MOHAMMED exits)

GARRY

Wanna watch a movie?

(GARRY pulls out his laptop and hands it to RACHEL, who starts searching)

Your pick.

(After a bit of scrolling:)

RACHEL

Aww.

GARRY

What?

(GARRY looks over at the computer)

RACHEL

It’s perfect. It’s a road trip movie.

GARRY

It’s not just any road trip movie. *The Muppet Movie* is the best road trip movie.

(GARRY is about to press play when:)

RACHEL

Wait. Before we start watching. Um. I’m ready to hear your answer. I promise I won’t interrupt you this time.

(GARRY looks confused. RACHEL gives him a prompting look. GARRY realizes)

GARRY

Oh. The “Why now?” question?

RACHEL

Yeah. The “Why now?” question.

(This time, GARRY takes the moment he needs to think about his answer and the time he needs to answer it)

GARRY

I just reached a point after Dad died where I needed some closure. I wanted to say “thank you” to someone for... my being alive. And I thought about my life. Like, my literal life, my existence. What was it dependent on in the first place? And - along with a bunch of other factors - the answer was this man I’d never met. This man I’d never thought to try and reach out to before. And there he was, in Seaside, Oregon, of all places. And now, here we are.

(Pause)

RACHEL

Here we are.

(Pause)

GARRY

Why did you want to come along?

RACHEL (confessional, not mean)

I didn’t.

(Beat)

Mom thought it would be good for me.

(This registers with GARRY)

GARRY

If you don’t mind my asking, what did you and Joni talk about after Dad died? The thing you mentioned in the car.

(Pause)

Sorry, we don’t have to talk about it.

RACHEL

No, no. It’s fine. I’m just not good at telling stories like you or Mohammed.

GARRY (sarcastic)

I want you to tell it *just* like Mohammed would.

RACHEL (playing along)

Picture it! Two women, a high school student and a Google employee, sit on the edge of my bed!

(The lights change. These are hazy, memory lights. We are now...)

Scene 5

(In RACHEL's room. In RACHEL's recounted memory. GARRY, in the present, gets off the bed and watches from far away. From the past, JONI enters, and sits next to RACHEL on the edge of the bed)

JONI

On the three-year anniversary of my parents' deaths, me and some girlfriends went to this weird, totally Portland thrift store. Like, it was mostly a vintage place, but not completely, and you paid for things by the pound. And I bought a jumpsuit. That was it. We went out for cake after.

RACHEL

So, it gets normal?

JONI

No. Yes... No. For me, it got easier. Never normal. It's been eleven years and it's still not normal. Not completely. But some parts are easier. I can go out with friends on hard days. I can be in relationships with guys who never knew my parents. I got a thick skin. I don't know if I had one before. But it's one of the few good things I got from a horrible situation.

RACHEL

Yeah...

JONI

You're allowed to own that, you know? It's horrible. It's fucked up. It happened to you. It happened to us. What the fuck? You know? You're allowed to cry about it. You're allowed to scream.

(JONI starts to yell. It is ugly, a burst of feelings pent up in all of JONI's usual orderliness. JONI gets up. Jumps around with abandon. RACHEL is utterly taken aback by this.)

RACHEL (unable to hold back her amusement and shock)

Joni, what the hell?

(JONI stops. Takes a breather and sits back down.)

JONI

You wanna scream?

RACHEL

I don't know.

JONI

C'mon. Who's gonna judge you? Me? The one who started screaming in the first place?

RACHEL (nervous)

Okay...

(RACHEL lets out a halfhearted, "Aaa!")

JONI

Hey, that's something! AAARRRRGGGGHHH!

RACHEL

Aaarrggghhh!

JONI

We're getting somewhere with that one.

(JONI jumps up again, pulls RACHEL up with her. With JONI leading, both women scream. They jump up and down. This should be similar to but not directly imitative of MARINER's fire dance. This scream-dance is part celebration, part anger, part sadness, distraction, etc. It is all defiance.

JONI and RACHEL fall back onto the bed, laughing. JONI gets up)

JONI

Alright, I'm gonna go check if your mom needs help cleaning up any food from the shiva. Let me know if you need anything.

RACHEL

Thanks Joni.

(JONI gives RACHEL a knowing wink)

JONI

Anytime.

(JONI exits)

Scene 6

(Late morning. On one side of the stage, GARRY is awake in the bedroom. RACHEL is still asleep. MOHAMMED wakes up next to SIMON, still asleep, in a bedroom on the other side of the stage.

GARRY calls MOHAMMED. MOHAMMED picks up. Both speak in a hushed enough tone so as not to wake the person sleeping in the room with them)

MOHAMMED (slightly groggy)

Hello?

GARRY

Where are you?

MOHAMMED

Damn, I'm sorry. I thought I texted you. I met a guy at the bar last night and ended up spending the night with him.

GARRY (exasperated)

You did what?

MOHAMMED

I'll head back over real fast. It can't be far.

GARRY

Okay, Momo. See you soon.

(Beat)

I hope you had fun last night.

MOHAMMED (grinning)

I did.

(MOHAMMED hangs up. Puts on pants and shoes.

GARRY takes his meds. Puts on his shoes.

MOHAMMED leaves his room, with the door open. GARRY leaves his room at the same time. They both turn and find each other)

GARRY

Momo?

MOHAMMED

Garry?

GARRY

Sorry, I must have misunderstood you on the phone. I thought you stayed at the guy's place and were coming here.

MOHAMMED (disoriented)

Sorry, what? Where are we?

(GARRY notices the man sleeping in MOHAMMED's bedroom)

GARRY

Wait, you brought the guy *here*? To my biological father's house?

MOHAMMED

No! He took me back to his place...

(A terrifying realization dawns on GARRY)

GARRY

You fucked my biological father?!

MOHAMMED

Jesus, no! Look at him!

(GARRY looks in the bedroom at SIMON)

He's our age! A little younger than us, probably.

(MOHAMMED gently closes the door. GARRY starts to calm down, though both he and MOHAMMED are still very confused)

GARRY

How did you not realize it was the same house?

MOHAMMED

It was dark! I'd had a beer! Okay, maybe two beers. And I didn't have my glasses on, and he took me in through the backdoor... *(realizing the unintentional comic opportunity he's given himself)* And then I went through the backdoor again, if you know what I mean.

GARRY (putting his foot down)

Mohammed Ben Halim, now is not the time!

(SIMON wakes up and opens the door. He is only wearing boxers. Comes up to MOHAMMED and gives him a quick smooch)

SIMON

Good morning, handsome. *(Seeing GARRY)* Oh hey, dude. You must be Garry.

(SIMON holds out his hand to shake. GARRY gives him a weak handshake)

I'm Simon. My dad told me you'd be coming.

(GARRY and MOHAMMED are speechless. GARRY looks slightly ill)

Sorry, so rude. I didn't introduce you two. My b. Blame it on my ADD, am I right? Garry, this is Mohammed. Mohammed, Garry. *(To MOHAMMED)* Sorry, you must be so confused. This is awkward. It's kind of a complicated story, actually.

MOHAMMED

Is it now?

(GARRY is still speechless. He looks sicker)

SIMON (to GARRY)

You know, this is the first time I've met one of my dad's sperm kids. I guess that makes us brothers, huh? Pretty cool to meet you, bro.

GARRY (in a daze)

Yeah... Excuse me, I need to go to the bathroom.

SIMON

Of course, man. It's right at the end of that hall.

(GARRY exits)

MOHAMMED (aside)

Oh my God. There is a queer gene!

(The sound of GARRY puking can be heard from the bathroom. The doorbell rings)

SIMON

That must be my dad. Yo, I haven't exactly told him I'm gay. I think he'd be chill about it, but...

MOHAMMED

Don't worry, I get it.

(SIMON goes to get the door. JONI enters)

SIMON

Hello?

JONI (not sure what to make of the near-naked young man greeting her)
Hi... *(sees Mohammed)* Oh, hi Mohammed.

MOHAMMED

Joni? How did you get here?

JONI

Aunt Marilyn's driver brought me.

MOHAMMED (generally confused)

What?

JONI

I know, she's almost embarrassingly wealthy. I need to just get a license. Is Garry here?

(More retching is heard)

MOHAMMED

Uh, he's around here somewhere.

SIMON (oblivious)

It sounds like he's throwing up in the bathroom. How do you all know each other?

JONI

Garry's my boyfriend. And obviously I know Mo—

(MOHAMMED makes a loud noise to stop Joni from finishing the sentence)

MOHAMMED (to SIMON)

Can you give us a minute?

(While MOHAMMED and JONI have their exchange, SIMON makes himself an easy breakfast [cereal, PB&J, etc.] and eats it standing up)

MOHAMMED

What are you doing here?

JONI

... I was always going to be here. I told Garry I just wanted to stay at my aunt's for the night.

MOHAMMED

He failed to mention that part. He made it sound like you might have broken up.

JONI

Broken up? We had a bad fight, but we never said anything about breaking up. *(Slight pause)* Wait, so what's going on? Where is Garry now? Is he really sick in the bathroom?

MOHAMMED (blurts out, too loud)

I slept with Garry's biological half sibling!

(SIMON looks at him)

JONI

You slept with Rachel?!

MOHAMMED

Oh my God, no! This guy! *(Points to Simon)* Simon.

SIMON

Hey, what's up? I'm Simon.

MOHAMMED

He's Abe's son.

(JONI is shocked)

I guess I have a type?

JONI

Does Garry know about this?

MOHAMMED

Yes. I think that's why he's... not feeling well.

(GARRY returns from the bathroom. He still looks unwell. And now also depressed)

JONI

Garry.

(GARRY sees JONI. Out of the gloom, something in him lights up. For the following dialogue, it feels as if they are the only two people in the room. The lights may change slightly to reflect this)

Are you okay?

GARRY (honest)

No.

(GARRY falls into JONI's arms. She holds him. He is shaky and a little blubbery in the following apology)

I am so sorry. I should have talked to you. You were right. I didn't think about you. Everything you've gone through. I should have talked about it.

(JONI holds GARRY tighter, rocking him. She is genuinely moved)

JONI

Shh, shh. It's okay. We don't need to talk about anything right now. You're okay. I've got you right here.

GARRY

I took my meds this morning.

(JONI chuckles)

JONI (lovingly mocking)

I'm proud of you.

GARRY

I don't want to make you feel like you have to be the grown up all the time.

JONI

You're not the only reason I feel like I have to be the grown up all the time.

(Beat)

My last year of high school, after my parents died, I lived with Aunt Marilyn. But it was hard for us to get close. We were so different. After that, I left, and I tried not to look back. I worked my way through college. I had family money, but I didn't have any family outside of my aunt. Did I ever tell you any of that?

GARRY

No.

JONI

Then how were you supposed to know?

(Pause)

GARRY

I guess we're both a little guarded.

JONI

But as guarded as we both are, we know almost everything about each other.

GARRY

What do you mean?

(For the rest of the exchange, which should feel like a verbal dance itself, GARRY and JONI continue to sway together)

JONI

I mean, I know that you're a cat person, but people always think you would be a dog person.

GARRY

And I know that you're the other way around.

JONI (teasing)

I know that you need to get yourself a therapist, *yesterday*.

GARRY

And I know you're a therapy regular. And you're on antidepressants.

JONI

And I know you're on attention meds... except for the last two days.

GARRY

I know you submit to the New Yorker caption contest. And you call your representatives, and you sing in the shower when you think other people aren't around.

JONI

Everyone does that, Garry.

GARRY

No, Joni.

(The pace of their dance starts to slow down)

JONI

I know... you understand your world through references. To the X-Men, to Mohammed's graphic novel—

GARRY

To the Muppets.

JONI

Sure.

GARRY

Sorry, Rachel and I watched *The Muppet Movie* last night. For the first time, I really felt like Gonzo watching that movie.

JONI

Tell me more.

GARRY

He's an alien. He's this outsider freak. He's trying to find something, but he's also lost something, and he doesn't fully know what either of those things are. But he finds a family among these other weirdos.

(JONI is in awe)

JONI

That's exactly what I mean. You have this gift of understanding your life through these stories. I'm not like that. My brain doesn't work that way. I'm a woman of code and logic and therapy and workbooks and schedules—

GARRY

I know... I know that I'm very much in love with you. And I will be long after it's all over.

(Beat)

Which we both know it could be soon.

(They do. It could. They take a moment to process this, now that it's been said out loud. RACHEL wakes up and leaves the bedroom. She slowly takes in the sight of SIMON, the stranger with his breakfast and underwear; JONI and GARRY's slow dance embrace; and MOHAMMED, who sees RACHEL first and immediately gives her an apologetic "I don't know how to explain all this" look)

RACHEL (slow)

What the hell is happening?

(JONI steps away from GARRY and the dance)

JONI

I'll take this. *(To RACHEL)* Aunt Marilyn's driver brought me here 'cause I can't drive. Mohammed and Garry's half-brother accidentally screwed—

MOHAMMED

I mean, the sex was on purpose, I just didn't know that he was—

JONI (ignoring MOHAMMED, looking right at GARRY)

And I love your brother very much.

(Quietly, ABE enters the same way JONI came in. Only SIMON notices)

SIMON

Hey Dad! How was work?

(Hearing this immediately turns GARRY around. GARRY stares at his biological father)

ABE

It wasn't easy, but these things happen. What can you do?

(Sees the others. Knows which one is GARRY)

Garry?

GARRY (all he can manage)

Abe. Hi.

(Awkward pause)

ABE

It's so nice to meet you, Garry.

GARRY

It's nice to meet you, too.

ABE

I'm glad you found my place alright. Sorry it's a little small. It's just me and Simon here.

(Notices the others again)

Ugh, my ADHD! I haven't said hello to you all!

(One by one, shaking hands)

You must be Rachel.

RACHEL

Nice to meet you.

ABE

Joni?

JONI

Hi, it's a pleasure.

ABE

And you must be Mohammed!

MOHAMMED

Hello.

ABE

You all slept alright?

(Confirmation murmurs)

MOHAMMED

I slept... fine.

SIMON

You slept like a log!

ABE

What?

MOHAMMED (thinking fast)

Um... He must have heard me snoring... in the guest room! I'm *very* loud. In fact, one time—

SIMON

No. That's not true... I can't keep lying.

(Beat)

Thanks for trying to cover for me, Mohammed. I owe you one.

(Deep breath)

Um, this maybe isn't the best time to tell you this, but... Dad, I'm—

GARRY

Wait!

(GARRY grabs JONI by the hand, starts to run out with her)

JONI

Garry, what are you doing?

GARRY (to ABE and SIMON)

Sorry, I need to talk with these guys outside real quick.

(To RACHEL and MOHAMMED) You guys too! come on!

(JONI, RACHEL, and MOHAMMED, utterly confused, follow GARRY on his race out the door. GARRY yells back to ABE and SIMON:)

Keep talking about whatever you were talking about! (To SIMON:) Mazel tov!

(The scene continues outside. Lights fade on ABE and SIMON, and the other onstage indicators of the house's interior. Natural, bright daytime light on GARRY, JONI, MOHAMMED, and RACHEL.

GARRY keeps running, manic, almost ecstatic)

JONI

Garry, slow down.

(GARRY starts to skip, dance, jump around)

MOHAMMED

What is happening?

(GARRY stops. Yells to the heavens:)

GARRY

AAARRRGGGHHH!

(GARRY ends his yell for a moment, panting. After he catches his breath he starts running again. JONI and MOHAMMED try to chase after him)

RACHEL

Guys, stop.

(JONI and MOHAMMED stop, letting GARRY run, once again yelling, offstage)

He's screaming. *(To JONI)* Like you taught me to do.

(Beat)

I told him about it last night.

(JONI understands)

JONI (yelling)

Hey, Garry! Come back here for a minute.

(GARRY reenters, calmer or at least winded)

GARRY

This really *is* about more than me.

JONI

What is, Garry?

GARRY

Back at the house. Abe and Simon.

(Beat)

No. It *really* isn't about me at all.

(Pause. Garry's still catching his breath)

That's about a son coming out to his father. His real father.

(Beat)

And I was lucky enough to get that moment with my real dad. The whole shebang. He said, "I love you." I said, "I love you too, Dad."

(He takes this in)

I love you too, Dad.

JONI

And that's just one of the memories you can hold onto now.

GARRY

The memories hurt in a way they never did before he died.

MOHAMMED

But would you give them up?

GARRY

No. I wouldn't give them up.

RACHEL

Neither would I.

(RACHEL and GARRY look at each other, acknowledge the commitment they've both just made.
Beat)

GARRY

And I don't want to ruin *this* memory for Simon and Abe by making it about me.

(Pause)

I don't know what I came here looking for. *(To JONI and MOHAMMED)* I was telling Rachel last night, I guess I just decided one day that I needed some closure. That I wanted to find someone I could thank for being alive.

(Sound of the sea. Whale sounds. The shadow of the whale appears, peaceful and blue)

I still want to say thank you. To Abe. *(Indicating RACHEL, JONI, and MOHAMMED)* And you guys.

(Pause)

(To RACHEL) And to Dad.

(All light around GARRY fades so, as in the first scene, only he can be seen. GARRY Looks around. Hears the whale sounds. Feels presence and loss all around him. All sounds fade)

Thank you. I love you.

(After the briefest moment, lights return to normal.)

MOHAMMED, JONI, and RACHEL watch GARRY. GARRY looks back, then joins them. They all hold onto each other)

MOHAMMED

Hey, look. We're almost to the beach. Even from here, you can already start to see the ocean.

(They all look. They listen as waves softly meet the shore)

Wanna walk to the beach?

GARRY

I think I need to stay behind. I should thank Abe. And then... and then I think it's time to go home.

(Beat)

You guys go ahead.

JONI (to GARRY)

Can I stay behind for a minute, too?

GARRY

Of course.

RACHEL

I'd love to take a walk with you, Mohammed.

MOHAMMED

Well, it's official. Rachel's my favorite now.

(RACHEL and MOHAMMED begin to leave, then MOHAMMED stops and turns back to GARRY)

MOHAMMED (to GARRY)

Are we cool?

GARRY

Of course we're cool. You know I love you, Momo.

MOHAMMED

I love you, too. (*Butching it up:*) Bro.

(GARRY and MOHAMMED jokingly bro hug, then give each other a real hug.

RACHEL and MOHAMMED walk off towards the beach.

JONI and GARRY watch them leave, then exit together)

Scene 7

(RACHEL and MOHAMMED enter. They walk together on the beach)

MOHAMMED

What a trip this has been!

RACHEL

What a *morning*.

(MOHAMMED laughs)

Have you figured out how your story ends yet?

MOHAMMED

No. I still don't know.

RACHEL

Do they find the father?

MOHAMMED

I don't think they can.

RACHEL

Does the prophet come back? Does the puppet make it out of the fire alive?

MOHAMMED

I don't know! I thought I could find an ending here, but I'm more confused than before.

RACHEL

I think... can I tell you what I think?

MOHAMMED

Of course.

RACHEL

Okay, I think...

Well... Picture it! The Mariner is still dancing in the fire.

(The fire starts up again. The MARINER is back, dancing in shadow. MOHAMMED and RACHEL watch, then RACHEL continues)

The Puppet comes running out, screaming, like:

PUPPET (running onstage, screaming)

What the hell?!

MOHAMMED

My characters don't really talk like that. It would be something more like,

PUPPET (running, screaming)

What have you done?!

RACHEL (bemused)

Okay. Anyways, he's all like,

PUPPET

What have you done?! This whole whale's on fire!

MOHAMMED

Yeah, I like that. And then the Mariner can stop and look around and really see the fire.

(MARINER does)

MARINER (quietly)

What have I done?

PUPPET

We don't have time to worry about that. We've got to stop this fire.

MARINER

We can't stop it on our own.

(Beat)

Did you ever find your father?

PUPPET (sadly)

No. I looked. I don't think he's in this whale after all. I don't know where he is.

MARINER

I'm sorry. I'm sorry about before. I should have helped you try to find him.

PUPPET

I said we don't have time. You can say sorry when we stop this fire.

MARINER

No. I'm saying this now. You were right. I'm just a man from a story. I tried to get out. I made a throat and said I'd be the last man to ever get gulped by this big fish. But I'm still here. And so are you. So I'm making you a promise. I promise you we will both get out of this whale, and when we do, I will do whatever it takes to help you find your father.

(PUPPET hugs MARINER. The fire roars)

RACHEL

Shit. How *do* they get out of this one?

MOHAMMED

If they can't stop it on their own, then they need...

RACHEL

Crash!

(In the whale: Crash!)

PUPPET and MARINER

What was that?!

MOHAMMED

What *was* that? I was gonna say they need—

RACHEL

The prophet, I know.

(PROPHET makes an epic entrance, bathed in light)

PUPPET and MARINER

You're back!

PROPHET

I'm back.

PUPPET

You're back in the whale?

PROPHET

Not for long. Yo, God, could you let me out again? With these two this time?

MOHAMMED (to RACHEL)

You've really got to get a handle on how these characters talk.

RACHEL

Hey, I'm helping you come up with an ending.

MOHAMMED

Sorry, keep going.

RACHEL

So, God or the whale or whoever, I guess, lets the prophet out again.

(PROPHET steps forward)

And the puppet and the mariner follow.

(PUPPET and MARINER follow PROPHET. The fire ends)

MARINER

It sounds like the fire's finally over.

(PUPPET, PROPHET, and MARINER all breathe a sigh of relief.
The whale makes a distressed sound.)

Quick help me get this whale back to the sea!

(PUPPET, PROPHET, and MARINER push. And push! And push!! Finally, there is a splash and then the sound of swimming. PUPPET, PROPHET, and MARINER watch the whale swim away. The peaceful shadow of the whale returns, then spouts air from its blowhole. A sound like a shofar.
MARINER looks around)

Where are we?

PUPPET

It's the beach. My beach. The beach where I lost my father.

(Lights shift to bright gray. Sound of waves hitting the shore)

PROPHET

You crashed here. I was wandering the desert when I saw the ocean in the distance. I came closer and found the whale... beached. Smoke pouring out the top.

MARINER

Thank you for saving us.

PROPHET

It's what I do best.

PUPPET

Well...

MARINER

We're off to travel the world.

PUPPET

We're still looking for my father.

MARINER

Would you like to join us? I've got my reason, and Puppet's got his magic, but we could use a little of your faith.

(PROPHET considers, then nods. PUPPET, PROPHET, and MARINER exit)

RACHEL

That's your ending, Mohammed. Now you just have to write it.

MOHAMMED

And draw it.

RACHEL

Oh, right, that too.

(Beat)

Hey, you're the one who said you could live on the beach if you wanted to. You could stay behind for the day. Finish up your sketches.

MOHAMMED (considering)

You know, that's not a bad idea. Wait, how am I supposed to get back?

(RACHEL ponders this)

RACHEL

I heard a rumor there's a hot young guy back at Abe's house who said he owes you one. Maybe he'd give you a ride?

MOHAMMED (can't resist)

I mean, he gave me quite the ride last night.

RACHEL

Oh my God.

MOHAMMED

I'm sorry!

RACHEL

I hope you know you're turning me homophobic.

(Beat)

I'm just kidding. You're one of the strangest people I've ever met... but you're a pretty cool friend, Mohammed.

(RACHEL exits. MOHAMMED is momentarily choked up. He considers his options, as music begins)

MOHAMMED

Picture it: Three men – a puppet, a prophet, and a shipwrecked mariner –

(PUPPET, PROPHET, and MARINER reenter)

Out of the fire, and out of the whale, travel the world. They travel to...

PUPPET

To Italy!

PROPHET

To Nineveh.

MARINER

To fifty north and forty west.

(With determination, PUPPET, PROPHET, and MARINER disperse and exit)

MOHAMMED

They travel. They search.

Some say they're still searching to this day.

(Sad and hopeful, MOHAMMED exits. The music fades into the sea)

Scene 8

(JONI and GARRY are still walking in the Seaside neighborhood together)

JONI

On the drive back, could you drop me off at Aunt Marilyn's? I think I should stay with her for a bit longer. I have some sick and vacation time saved up at work. And my company seems good for her.

(Beat)

It'll be good for me, too.

GARRY

Absolutely.

(Beat)

We know almost everything about each other but... I think I need some time to learn about myself.

JONI

I think I do too.

(A small intimate gesture. Lovingly:)

That was very grown up of you, Garry.

(Pause)

GARRY

It's funny. I came here looking for closure, and I couldn't find it at temple, or in Momo's stories, or with Abe. Or even with you. And now I still don't know what I'm looking for.

JONI

I don't think there's any closure in grief. I think we'll spend the rest of our lives searching for what we've lost. The people we love.

(GARRY and JONI acknowledge each other and the moment they've just shared. JONI exits.

GARRY looks out into the audience, hoping he might find a familiar ghost)

(END OF PLAY)