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BEYOND “MUSCULAR BLUEPRINTS”: SARAH RUHL AND ACCESS INTIMACY
IN DRAMATIC WRITING

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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Accepted by:
Nic Brown, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

Sarah Ruhl, as a contemporary American playwright, has established her career with a signature style of poetic playfulness. By blending poetry with playwriting, engaging with both poetic and theatrical constraints, Ruhl's stage directions emerge as open-ended opportunities for staging. This essay approaches Ruhl through a disability studies reading to consider the ways in which her dramatic style invites new questions on playwriting and accessibility in theatre. This attention to accessibility is informed by disability studies writer and activist, Mia Mingus, and her notion of "access intimacy." As Mingus' access intimacy articulates access in terms of building community, this essay uses that framework to think of what Ruhl's stage directions mean for theatre as a community as well. This essay functions as the production notes for a sample of playwriting that draws from research on Emily Dickinson's poetry and status as a figure of disability.

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BEYOND “MUSCULAR BLUEPRINTS”: SARAH RUHL AND ACCESS INTIMACY
IN DRAMATIC WRITING (PRODUCTION NOTES ESSAY)

In a 2011 essay, Mingus introduces the term “access intimacy” by writing, “Access intimacy is that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs.”¹ While this kind of comfort can be found between disabled people in their shared experiences, access intimacy is not necessarily dependent on a mutual diagnosis, but from a sense of understanding developed through interdependence. If this script is being read for a production, the reader might consider what is meant by “interdependence” here. To again reference from Mingus, interdependence can be understood as a rejection to ableist assumptions of independence. Or, as Mingus puts it, the “Interdependency is not just me ‘dependent on you.’ It is not you, the benevolent oppressor, deciding to ‘help’ me.”² She further notes, “Interdependency is both ‘you and I’ and ‘we.’ It is solidarity, in the best sense of the word. It is inscribing community on our skin over and over and over again.” I am highlighting Mingus as the theatre, a space possible of community in the way Mingus describes, also has the capacity to further perpetuate a history of ableism.

Here, ableism in theatre can be identified in multiple aspects of the art, from disability drag or “cripping up” with casting to physical accessibility in a theatre’s built environment. For my essay, I will be contributing to this conversation by looking at the

¹ Mia Mingus, “Access Intimacy: the Missing Link,” May 5 2011, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/>

² Mia Mingus, “Interdependence (excerpts from several talks),” January 22 2010, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2010/01/22/interdependency-exerpts-from-several-talks/>

stage directions of contemporary playwright Sarah Ruhl to consider how Mingus' access intimacy can be invited within the script of a play itself. Although Mingus was not writing about access intimacy and interdependence in regards to the theatre, my claim is informed by the academics engaging with both disability studies and dramatic literature (such as Sam Yates, Ann M. Fox, and Kirsten Johnston) whose critical work outlines the histories and continuation of ableism in theatre. In return, this analysis will demonstrate how an understanding of Ruhl and Mingus are integral to any staging of *The Nobodies* as well.

When it comes to writing stage directions, Ruhl turns to poetry and rejects the idea of them as “muscular blueprints.”³ In a disability studies context, Ruhl's use of corporeal language when describing traditional stage directions as “muscular” blueprints becomes particularly relevant. As theatre has traditionally privileged the “able” body onstage, this would extend to stage directions as well, creating these “muscular” blueprints that are just as strict as what dominant culture demands a body to be. But what do these muscular blueprints actually look like? How do they function? From here, I will return to Kristy Johnston with her book, *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama*, which addresses the notion of disability theatre in terms of both space and script.

As Johnston unpacks the accessibility of a physical theatre space, she also moves to think through how that built environment and how it used have been inherently informed by the text of a script itself. Johnston writes, “The use of ‘conventionally scripted plays’ introduced the challenge of how to deal with disability on stage when the

³ Concord Theatricals, “Sarah Ruhl on Stage Directions,” Youtube Video, January 29 2015, <https://youtu.be/JbcMDDN47XU?si=3db0Dh-Nx8BIYiDX>

play had not been explicitly written for disabled actors or highlighted disability as a theme.” But what do we mean by “conventionally scripted plays” here? To demonstrate an example, Johnston references Richard Tomlinson’s words about a 1975 production of Harold Pinter’s 1957 play, *The Dumb Waiter*, at Graeae Theatre Company. Johnston quotes Tomlinson as he notes, “We followed Pinter’s stage instructions to the letter, except that instead of walking across, Gus wheeled across.” As the stage directions instruct the actor to walk, a theatrical constraint emerges from the script, calling attention to the limitations of “conventionally” written dramatic work that Johnston highlights. When considering this with Ruhl’s notion of muscular blueprints in mind, it contextualizes the kind of traditional stage directions that her work is rejecting, making room to ask: How does Ruhl use poetry when engaging with constraint in playwriting?

Before looking at how Ruhl uses constraint, it’s worth asking first: What exactly do I mean by constraint and how is the Ruhl example relevant to *The Nobodies*? Turning to Clare Mullaney’s “Not to Discover Weakness Is the Artifice of Strength”: Emily Dickinson, Constraint, and a Disability Poetics” can highlight the connection. As Mullaney details constraint in terms of poetry and literature by noting, “The relationship between writing and constraint has a long tradition, especially in histories of poetic form. As poetry’s most central feature, constraint is assumed to facilitate a poet’s creativity.” When Mullaney continues to list examples of poetic constraint, from rhyme meter to a haiku’s predetermined length, a dramatist might be reminded of theatrical constraints. Constraint in theatre refers to both outside constraints (production budget, performance space, etc.), but can also touch on constraints in dramatic form of the play itself (the ways

in which works by Shakespeare play with the Elizabethan five act structure are an example here). However, Mullaney's use of the term "constraint" fosters new observations in poetry when extending to consider the poet's disabilities as well. She writes, "In addition to serving as universal descriptors of language conventions, constraints denote specific bodily and cognitive conditions and the ways those conditions are represented in poetry." In applying Mullaney's approach to theatre, it is important to note that a production of a play is dependent on more people besides the playwright. With that in mind, I am not reading Ruhl's work in light of Ruhl's own relationship to disability, but in regards to anyone who might be rendering her scripts onstage.

Ruhl's rejection of the "muscular blueprints" challenge the ways in which traditional stage directions have been treated as mere instructions for physical performance. Instead, Ruhl's playwriting embraces poetry as she adopts the idea that stage directions should act instead as more of a "love letter" to future readers, where the script should not be bound by the conventions of traditional stage directions. Instead, Ruhl engages with poetic constraint to expand the possibilities of a production. An example of constraint in Ruhl's poetic stage directions can be found in *Dear Elizabeth*, a dramatization of Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop's relationship and their correspondence, that asks to render the following onstage: "He goes to her and speaks this letter directly to her. / They sit on a rock, or the idea of a rock"⁴ (pg. 36). As a stage direction, Ruhl's "idea of a rock" offers nothing specific in terms of what that should look like staged in a performance. With a stronger familiarity of Ruhl's work, this example

⁴ The use of "/" is being used to indicate line breaks as they appear in Ruhl's script. This is being done to keep the poetic integrity of her work.

from *Dear Elizabeth* might echo the stage directions in *Melancholy Play* where a character turns into an almond, or *The Clean House*, whose note on casting only suggests “Everyone in this play should be able to tell a really good joke.” If traditional stage directions create constraint, as observed in Tomlinson’s production of *The Dumb Waiter*, then Ruhl’s use of poetry in her stage directions create moments of constraint which invite opportunity rather than limit potential stagings.

Now! Onto the production notes of this production! Let me address the intentions behind the scenic suggestion that “Nothing should feel the need to be entirely realistic.” Although this script was informed by research, notably *Dickinson Unbound: Paper, Process, Poetics* by Alexandra Socarides, I am not embracing historical accuracy at large. Ultimately, Dickinson’s truth is not my own, nor is it a reality that can be replicated simply with a 19th century aesthetically accurate production design. To borrow from the introductory essay of Tennessee Williams’ production notes in *The Glass Menagerie* he writes,

When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn’t be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are.⁵

As *The Nobodies* offers an interpretation of Dickinson and her work through some specifically “unrealistic” staging, I want to articulate why these choices should not be

⁵ Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*. New Directions, 1999.

considered an attempt to “escape its responsibility of dealing with reality.” The goal of this play is not to give a definitive biography of Dickinson’s life. There are some questions that audiences might expect this play to answer as well. Was Dickinson really a recluse? Why did she never marry? What was “wrong” with her? These are some of the questions this play will not be answering. In other words, we will not be suggesting any diagnosis for Dickinson in the way audiences today might expect or want. For Williams, rejecting convention meant departing from the “straight realistic play with its genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes” to embrace the poetic and figurative. *The Glass Menagerie* turns to dreamlike theatricalism in its stagecraft, where technical elements like lighting and music are explicitly instructed to not be realistic. This alternative to realism is what Williams defines as “plastic theatre.”

Plastic theatre functions by abandoning conventions of realism gives room for articulating the “truth.” In recognizing the responsibility of “dealing with reality,” I do not believe it is my place to determine or define Dickinson’s identity. As defended in Mullaney’s article, “Not to Discover Weakness Is the Artifice of Strength’: Emily Dickinson, Constraint, and a Disability Poetics,” Dickinson did not need to self-identify as disabled in order to be aware of disabling life experiences (both physically and mentally) and how they can manifest within a text. With plastic theatre, by abandoning conventions of realism, Williams makes room to translate the more slippery truths of feeling and memory for a theatrical medium. Richard Kramer, Williams scholar, articulates this theatrical approach by noting:

Williams was envisioning dramatists who, rather than just writing scripts, wrought them from all the materials that were available in the theatrical lumberyard. Then the tension—the “push-pull”—among these disparate arts would create the plasticity of the theatrical experience ... the audience of a plastic theatre work has a theatrical experience beyond the mere image of actual life⁶

Plastic theatre in *The Glass Menagerie* allows Williams’ protagonist to both deliver and control the narrative at an atmospheric level. It embraces theatrical constraints by leaning into what the theatrical space cannot provide by playing with what is “available in the theatrical lumberyard”— lighting, sound, projection, etc. My point in introducing Williams’ plastic theatre is that it sets the foundation for the kind of poetic stage directions that Ruhl employs. From here, we can ask: if Ruhl’s counter to muscular blueprints is thinking of the script as a love letter, then what does this mean when extended to other parts of the written text as well?

Think back to our example of Ruhl’s “idea of a rock” in *Dear Elizabeth*. With Ruhl’s preface, in the place of production notes, she uses the format to speak on the possible stagings of her open-ended stage directions. Here, she writes, “There are many ways to do this play. One can imagine the full spectacle I have suggested in the stage directions, complete with planets appearing and water rushing onto the stage, as in its premiere at Yale Repertory Theatre.” As *The Nobodies* features stage directions of similar spectacle, I want to pause and highlight Ruhl’s following quote more closely:

⁶ Richard Kramer, “‘The Sculptural Drama’: Tennessee Williams’s Plastic Theatre,” *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, November 5 2002.

You really need nothing more than a table and two chairs for two wonderful actors who could even read the letters straight from the page rather than memorizing them. A third actor could read stage directions in place of the projected subtitles.⁷

If we are to imagine the rehearsal or performance space as a “theatrical lumberyard” then it is relevant to acknowledge how not lumberyards are working with the same privileges and budgets.

Returning to Mingus’ idea of “access intimacy,” Ruhl’s technique of centering the reader in her playwriting presents an example of what access intimacy could look like in theatre at the script’s level. Or, it is Ruhl’s emphasis on freedom in interpretation through theatrical constraint that disrupts the standardizing “muscular blueprints” of traditional stage directions, which calls to mind how the script can engage with constraint for opportunity rather than limitations. Although this does refer to aesthetic elements of stagecraft production, such as Yale’s rushing water effect, Ruhl is also touching on the element of constraint in technical production as well. Her stage directions urge for a kind of theatre making that does not demand a certain level of privilege to access.

In closing out my production notes, I want to build from Ruhl’s example to urge that any production of *The Nobodies* should also embrace the materials that surround it. Scenes are titles after poems in a way that could be projected with video media, be painted into a backdrop, or a third actor reading from the page as Ruhl suggests. This is a kind of stagecraft that should reflect plastic theatre in its attempt to capture Dickinson’s

⁷ Sarah Ruhl, *Dear Elizabeth*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

“reality.” When writing *Dear Elizabeth*, Ruhl chose to construct the dialogue solely from Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell’s correspondence. For *The Nobodies*, I have done almost the reverse. My use of Dickinson’s actual language is loose, turning to focus on the material text instead. The materiality, as in the design and physical print formats of her text, provides another way of engagement with the text in addition to her use of language itself. Socarides observes this in *Dickinson Unbound: Paper, Process, Poetics* by writing,

By placing emphasis on the processes that Dickinson employed and on the paper she used to make her poems, we have the opportunity to re-enter poems we may have thought we already knew and the chance to understand in new and more concrete ways the poet who has heretofore eluded, and perhaps always will elude, our grasp.

Socarides suggests that attention on the material text can create new entrances for analysis, a claim that is demonstrated in Mullaney’s ability to recognize Dickinson as a poet of disability in this way. As Mullaney points out, “What if Dickinson turned to the fragile scraps to depict her declining health? Her poems shift from framing impairment as a specific form of bodily difference ... to understanding disability as a universal condition, hence her growing preoccupation with death.” I bring this up in the production notes for a specific reason. If staging Dickinson with disability theatre and access in mind, it is the stagecraft which will be rendering the materiality of that world for the audience. When Mullaney notes how Dickinson understands disability as a universal condition, it echoes Mingus’ argument for access intimacy by asserting that “disabled

people are everywhere.” To think of Mingus in terms of theatre, as already reminded by academics like Sam Yates, Ann M. Fox, and Kirsten Johnston, it is hard to forget the ways in which most theatre has preferred disability only when it is part of a plot. In rendering *The Nobodies* for production, I encourage that performance be designed and rehearsed with this understanding of access intimacy in mind. As Ruhl’s poetic stage directions engage with theatrical constraint by writing stage directions that encourage creative freedom rather than creative demands, her playwriting style becomes a match for both Dickinson and access intimacy in theatre alike. My hope with using Ruhl-inspired stage directions is to give theatre artists that same freedom if bringing *The Nobodies* to production.

THE NOBODIES

A Play in One Act

by

Taylor Steck

Cast of Characters

Little Emily: Is 14-17 years old, has a sweet tooth. The Emily before the poet.

Big Emily: Older than 17, indulges. The Emily that everyone has read. Wears a white house dress. If a Dickinson scholar is reading this then you know the one.

Mother: Emily Norcross Dickinson, Emily Dickinson's mother. The first Emily. Wears a knit shawl.

Abby: Also 14-17 years old, a friend from school.

Scene

Inside the Dickinson home as Big Emily might remember it. Suggestions of a dining room are stage right, her bedroom stage left. The front door which leads outside should be upstage center. Elements of the set may be manipulated by actors throughout the play. Depending on your technology, the use of automation is also allowed. Nothing should feel the need to be entirely realistic. A garden lines the edge of downstage. All of the flowers are in bloom.

Time

19th century New England, or something like it. Scenes change by blending into each other almost as if nothing separates them to begin with.

Production Notes

See the essay printed above.

Note that a (//) indicates where overlapping dialogue should begin.

1. "I'm Nobody! Who are you?"

(A small light on BIG EMILY as she drags a wooden trunk to center stage and opens the lid. It is filled with neat sheets of paper that bear her writing. She empties the trunk with methodical concentration by trying to find a place for each paper in organized rows on the floor. Her doubt will cause some papers to be rearranged, picked up again for closer inspection, or fully swap places with another. At least one piece of writing makes her cringe upon rereading it, which then gets crumpled into a ball and tossed aside. Once she is satisfied, BIG EMILY closes the trunk and drags it stage right before climbing on top to scan her attempt at organization from above. With a nod of approval, she hops back down. She picks up the first sheet of paper in the row closest to her and brings it downcenter. The Homestead should become alive with light as soon as she reads.)

BIG EMILY

"I dwell in possibility- "

(Light change. She looks up from her poem and takes it in. The lights are bright. She raises a hand to shield her eyes and winces. The lights dim in response.)

BIG EMILY

"A fairer House than"...

(She is interrupted by a curt knock on the front door. It startles her before she scrambles to lock the door. It locks with an audible click. She presses her back against the door and looks at the audience to explain.)

BIG EMILY

Sorry! Not ready to answer that door just yet.

(gestures towards the papers below)

I mean, nothing's finished, or put together. It's a mess and I don't know...

(She is interrupted again as the knocking returns. It is louder this time, making the pages jump and flutter from the floor. BIG EMILY peels herself from the door to rush towards the growing mess. The knocking fades as she collects each poem until her arms are full of paper and the stage is silent. She breathes. She looks down to the poetry in her arms and reads the first one to herself. She flips through the other pages and tries to contain a sigh.)

BIG EMILY (cont'd.)

The poems make sense when I write them. But when I put them together and imagine someone else seeing, reading these, they all seem so?

(struggles to find the words)

Not good. Like, bad. No, terrible. Horrendous. Gut-splitting, brain busting, not good very bad.

(pause)

How do Wordsworth or Emerson know when a work is done? Who tells him if it's even any good?

(goes to her trunk, flips open the lid)

I'll try again. Start over. I will put them together again and again until the order is right.

(She lowers her collection of poetry into the trunk except for a single sheet. Closing the lid, she sits on top and reads her poem. As she reads, piano music starts to play from inside the home. BIG EMILY lets herself get distracted and follows the sound. She finds LITTLE EMILY at the keys. For a moment, all BIG EMILY does is lean against the piano and watch her play.)

BIG EMILY

(folds her poem, slips into her dress pocket)

Sometimes I think maybe I should have become a musician. With piano, I just follow some sheet music, and I know it's correct when the notes I play sound like a song.

(gestures to LITTLE EMILY)

Here, I am fourteen years old and have never written a poem. Well, I have, but nothing published yet. The piano, which my father bought, is also new.

(LITTLE EMILY fumbles a few notes and stops)

BIG EMILY (cont'd.)

Very new.

(LITTLE EMILY heaves her shoulders with a deep breath to restart. She resumes her playing.)

BIG EMILY (cont'd.)

This piece is by Henri Bertini. Henri with an "i," he's French. His instruction book, *Method for the Piano-Forte*, is how I learned to play.

(LITTLE EMILY plays while BIG EMILY sits at the base of the piano to read her poem again. A small frog croaks suddenly from the garden downstage. The piano pauses. BIG EMILY glances up towards the sound but stops as LITTLE EMILY continues her piano practice. Another croak interrupts. LITTLE EMILY pops above the piano as BIG EMILY stands up. It is silent. LITTLE EMILY resumes piano practice while BIG EMILY leaves to search the garden. The frog restarts its croaking. LITTLE EMILY leaves her piano to search for the frog as well.)

BIG EMILY (cont'd.)

Maybe if Massachusetts had fewer frogs I would have finished that Bertini book a little sooner.

(More croaking. LITTLE EMILY gets on her hands and knees to search the dirt. Slowly, LITTLE EMILY reaches out, and grabs the frog. It stops croaking. She sits up and brings the frog to eye level. BIG EMILY stands behind her to look at the frog as well.)

LITTLE EMILY

(to the frog)

Who are you?

(The frog springs from her hands and into the garden)

LITTLE EMILY

Hey!

(LITTLE EMILY goes full belly crawl to get a closer look at the dirt. BIG EMILY winces a bit at the sight.)

BIG EMILY

(to the audience)

You have no idea how long it took to get the mud stains out of that dress.

(A knock at the front door upstage. It is not the same knocking from before. LITTLE EMILY doesn't notice but BIG EMILY perks up.)

BIG EMILY

Right on cue!

(BIG EMILY shuffles back to stand right beside the door and flourishes her arms.)

BIG EMILY

(announcing like an emcee)

Now I present... Abby Wood! Abby is also fourteen years old and one of my best friends from school.

(A harder knock on the door this time. BIG EMILY looks expectantly between the door and LITTLE EMILY who still cannot hear anything from the garden.)

BIG EMILY

(sighs before trying again)

... Abby Wood!

(LITTLE EMILY doesn't stir. BIG EMILY deflates and takes a deep breath to repeat her announcement and arm flourish.)

BIG EMILY

Like I said... Abby-

(BIG EMILY is cut off by ABBY swinging the door open, which smacks into BIG EMILY who was standing too close. ABBY lets herself in and peers around the house looking for LITTLE EMILY. She wears a satchel and a light dress for summer. BIG EMILY steps out from behind the door rubbing her nose to feel for blood. She closes the door and goes to her trunk with a hand still holding her nose. With her other hand, she opens the trunk and sifts through papers. She picks one out and reads it over)

BIG EMILY

Hmm... this will do.

(ABBY finds her way to the garden. BIG EMILY slumps to sit on the floor with her back resting against the trunk. She crumples the paper in her fist to soften it up before bringing it to her nose to use as a tissue.)

BIG EMILY

(defending herself to the audience)

What? Don't be so precious. Not all of my poems are worth saving, okay?

ABBY

Should have figured you'd be outside.

LITTLE EMILY

(rolling onto her back)

Hm? How did you- did Mother let you in?

ABBY

Found a key under the doormat.

(ABBY takes a letter from her bag fans herself)

ABBY

The sun is relentless. Aren't you hot?

LITTLE EMILY

Not at all.

(LITTLE EMILY notices the paper fanning ABBY's face and sits up)

LITTLE EMILY

What's that?

ABBY

Letter.

LITTLE EMILY

From whom?

(ABBY opens her mouth to speak)

LITTLE EMILY (cont'd.)

Wait, no! Let me guess...

(beat)

LITTLE EMILY

Harriet?

ABBY

(looking at her like, *c'mon*)

Try again.

LITTLE EMILY

Oh. Are she and George still... ?

ABBY

Betrothed? Match-made? In love? Madly and deeply, forevermore?

(LITTLE EMILY makes a retching sound)

ABBY (cont'd.)

Yes.

LITTLE EMILY

I guess that explains why she's been too busy to write anyone back since winter.

ABBY

Here.

(ABBY shoves the letter in front of her, waving it by LITTLE EMILY's face. She takes the letter and swats at ABBY's legs.)

LITTLE EMILY

No more guesses?

ABBY

It's from Abiah. I read it before coming here. She's got bad news. Well, sort of. Good news for her but bad news for us.

(ABBY sits next to LITTLE EMILY and rummages through her satchel.)

ABBY (cont'd.)

You're gonna be upset. Candy helps.

(reveals two sticks of penny candy from her satchel)

Strawberry or butterscotch?

LITTLE EMILY

Oh, I shouldn't.

(ABBY puts one candy stick back into her satchel and snaps the remaining one in half. She pops a piece into her mouth as LITTLE EMILY takes the other half. LITTLE EMILY opens the letter. Together, they read. BIG EMILY chucks the crumpled paper over her shoulder and moves behind them to read over their shoulders. She looks at the audience to explain.)

BIG EMILY

So, Abiah was another friend from school. She, Abby, all of us, we were classmates at Amherst Academy. It was hard waiting for summer to end so that we could be in class and together again. Well, until...

(BIG EMILY gestures to indicate the girls below. As if on cue, LITTLE EMILY gasps at the letter)

BIG EMILY (cont'd.)

Abiah wrote to say she wasn't coming back that semester. Sure, yes, I knew that we couldn't stay girls in school forever, but still.

(beat)

We did write letters, though. That helped. We wrote to each other a lot, at first, then less and less until it was almost none.

(another beat, then brushes it off)

I think that might have sounded more dramatic than it was.

(LITTLE EMILY immediately contradicts her by collapsing backwards with a dramatic flop. BIG EMILY, startled by the sudden movement, jumps back with a shuffle.)

LITTLE EMILY

(handing the letter back to ABBY)

I can't believe it!

BIG EMILY

Okay, it might have been dramatic at the time, but that's how everything felt then. People just got older, busier.

(As the girls get into conversation, BIG EMILY sits herself next to ABBY, and steals a candy stick. She will snap it in two only to shove both halves into her mouth anyway.)

ABBY

Samuel will be crushed.

LITTLE EMILY

Who?

ABBY

Her boy...

(realizing she isn't quite sure what to call him)

Boy person.

(anyway...)

Remember the orchestra concert? Last fall? And that guy in the audience, over by the violins?

LITTLE EMILY

Was he wearing that orange waistcoat or the one with really big sideburns?

ABBY

Orange waistcoat.

LITTLE EMILY

Okay, go on.

ABBY

Well, anyway, she totally could not stop staring at him but I guess that worked because now they're together and it's the only thing I ever hear about.

(pulls a geranium leaf from the envelope)

Ooo! Geranium! This would look so good in a scrapbook, do you want it?

LITTLE EMILY

I don't care. Keep it.

(ABBY tucks the geranium leaf into the envelope)

ABBY

(folding the letter closed)

I wonder if Samuel knows yet. That she won't be back to school.

LITTLE EMILY

Who cares about him! She was the only one of us who could understand algebra, how are we supposed to pass that class without her?

ABBY

Algebra... oh, please, it's not like any of us were going to use algebra when we're done with school anyway. And, besides, she's still our friend.

LITTLE EMILY

Yes, but that doesn't mean I can understand her. Could you be attracted to a man wearing an orange waistcoat?

ABBY

Abiah's in love, that doesn't matter! You'll get it someday.

LITTLE EMILY

I really doubt that.

ABBY

You know what I mean.

LITTLE EMILY

I really don't. There are already tons of people that I already love. And none of them would ever wear an orange waistcoat.

ABBY

Okay, fine, but loving and being in love are two separate things.

LITTLE EMILY

How do you tell the difference?

ABBY

Being in love is so much bigger than loving. You can love lots of things. I mean, I love marshmallows and sunny days but I'm not in love with them. To be in love, you go to church and take a vow. It's for forever.

LITTLE EMILY

That's marriage. I know what marriage is. My parents are married, I've been to weddings. Just because you put on a white dress doesn't make you any different.

(BIG EMILY stretches her arm and frowns at the white sleeve of her white dress. She shrugs off the comment and continues to eat her candy sticks.)

ABBY

Well, you aren't married.

LITTLE EMILY

Right, but like, have you even tried making marshmallows? Now that is way harder than saying "I do." It's only two words. "I. Do." See? I just said it right there. That was not impressive.

ABBY

It's the choosing to dedicate your life to someone else that makes it bigger.

LITTLE EMILY

So it's just a choice?

ABBY

Not *just* a choice. It's the most major choice anyone could make!

LITTLE EMILY

If the most important choice in my life is picking to spend the rest of my existence with a man who wears orange in public then perhaps I should save myself the embarrassment and die right now. I could go find a nice carriage to throw myself in front of or dunk my head in the water basin and not come out.

ABBY

I would prefer you didn't.

LITTLE EMILY

But don't you think that being in love should *feel* like something?

ABBY

Like what?

LITTLE EMILY

Well, it's like with poetry. I don't get to choose what's poetry and what isn't. "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry."

ABBY

Those sound like medical problems.

LITTLE EMILY

You know, maybe it's good that Abiah isn't going to school anymore. It would just be a waste of academic resources on a brain that doesn't need to think.

ABBY

Well, I hope you don't write that in your letter back to her.

LITTLE EMILY

I'm only being factual. Abiah wants to be in love or get married or whatever and she's good at all the things you need for doing that. Like smelling good, and smiling or... doing hair! She doesn't need school for all that.

ABBY

You could just ask if you want help doing your hair.
(sitting up on her knees, motions LITTLE EMILY to get closer)

C'mere, scootch.

(LITTLE EMILY does as told, scooting over and turning her back to ABBY, who takes up the work of braiding her friend's hair and twisting it up. Meanwhile, BIG EMILY puts both ends of the candy stick in between her teeth, biting down to hold them there. With free hands she shakes her hair loose and leans over to observe the work. Her hands move awkwardly in an attempt to replicate the braiding. It is not a success. She spits out the candy and puts it in her pocket before standing up.)

BIG EMILY

I never got any good at this hair thing. Not like Abby at least. Whatever. I should focus.

(BIG EMILY goes to the trunk and rifles through different papers to find her next poem.)

LITTLE EMILY

Almost done?

ABBY

Close!

(ABBY pulls a pin from her own hair to secure the finished look.)

Okay, done.

LITTLE EMILY

Better?

ABBY

I don't know. Do you feel it?

LITTLE EMILY

I guess.

ABBY

Alright, now that your hair is done, who would you pick to marry?

LITTLE EMILY

What? Why would I be the one proposing?

ABBY

You wouldn't! We're talking... imagination! Fun? Sometimes I like to think about marrying Peter from geology class. So, you can pick anyone but him because I already did.

LITTLE EMILY

Okay...

ABBY

It's just, have you seen the way he holds a rock? I still remember when our teacher brought in those mica samples, he was so... gentle?

LITTLE EMILY

(wanting to get out of this conversation)

Uh... sure...

ABBY

Okay, but really, who would you pick?

LITTLE EMILY

(stuttering to answer)

Oh, I, well, uh, maybe... how about? No, uh...

(LITTLE EMILY continues to struggle for an answer. It is impossible to think of being with anyone but herself. BIG EMILY notices the stuttering and looks up from her trunk.)

BIG EMILY

Abby grew up and married a dentist, Abiah married a minister, Harriet married George, who was also a minister, and I... I had a dog?

(BIG EMILY pauses, her eyes trailing off as if her life's purpose can be found through sight. She forgets about the girls until ABBY speaks again.)

ABBY (cont'd.)

C'mon... What about Francis? From Latin? He's a bit dull but his parents are bakers so at least there's bread.

LITTLE EMILY

(more stuttering)

Yes, alright, well, uh... I think? Maybe? Hm, uh...

BIG EMILY

(standing, moves to the garden)

Oh, this is too painful to watch.

(BIG EMILY pushes back her sleeves, dives her arms to the dirt, and lifts up the frog. She places it inside ABBY's satchel on the ground. BIG EMILY takes a few steps back. The frog croaks. ABBY hears this, flipping her bag over and reveals the frog as he tumbles out. She shrieks and rushes offstage through the house. LITTLE EMILY picks up the frog and turns back in her direction.)

LITTLE EMILY

No, Abby! It's just a

(Frog croaks.)

LITTLE EMILY (cont'd.)

(to the frog)

Haven't you said enough today?

(LITTLE EMILY puts back the frog and goes into the Homestead, returning to her piano. She plays her practice music again. BIG EMILY saunters downstage to the garden. She picks up the frog

and looks him in the eyes. Then, she turns him towards the audience.)

BIG EMILY

I hope he likes Bertini.

(Another croak.)

BIG EMILY (cont'd.)

Tough crowd.

(She kneels down and releases the frog. She wipes her hands off on her dress before going back to her trunk to find the next poem. Eventually she pulls one from the pile and closes her trunk. She moves center stage to deliver the poem.)

"Why— do they shut"...

(Light change. The shift is to something cold and dark this time. Lights keep dimming as the piano music goes quiet. LITTLE EMILY is gone. It starts to snow. A wind howls. Panic rises in BIG EMILY as winter rolls in. She holds onto her poem tight.)

2. "Why— do they shut Me out of Heaven?"

(Before BIG EMILY is plunged into total blackout, MOTHER lights a fireplace in the dining room behind her. Warmth softly fills the house once the fire gets going. MOTHER exits stage left to where the kitchen would be. BIG EMILY turns around and goes inside. She puts her poem in her pocket and kneels by the fire. Her hands stretch out to feel its heat. MOTHER returns with a tea tray and a book. She sets the table for one. She sits and pours herself a cup of tea. BIG EMILY tip toes behind MOTHER to read the title of the book she brought.)

BIG EMILY

(informing the audience)

She's reading "The Frugal Housewife." Well, "The American Frugal Housewife," but since we're already in America, I guess it's just "The Frugal Housewife." It's the one written by Lydia Maria Child. If you're unfamiliar, it's mostly about laundry and cooking supper. Maybe I'd be published by now if I wrote recipes too.

(BIG EMILY moves to sit at the table. She sits with both hands in her lap like a child about to be scolded. MOTHER blows on the top of her tea to cool it down. Once, twice. She pauses to scoop in some sugar, then stir it in slow circles. Her concentration on these tasks are methodical, almost laborious. BIG EMILY slowly takes the poem and a pencil from her pocket and places them on the table. She takes the pencil and scribbles on the paper, workshopping her poem. MOTHER sips her tea. Neither notice when LITTLE EMILY and ABBY enter from behind the audience, walking together towards the stage. They are wearing cloaks and thick layers for winter. A pair of ice skates dangle from LITTLE EMILY's fist.)

ABBY

(while walking)

So then Daniel says, "can I walk you home?" and I tell him "yes," like, obviously, and so we're walking and walking and our arms sort of brush against each other, you know? And it was like WOW! It was only our arms that touched but I swear my whole body felt it. Felt. It. He was wearing this tweed coat and I just kept picturing how it must feel to be that coat. All wrapped around him like that, so close to his skin. I bet that coat even knows the way he smells. It made me so jealous I almost forgot to keep walking! But then we get to my house and he looks at me, just really looks at me, and asks if we can walk together again next week. And I said yes!

(LITTLE EMILY and ABBY pause at the stage. ABBY waits for a response. LITTLE EMILY is not impressed.)

LITTLE EMILY

So you couldn't go ice skating because Peter wanted to walk you home? I waited at the pond for over an hour.

ABBY

No. Peter didn't walk me home, Daniel did. Peter was last year's interest.

LITTLE EMILY

Right.

ABBY

Okay, enough about me and Daniel. Why don't you talk about Francis?

LITTLE EMILY

Oh, well, uh? He has a face. So that's good.

(ABBY isn't sure why LITTLE EMILY won't talk to her. LITTLE EMILY does not know how. They idle by the garden. LITTLE EMILY lightly coughs, ABBY checks her nails.)

LITTLE EMILY (cont'd.)

It's pretty cold. I'm gonna head inside.

ABBY

See you later!

(The girls wave goodbye as ABBY exits back through the audience. LITTLE EMILY walks quietly in the garden to exit offstage, making her way to the front door. She opens it slowly to avoid any sound. She closes the door even slower. Then, she sneezes. The ice skates drop and fall with a thud.)

MOTHER

Come here.

(LITTLE EMILY goes to the dining room in defeat. She stands in front of MOTHER but keeps her eyes on the table.)

MOTHER (cont'd.)

Sit.

(MOTHER gestures to the chair BIG EMILY is already sitting in. As LITTLE EMILY moves to sit, BIG EMILY gets out just in time. She takes her poem and paper before moving to another chair. She tries to continue writing but can't ignore their arguing.)

MOTHER

You missed church this morning. Again.

BIG EMILY

I am fifteen years old and there is a religious revival in town. In order to join the church, you had to stand before everyone and profess your belief to them. I never went. This isn't to say I had no faith, but that I didn't see why it had to happen in public.

MOTHER

Are you going to explain yourself?

BIG EMILY

Here we go...

(BIG EMILY puts her head, face down, on the table.)

LITTLE EMILY

I... forgot.

MOTHER

You're lying.

LITTLE EMILY

You don't understand.

MOTHER

Right, of course. Because I'm a terrible mother. You should get your grandfather's rifle and go shoot me out back. I think it's somewhere in the shed.

LITTLE EMILY

That is not what I said.

MOTHER

It isn't?

LITTLE EMILY

I didn't feel well.

MOTHER

Then you should be resting, not outside in the cold. Don't lie to me again.

LITTLE EMILY

I'm not lying.

MOTHER

You lied about finishing the dishes, you lied about washing the linens, / you're lying.

LITTLE EMILY

No, I did the laundry!

MOTHER

You stripped your bed and put some sheets in the hamper. That is not washing linens. It doesn't heat the water, or fill the basin, measure out soaps and starch. And it didn't hang each garment one by one on the clothesline either. Besides, that was last week. The hamper is full of linens again. It will be full again next week, and the week after. You go to sleep in a clean bed each night and never stop to think how it doesn't get dirty.

(LITTLE EMILY knows that she is right. MOTHER sips her tea. LITTLE EMILY pushes out her chair and stands.)

LITTLE EMILY

(removing her cloak, folds it over the chair)
I'll do it now.

(LITTLE EMILY exits. BIG EMILY lifts her head. MOTHER pours herself more tea. LITTLE EMILY returns, sheepish.)

MOTHER

That was fast.

LITTLE EMILY

... Where's the soap?

(MOTHER stands with a sigh to get the soap herself instead of answering. She exits. LITTLE EMILY follows.)

LITTLE EMILY (cont'd.)

(as she exits)

You can just tell me where it is!

(BIG EMILY cranes her neck to double check that they are gone. She stands, steals the cloak, and wraps it around herself as she heads outside by the garden. She goes to the trunk ready for a different poem. When she opens the lid, a winter wind blows the pages out. She turns and gathers each page into a sloppy pile that gets tucked under her arm as she marches back to the trunk. She drops the poetry inside and slams it shut.)

After rubbing her hands together for warmth, she drags the trunk inside the home. After a second to breathe and hang up her cloak, she opens the trunk, and looks for the next poem again. Wind stops as a bobolink's bird song begins. Winter turns to spring. MOTHER enters the garden with a laundry basket full of white bedsheets and sets up a clothesline. She now wears a lighter dress under her shawl. At the clothesline, MOTHER will pin up each sheet to dry, BIG EMILY from view. MOTHER finishes hanging the sheets. She exits and returns with a bucket of gardening supplies and tends to the plants. She gardens with genuine joy. A soft breeze rustles through the linens as they hang.)

4. "I taste a liquor never brewed--"

(LITTLE EMILY flits through sheets on the clothesline to emerge down stage. Whatever she wears should feel excessively frilly with crowds of ruffles and bows that seem to suffocate. All of this makes LITTLE EMILY visibly uncomfortable.)

LITTLE EMILY

I don't think this fits.

MOTHER

(pauses her gardening)

Put your arms out. Turn around.

(LITTLE EMILY fans out her arms and does a slow spin.)

MOTHER (cont'd.)

Well, maybe the hem is off but overall, it fits.

(MOTHER resumes her gardening, talking as she works.)

LITTLE EMILY

But I don't think it like, fits **me**. I mean, my body? Yes. But the dress doesn't fit, it doesn't feel good.

MOTHERS

Some dresses are meant to be worn regardless of what you may "feel."

LITTLE EMILY

That's not, don't you think, maybe the color? Or how it drapes, is so?

(giving up)

It's, I'm already wearing it. It's fine.

MOTHER

I thought you loved that dress.

LITTLE EMILY

Maybe when I was thirteen! I should just stay home. I didn't even want to go to this party to begin with. It's going to be full of all the same people from Amherst Academy that I've already seen for seven years. Nothing exciting will happen, it's a waste of time.

MOTHER

Classes start at Mount Holyoke next week, you'll be moving on Saturday. It might be nice to see everyone before then, say goodbye.

(pulls out a nasty weed)

Isn't Abby going? I thought you liked Abby?

LITTLE EMILY

Yes, but I don't know what we'll talk about.

(wants to explain why, but isn't sure how)

She doesn't care as much about school these days.

MOTHER

There are other things to have a conversation about.

LITTLE EMILY

It's not my fault that the other girls didn't study enough to do anything with their schooling.

MOTHER

Not all of them had housekeepers and a father with money to support those studies either.

(yanks another weed)

Look, I don't care if you miss the party. Stay home. Fine. You can help take the laundry down.

LITTLE EMILY

I'm actually busy / with...

MOTHER

Make sure you fold them correctly this time. Or, if you'd rather, there's also a stack of dishes in the kitchen and I think the floors could use a sweep too.

LITTLE EMILY

Um, I think, I think I'll just...

(A knock at the door. It's ABBY. This knocking should have the same rhythm as it did when she knocked on the door in Scene 1. LITTLE EMILY looks between MOTHER and the door as if waiting for permission to answer it.)

MOTHER

Get the door. I'll finish up here.

(LITTLE EMILY snakes through the hanging bed sheets to open the door. MOTHER dusts the dirt off her hands before unclipping each sheet from the line. As the sheets drop, we see that BIG EMILY and her trunk are gone. MOTHER exits with the bundle of sheets. LITTLE EMILY lets ABBY inside but hides her body behind the door as she does. ABBY is wearing something lovely.)

ABBY

Are you ready to go? The party's soon.

(LITTLE EMILY steps out from the door and lets it shut behind her.)

ABBY (cont'd.)

Oh gosh.

LITTLE EMILY

I look like a Christmas tree.

ABBY

(trying to be positive)

I like Christmas?

LITTLE EMILY

(speaking while walking to her bedroom, ABBY follows)

Today is not Christmas! And my hair won't sit right, I just shouldn't go!

ABBY

Let's start with the dress. Where's your sewing kit?

(LITTLE EMILY exits and returns to hand ABBY her sewing kit. She lays on the floor as ABBY pushes past buttons and bobbins to find a pair of embroidery scissors.)

ABBY (cont'd.)

Sit up, we can fix this.

(LITTLE EMILY sits up. ABBY snips the thread around a bow. She plucks it off the dress and lets it drop on the floor. LITTLE EMILY takes the hint and pulls her sewing kit over to find another pair of scissors.)

LITTLE EMILY

Keep doing the bows, I'll get ruffles..

(LITTLE EMILY cuts at the ruffle on her hem with one hand. ABBY holds her other hand, pulling the arm straight, snipping off each bow one by one.)

ABBY

I meant to ask, how do I look tonight?

LITTLE EMILY

Better than I do.

ABBY
No, no jokes. Do I really look alright?

LITTLE EMILY
(to appease)
You always look wonderful, Abby.

ABBY
Okay. I suppose.

(ABBY snips off the last bow.)

ABBY (cont'd.)
Other arm.

(LITTLE EMILY sets down her scissors as ABBY moves to hold her other arm.)

ABBY
Do you think Daniel will be at the party?

LITTLE EMILY
Was he invited?

ABBY
Well, yes, / but-

LITTLE EMILY
Then he should be there.

(More scissor snipping.)

ABBY
And you wouldn't lie to me?

LITTLE EMILY
Never.

(ABBY puts down the scissors and stands.)

ABBY
Then would you tell me how I look?

LITTLE EMILY

Okay, give a spin.

(ABBY twirls around.)

ABBY

Well?

LITTLE EMILY

You look exactly the same as before. Still wonderful.

ABBY

Do I look good, though? Pretty?

LITTLE EMILY

You're as wonderful as the mountains or a bright blue sky.

ABBY

But am I pretty? I don't want to look like the mountains.
No one marries a mountain.

LITTLE EMILY

Is this about David?

ABBY

His name is Daniel.

(pause)

If I can remember the names of Hawthorne and Emerson and
all the other men you care about then you should be able to
do the same for Daniel.

LITTLE EMILY

Hawthorne and Emerson are writers, Daniel is just a boy.

ABBY

He wrote me a very nice card for Valentine's Day, actually.
Which I did tell you about even though you don't remember.

LITTLE EMILY

Because that kind of writing doesn't count. A card doesn't
have story, or characters, it doesn't take thought. Anyone
can write a card.

ABBY

How many Valentine cards did you get?

LITTLE EMILY

... None.

ABBY

So you have no idea what you're talking about.

LITTLE EMILY

Look, I'm sorry, you wanted to be told that you're pretty, so let me just say it! You look pretty. Not wonderful, or sublime, not even dazzling. Pretty. There, you're pretty.

ABBY

(sitting back down, tries to sound less bothered than she feels)

Thanks. You look good too, by the way.

LITTLE EMILY

There's no Daniel waiting for me. I don't need to be pretty. I'll write myself cards, I have thoughts and wit.

ABBY

Can pretty girls not have thoughts and wit?

LITTLE EMILY

Yes, but once you marry Daniel it won't matter anymore what you are.

ABBY

To you.

LITTLE EMILY

What?

ABBY

It won't matter to you. Apparently.

LITTLE EMILY

That's not what I meant.

ABBY

I don't think that's true.

(picks up the book)

Maybe I'll publish something like a "real" writer one day and you'll be able to care about me then.

LITTLE EMILY

(not arguing, matter of fact)

Oh, well, that's a Lydia Maria Child. It's for housewives. No Shakespeare or anything.

ABBY

That isn't the point.

LITTLE EMILY

I'm just saying that if you're going to be published that you should aim for something more sophisticated than a glorified cookbook.

ABBY

Why not? Everyone has to eat.

LITTLE EMILY

I don't know why we're arguing about this, you're not going to be publishing anything ever anyway.

ABBY

(brandishing the book on "this")

This is not what we were arguing about.

(ABBY lets the book drop on purpose. They stare at it after the thud.)

ABBY (cont'd.)

I should go. Don't look for me at the party, I'll be with Daniel.

(ABBY exits with a slam of the front door. LITTLE EMILY cuts at the bows that ABBY didn't get. She makes her way up the collar, then snips at a bow on the shoulder of her sleeve. It's pesky. She resorts to ripping it off. She tosses the bow across her room in triumph. She stands, dusts herself off, then notices she's accidentally ripped her shoulder seam as well. The sleeve falls down her arm. She sits back down and looks in the sewing kit for what she needs to fix it. When she starts sewing her sleeve back together, BIG EMILY enters, still holding her collection of

poetry. She sits next to her younger self and gathers her own sewing materials. BIG EMILY proceeds with the task of creating what the academics will later call a "fascicle." She starts by folding each sheet of paper in half before sewing them together. This includes stabbing holes through the paper, threading a needle, cutting thread, tying the knot, and a full row of careful hand stitching up its spine. The girls sew in silence together. LITTLE EMILY loses patience that she doesn't have yet. She stands up then pulls off the torn sleeve and rips out the other to match. She exits out the front door as BIG EMILY continues to sew. Her memory of the party bleeds in through sound. Quietly, at first, until the noise of music, people conversing, and clinking glassware become clear. BIG EMILY puts down the needle and thread to cover her ears.)

BIG EMILY

(shouting over the clamor)

The party was not fun. Everyone was there and yet I couldn't help but feel alone. I am sixteen years old and ready to leave and never come back.

(She looks from left to right and sees that she is still alone. She takes her hands off her ears. The party noises go quiet.)

5. "I felt a cleaving in my mind"

(BIG EMILY picks up her needle and thread to continue sewing. Her stitches should be more aggressive than one would expect. MOTHER enters, sweeping the floor, and exits. BIG EMILY finishes the fascicle by tying a knot. She gets off the floor and brings her fascicle to the garden.

BIG EMILY

I was seventeen years old when I left home to stay at Mount Holyoke for school.

(showing off her fascicle to the audience.
And this? I'm done, here! Finished! Done. It's done.
Everything tied together and complete.

(She brings down the fascicle and flips through its pages. Her face drops as she finds new imperfections in her writing.)

Oh, maybe this one should have gone up front.

(flips to another page)

And this should come later, right? Can't I be finished?

(BIG EMILY flips back through her fascicle when the harsh knocking from Scene 1 comes back. Startled, she drops the fascicle and rushes to throw her back against the door.)

BIG EMILY (cont'd.)

No, no, I should be done. Story's over. I am seventeen years old and still at Mount Holyoke. I haven't left yet. I finished the poems, tied 'em together, that makes it the end. I shouldn't have to see this part.

(More knocking.)

I am seventeen years old and I go to Mount Holyoke. I am seventeen years old and I go to Mount Holyoke I am seventeen years old and I go to-

(The knocking slows and BIG EMILY thinks it might be over. However, the knocking returns, with even more force. She pats her pocket and dress to feel

for the fascicle before running to the garden to find it. After picking up the fascicle, she lets herself hold it one more time before dashing offstage and returning with the gardening bucket. She stands center and places it down in front of her. With that, she takes the fascicle to her mouth and bites the stitches loose before ripping the rest of it apart above the bucket. When there is nothing left she takes a matchbox from her pocket and strikes a fire. She drops it into the bucket. We are engulfed in total blackout as the poetry turns to ash. The knocking goes silent. Darkness lingers. Then, eventually, the sounds of scribbling and scissors cutting through paper emerge in a haze of unnatural pink light.)

ABBY

(unseen, still in the dark)

Where's the lamp?

(the sound of footsteps as she seeks an oil lamp in the bedroom)

Here!

(ABBY lights a small oil lamp that slowly illuminates the entire space with a soft glow. She is dressed exactly as she was at the beginning of the play. Instead of poetry ashes, there are two scrapbooks in the middle of the floor. These were extremely common for women and girls at the time, even Dickinson. There are bits of newspaper, wrapping paper, plants, ribbon, bottles of glue, scissors, and other materials scattered around. One scrapbook is closed and the other lies open. ABBY brings the lamp to sit on the floor to continue working with the open scrapbook. BIG EMILY stands beside the scrapbooks and tries to make sense of the scene.)

ABBY

(holds up her scrapbook to show its pages)
 Look! It's Abiah's gardenia, from her letter. Doesn't it look good on this page?

BIG EMILY

I am fourteen years old and.. making scrapbooks? Again?
 (circling behind ABBY, like how dogs chase a scent)

And we're in my bedroom? No, we're in the parlor? At school?

(lets it go)

Never mind.

(ABBY slides the closed scrapbook over to BIG EMILY)

ABBY

Here.

(BIG EMILY turns her head back and forth behind her to make sure that ABBY is really looking at her. She is.)

ABBY (cont'd.)

Really, you should start before I take all the good ribbon.

(BIG EMILY takes a few tentative steps to accept the scrapbook but does not sit. ABBY pats the ground next to her.)

ABBY (cont'd.)

What? Sit.

(BIG EMILY allows herself to sit. She fiddles with the ribbon as ABBY continues scrapbooking. The space glitters and shines with unnatural beauty whenever she adds something new to her page. Maybe the walls turn pink or a drizzle of

confetti turns to storm. BIG EMILY lets the ribbon go limp as pauses to adjust. ABBY eyeballs the ribbon before pinching the end.)

ABBY (cont'd.)

Okay, so, would you mind if I took just a little?

(BIG EMILY holds out the ribbon and nearly flinches when ABBY actually grabs it. Their hands almost touch. This stuns BIG EMILY more than any of the twinkling visuals around them. She drops her end of the ribbon to leave ABBY holding it all.)

ABBY (cont'd.)

Oh, I don't need all of it.

(takes the scissors, cutting herself less than half a piece)

Maybe an inch or two.

(ABBY pastes the ribbon and BIG EMILY opens her own book. She flips through the blank pages, feeling its emptiness.)

BIG EMILY

Where do you start?

ABBY

Anywhere, I guess?

(BIG EMILY flips another page before closing the book.)

BIG EMILY

When does it start making sense? How do you know when to stop?

ABBY

(with a shrug)
When you feel like it.

BIG EMILY

Right...

(BIG EMILY opens her scrapbook but can only bring herself to stare at it.)

ABBY

Maybe start with some of that fabric? The florals are pretty.

(cuts a small piece and pastes it into her own book)

Like this!

(ABBY finishes pasting the fabric and a moment of pretty music flourishes as she does. BIG EMILY tries to copy this, cutting the fabric and slapping it into her scrapbook with a messy glob of glue. Rather than a full song, this generates a sound of failure that is more noise than music. It can be the string of a violin snapping, horns flailing, the piano going off-key. She peels off the fabric and tries again but it produces the same result.)

BIG EMILY

I don't know how to make it good.

ABBY

Does it have to be good?

BIG EMILY

Everything will be a waste if not.

ABBY

So it's a waste if it's not good?

BIG EMILY

Well, yes. It's a waste to be stuck here if nothing is good. Not worth it.

ABBY

I'm stuck here. Am I good? Am I worth it?

BIG EMILY

I meant stuck in the book.

(BIG EMILY knows that ABBY will someday be married and sail to Syria on mission trips. She has multiple kids and travels the Middle East, leaving nothing in Amherst but the letters she mails back, before her death and burial in Beirut. When BIG EMILY tells ABBY that she is not stuck in Massachusetts, it is not hypothetical, even if this ABBY has not lived it yet.)

ABBY

I have been in Massachusetts all my life, I think the rest of the world would agree that means I have been "stuck."

BIG EMILY

But you won't always be here.

ABBY

You don't know that. Besides, I like Amherst. You're here. How would I make friends somewhere else?

BIG EMILY

You will.

ABBY

You don't know everything.

BIG EMILY

I'm being... realistic.

ABBY

Then stop. I don't like it.

BIG EMILY

(in a tone just like MOTHER)

Yes, I'm a bad friend. Terrible.

ABBY

I didn't say that.

BIG EMILY

You should say it. Let me hear it. Go on, tell me. Tell me that I am a bad friend. I'm bad.

ABBY

No?

BIG EMILY

But I'm not good! How am I good? That makes me bad. Another waste.

(ABBY picks up the ribbon and feels its smoothness between her fingers.)

ABBY

What happened to scrapbooking?

(ABBY cuts a piece of ribbon and hands it over.)

ABBY (cont'd.)

Here.

(A pause as BIG EMILY decides to try again.)

BIG EMILY

(not just for the ribbon)

Thank you.

(BIG EMILY takes her empty scrapbook. She fills the scrapbook pages haphazardly as clashing music and lights bounce around to mimic her work. ABBY is lost in a light change. BIG EMILY continues with hesitance until finding joy in the chaos. When the harsh knocking returns, BIG EMILY barely notices at first amid everything else. The knocking grows louder. She flips to an empty page of the scrapbook and the theatricalism drops. The knocking keeps up as music stops and colors drain from light. She is unnerved but waits it out. She feels comfortable this time. She gives a calm look to the audience, takes a pencil from her pocket, smooths the page before her, and writes. She lets the knocking persist.)

6. "In this short Life"

(When BIG EMILY finishes the poem, she rips out the page from its book. The knocking should stop as soon as that happens. BIG EMILY lets herself breathe, feeling success. However, the front door swings open, but BIG EMILY braces with a newfound confidence. LITTLE EMILY enters, dragging the trunk behind her, and slams the door shut. She is dressed modestly from a year at Mount Holyoke. After dragging the trunk to her bedroom, she lays on the floor. BIG EMILY takes her poem and goes to the trunk to see if her other poetry is inside. She only rummages out pieces of clothing and old letters. She closes the trunk, sits on top, and addresses the audience.)

BIG EMILY

I am seventeen years old and couldn't make it through Mount Holyoke. One school year then back home to Amherst.

(BIG EMILY looks at the single poem and folds it in half, slipping it into her pocket. She crosses her arms. LITTLE EMILY rolls onto her stomach.)

BIG EMILY (cont'd.)

And I know what you're thinking: Why did she leave?

(gestures to LITTLE EMILY on the floor)

I left because I had to. Because I could. Sorry I can't give a better answer.

(BIG EMILY slinks off the trunk and lays down next to her younger self. They rest. When a bullfrog croaks in the garden, the girls sit up in unison. LITTLE EMILY follows the sound outside. BIG EMILY walks behind her. LITTLE EMILY finds the frog and picks it up. It is the same frog as earlier, now a full grown bullfrog.)

LITTLE EMILY

You're still here? C'mon, let's go to the pond...

(LITTLE EMILY carries it through the audience to exit, bringing him to the pond where she tried to go ice skating two years before. MOTHER enters the dining room with four plates and sets the table for supper. She exits and enters to bring things from the kitchen. BIG EMILY goes to the dining room to watch. As MOTHER works, BIG EMILY exits and returns with an empty vase. She brings it to the garden. She kneels to pick flowers but can't help herself from looking back to MOTHER just for a moment.)

BIG EMILY

(turning to the audience)

We all had chores. At school. Mine was knives. Breakfast was at seven. We ate again at twelve, then supper by six. I carried the knives and set one down at each seat on every table. Then, I would wash and wipe all the knives to use again. Morning and noon and night.

(As MOTHER finishes, she takes off her shawl, and drapes it over one of the dining chairs. She exits. BIG EMILY plucks some flowers into the vase and brings it to the dining room. She sets it in the middle of the table.)

BIG EMILY (cont'd.)

There were almost 300 girls at that school. Girls who ate with knives. It's a lot of knives, and I could complain, but the work was't hard. I liked it. Laying the knife, between fork and spoon, making sure every plate had one. "There is an ease & grace, a desire to make one another happy, which delights & at the same time, surprises me very much."⁸

⁸From Emily Dickinson to Abiah Root, South Hadley, November 6, 1874 (L18). If using a media projector, this letter may be displayed.

(She picks up a knife, then puts it down.)
It wasn't until I left home that I learned how to care
about my own.

(She picks up MOTHER's shawl off the dining
chair, smooths her hands over the fabric, and
puts it on. From behind the audience, LITTLE
EMILY returns in a march to the garden. The sound
of croaking is heard before she enters. It is a
constant, angry croak. She holds the bullfrog far
in front of her as if it might explode. Her dress
is soaked in pond water from the waist down,
including socks and stockings. Her shoes are
lost.)

LITTLE EMILY

(while walking, as if the frog were a fussy baby)
Yes, yes okay! I get it, please, stop? Frog, I know. Okay.
We are doing this. It will be over. This will be over.
Okay? You're okay. I'm okay. I'm okay? It's okay! Okay!
We're here!

(She releases the frog deep in the garden and his
croaking immediately stops.)

There? There.

(LITTLE EMILY wrings out the bottom of her skirt
before going to her bedroom. BIG EMILY looks up
to notice as she enters, tightens the shawl
around herself, and follows. As LITTLE EMILY
walks past, she sees BIG EMILY in the shawl and
recognizes her as MOTHER.)

LITTLE EMILY

That is a very pesky frog in the garden.

(LITTLE EMILY opens the trunk and looks for dry
clothes.)

LITTLE EMILY (cont'd.)

He kept croaking and croaking I thought he was asking to go where he belongs. So I tried to be good, I brought him to water, to the pond. The one that freezes over in winter? And I'm by the edge so I leave him right there by some very nice rocks but then he starts croaking and doesn't stop! Like he's yelling at me! I thought, okay? It's a frog! Frog's like water! Let's put him in the water? So I move closer to the water, then let him go again. And he stops, for maybe a second, two seconds. I go to leave. Then? He jumped. Right at me! That's when I fell in. I mean, the pond isn't that deep or anything but still.

(finds a pair of socks, sits on the ground to peel off her wet ones and pull on the dry pair)

So now I'm there, sitting in pond water, with this frog who won't stop croaking and won't let me leave. I just, I had to bring him back here. To the garden. What if he liked the flowers and worms? Or how the whole yard will smell like soap whenever there's laundry drying? Maybe there's other frogs in the pond that he doesn't like. I don't know.

(she changes into a dry skirt and drops the wet one into a pile with her socks)

The garden just seemed so small, I don't get why he stays.

(finishes adjusting her skirt into place, looks right at BIG EMILY for the first time since returning from the pond.)

Has the garden always had frogs?

(BIG EMILY is startled by LITTLE EMILY's eye contact. She looks behind her to check if MOTHER is there.)

LITTLE EMILY (cont'd.)

Mother? Hello?

(When BIG EMILY sees no one behind her, she turns back.)

BIG EMILY

(points to herself)

Me?

LITTLE EMILY

Yes... ?

BIG EMILY

(in an exaggerated tone, obviously lying)

Oh no! I, uh, I think the chicken is burning. Let me check...

(BIG EMILY starts to sweat. She goes to the dining room and takes off the shawl to fan herself. She picks up a spoon, checking her reflection on the back. LITTLE EMILY unpacks her trunk.)

BIG EMILY (cont'd.)

Oh my... she's right...

(to the audience)

I look just like my mother.

(BIG EMILY takes a deep breath and brings herself back to the bedroom. LITTLE EMILY continues unpacking.)

BIG EMILY (cont'd.)

Emily, the garden is a wonderful...

(she notices that LITTLE EMILY isn't listening)

Emily?

(claps her hands, snaps her fingers, jumps around making any noise to find out if she can be seen)

Hm.

(BIG EMILY paces, moving back to the dining room. She sees the shawl and puts it on again before going back to the bedroom. LITTLE EMILY immediately looks up at her entrance this time.)

LITTLE EMILY

Was the chicken okay?

BIG EMILY

What?

(remembers her lie)

Oh, sure, chicken's fine.

(LITTLE EMILY, still unpacking, takes a stack of envelopes from the trunk and sets it aside. BIG EMILY moves to pick them up but LITTLE EMILY snatches it back.)

LITTLE EMILY

Those are private, they're letters.

BIG EMILY

Yes, they're from my frien- your friends, right? And I have a feeling that you haven't written them back.

LITTLE EMILY

I didn't know how. Abby's become a Christian, she's getting engaged. They're moving to Syria after the wedding. Mission work. And I'm happy for her, I am. But I did nothing except move back home. It didn't seem like much to write about.

BIG EMILY

Maybe it's like the frog. You thought he belonged in the pond but he was quite happy here. I'm sure there would be pages and pages written about our garden if that frog could hold a pencil. If you can't find something to write about here then you aren't looking well enough.

LITTLE EMILY

How do you do it, though? How do you stay? Stay here. My father can come and go but you stay. How do I stay here? We aren't frogs.

BIG EMILY

You do laundry. Cook, garden. Take care of things. Time sort of... passes in this way. If you don't know what to write

LITTLE EMILY

And time can only pass?

(BIG EMILY isn't sure but answers anyway.)

BIG EMILY

Yes. Or, no. Yes. Look, the laundry? Cooking, gardening, the house? This house? Your writing. It happens in this house. Because you have this house to do it in. Not because you're any different or more special than the other girls. You write because we need to, and you can.

(turns for the dining room)

Come with me. Bring the letters.

(LITTLE EMILY follows BIG EMILY into the dining room. BIG EMILY clears a seat at the table.)

BIG EMILY (cont'd.)

Sit.

(BIG EMILY exits to put the plate and silverware away. LITTLE EMILY removes letters from their envelopes and reads them over. BIG EMILY returns with blank sheets of paper and a pencil, placing them in front of LITTLE EMILY.)

BIG EMILY (cont'd.)

You're going to write her back.

LITTLE EMILY

But I /

BIG EMILY

(reaches over to rip the head of a flower off its stem from the vase)

Here. Press this into the paper when you're done. Tell Abby it's for her scrapbook. There's more of those flowers in the garden, you can pick some for yours too.

LITTLE EMILY

I don't think /

BIG EMILY

Try.

(LITTLE EMILY starts writing with a tentative sentence. She writes another, then another. BIG EMILY steps out of the dining room as LITTLE EMILY grows comfortable writing. BIG EMILY takes off the shawl, letting it drop on the floor. She moves freely back to the dining room and picks up some of the envelopes while LITTLE EMILY writes. She takes them back to her bedroom and sits at the desk. One of the envelopes has a large rip. She holds it up to assess the damage before tossing it on the floor. She looks at a few more envelopes before feeling bad and picking up the torn envelope. She rips off the envelope flap and writes a poem that fits within its shape. This will be one of many future envelope poems. As the girls write, MOTHER enters the front door with her bucket of gardening supplies. She stops to pick up the shawl and puts it on before going out to the backyard garden downstage. She tends the garden while her daughter continues to write. The frog lets out a single happy croak. Day turns to night.)

End of Play