HARD TO BE WON: A THEATRICAL INTERPRETATION OF ELIZABETH KECKLY’S “BEHIND THE SCENES, OR THIRTY YEARS A SLAVE AND FOUR YEARS IN THE WHITE HOUSE”

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HARD TO BE WON: A THEATRICAL INTERPRETATION OF ELIZABETH KECKLY’S “BEHIND THE SCENES, OR THIRTY YEARS A SLAVE AND FOUR YEARS IN THE WHITE HOUSE”

by
Selah DeGering

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Advisor: George Nelson
Honors Coordinator: Dean Duncan
ABSTRACT

HARD TO BE WON: A THEATRICAL INTERPRETATION OF ELIZABETH KECKLY’S “BEHIND THE SCENES, OR THIRTY YEARS A SLAVE AND FOUR YEARS IN THE WHITE HOUSE”

Selah DeGering

Theatre and Media Arts Department

Bachelor of Arts

Hard to Be Won is a musical adaptation of a memoir by Elizabeth Keckly, a black woman of considerable success who earned the confidence of Abraham Lincoln and his wife, Mary, in war-torn 1860s America. My adaptation of this story showcases a new perspective: that of Elizabeth herself. Despite her memoir narrating these events in her own voice, Elizabeth as an individual has been largely ignored or misrepresented in modern, idealistic, and racially ignorant retellings and criticism. Elizabeth as a token black person in the narrative of the Lincoln household cannot stand as representation of this woman’s legacy when she was responsible for so much good. The founding of a relief association, schools, and her own work as a university professor in her later years deserve to shine as the successes they were. Alongside this, to avoid the deification of Elizabeth as a historical figure (as has happened with Abraham Lincoln), Hard to Be Won elaborates on her struggles, pain, and capacity for the love of others. Featuring music inspired by 60’s jazz, traditional slave songs, and contemporary Gospel music, Hard to Be Won evokes movement and strikes the soul. This manuscript is accompanied by a forward further discussing the purpose of the script and the research conducted to justify it as a valid interpretation of the source material.
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I. Introduction

Plays are given their name by the “what if” component essential to their conception. Why do we play? To see what will happen. Hard to Be Won is a play heavily inspired by the characters and events that take place in Elizabeth Keckly’s Civil War-era memoir. In it, I discuss the relationship between Mary Lincoln and Elizabeth Keckly as seen in Elizabeth’s memoir, and what would happen if Abraham Lincoln, Mary’s husband and 16th president of the United States, dared fall in love with a black woman. The relationship between Mary and Elizabeth is widely discussed and agreed upon to be “remarkable” (Fleischner), however the perspective of the source material in historical context reads as simply a rich white woman heaping emotional labor upon a woman of color, an ex-slave who had been dealing with women like her for her entire life. Elizabeth Keckly lived in a world that was full of Mary’s. Erasure of the black woman’s perspective from media is a chronic problem; by giving Elizabeth power, even a sense of desirability, as opposed to Mary Lincoln, in this narrative, I restore to her the autonomy she deserves to have in recounts of her life.

I. Refutation of Accepted Historical Analysis

In many of the representations of Elizabeth Keckly, she is heavily overshadowed by Mary Lincoln. Everything Elizabeth did in her whole life has been reduced to make room for her supposedly groundbreaking friendship with Mary, who is, according to the popular narrative, exempt from the biases and racism of the time. Indeed, Elizabeth was Mary’s dresser and modiste, and often a confidante to her private moods and fears. Hard to Be Won does not refute this. However, Hard to Be Won does argue against the notion that this relationship was equal or pleasant. Several times in the source material, Elizabeth comes to Mary’s beck and call even at a
disadvantage to herself. Mary’s business “was a constant source of trouble to [her]” (Keckley, 145). This is often done in deep friendships, but what modern historians seem desperate to ignore is that when Elizabeth says no to Mary, Mary ignores her. There is little, if anything, Mary does to earn Elizabeth’s trust; she does not care about Elizabeth’s struggles or the efforts she goes to to fulfill Mary’s wants. If Mary says jump, Elizabeth says how high, as it were. If Elizabeth says no, Mary sends four more telegrams demanding her compliance. In this, there is very little evidence of respect for Elizabeth as a person or her boundaries, and instead stands a complete disregard for her priorities or plans.

As romantic and lovely as it would be for Mary Lincoln and Elizabeth Keckly to be the best of friends without prejudice, due to the source material and other sources, I cannot reconcile. Elizabeth does not appear to have any confidante, at least none that she mentions by name. There are very few instances wherein Mary inquires about the goings on of her “best friend’, but even then, “a greater number [of questions about Elizabeth’s life were prompted] by curiosity; … but [Elizabeth’s] brief answers were not always accepted as the most satisfactory” (Keckley; 93, 100). Elizabeth describes no mutual confidence, likely due to Mary’s fickle moods and seeming disregard for Elizabeth’s personal life. While this is speculation so far, Mary’s lack of sympathy for the black condition can be supported by Jennifer Fleischner’s comprehensive history of these women, Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly, which claims Mary “preferred the master to the weaker slave.” Indeed the relationship between the two much closer resembled a child and “the always present Mammy Sally”, though aspects of Elizabeth’s personal character deviated from this role. (Fleischner, 53, 232).
What stood out to me most about Elizabeth’s memoir was the fondness and softness with which she described Abraham Lincoln. While her tone throughout the novel is rigidly unattached most of the time, the moment Abraham Lincoln comes into view, it shifts dramatically into something personal and heartfelt. In discussing Mary, often directly afterward, Elizabeth seems to become bitter; after three paragraphs of describing Mr. Lincoln’s fondness of pets and animals, and their sweet nature, she adds curtly, “Mrs. Lincoln was not fond of pets,” elaborating that after her son’s death, Mrs. Lincoln was fond of little and could not stand even the sight of flowers (Keckley, 80).

Like historians and America at large, I have no interest in tainting the memory of President Lincoln by implying he is a philanderer who carried on with the hired help. However, that is not to say that Elizabeth’s fondness for the man “noble in all the noble attributes of God” could not have been shared. Describing her reaction to Abraham Lincoln’s death, Elizabeth writes that “the blood had been frozen in [her] veins, and that [her] lungs must collapse for the want of air” (Keckley, 82). In the context that this woman has been beaten, raped, and lost a child to war, it is a hefty statement, and implies a deeper connection than simply employee and employer.

After the death of the Lincoln’s prepubescent son, Elizabeth was present to wash and prepare the body for burial- not a dressmaking-related endeavor -and watched as Abraham wept over the child’s corpse. She was there to comfort him in his grief while Mary was locked away in her room, inconsolable. She was invited on a trip to Richmond that, by all accounts, she had no real purpose in attending other than the Lincoln's wanted her alongside them. In this specific account, she elaborates on a time Abraham Lincoln stopped an entire procession to see a turtle,
and again when he stopped to talk to a black child on the road. She was touched by his attention
to detail and appreciation for the world around him, which Mary had no affection for (Keckley).

The novelizations, play, movies, and books about these historical figures persistently ignore Elizabeth’s perspective as a black woman, portraying her as equal and happy in her role as best friend to Mary. Elizabeth is more than the ex-slave, more than the “strong, independent black woman”, and more than the “best friend”; Elizabeth Keckly was a person, who loved and lost. My play seeks to restore to Elizabeth the power and autonomy her narrative deserves as the main player in her own performance.

III. Black Women in Media

The way black women are treated in media is a reflection of the public’s perception of them, and in turn shapes that perception in a cycle of the snake eating its own tail. The caricatures of black women, “Mammy—the asexual, happy, obese, dark-black mother figure; Jezebel—the shameless, oversexual, schemer; and; Sapphire— the rude, loud, and overbearing emasculator” persist in modern media as a holdover from slavery (Balaji; Adams-Bass; Lemons, 102). Essentially, a black woman can only be one of these three things: a caregiver, a homewrecker, or a strong, independent black woman who don’t need no man, as it were. Elizabeth Keckly falls into two of these categories depending on the context. On one hand, she took a caregiving role in the Lincoln home, loving children and serving as a confidant. On the other hand, she lived as a single woman despite her estranged husband and was a successful business owner with, at one time, twenty employees (Christensen, et. al., 449). At first glance, it may appear that Hard to Be Won is thrusting Elizabeth into the third role, the homewrecker. However, Mary and Abraham Lincoln’s relationship was in shambles; Mary was possessive,
controlling, and abusive physically, verbally, and emotionally (Keckly, Fleischner). The place Elizabeth took most firmly in the Lincoln home was that of caregiver and friend. Her deeper feelings, for she was a person and had them, are rarely, if ever, discussed; Hard to Be Won gives a platform for the ideal of Elizabeth’s heart to come through. She was a person who loved much, loved enough to serve others before herself even after half a lifetime of doing so involuntarily. The “what if” of this play is not only what if Abraham Lincoln fell in love with a black woman, but what if Elizabeth fell in love and had it reciprocated? What would a loving relationship look like for her?

Though Elizabeth describes her pain in her book to varying degrees, she is not recognized as a person who suffered. The stereotype of black people’s inability to feel pain, physically or emotionally, persists even into modern medicine. Research conducted in 2016 shows a proportion of Americans without medical training believe that “the black body is stronger and that the white body is weaker” (Hoffman, Kelly, et al). Black women as “not feeling subjects” in media excused society’s poor treatment of them; the white woman’s social role as the domestic guardian “excluded black women; slavery and labor spoiled notions of virtue, home, and privacy for women of African descent” (Cobb, 28-29). Exploring Elizabeth’s pain about the loss of her son, her rape, her estranged husband, and the death of Abraham Lincoln acknowledges that pain was had. She experienced it, she described it herself in her memoir, and according to modern and classic media, it does not appear society is aware.

Elizabeth’s exclusion from the Lincoln narrative is no less than intentional. Robert Lincoln, son of Mary and Abraham, tried to erase her from his family’s history, and was, to a point, successful (Christensen, et. al., 449; Fleischner, 318). By 1935, just shy of thirty years
after Elizabeth’s death, historians debated whether she even existed. By the 1960s, her remains had been taken and buried in an unmarked grave, as her slave ancestors, while her original resting place was paved over (Fleischner, 319, 324-325). Today, while her existence has been recognized, if you search Elizabeth Keckly in a web browser, an overwhelming majority of results claim her as a confidante to Mary Lincoln and nothing more, relevant only for who she served rather than how she served. Even this small note of acknowledgment is an example of “participating politely but not taking over … and veering away from contentious topics” (Joseph, 195).

Elizabeth and Mary being best friends untouched by racial bias is as radical a theory as Elizabeth and Abraham having an emotional affair. The latter, however, is a more powerful perspective on history. Interracial relationships between white men and black women are taboo at best and forbidden at worst; studies show that “white-Black interracial couples are viewed more negatively than other racial combinations”, and that these respective groups, out of all others, have “the strongest taboos against interracial marriage.” (Childs, 544; Rockquemore and Brunsma, xiii; Qian, 33).

IV. Methodology
   a. Style

   Plays allow us, the audience, to enter the world of the characters and see them as tangible people with actual consequence in their own right. Just as well, they allow us to put ourselves in the shoes of those whom the story represents so that we may better understand their perspective. Given that my main objective is to showcase Elizabeth’s personhood and view, a play is the most effective way to accomplish this goal.
If a play lets us into the world of the characters, a musical lets us into the mind. Elizabeth Keckly was a woman of few words outspoken, often to the point and in the background. A musical format allows us to see, hear, and feel the impressions of her soul as events play out before our eyes.

b. Perspective

It occurred to me to write this from many different perspectives. I entertained the idea of telling Elizabeth’s story from the perspective of one of her students or apprentices. An apprentice would know her well, love her dearly, and respect her— all things I wanted the audience to leave a performance with. However, an apprentice’s perspective would be removed from Elizabeth’s personal experience. They would only know what Elizabeth allowed them to know, and to a point, this still came through. We see Elizabeth’s life as she tells it, biases and all. However, an apprentice as a narrator was ultimately cut because as a character, the narrator would have little to offer the script as a whole and would only serve as a plot device to deliver information. If I wrote them to be more than a plot device, their own perspective would color the plot, and while it may be interesting, I did not want to deviate from what I felt was an honest interpretation.

I also considered writing from the perspective of Robert Lincoln, the Lincoln’s eldest son. His viewpoint would be purely antagonistic, which would serve as a way to make the audience draw their own conclusions about what they saw. However, Robert would be abhorred at the idea of Elizabeth and his father having any degree of friendship, much less an emotional affair. Robert was so outraged and embarrassed at Elizabeth’s book that he hunted down and destroyed as many copies as possible. He was so successful in his endeavor to wipe Elizabeth from the record that, as aforementioned, historians questioned whether or not she even existed.
These historians were proven wrong by people still living that had known her, but the point stands: Robert would not have delivered on the story I wanted to tell. That, and giving a racist white man voice and control over Elizabeth’s narrative was the last thing I wanted to do.

Having Elizabeth tell her own story was the only way to do this properly. Doing so allowed me to use direct and paraphrased quotes from the book, enabling a richer and more true to the source end product.

c. Inclusions vs. Exclusions

The most important part of writing an adaptation is knowing what to include and what to cut. I had to go through the primary source record and rigorously organize what of the anecdotes to include, which to expel, and which to combine or retell in a new context. Elizabeth describes many scenes in her book where she outlines dialogue and reactions- very helpful in a theater-style adaptation -however, more frequently, she offers one-off statements that generalize a person’s behavior. For example, "[Mary Lincoln] was shrewd and far-seeing, and had no patience with the frank, confiding nature of the President" (Keckley, 43). I had to take all of those one-off statements and turn them into fleshed-out characters, or create characters, such as James, Rose, and Anne, who fulfilled roles that were mentioned but rarely explicitly laid out.

The scenes Elizabeth specifically noted I took special care to draw quotations from, and made an effort to replicate the behavior shown in the book throughout the play, even in fabricated interactions. For example, Abraham Lincoln is shown teasing his wife, dramatically reciting poetry, and making passive jokes (Keckley). This version of the character seen in Elizabeth’s memoir is very different from the morose, brooding Abraham often described in texts.
such as Bartelt, Donald, and Fleischner. Elizabeth's Abraham is instead charming and, while occasionally melancholy, is only in poor humor when actively distressed. He may think a lot and be the sort to look out windows and ponder, but he avoids stewing in sadness. This perspective on the character allowed me to build him into a more rounded persona with depth, where all versions of the man could be seen in elements of personality.

The brief overview of the slave years in the play is due to Elizabeth’s own brevity on the matter. She describes her time in the White House as the golden years of her life, and in an effort to respect that, I cut most of her time as a slave. In addition to that, grotesque, live performances of beating and rapes, while relevant and worthy of discussion, would take away from the intention of the story. While such scenes would display Elizabeth’s pain, the public is well aware that slavery was bad. This story is not about slavery; it is about a woman falling in love, and losing that love. So rarely do we see such stories from the perspective of a black woman.

James Keckly is very briefly mentioned in Elizabeth’s account of her life. She mentions that he pursued her for a number of years but she rejected him. She mentions their marriage, separation, and finally his death many years later, for which she shed no tears. For the purposes of this play, I had to invent James as a person who could have tricked Elizabeth into marrying him, someone who could charm her while simultaneously gaining information he could use to manipulate her. The result is the version of James we see in the play: sauve, observant, and well-spoken.

George, Elizabeth’s son, is also mentioned very briefly in the source material. She notes his birth, which she dreaded, and his death, which she mourned. Further research found that George was “almost white” in looks, even to the degree that he made it into the Union army as a
white soldier. To solidify this integration into white society, he took his biological father’s last name, Kirkland (Fleischner, 222). I briefly speculate on what Elizabeth’s feelings on this matter may have been, because she, like her mother, was a child of rape by a white man. Unlike George, she took and kept her mother’s last name until she was married, and did not claim her biological father’s name even as a widow. In fact, she kept her paternal parentage a secret until she died (Fleischner, 29, 88). This decision on George’s part reads to me as a profound disrespect. Given that Elizabeth did not want a child in this way, and that George looked very different from her, I imagine this relationship as strained and complicated. George also spent eight years with James as his step-father, from whom he may have picked up poor behavior and treatment of his mother (Fleischner, 142).

In the Cast of Characters, it is noted that Willie, the Lincoln’s son, is to be played by the same actor that portrays George as a child. This is in part to keep the cast small, but also to inform the audience that caring for Willie would have called Elizabeth back to her own son. Willie’s death is an opportunity for her to grieve her George, and the death of a once positive relationship. It also serves as a direct comparison between the children, drawing out their similarities for the characters and the audience.

In the case of the other Lincoln sons, they are not present in the script. Child actors are hard to work with, and while Tad or Robert’s inclusion may be interesting, they make the cast more complicated than it already is. Also, child actors are difficult to find and work with due to child labor laws; too many children would make the show difficult to perform and would blacklist it as too unplayable for many theaters. Just as well, the other two Lincoln sons had little to do with the heart relationship of the play, Abraham and Elizabeth. Elizabeth cared for them,
watched them grow, and loved them. She admired that Abraham loved them, and that was a point of attraction for her (Keckley). However, a mess of entrances and exits by children would distract the audience from the main conflict and interest, which is the romance.

The discrepancy between the Keckly and Keckley spelling of Elizabeth’s last name is due to this: Elizabeth spelled her last name “Keckly” in her own hand, while the book publisher spelled it “Keckley”. To take after Fleischner, I prefer to use Elizabeth’s spelling of her name when referring to her person.

d. Composing

Choosing a composer was a simpler matter than one might anticipate. Amy Loertscher and I have had a years-long close friendship and music-writing history; she was the first person I thought of to endeavor on this project. She also studied music in university, and was willing to seek out mentorships on the style of music specific to Hard to Be Won.

e. Musicality/Lyrics

As far as music goes, I wrote all of the lyrics and many of the melodies. A lot of thought went into the structure of these lyrics; I made an effort to give the songs varying tempos, time signatures, and verbal punctuation. Giving each of the characters a “voice” was also key to a successful play. While all of the characters need to have distinct language and dialogue tics, they also needed to have a specific sound in music. Mary, for example, is very refined and aggressive. All of her melodies are clean, specific, and have polished beginnings and endings that can be seen best in At Least I’m Me. Meanwhile, Abraham has a very slow, calm sound in all of the songs he’s included in. The contrast between Mary and Abraham, the greatest musical contrast in the show, can be seen best in The War Room (Appendices). The War Room is also a great
example of a song that supplements dialogue in a scene. Where *Nightmare* is conveying thoughts and feelings unspoken to inform the audience, *The War Room* uses music to fill in for the audience that these characters are having a fight. What the fight is about is of little importance, hence why we have a song and not a scene. Fights between Mary and Abraham are so often and so varied that any given fight is irrelevant; the audience needs to know that the two fight passionately, and that Abraham is frequently away, *The War Room* fulfills both purposes, succinctly feeding the audience information about respective character while simultaneously moving along the plot. (Over the course of editing, *The War Room* was cut from the script. However, I include it in the Appendices as an example of this principle)

Because this play covers the span of many years, music is used to segue between events. The song serves as a sort of elevator music- when it starts, we, the audience, are in one time, and when it ends, we are in a new one. *Dancing* is a perfect example of this. Over the span of this number, James and Elizabeth court, are married, and their relationship falls apart when James is revealed to be dastardly.

A series of reprises are used to recall memories for the audience and the characters at the same time, intrinsically tying moments together. *Free Blacks of St. Louis* is played in some variation three separate times, pulling attention to Elizabeth’s roots and the source of her freedom. St. Louis in the world of the play, in many ways, is a symbol of freedom for Elizabeth. There, she saw people like her thriving and living their own lives, something she has only had limited opportunity to do even after ending her time as a slave. *The Fall of St. Louis* is a symbolic death of Elizabeth’s hope for the future, foreshadowing Abraham’s death soon after.
In terms of musical style, the musical’s composer, Amy Loertscher, has described it as “big band swing,” with a full brass section (trumpet, trombone, saxophone, and french horn), and a rhythm section (drums, guitar, bass, piano), in addition to a string section that represents Abraham and Mary’s sophisticated, classical world, apart from the rowdy, 60’s jazz-inspired world of Elizabeth and St. Louis. The moment of Gospel music in *The Freedmen* calls specifically to slave song tradition, rhythmic and a capella, shared amongst slaves of hard labor. Elizabeth was not one of these slaves, and may not have necessarily known or sung many of these songs. Slave songs are a huge part of this time and culture, however, and needed to be represented.

f. Visualization

When writing a play or musical, one must be able to picture potential staging or choreography. While the playwright will likely never direct the script themselves in a production, having a script that is easy to be performed allows directors more flexibility in their portrayals. I personally spent much time picturing aesthetics and staging to help set the mood for various scenes in my mind. Doing so helped me write the story in the world I had imagined, and write music in that world alongside dance and timing that had to be reflected in the score. While I did not write the score personally, I did record my melodies and timing and send them to my composer for consideration. Much of this work was preserved in the score, as Amy and I worked very closely.

g. Expert Insight

I first contacted Jennifer Fleischner, recognized expert on Elizabeth Keckly and her relationship to the Lincoln family, on April 9, 2021. After a few questions, she advised me to
read her book and collect my thoughts before further discussion of my thesis. I conducted a forty-five minute interview with her a year later on March 21, 2022 while in the polishing stage of my playwriting. By this time, my views and opinions were fully developed and we could hold a more engaging, informed conversation for the record. Dr. Fleischner noted to me specifically that this interview was to be used for no other purpose than citation for my thesis, and was to be printed in no other place nor context. The full transcript found in the Appendices is only edited so far as amending mistakes made by the Zoom transcription software. I have included relevant moments from the interview below, regarding Elizabeth’s relationship with Mary and Abraham respectively:

00:00:23.100 --> 00:00:31.200

Selah DeGering: Okay, so my first question is: what is remarkable about the relationship between Elizabeth Keckly and Mary Lincoln?

00:00:52.950 → 00:05:57.690

Jennifer Fleischner: I would say that um. It's. It's remarkable, to the extent that it was noticed, it was observed, you know Keckly was a known figure at the time, noticed in the White House. After, people understood thier closeness, you know, that they. They had. I don't know how they understood the closeness exactly, but carefully. It was, you know, the language of the time, put it in the way you would imagine Keckly’s loyalty to Mary Lincoln. You know, helpfulness, loyalty, it wasn’t- wasn't- it's not that they were seen as equals within the relationship itself, you see.

…

I think that suggests that kind of freedom, a sense of herself in a
relationship with this woman that transcends—clearly transcends being, you know, a hired dressmaker. [unintelligible]

You know, women and their dressmakers, women in their, you know, hair salons even today, I suppose, you know, you have this—you talk, you know, there's a kind of—can be a gossipy, it can be a relationship, I think this did go past it—to go beyond it.

And so, and again, you see, in Mary's letters, certainly the word friendship come up.

There's not. Keckly doesn't use it in her book, she wouldn't use it in her book is my guess, but. There aren't letters. We don't see letters currently that are, you know, I haven't seen any, you know, which that's—but, you know, she—Even early on, you know, when she was in slavery, there's the one letter you can read to the, you know, one of the women who was her half sister and not—she had never been. You know, in the position of a mistress and wasn't Fanny but this letter to Fanny speaks Keckly's sense of herself as equal, you know, even though not, of course, right, but the way she writes, The self possession, the [unintelligible] gossip frankly.

It comes from herself is the thing.

So maybe in the end that stands out.
Selah DeGering: What is your opinion, if any, on the relationship or potential relationship of, like, which any, like, any kind: friendship, a confidant, a person that works in your house, um, between Elizabeth and Abraham Lincoln?

Jennifer Fleischner: Well, I don't read that, I don't see what you're talking about seeing her but, um, but that's okay.

Selah DeGering: I didn't expect you to.

Jennifer Fleischner: I think that. One of the things she- she talks about a lot is Mary Lincoln's, like, out of control. This and particularly around the mourning, around that scene, and I think in that stoicism that she learned to prosper, probably the self to survival. Part of her identity is something that, I think, and I think also she might have seemed mean, I think that her connection such as is to Lincoln had to do with it kind of respect and, and. And he was a depressive guy, he was depressed, you know. That kind of connection in terms of mourning and doing in a different way and. And so. I think, maybe some of it had to do with that and some of it, maybe had to do with
they're both in the position of having to deal with Mary, actually.

00:35:53.040 --> 00:35:53.250

Selah DeGering: Yep.

00:35:54.360 --> 00:38:23.610

Jennifer Fleischner: And so I see that. I see also, Lincoln is pretty accessible. And so that scene, they're looking at a window there you know with the goats and all that comment about not you know, Mary doesn't like goats is a comment, I think, partly to establish the what she shares, you know sort of a real connection, where she actually shares with Lincoln or identifies. And Lincoln, you know, when he writes about slavery before he's President and he talks about he talks about is the system of Labor. And you know as race, you know, he was racist, he had this idea blacks and whites can't live together, it all sorts of things you know, I didn't- in the Douglass-Lincoln debates. You know, he doesn't offend race and so when he talks about slavery, it is a system of Labor where you don't get the fruits of your Labor and that's the injustice of it like that's profoundly the injustice, and I think his understanding of work and Labor would have been something correctly understood. She talks about that explicitly, you know, being worth her salt. She's very bright, all of that, about Labor and we're not getting paid for it and not getting paid for it.

So I find I, my impression, like, if I were going to- So, no, but also, you know, Lincoln lived in a man's world, so he's- he's not going to have a
close friendship with her. And I mean the White House was a man's world, I mean, that was part of Mary's problem with it too. But. So I think that, to the extent that there's a connection, it's around work, it's around ways of mourning and. And also an alliance to, you know, around managing Mary, frankly.

In my discussion with Fleischner, I found that many of her views of the source material were relatable at best, and confusing at worst. In those included above, despite her opposing standpoint on my interpretation of Abraham and Elizabeth’s potential relationship, I found it interesting that the very points she outlined as being the basis for their business relationship I also used as basis for their romantic one. This exchange goes to show the dichotomy with which those interpreting historical records can come to conclusions so different. Despite her professional opinion, I maintain my ground that the nature of their relationship is ambiguous and up to interpretation.
Hard To Be Won

A new musical
Book and lyrics by Selah DeGering
Score by Amy Loertscher

Contact:
Selah DeGering
748 Wymount Terrace
Provo, UT 84604
(801) 462-1814
selahdegering@gmail.com
Hard To Be Won
Book and Lyrics by Selah DeGering
Score by Amy Loertscher
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A new musical
8 women, 7 men, 1 boy
Cast of Characters

Elizabeth Keckly  A mixed race woman.

George           10. A white boy with curly hair. Double cast with Willie.

Older George     16. A white boy with curly hair.

Abraham Lincoln  A middle-aged white man.

Mary Lincoln     A middle-aged white woman.

Willie Lincoln   10. Abraham and Mary Lincoln's son. Double cast with George.

Anne             A young Irish maid.

White Ensemble   3 women, 3 men. Caucasian. Used to play bit parts. (Bookeep Master Garland, Mistress Garland)

Black Ensemble   3 women, 3 men. African-American. Used to play bit parts. (James, St. Louis residents, Freedmen)

Note:
This is a race-heavy play that explicitly discusses racial issues. A visual nod to this would be an all-black cast, highlighting the absurdity of elevating people above one another over arbitrary difference.

This is, of course, a suggestion over a mandate.
In front of a bookshop on a busy street in Washington D.C., 1868. The window advertises in big letters, “LINCOLN WHITE HOUSE TELL-ALL! BEHIND THE SCENES BY ELIZABETH KECKLEY”, behind which is a large display of books. Passersby look at the sky and wince as it begins to rain. Many cover their heads with newspapers or pull out umbrellas.

ELIZABETH
I just can’t believe it.

A disgruntled WHITE MAN struggling to open his umbrella stops.

WHITE MAN
Do yourself a favor and spare the read.

ELIZABETH
Excuse me?

The man opens the bookshop door. ELIZABETH sees he has a book.

ELIZABETH
What are you doing with that?

WHITE MAN
Better return it than give it to you.

ELIZABETH
You didn’t like it?

WHITE MAN
Why do you care?

ELIZABETH
I wrote it.

WHITE MAN
My review.

He throws the book at ELIZABETH’s feet and spits on it before he exits. Thunder and lightning. Pouring rain. ELIZABETH picks up the book. Enter BOOKKEEP, from the door of the shop. He takes down the signs. The book display is empty.

ELIZABETH

What are you doing?

BOOKKEEP

Publisher’s pulled it.

ELIZABETH

What? Why? No, stop-

Enter WHITE WOMAN. BLACK WOMAN, BLACK MAN, and WHITE MAN are pedestrians on the street.

BOOKKEEP

I’m sorry, Mrs. Keckly. It’s over.

A vicious crack of thunder. BOOKKEEP exits into the shop, shutting the door in ELIZABETH’s face.

Because of You

ALL

FREEDOM
HARD TO BE WON
HARD TO BE WON

WHITE WOMAN

You’re Mrs. Keckly? Elizabeth Keckly?

ELIZABETH

Yes?

WHITE WOMAN
BECAUSE OF YOU
MY SERVANTS WILL SAY
AND THINK WHATEVER THEY LIKE

BLACK WOMAN

BECAUSE OF YOU
MY FAMILY WAS FED
YOU SAVED OUR LIVES

BLACK MAN

BECAUSE OF YOU
I HAD A ROOF OVER MY HEAD

WHITE MAN

BECAUSE OF YOU
THE LAST OF GOOD TIMES ARE DEAD

ALL

BECAUSE OF YOU...
BECAUSE OF YOU...
FREEDOM
HARD TO BE WON
HARD TO BE WON...

BLACK MAN and BLACK WOMAN exit.

ELIZABETH

ALL I DID WAS TELL MY STORY
WASN’T THE FIRST, NOR THE LAST
ALL I DID WAS TELL MY STORY
THE BLOOD AND TEARS OF MY PAST
ALL I DID WAS TELL MY STORY
HAVE I NOT THAT RIGHT?
I’M A FREE WOMAN NOW
I’M A FREE WOMAN NOW
HAVE I NOT THAT RIGHT?

WHITE ENSEMBLE

BECAUSE OF YOU
(BECAUSE OF YOU)
THE GOOD TIMES ARE DEAD
BECAUSE OF YOU
(BECAUSE OF YOU)
WE ALL LIVE IN DREAD
BECAUSE OF YOU
BECAUSE OF YOU

As Because of You crescendos, the ensemble points accusatory fingers at ELIZABETH. The music cuts out with a school bell tolling. All the ensemble members sit and raise their hands in the same moment. ELIZABETH is a teacher, a professor at the UNIVERSITY OF OHIO. She sighs in exasperation.

ELIZABETH
Y’all got me rambling again. Congratulations, school is out.

Elizabeth erases the book display sign leaving only her name; the display is now revealed to be a chalkboard. ELIZABETH writes “DRESSMAKING 101” on the board, and erases “ELIZABETH.” In its place, she writes “PROFESSOR.”.

ELIZABETH
Doesn’t that look good? Professor. Professuh Keckly. What my daddy wouldn’t have done to have a title like that in his day. He died a slave, buried in an unmarked grave, or perhaps not buried at all. Mother, too, a slave. My son, bless his soul, dumped in a hole someplace, died fighting to free his brothers. And me, well. If Professor gets me anything, let’s hope it’s a tombstone. Daddy was a good man, a hard worker. A poet in his own right, you know, he could read, and pen a letter. My mother, too. Those were star-crossed lovers if I ever met ‘em. Sold apart, never again to see one another in the flesh. When I was a girl, he wrote me something once, it said…it said, “Tell my Little Lizzy to be a good girl, and to learn her book.” He wrote, “and not to think that because I am bound so far that God’s not able to open the way.” …He died before that way came to pass. Before our good Moses brought down those commandments of Emancipation from that great Capitol Hill. What a man he was, that Abraham Lincoln. Don’t tell anybody, but I knew him well. That man… I’m a Professor, and he’s six feet under. It’s funny how life goes on after the world ends.
ELIZABETH sits on her desk, suddenly realizing how vulnerable she’s become. She composes herself.

ELIZABETH
Well, I guess most of y’all have made yourselves comfortable, huh? End of the day, young people with nothing to do? I don’t believe it. Daddy said to learn my book, and I wrote one. It’s banned. Banned-banned, like “it’s out of print and they burned all the copies” banned. Most of them.

ELIZABETH winks.

ELIZABETH
It’s a pretty good read, I mean, if you’ve got the time… Or, since we’re here… I hate to talk about myself, but y’all wanna hear the story?

ELIZABETH waits for applause.

ELIZABETH
Sorry, I can’t tell. Is that a yes?

ELIZABETH waits for louder applause.

ELIZABETH
Alright, alright, I’ll tell you! It’s a little slow to start, but it gets better, I promise.

In That Day

ELIZABETH
A LIFETIME
OF ROMANCE AND SORROW
OF DAYDREAMS
OF REALIZED TOMORROWS
A LIFETIME
A HUNDRED YEARS
A HUNDRED WARS
A HUNDRED TEARS

A HUNDRED PEOPLE
HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE
IN THAT DAY

Enter WHITE ENSEMBLE, dressed in wealthy attire.

WHITE ENSEMBLE

IN THAT DAY
THERE WERE HORSES AND BUGGIES
IN THAT DAY
THERE WERE GALAS AND BALLS
IN THAT DAY
THERE WAS HONOR AND GLORY
IN THAT DAY
THERE WERE SUMMERS AND FALLS

Enter BLACK ENSEMBLE, slaves and free people alike.

BLACK ENSEMBLE

IN THAT DAY
THERE WAS TRADE ON THE ATLANTIC
IN THAT DAY
THERE WERE CRIES OF THE ABUSED
IN THAT DAY
THERE WAS SERMON ON SUNDAYS
IN THAT DAY
WERE POLICE IN THE PEWS

BLACK ENSEMBLE

IN THAT DAY
THE NEGROES WERE RISING
IN THAT DAY
THEIR CHAINS WERE HARDFAST

WHITE ENSEMBLE

IN THAT DAY
THE MASTERS WERE KINDER
IN THAT DAY
WAS FORGIVEN, THE PAST
ALL
FREEDOM
HARD TO BE WON
HARD TO BE WON

FREEDOM
HARD TO BE WON
HARD TO BE WON

IN THAT DAY
BLOOD STAINED THE SOIL

BLACK WOMEN
MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

WHITE MEN
FATHERS AND SONS

BLACK ENSEMBLE
THE GENERATIONS
WAILED FROM THE DITCHES
THE ANCESTORS
SCREAMED FROM THE MUD

AND FROM THAT DAY
OF BONDAGE AND VIOLENCE

WHITE ENSEMBLE
FROM THAT DAY
OF GOD-GIVEN LAW

The ENSEMBLE converges, hiding ROSE from view. ROSE disappears as we enter ELIZABETH’s memory.

ALL

FROM THAT DAY
OF RIGHTEOUS CONTENTION
CAME A VOICE
TO TELL IT ALL
ELIZABETH

ELIZABETH KECKLY

WHITE ENSEMBLE

ALL

ELIZABETH

BLACK ENSEMBLE

LITTLE LIZZY HOBBS

MARY

ELIZABETH

GOOD FOR NOTHING TURNCOAT

ELIZABETH

LIED BEFORE GOD!

ALL

FREEDOM

HARD TO BE WON

HARD TO BE WON

FREEDOM

HARD TO BE WON

HARD TO BE WON

The ENSEMBLE exits, leaving ELIZABETH alone.

ELIZABETH

Welcome to Virginia, somewhere in the 1840s, about. I came upon this Earth free in God-like thought, but fettered in action. A slave. I belonged to a lawyer and his proud and noble family. My sewing kept them alive.

GEORGE (offstage)

Mama!

ELIZABETH

And my little Georgie kept me at the Lord’s door.
Enter GEORGE, who runs into ELIZABETH’s arms.

ELIZABETH

What’s wrong?

MASTER GARLAND

Lizzy!

ELIZABETH

What did you say?

Enter MASTER GARLAND

ELIZABETH

Yes, sir?

MASTER GARLAND

Unhand that child at once.

ELIZABETH

What for?

MASTER GARLAND

A lesson in respect.

ELIZABETH

He’ll apologize straightaway. Humbly.

GEORGE pouts. ELIZABETH spanks him.

GEORGE

I’m sorry, sir.

MASTER GARLAND

He disrespected my son.

ELIZABETH

How?
He disrespected me.

Hugh is no Master, sir.

Master Garland wrenches George from Elizabeth.

You’d act on his word alone?

You callin’ Hugh a liar?

No, sir.

Master Garland raises his hand. Elizabeth flinches a little.

That’s what I thought.

I didn’t mean it, please-

It’s alright, baby.

Mama!

Exit Master Garland and George. Elizabeth looks away.

Lizzy!

Mistress Garland
Enter MISTRESS GARLAND.

ELIZABETH

Yes, ma’am?

MISTRESS GARLAND talks in an animated fashion, but no sound comes out; ELIZABETH talks over her to the audience.

ELIZABETH

(to the audience) I had worked for many women of a certain kind and Mistress Garland was little different. All that was ever required of me, really, was to smile falsely and nod, and appear to take on with great seriousness and gravity the anxieties that weighed the delicate shoulders of The White Lady. Fail to do so, and-

MISTRESS GARLAND gives ELIZABETH a purse.

MISTRESS GARLAND

Don’t dawdle now, either. Tonight, I said, the club is tonight. If you disappoint me, Lizzy, I swear-

ELIZABETH

I won’t.

MISTRESS GARLAND takes a breath, clutching ELIZABETH as a grounding point. She speaks softly.

MISTRESS GARLAND

You’re right. You’re right. I should…I should sit down. I mean it, though, Lizzy. Oh, dear…

MISTRESS GARLAND bites her glove. ELIZABETH pries herself out of MISTRESS GARLAND’s hands with a grimace and ventures into St. Louis, where the ENSEMBLES mill intermixed.

ELIZABETH
(to the audience) And then there was the Other World, what appeared to me like a pocket of paradise. In St. Louis, there were colored people- free people, who looked and thought like me. It was bold of me to seek to own anything at that time, but at that time...I wanted to swallow St. Louis whole.

_Elizabeth_

_TO ALL WHO KNOW_

_MY NAME IS GARLAND’S LIZZY_

_OWNED AND NAMED_

_LIKE CATTLE OR A MARE_

_BUT OUT HERE_

_I CAN BE MY OWN LIZZY_

_AND PASS FOR FREE_

_TO ALL THE PEOPLE THERE_

_ALL THE_

_BLACK ENSEMBLE_

_FREE BLACKS OF ST. LOUIS_

_LOUIS_

_ELIZABETH_

_ALL THE_

_BLACK ENSEMBLE_

_FREE BLACKS OF ST. LOUIS_

_ELIZABETH_

_WE’RE NEW IN TOWN AND_

_NONE WHO LIVE HERE KNOW ME_

_ON THE STREET_

_I COULD BE ONE OF THEM_

_MY BOY COULD PLAY_

_AND LIVE IN SUCH A CITY_

_IF WE WERE FREE_

_WE COULD BE PEOPLE THEN_
LIKE THE BLACK ENSEMBLE
FREE BLACKS OF ST. LOUIS
LOUIS

ELIZABETH
ALL THE BLACK ENSEMBLE
FREE BLACKS OF ST. LOUIS

BLACK MAN 1
HELLO, MY NAME IS OLSEN
I RUN A GROCER’S SHOP

BLACK MAN 2
COME BY JOHNSON’S BARBER
I’LL GIVE YOU A CHOP

AS THE BLACK ENSEMBLE
FREE BLACKS OF ST. LOUIS
LOUIS

BLACK MAN 1
WE’RE THE BLACK ENSEMBLE
FREE BLACKS OF ST. LOUIS

BLACK WOMAN 1
I CAN TEND YOUR LAUNDRY

BLACK WOMAN 2 AND 3
AND WE CAN TEND YOUR BATH

JAMES
HERE’S A LOVELY FLOWER

JAMES offers ELIZABETH a rose.

ELIZABETH

Oh, I can’t pay for that.

JAMES

YOU’RE WITH THE

BLACK ENSEMBLE

FREE BLACKS OF ST. LOUIS

LOUIS

JAMES

WE’RE THE FREE BLACKS OF ST. LOUIS

Go on, take it.

ELIZABETH

That’s very kind, but I can’t pay.

JAMES

That purse full of rocks?

ELIZABETH

No, my mistress sent me to buy some things, and-

JAMES

A gift.

ELIZABETH

Oh.

ELIZABETH takes the rose.

ELIZABETH

(to the audience) I had never met such a man.

JAMES
You’ve got that green about you.

ELIZABETH

Green?

JAMES

Like a spring day. Can I show you around?

ELIZABETH

(to the audience) He was persistent. He chased me for years, and I took a fancy to him for it.

JAMES

Let me give you the tour.

ELIZABETH

(to the audience) He was handsome and he knew it. Charming, and he knew it.

JAMES

Come on, I’ll show you the ropes.

ELIZABETH

I can find my own way. (to the audience) And he knew it. But not all was as it seemed. As you can guess, he was a liar, a cheat, and all around a rotten, evil man.

JAMES ensnares ELIZABETH, their dancing now a difficult, staggering thing. He’s kissing her, grabbing her; ELIZABETH is not enjoying herself.

ELIZABETH

And you know what?

ELIZABETH slams her foot on his. JAMES yowls.

ELIZABETH

He wasn’t much of a dancer. Or a husband, for that matter.

JAMES stumbles, exiting.

JAMES

Ain’t seen the last of me, woman!
ELIZABETH
Ain’t smelled the last of you, either!

ELIZABETH wafts the stench of alcohol out of her face. She shudders.

ELIZABETH
After I handled the “husband,” I had yet another man in my life to take care of. –Not like that. My son. A teenager, now, and not so quick to grab at my skirts for comfort as he was to scowl upon my face.

Enter OLDER GEORGE. The ENSEMBLE continues milling about.

OLDER GEORGE
Why are we dawdling out here?

ELIZABETH
Georgie-

OLDER GEORGE
Stop calling me that.

ELIZABETH
Mr. Whittaker should meet us here soon.

OLDER GEORGE
Have me followin’ you like a mule on a lead.

ELIZABETH
Some might take that lead and string you up by it.

OLDER GEORGE
I’m smarter than that.

ELIZABETH
Smart enough to act right, or enough not to get caught?

OLDER GEORGE
Ain’t followin’ nobody.

ELIZABETH
Won’t be kept by nobody either. A free man, George Keckly.

OLDER GEORGE
Kirkland.

ELIZABETH
Excuse me?

OLDER GEORGE
I go by my white name.

ELIZABETH
Half white.

OLDER GEORGE
Half free.

ELIZABETH
Half black.

OLDER GEORGE
I should’ve been born free. I have free blood in me, I should be free.

ELIZABETH
Stick with me and you will. (to the audience) Like it or not, he was still a boy deep down. Rowdy and restless with a bleeding heart.

GEORGE flips a coin.

ELIZABETH
One silver piece was all it would take for us to board a ferry and cross the river. A hundred silver pieces would purchase our freedom papers and a ferry. Lucky for me, George had enough sense to know that.

OLDER GEORGE
How many we got?
ELIZABETH
Not enough. Mistress Garland says if we get six testaments to our good character, she’ll let us work to raise it.

OLDER GEORGE
And work here, too? My grandchildren will be dead before we make, what? A thousand dollars?

ELIZABETH
Thirteen hundred. And no, not here. In the city. New York.

GEORGE drops his disinterested facade.

OLDER GEORGE
New York City?

ELIZABETH
If we get six testaments signed.

OLDER GEORGE
How many we got of them?

ELIZABETH hides a grin.

ELIZABETH
Here, I’ll check. One…here, hold this.

ELIZABETH rummages through her bag. She hands GEORGE a paper. She counts them theatrically.

ELIZABETH
One, two, three, four…

OLDER GEORGE
Oh my Lord.

ELIZABETH
We got five, baby.
GEORGE looks through them incredulously. He looks at his mother.

OLDER GEORGE
That’s…that’s one more.

ELIZABETH
You’ll get a job, ride the train, meet city girls-

OLDER GEORGE cringes.

OLDER GEORGE
Ugh, Ma, no–

ELIZABETH
A free man, George…Kirkland, if that’s what you choose.

OLDER GEORGE hugs his mother desperately.
ELIZABETH is shocked; she doesn’t know what to do with her hands. Before she can respond, GEORGE lets her go. He straightens himself out and composes himself.

OLDER GEORGE
We can’t do no thousand dollars- thirteen hundred, whatever -but we can do this. One more.

WHITE MAN, Mr. Whittaker, enters.

WHITE MAN
Sorry for the wait, the missus had a screw loose.

ELIZABETH
I understand.

WHITE MAN
You have that pledge-testament thing? The paper?

ELIZABETH
Yes, sir. Thank you so much.
ELIZABETH fishes for the last paper out of her bag. WHITE MAN purses his lips. Flustered, ELIZABETH looks faster. GEORGE flips through the papers he has and comes up with a blank one.

OLDER GEORGE
Mama.

ELIZABETH stops, she takes a great sigh of relief. GEORGE hands the paper to the WHITE MAN. He signs it with a ballpoint pen from his jacket and hands it back.

WHITE MAN
Bye-bye, now, Lizzy. George.

ELIZABETH
Promise to keep my word.

WHITE MAN shakes their hands.

WHITE MAN
We’ll see.

ELIZABETH
How d’you mean?

WHITE MAN
Nothing by it, we’ll just have to see.

ELIZABETH
See what?

WHITE MAN
You know, if you’ll come back. Pay the debt with that city money.

WHITE MAN shrugs.

ELIZABETH
If I don’t, you’ll be stuck with the sum!
WHITE MAN

So?

ELIZABETH

So I owe it to you to stick by my word.

OLDER GEORGE

Ma, it’s fine.

ELIZABETH

You think I’d swindle you outta thirteen hundred dollars!

OLDER GEORGE

Mama-

WHITE MAN

Those Northern folk’ll switch you up on us.

ELIZABETH

I’ve been a Southerner my whole life!

OLDER GEORGE

Just say thank you-

WHITE MAN

A cow can’t call herself a farmer.

ELIZABETH

Let me see that pen.

OLDER GEORGE

Mama, don’t!

ELIZABETH tries to take the pen. OLDER GEORGE snatches the paper from her. ELIZABETH and GEORGE fight over it.

OLDER GEORGE

Mama. Don’t do this.
ELIZABETH

He doesn’t trust us!

The paper tears in half. OLDER GEORGE falls to his knees, staring at it. ELIZABETH goes pale. WHITE MAN exits with a half-hearted wave.

OLDER GEORGE

You couldn’t let this one thing go.

ELIZABETH

What else do we have if not our names?

OLDER GEORGE

I have nothing! And thanks to that little show you put on, that’s all I’ll ever have.

OLDER GEORGE and ELIZABETH stare at each other. ELIZABETH does not give.

OLDER GEORGE

Your stubborness’ll be the death of you.

ELIZABETH

Not if you get me first.

GEORGE, hurt, starts to walk off when he’s interrupted by three fussy WHITE WOMEN.

OLDER GEORGE

Excuse me, ladies–

GEORGE makes an effort to give them a wide berth, but they usher him back to his mother.

WHITE WOMAN 1

Hush, hush, hush, nonsense! Hello, Lizzy!

WHITE WOMAN 3
We need to see you, too. Be a good boy, now.

Tell her!

We’ve solved your problem.

We all know how hard you work, so…

We got the money for you! We set up a fundraiser! All you have to do is accept!

One at a time, please!

We have the money under your name. It’s at the bank.

What money?

You know what this means, right?

How much more do we need?

You don’t need any more.

I don’t understand.
OLDER GEORGE

We accept!

WHITE WOMAN 1

It’s done!

WHITE WOMAN 2

Freedom’s got your name on it.

WHITE WOMAN 1 takes ELIZABETH’s hands in hers.

WHITE WOMAN 1

You’re free.

OLDER GEORGE picks up WHITE WOMAN 2 and spins her, delighted.

OLDER GEORGE

We’re free!

ELIZABETH watches GEORGE, still unsure but moved by his joy. She swallows and nods, head down, humbled.

Free Blacks of St. Louis (Reprise)

ELIZABETH

TO ALL WHO KNOW
I’M NO MORE GARLAND’S LIZZY
OWNED AND NAMED
LIKE CATTLE OR A MARE

TODAY
I CAN BE MY OWN LIZZY

ENSEMBLE

BECAUSE YOU’RE FREE
FREE
The ENSEMBLE changes ELIZABETH out of her slaves clothes into those of a nothern lady, a middle-class free woman. OLDER GEORGE changes into a Union Army uniform, marching to the music. ELIZABETH waves and blows a kiss. The music cuts off with a gunshot. OLDER GEORGE stumbles back and exits.

ELIZABETH

George!

ELIZABETH sits in her grief, the refrain of the music playing as she weeps alone.

ELIZABETH

(quietly, to the audience) To have a child is to take your heart out of your body and watch it learn to walk on its own, traipsing along outside you like it knows something. But the heart doesn’t know. The heart doesn’t know a damned thing.

ELIZABETH picks herself up. As she straightens up, the space becomes MARY's chamber in the White House, a packaged dress placed in her hand by the ENSEMBLE.

ELIZABETH

(to the audience) There was more for me than what I’d lost. After George passed, all I had was that name I touted so high back then. My name. Eventually, I found myself in the contractual employ of-

MARY (offstage)

I cannot!

ANNE (offstage)

Mary, please.

ELIZABETH

The First Lady.

MARY

It cannot be! I have nothing to wear and furthermore-
ANNE
The address won’t begin for another half hour at least.

Enter WILLIE, wrapped in a blanket. ELIZABETH is stunned, as though she’s seen a ghost.

WILLIE
Mother?

ELIZABETH
(to the audience) His eyes, his nose, his loose curl. My heart stood before me, bundled in a cotton linen, clean and white like an angel. But my boy was gone now, and he didn’t look at me. His gaze was fixed…on his mother, in a way no child would ever look at me again.

MARY
My poor Willie is ill! He needs his mother, he needs- (noticing ELIZABETH) Mrs. Keckley. You have disappointed me- deceived me. Why do you bring me my dress at this late hour?

ELIZABETH
I just finished it, I thought I was on time.

MARY coddles WILLIE somewhat oppressively-performatively.

MARY
Disturbing my children, no less… You are not in time, Mrs. Keckly; you have bitterly disappointed me. I’ve no time now to dress, and, what’s more, I will not dress.

ELIZABETH
Let me. I’ll have you ready in a few minutes.

MARY
No. I stay in my room- better yet, I stay with my son in his hour of distress. Mr. Lincoln can go alone.

ANNE
The good doctor said Willie’d make a quick recovery.

WILLIE
Mother?

ELIZABETH

I'll stay with him. I'll dress you, you'll go to your party, and I'll take care of things here. (to the audience) I was ready to make almost any sacrifice consistent with propriety.

MARY

You stay with him?

ELIZABETH

Provided you let me fulfill my contract.

MARY

You dress me, yes, but you stay also?

ELIZABETH

Yes.

MARY

I have your word?

ELIZABETH

Yes, ma’am.

MARY

Get on with it then, and be timely. Willie, dear, go lay down. Anne, ensure my son is put to bed.

ELIZABETH gently nudges WILLIE out of the way and begins dressing MARY and placing flowers in her hair.

WILLIE

I’m not tired.

MARY

--And careful, mind you, a lady cannot be in haste. The vultures can tell.

WILLIE

Mother?
ELIZABETH
Vultures?

MARY
The party-goers, the- the audience. They’ve gathered to feast upon me and my dear husband.

WILLIE
Mother, I will not go to bed! I’m to hear Father speak, he promised!

ABRAHAM
...The husband, that mother and infant who blessed;
Each, all, are away to their dwelling of rest.

MARY
Oh, God.

Enter ABRAHAM, greeting each of the women
with some flair, but aiming his poetic compliments
at his wife, who was not charmed.

ABRAHAM
The maid on whose cheek, on whose brow, in whose eye,
Shone beauty and pleasure - her triumphs are by;

WILLIE
Father!

MARY
If you won’t lay down, then do sit, child.

ABRAHAM
And the memory of those who loved her and praised,
Are alike from the minds of the living.

WILLIE pouts and sits on the sofa. ABRAHAM
casts himself back on the same sofa, squishing
WILLIE. WILLIE laughs uproariously trying to get
out.

ABRAHAM
(to the audience) I had never met such a man.

WILLIE
You’re heavy!

ABRAHAM
Heavy with the weight of my…well, my mind, little one.

ABRAHAM rescues WILLIE and puts him on his lap. WILLIE leans back comfortably.

MARY
What is your mind addled with today, Father?

ABRAHAM
Why, Mother! To have a mind is to be addled, I would say.

WILLIE coughs.

ABRAHAM
Alright, Willie-boy. It is late.

WILLIE
Impossible.

ABRAHAM
Alas, it may seem so, but it is. Come, now.

ABRAHAM begins to take WILLIE to exit.

MARY
Let Anne do that, I need you.

ABRAHAM
Only a few minutes-

MARY

50
Anne!

ANNE jolts. She takes WILLIE’s hand.
ABRAHAM reluctantly lets him go. He kneels to WILLIE’s level quickly.

ABRAHAM
Your bedsheets are the turret waves; dream with your sailboats all about them, battling pirates and fishing for wishes, hm? I love you.

ABRAHAM kisses WILLIE’s forehead. WILLIE hugs his father’s neck. ABRAHAM smiles curtly, aware of MARY’s eyes on him. ABRAHAM stands; WILLIE and ANNE exit.

MARY
You seem to be in a poetical mood tonight.

ABRAHAM
Yes, mother, these are poetical times. --You look charming in that dress. Mrs. Keckly has met with great...success.

ABRAHAM smiles wide, waiting for a reaction.
MARY, determined no to give it to him, folds.

MARY
Yes, father, I did hear.

ABRAHAM
I should hope, for all the chatter coming from this room. --I jest. Really, Mrs. Keckly, you’ve outdone yourself.

MARY
Pray the scavenging crowd agrees.

ELIZABETH
(to the audience) They were a peculiar couple, like a hunter gifted an old hound. She may order him, but all he wanted was a good scratch behind the ears and a bit of bacon. Peculiarity aside, no queen could have carried herself with more calmness and dignity than Mary Lincoln. She was confident and self-possessed, and confidence always gives grace.
MARY

Our audience awaits.

MARY and ABRAHAM exit.

ELIZABETH

(to the audience) But it wasn’t long before her heart left her, too.

Enter MARY and ABRAHAM in mourning clothes, MARY wailing and screaming in grief before a bed. On it lies the sheet-shrouded figure of a child, WILLIE. ELIZABETH sits at the bedside like a guardian in a tomb.

ELIZABETH

(to the audience) He was his mother’s favorite child.

ABRAHAM tries to hold MARY, but she launches away from him. ABRAHAM watches in horror as she crumples, weeping, into the sofa. ANNE enters and attends her, leaving ABRAHAM to stare horrified at his dead son. ELIZABETH watches as ABRAHAM lifts the shroud with trembling hands. His sobs echo in the deafened hall.

ELIZABETH

(to the audience) Little Willie died in the house, in his bed, amid his sailboats. I tended to him in his final hours, and after. It sickens me to remember.

ELIZABETH chokes up, as if ill.

ABRAHAM

For God gave his only begotten Son...to think God can suffer a pain such as this, and live?

ELIZABETH

…You will live, Mr. Lincoln.

ABRAHAM

How?
ELIZABETH
I lost my George in a battle in Missouri last year.

ABRAHAM
How can that be?

ELIZABETH
He passed as white.

ABRAHAM
Your husband?

ELIZABETH
My son. George was one of the first to... for the Union.

ABRAHAM
He must have been brave.

ELIZABETH
For all the good times we had, those aren’t the ones that...

ABRAHAM
Haunt you.

ELIZABETH
Willie was young. He still loved you.

ABRAHAM
I’d rather he hate me and live.

ELIZABETH
That’s not up to us.

ABRAHAM
More fathers and mothers than I’ll ever know have lost sons in this war, and with such hubris... It’s only fair we’re among them.

ELIZABETH
Since when is life fair?
ABRAHAM

Still, I hoped foolishly.

ELIZABETH

Hope may be foolish, but it’s no sin.

ABRAHAM

...I know that he’s better off in heaven, but -

ABRAHAM cries openly over the body of his son,
   ELIZABETH suddenly a part of this strange,
   horrible moment. She begins to leave when
ABRAHAM takes hold of her skirt. Realizing what
   he’s done, ABRAHAM takes back his hand. The
   image of Abraham Lincoln at the feet of a black
   woman.
   ELIZABETH hesitantly returns to his side, the only
   one to comfort him in his grief.

ABRAHAM

There was no patriot like Baker,
   So noble and so true;
   He fell as a soldier on the field,
   His face to the sky of blue.

ELIZABETH

Another of your poems?

ABRAHAM

Willie’s. He sent it to me a few days ago. It could be about your son.

ELIZABETH

Could be about anyone. George had rhymes, too. “Howdy, Mr. Jay. You’re a tell-tale-tell. You
   play the spy each day, then carry tales t’hell.”

ABRAHAM

That’s morbid.

ELIZABETH
The blue jays tell the devil all the naughty mischief little ones get up to— that’s how mama knows. We got eyes in the sky.

ABRAHAM
Thus making you the devil-figure in this story?

ELIZABETH
I happen to catch ‘em for a moment on their way down. Little birdies in my ear.

ABRAHAM
Are you…sad?

ELIZABETH
I can’t cry anymore.

ABRAHAM
What else is there to do?

ELIZABETH
…My mother used to tell me we put our sorrows on the wind. Sing the old songs.

ABRAHAM
Do the birds take those, too?

ELIZABETH
At least they listen.

ABRAHAM
I’m listening.

ELIZABETH considers. She shakes her head.

ABRAHAM
What was he like?

ELIZABETH
Charming. Funny. Proud and stubborn as a mule, but he got that from me.

ABRAHAM
Willie’s so sweet. Was.
ELIZABETH

It’s no wonder. He had you.

ABRAHAM

It’s a…a void in my chest. A chasm.

ELIZABETH

Feels like your body’s a tomb.

ABRAHAM

An empty one. It’s wrong.

ELIZABETH

Parents should never bury their children.

ABRAHAM chokes.

ABRAHAM

He’s afraid of the dark.

ELIZABETH

Mr. Lincoln-

ABRAHAM

I won’t put him down there, he…he’ll be frightened.

ELIZABETH

Willie won’t be frightened anymore.

ABRAHAM

He wouldn’t like being in a…hole…

ELIZABETH

Buried in sacred ground. It’ll put his soul to rest.

ABRAHAM

Sacred ground.

ELIZABETH
Sacred ground.

Left Behind.

ABRAHAM

DEATH IS LIKE A DOOR
TO THE OTHER SIDE
ONCE WE GO THROUGH IT
IT DISAPPEARS BEFORE OUR EYES
HEAVEN'S GATES ARE LOCKED
FROM THE INSIDE
WHAT IS THERE FOR US
WHO WERE LEFT BEHIND?

ELIZABETH

LEFT BEHIND
LEFT BEHIND
AND DOWNTRODDEN

ABRAHAM

DEAD AND GONE
DEAD AND GONE
BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

ELIZABETH/ABRAHAM

WHAT IS THERE FOR US
WHO WERE LEFT BEHIND?
HOW CAN WE GO ON
WHEN OTHERS SHUT THE DOOR
AND LOCKED IT TIGHT
HOW ARE WE TO COPE
WHEN THERE'S NO END IN SIGHT
WHAT ARE WE TO DO?
MAKE IT THROUGH THE NIGHT?
LEFT BEHIND
LEFT BEHIND
LEFT BEHIND
LEFT BEHIND
LEFT BEHIND

LEFT BEHIND
LEFT BEHIND

ABRAHAM

AND DOWNTRODDEN
DEAD AND GONE
DEAD AND GONE

ELIZABETH

BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

ELIZABETH/ABRAHAM

WHAT IS THERE FOR US
WHO WERE LEFT BEHIND?
HOW CAN WE GO ON
WHEN OTHERS SHUT THE DOOR
AND LOCKED IT TIGHT
HOW ARE WE TO COPE
WHEN THERE’S NO END IN SIGHT
WHAT ARE WE TO DO?
MAKE IT THROUGH THE NIGHT?
LEFT BEHIND
LEFT BEHIND
LEFT BEHIND
LEFT BEHIND

ABRAHAM

DEATH IS LIKE A DOOR
TO THE OTHER SIDE

ELIZABETH

ONCE WE GO THROUGH IT
IT DISAPPEARS BEFORE OUR EYES

ABRAHAM

HEAVEN'S GATES ARE LOCKED
FROM THE INSIDE

ELIZABETH

TOGETHER WE CAN BRAVE THE STORM
ABRAHAM
TOGETHER WE CAN BE ALRIGHT

ELIZABETH/ABRAHAM
WHAT IS THERE FOR US
WHO WERE LEFT BEHIND?
AT LEAST WE HAVE OTHERS
WHO'VE SEEN THE DOOR
IN ALL IT'S LIGHT
TOGETHER WE CAN COPE
THERE'S AN END IN SIGHT
WHAT ARE WE TO DO BUT
MAKE IT THROUGH THE NIGHT
LEFT BEHIND
LEFT BEHIND
LEFT BEHIND
LEFT BEHIND

ELIZABETH
(to the audience) Genius and greatness weeping over love's idol lost. This image haunts me to this day.

The scene fades. Exit ABRAHAM, but ELIZABETH remains. MARY enters, dressed in black, followed by ANNE.

MARY
I don’t care! He was my son! I say what he wanted and what he loathed, and I say the flowers must go!

ANNE
They’ve been ordered for th’funeral, ma’am.

MARY
If there are flowers present, I won’t be. Lizzy?

ELIZABETH
Ma’am?

MARY
Undress me at once.

ELIZABETH

I don’t think-

MARY struggles to undress herself, wrenching the dress off. She gives up, collapsing in tears. ELIZABETH and ANNE try to help.

MARY

Don’t touch me. (to ANNE) Get out.

ANNE

Yes, ma’am.

MARY

Get out!

ANNE exits, scurrying.

ELIZABETH

You need to attend his funeral, Mary. You’ll regret it.

MARY

What do you know? You’re not a mother!

Enter ABRAHAM.

ABRAHAM

That’s a cruel thing to say.

MARY

No one understands my pain.

ABRAHAM

You certainly don’t understand mine.

MARY

What is that supposed to mean?
ABRAHAM

Please get dressed.

MARY

You have something to say, go on.

ABRAHAM

The casket flowers stay.

MARY

I cannot bear them.

ABRAHAM

They’re lilies, Mary. They’re his favorite.

MARY

He was my favorite! The only good thing you ever gave me, and now-

ABRAHAM

You don’t mean that.

MARY

You weren’t there for him.

ABRAHAM

I beg your pardon?

MARY

You weren’t there for me-

ABRAHAM

I’m right here!

MARY

You only care about yourself!

MARY bursts into tears and exits.

ABRAHAM

What
ELIZABETH
Pay her no mind.

ABRAHAM
Only care about—what does she think I do all day?

ELIZABETH
Gossip about her while you and the cabinet braid each others’ hair.

ABRAHAM snorts. He covers his face and groans.

ABRAHAM
How am I supposed to—

ELIZABETH
The funeral?

ABRAHAM
Exactly.

ELIZABETH
Go without her.

ABRAHAM
But—

ELIZABETH
I know.

ABRAHAM throws himself back on the sofa, covering his face.

ABRAHAM
Abraham Lincoln, his hand and pen,
He will be good but God knows when.

ELIZABETH
Are you skipping, too?
ABRAHAM
I’ll go.

ELIZABETH
When?

ABRAHAM
When I’m well. You said I would be.

ELIZABETH
I said you would live.

ABRAHAM
Well, when I live again, I’ll go. …What?

ELIZABETH
You must live now.

ABRAHAM smooths his hair.

ABRAHAM
Even with hair like this?

ELIZABETH
Maybe not.

ABRAHAM
If it weren’t for this darned cowlick…

ELIZABETH
Sit.

ABRAHAM sits.

ELIZABETH
Comb?

ABRAHAM
On that desk there.
ELIZABETH fetches the comb and carefully fixes his messy hair.

ABRAHAM

It’s strange to be so formal.

ELIZABETH

It’s a funeral.

ABRAHAM

Between us.

ELIZABETH

Mrs. Lincoln calls me Lizzy.

ABRAHAM

For Elizabeth, yes?

ELIZABETH

Mhmm.

ABRAHAM

Elizabeth, then. Madam Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH scoffs in bewilderment.

ELIZABETH

If I’m a Madam to you, you must be- you must be a great Pharaoh of Egypt.

ABRAHAM

The Bible’s Pharaoh was a proud and unruly man.

ELIZABETH

With unruly hair?

ABRAHAM

I believe he was, in fact, bald. But you are yet a madam, Madam.

ELIZABETH

If you insist, Mr. President.
ABRAHAM
I do.

ABRAHAM picks up a Bible. A moment.

ABRAHAM
The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away.

ELIZABETH
Job?

ABRAHAM
He rent his mantle and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground to worship.

ELIZABETH
We’re back to the bald head, it must be destiny.

ABRAHAM
The first bald president. (sadly)…I’m no Pharaoh, Madam Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH
What are you?

ABRAHAM
A father.

ELIZABETH
…Abraham in the Bible was the Father of Israel.

ABRAHAM
He sacrificed his boy for God.

ELIZABETH
God stopped him.

ABRAHAM
He didn’t stop me.

ELIZABETH

65
What do you mean?

ABRAHAM
Nothing, it’s nothing. Ramblings of a deranged mind, pay no attention.

ELIZABETH
Mr. Lincoln?

ABRAHAM
Abraham.

ELIZABETH
Abraham… Have you prayed?

ABRAHAM
For Willie? Yes. And for Mary, though I doubt she appreciates it.

ELIZABETH
She does.

ABRAHAM
She couldn’t care less.

ELIZABETH
You think so little of her faith?

ABRAHAM
That woman curses the Lord like breathing. I love her, but she makes things so-

MARY wails offstage.

ABRAHAM
Excuse me. Mary?

ABRAHAM stands to leave but MARY enters, disheveled and carrying fistfuls of flowers, makeup streaked with tears.

ABRAHAM
What have you done?
MARY
They’re everywhere!

MARY throws the flowers on the ground, disgusted. ABRAHAM goes to hug her.

MARY
This is your fault. You got him that pony for his birthday and he caught cold riding it. You killed him! And you mock me with these flowers, everywhere, everywhere!

ABRAHAM
How can you say that?

MARY
They’re laughing at my grief, everyone.

ABRAHAM
How dare you accuse me- It’s unspeakable!

MARY
It was your fault.

ABRAHAM
You’re the one who suggested the pony!

MARY
You bought it!

ABRAHAM
He loved that horse, Mary. You know he did.

MARY
You should’ve known.

ABRAHAM
How could I?

MARY takes a vase of flowers off the mantle. She shatters it on the floor.
MARY
It was you! You should have known better! You should have talked me out of it, I-

ABRAHAM reaches for her. MARY slaps him away and exits with a door slam. ABRAHAM sinks into a chair.

ELIZABETH
She’s wrong to say such things.

ABRAHAM
She has a point.

ELIZABETH
You didn’t do anything.

ABRAHAM
I bought the horse, I let him ride it…

ELIZABETH
And the rest?

ABRAHAM
The prophet, Abraham, was stopped in the nick of time, his blade hovering at the highest peak in the man’s arc of motion. One moment more and that blade would have driven into the beating heart of his only child, but God. Stopped. Him. Here am I, at the height of my career, the peak of my ascension, I, a knife. Yet God did not stop the hand wielding me.

ABRAHAM waits to ELIZABETH to understand, but she only stares at him in fear and concern. He takes a breath and walks the stage, occupying moments. ELIZABETH’s eyes follow him. Eventually, he picks up a lily from the vase MARY smashed earlier.

What Happens to Flowers.

ABRAHAM
I LIKE TO READ ABOUT DYING
ELIZABETH
ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS
WHEN WE’RE GONE

ABRAHAM/ELIZABETH
BECAUSE I HOPE IT’S NOT SO BAD
AS WHAT’S DOWN HERE UPON THE SOD

ABRAHAM
I LIKE TO LOOK AT FLOWERS

ELIZABETH
WATCH THEM GROW AND BLOOM AND FADE

ABRAHAM
AND SEE THE POETRY
LIKE THE BOOKS I READ

ABRAHAM/ELIZABETH
IN THE WORLD OUR GOD HAS MADE

ABRAHAM
I MIGHT BE MELANCHOLY, LONESOME

ELIZABETH
BUT YOU SEE WHAT THE WORLD COULD BE

ABRAHAM/ELIZABETH
WHAT THE WORLD COULD BE
IF EVERYONE COULD SEE

WHAT HAPPENS TO FLOWERS
WHAT HAPPENS TO ROSES, VIOLETS, FAIR
THE WAY THEY RISE UP TO THE SUN
AND NEVER MAKE IT THERE
WHAT HAPPENS TO TULIPS
WHAT HAPPENS TO BIRDS AND BEES AND DEER
AND ALL THE CREATURES OF THIS EARTH
WE HOLD SO DEAR
ABRAHAM
MY SON LOVED FLOWERS
HE LOVED ALL LIFE AND LIGHT ABOVE

ELIZABETH
DESPITE THE CHALLENGE
THAT LOSING THEM WOULD POSE

ABRAHAM
MY SON LOVED FLOWERS
HE LOVED THE JOY THAT THEY SEND

ELIZABETH
YOU COULD DIE TOMORROW
ANY DAY COULD BE YOUR END

ABRAHAM
SO MANY BROKEN HEARTS TO MEND

ABRAHAM/ELIZABETH
WHAT HAPPENS TO FLOWERS
WHAT HAPPENS TO ROSES, VIOLETS, FAIR
THE WAY THEY RISE UP TO THE SUN
AND NEVER MAKE IT THERE
WHAT HAPPENS TO TULIPS
WHAT HAPPENS TO BIRDS AND BEES AND DEER
AND ALL THE CREATURES OF THIS EARTH
WE HOLD SO DEAR

ELIZABETH
WE ALL SEE THE THINGS WE CHERISH
WITHER AWAY

ABRAHAM
BUT LOVING THEM IS ALWAYS WORTH
THE PAIN

ABRAHAM/ELIZABETH
THERE IS BEAUTY TO BE SEEN
IN THE POETRY OF THESE
WHO WE'VE LOST

THINK NOT OF LOSS

ABRAHAM

THINK NOT OF LOSS

ELIZABETH

ABRAHAM/ELIZABETH

THINK NOT OF LOSS
BUT OF LOVE
AND WHAT HAPPENS TO FLOWERS
WHAT HAPPENS TO ROSES, VIOLETS, FAIR
THE WAY THEY RISE UP TO THE SUN
AND

ELIZABETH

RISE UP TO THE SUN AND

ABRAHAM

BLOOM

ELIZABETH

It’s time.

ELIZABETH hands him his coat.

ABRAHAM

What about you?

ELIZABETH

I wouldn’t miss it.

ABRAHAM

I'll be alone up there, and…I’d like you to join me. You should stand with the family.

ELIZABETH

But Mary won’t-
ABRAHAM
So?

ELIZABETH
I can’t stand in Mary’s place.

ABRAHAM
Take yours.

ELIZABETH
You forget the press.

ABRAHAM
Who cares?

ELIZABETH
How about I go up near the end? When people are leaving.

ABRAHAM
You’ll stand by me?

ELIZABETH
nods.

ABRAHAM
Good.

ELIZABETH
Abraham…

ABRAHAM
Oh, alright. After you.

ELIZABETH takes her coat and hat; ABRAHAM dons his hat and stops. He offers the funeral lily to ELIZABETH. She takes it. They leave one after the other.

The night passes into the day. ELIZABETH enters wearing a new dress, hat, and shawl.
BLACK ENSEMBLE enter after her, weary refugees of the war humming in unison to the march of their feet.

ELIZABETH (to the audience) The Civil War raged. As the Union pillaged the South, robbing it of beauty and ravaging whatever Godliness it had left, freed slaves ran north with nothing behind them, nothing with them, and nothing waiting for them upon their arrival to the promised land.

*The Freedmen*

BLACK ENSEMBLE

THE DAYS ARE UNKIND
TO THE NEGRO
THE FREEDMEN ARE FREE
FREE TO BE POOR
THE FREEDMEN ARE FREE
FREE TO BE STARVING
THE FREEDMEN ARE FREE
FREE TO BE IGNORED

OH, WHERE IS MY SAVIOR?
OH, WHERE IS MY PEACE?
OH, WHERE IS MY SOLACE?
OH, WHERE’S MY RELEASE?
OH, WHERE IS THE DE-CEN-CY
OH, WHERE IN THE WORLD?

THE FREEDMEN ARE FREE
THE FREEDMEN ARE FREE
THE FREEDMEN ARE FREE

ELIZABETH (to the audience) I hear them now. I bet I’ll always hear them, crying to God for help they should have been able to provide for themselves.

MARY stands as ELIZABETH fits a dress to her body.

MARY
The city is positively overrun, slaves languishing in the streets.

ELIZABETH
(to the audience) Did I mention Mrs. Lincoln was of wealthy Southern origin?

MARY
They come without the faintest idea of how Northern society works, and then- this!

ELIZABETH
It’s freedom they don’t understand.

MARY
I hardly understand Northern society myself. We Southern girls have to stick together.

ELIZABETH
They’ve gone from being fed and clothed and worked to death to being abandoned and left for dead.

MARY
We’ll simply have to adapt- all of us, nigger or not.

Tension.

ELIZABETH
I’d be greatly obliged if you refrained from that word.

MARY
It isn’t very ladylike, is it?

ELIZABETH
Erase it from your vocabulary entirely.

MARY
I’ll do my best.

ELIZABETH
It’ll be a powerful example.

MARY
The freedmen will manage. Look at you! You’ve done fabulously for yourself so far.
ELIZABETH
A little help never hurt anybody. (to the audience) Mrs. Farnham, a friend of Mrs. Lincoln, hosted festivals to raise money for wounded soldiers. White ones, anyway. Which got me thinking: (to MARY) Would people give charity to the freedmen if there were a more organized way of doing it?

MARY
Would you? ...Can I move?

ELIZABETH
If you’re careful.

MARY hobbles to a writing desk and pulls out a cheque book. She writes out a cheque.

ELIZABETH
(to the audience) Freedom without support is criminal, but it’s the burden of community. St. Louis did it for me- why not repay the debt in Washington?

MARY offers the cheque to ELIZABETH.

MARY
For your organization. Consider me your first beneficiary.

ELIZABETH
Thank you. The colored people of Washington D.C. thank you. The colored people of the whole United States.

MARY
I am the Lady President, after all. I should hope they do. Oh, this is all so exciting. And Lizzy?

ELIZABETH
Yes, ma’am?

MARY
Do try to be a little less sensitive in the future, hm? We ladies have our decorum.

ELIZABETH
…Yes, ma’am, we do.
MARY admires herself in the mirror.

ELIZABETH (to the audience) I called it the Contraband Relief Association, donations to which came from everywhere. From colored churches here in America, from England and Scotland across the sea, from Frederick Douglass, from Abraham Linclon himself.

MARY

Where is my husband?

ELIZABETH

I can’t say that I know.

MARY

Anne! Anne, where is my husband? Anne!

Enter ANNE.

ANNE

Ma’am?

MARY

Mr. Lincoln, you silly girl, where is he? Where is he, are you deaf?

ANNE

No, ma’am. I’m sorry, ma’am. He’s out on presidential business, ma’am.

MARY

And so your uselessness exhibits itself yet again.

ELIZABETH

Wait-

MARY moves sharply, sticking herself with the pins holding fabric to her body.

MARY

Of all the infernal curses of aristocracy and intelligence, look what you’ve made me do! I go to accomplish your simple job and look- behold! Anne, oh, you horrid girl.
MARY weeps. ANNE exits.

ELIZABETH
It’s not so bad yet. If you’d stand still-

MARY
It’s no use. Get me out of this.

ELIZABETH unpins the dress, freeing MARY from the fabric.

MARY
Tend to your sewing. Over there, I don’t know.

ELIZABETH finds a seat and prepares to stitch.

MARY
I wouldn’t be lonesome if my husband were here.

ELIZABETH
Ma’am?

MARY
He’s gone! He’s always gone, leaving me in my distress to worry over him and meander about. Aimlessly!

ABRAHAM enters.

ABRAHAM
What’s this about meandering aimlessly?

MARY
Nothing.

ABRAHAM
 Didn’t sound like nothing.

MARY
Well, it is.
I only have a few moments, so-

So, what?

What’d you call me for?

Why only a few moments?

I have work, dearest.

What if I had marvelous news?

I’d like to hear it.

And then be off to the wind, ne’er to be seen again!

What are you talking about?

Where are you going?

The War Room?

Aha! You’re always going there. It must be nice, surrounding yourself with people who listen to you.

I do more of the listening, actually.
MARY
Moving all your little pawns in this silly game of yours.

ABRAHAM
This is no game, Mary. People are dying, losing their homes. It’s my duty to this nation-

MARY
What about your duty to your wife?

ABRAHAM
What about it?

MARY
You never cease to amaze me. What about it, he asks. What about it! All you care about is playing hero-

ABRAHAM
I’m a steward for the heroes laying down their lives for this country!

MARY
Your poetry’s going to get you killed someday, you know that?

ABRAHAM
I will take that into consideration, thank you.

ABRAHAM starts for the door.

MARY
Wait.

ABRAHAM
We’re at an impasse.

MARY
Answer me this: who will be at the meeting?

ABRAHAM
We’ve talked enough.
MARY
A simple question, unless you have some secret that can’t grace my ears without consequence?

ABRAHAM
You’re bombarding me in the public, mother.

MARY
Lizzy is not the public.

ABRAHAM
Why concern yourself with presidential business?

MARY
Who granted you this position?

ABRAHAM
The citizens of the United States.

MARY
You would be nothing without my connections.

ABRAHAM
Would you care to elaborate?

MARY
You couldn’t fathom what I’ve done to get you where you are.

ABRAHAM
What good’s a president without his advisors?

MARY
What good is a king?

ABRAHAM
How very patriotic.

MARY
You should have been born a saint. Don’t you think so, Lizzy?

ELIZABETH
Mr. Lincoln is a good man.

MARY

Is that your opinion?

ELIZABETH

…A good man, of good judgment.

ABRAHAM

Your vote of confidence is appreciated.

MARY

Those hypocrites twine you around their fingers like a skein of thread.

ABRAHAM

Your prejudices can’t change my opinion.

MARY

Fools, the both of you. Saintly fools.

ABRAHAM and MARY exit. ELIZABETH billows out the dress she’s been working on in the corner.

ELIZABETH

(to the audience) And so it went. Dresses and dinners and dresses and parties and dresses. Days in the parlor when Mrs. Lincoln called me for company, and while I had other business, she never cared much about inconveniencing me.

ELIZABETH dons her hat and shawl, prepared to leave.

ELIZABETH

I always made my deadlines and my friendly visits alike, however. There wasn’t much choice. I was forced to take on assistants and apprentices to keep up with my workload. In the meantime, however, our people suffered with a salary less than a slave.

A poor, elderly BLACK WOMAN enters.

BLACK WOMAN

Why, Ms. Lizzy, you ain’t get a shift from Mr. and Mrs. Gov’ment!
ELIZABETH
No, ma’am, what of it?

BLACK WOMAN
I been up North more’n a eight months and Bliss God, children, if I had know that Mr. and Mrs. Gov’ment was going to do that a’way, I never would have comed here in God's world.

ELIZABETH
(to the audience) You all may be a bit young to remember this. On the Southern plantation, it was proper that a mistress made presents of much-needed undergarments.

BLACK WOMAN
My old missus used to give me two shifts ever’ year. I ain’t got none since, an’ you hav’n, an’ nobody I talked to have, why-

ELIZABETH
It’s gonna be alright.

BLACK WOMAN
How can you laugh?

ELIZABETH
I laugh because-

BLACK WOMAN
No master I ev’have been so cruel as t’see us freeze! Starve! See us be dirty, sick-

ELIZABETH
There is no master, now. Not for you. Not for anyone here, look.

BLACK WOMAN
But Mr. and Mrs. Gov’ment-

-ARE no masters to you. They will never give you a shift.

BLACK WOMAN
I never should’ve left.
You can always make one?

How? My hands are all bad.

The WOMAN holds up trembling hands.

I can’t hold a needle straight t’save my life, I tried!

I’ll see what I can do.

You’ll talk to Mr. and Mrs. Gov’ment?

No…That’s what the Relief Society is for. We have clothes and food-

I can’t pay, ma’am, you know that. And theren’t much work I can do now.

You don’t have to do anything.

How can that be?

Kind people donated these things for you. For all of us.

I don’t have t’pay?

No, ma’am.

How do I-
ELIZABETH
In that building yonder, you’ll meet a nice man named Reverend Christopher. Tell him what you need and he’ll help you.

BLACK WOMAN
Thank you.

ELIZABETH
You’re welcome.

The WOMAN takes ELIZABETH’s hands and kisses them.

BLACK WOMAN
May the Lord bless you.

ELIZABETH
Enjoy your rest. You’ve served long enough.

ELIZABETH
(to the audience) Along with these were people who built. Schools with good teachers, many of whom were my friends, white and colored- They popped up in black districts of the city, where whole brigades of bright-eyed dusky children burst through their doors. Such schools were of great interest to the President, and others. Insomuch as I was accustomed to his prying for my opinion.

Enter ABRAHAM.

ABRAHAM
Are you leaving?

ELIZABETH
Is there something you need?

ABRAHAM
My wife's entertaining.

ELIZABETH
Tiring?
Very. Say, I have thoughts-

ELIZABETH

I should hope the president has thoughts.

ABRAHAM

-You may find compelling. At least that suit your interest.

ELIZABETH

As you like.

They sit together.

ABRAHAM

I spend much time in the War Room, you know, discussing the intricacies of this nasty business, and it’s occurred to me- where is Mr. Keckly?

ELIZABETH

This occurred to you in the War Room?

ABRAHAM

No! I mean to say, if I’m keeping you from your husband-

ELIZABETH

Don’t have one. I did, but he was a scoundrel.

ABRAHAM

I’m sorry for your loss.

ELIZABETH

I left him. Readily.

ELIZABETH begins to leave.

ABRAHAM

I didn’t know that.

ELIZABETH
You didn’t ask.

ABRAHAM

Touché, madam. You must be very brave.

ELIZABETH

Oh?

ABRAHAM

You work with Mary all day.

ELIZABETH

And you work with her all night.

ABRAHAM goes red.

ABRAHAM

I mean- well-

ELIZABETH

My humor precedes my thought, I apologize.

ABRAHAM

No, no, you’re witty. I like that.

ELIZABETH

Glad to be of service.

They look at one another.

ELIZABETH

There was something you wanted to ask me, Mr. Lincoln?

ABRAHAM

–Abraham. Unless that makes you uncomfortable.

ELIZABETH

Oh, no, sir. Slip of the tongue.

ABRAHAM
You can call me whatever you like—or is most appropriate, considering.

ELIZABETH

Considering…

ABRAHAM

Nevermind. I shouldn’t keep you, I’m sorry.

ELIZABETH

You’re not keeping me, Abraham. What is it?

ABRAHAM

Do you think…white men are often bad?

ELIZABETH

I’ve had my fair share of bad apples.

ABRAHAM

Do you think…we…have a predisposition to be cruel?

ELIZABETH

The Lord never made anyone bad on purpose. Or by accident.

ABRAHAM

…Do you ever miss home?

ABRAHAM grimaces.

ELIZABETH

I miss my mother. I used to write her letters, but…she never replied.

ABRAHAM

Maybe they’re being intercepted?

ELIZABETH

No, Mistress Garland was good that way. She didn’t mind. She let me do all kinds of things, provided I got my work done. One summer, I was a bridesmaid in six weddings.

ABRAHAM

You must be fun at parties. Or a very good friend.
(jokingly) Not both.

ABRAHAM

(jokingly) Never both.

ELIZABETH

Do you miss your mother?

ABRAHAM

My sister was mother to me, after our own passed away. I was a child.

ELIZABETH

And your sister?

ABRAHAM

Didn’t have a choice. She loved me, though. Loved us all.

ELIZABETH

Children make reluctant mothers.

ABRAHAM

I doubt my rambunctiousness helped.

ELIZABETH

Mischief makes us fonder.

ABRAHAM

I’m not very familiar with the intricacies of slavery.

ELIZABETH

It isn’t very intricate.

ABRAHAM

Didn’t even see one until I was grown.

ELIZABETH

Well, for one, slave children can’t go to school.
ABRAHAM

Neither could I.

ELIZABETH

Can’t keep their wages, even if they worked for someone outside the family.

ABRAHAM

My father kept mine until my twenties.

ELIZABETH

That’s hardly the same.

ABRAHAM

You’re right,. I was wrong to compare. It’s no wonder you’d hate the Southerners.

ELIZABETH

How could I hate children I raised? Men and women who loved me and my son? Loved us enough to free us? The South isn’t wrong. It’s the law.

ABRAHAM

I didn’t expect that.

ELIZABETH

I beg your pardon?

ABRAHAM

You keep surprising me. –That’s what I think, too. That it’s the law, encouraging behavior beneath our humanity.

ELIZABETH

Oh?

ABRAHAM

We can change it.

ELIZABETH

Asking me all these questions won’t make you understand what it’s like.

ABRAHAM

Being black?
ELIZABETH

In a word.

ABRAHAM

I saw, once, a slave family sold and separated. The mother weeping as her child was taken, yet saying nothing. …I didn’t do anything about it.

ELIZABETH

There’s nothing you could’ve done.

ABRAHAM

I was a coward.

ELIZABETH

You were one in, what, a hundred? Was this a marketplace? They would’ve jailed you before you even got close.

ABRAHAM

I could’ve bought them.

ELIZABETH

An entire family?

ABRAHAM

They’ll never see each other again.

ELIZABETH

I can’t praise you for your agony.

ABRAHAM

I didn’t mean-

ELIZABETH

I know.

ABRAHAM

Mary would have given a blow to the face had I offended her the way I have you.

ELIZABETH
Maybe she shouldn’t do that.

–Elizabeth, I-

I have to free the slaves.

You’d do that?

Yes.

I’d give you a hundred thanks, a thousand. I’d kiss you a hundred thousand times.

Elizabeth…

Your hands, of course. If you freed them, I might.

It’s already decided…for the war.

What could my people have to do with-

We have no men left. Our generals are squabbling without supplies, without bodies— with too many bodies, rather.

You mean to make us fight?

I mean to ask.
If you free us-

We’ll win the war.

We fought in the revolution, and after, you put us in shackles.

It won’t be as it was.

So said the revolutionaries.

It won’t be as it was!

ELIZABETH leaves him.

ABRAHAM grabs ELIZABETH’s hand. She stops for a breath, and he lets go. Again, Abraham Lincoln at the feet of a black woman.

Elizabeth, please.

Never Be the Same

We’ll never be the same
We’re too different
People
We’ll never be the same
We’re too different
It’s legal
But somehow I see
In your eyes
The brightest light
Coming from inside
Somehow I see
AND I'LL NEVER BE

ABRAHAM

WE'LL NEVER BE THE SAME
WE'LL NEVER BE, WE'LL NEVER BE
BUT YOU SHOWED ME
YOU SHOWED ME
A PART OF YOU, A PART OF YOU
A PART OF YOU I'D NEVER SEEN
AND I'LL NEVER BE THE SAME

ELIZABETH

I HEAR THE RIVER CALLING
I HEAR THE SOUNDS OF HOME
MY SON IS RUNNING TO ME
CALLING TO ME
MAMA, DON'T LEAVE ME ALONE
IF I COULD DO IT ALL TOMORROW
LIKE TO THINK I'D CHANGE THE SORROW
BUT I KNOW DEEP DOWN, DEEP DOWN
THAT NEVER, NO, NEVER
NO, NEVER
IT'LL NEVER BE THE SAME

ABRAHAM/ELIZABETH

WE'RE TOO DIFFERENT
PEOPLE
WE'LL NEVER BE THE SAME
WE'RE TOO DIFFERENT
IT'S LEGAL
BUT SOMEHOW I SEE
IN YOUR EYES
THE BRIGHTEST LIGHT
COMING FROM INSIDE
SOMEHOW I SEE
AND I'LL NEVER BE

ABRAHAM

I HEAR THE RIVER CALLING
I HEAR THE SOUNDS OF HOME
MY SON IS RUNNING TO ME
CALLING TO ME
PAPA, DON'T LEAVE ME ALONE
IF I COULD DO IT ALL TOMORROW
LIKE TO THINK I'D CHANGE THE SORROW
BUT I KNOW DEEP DOWN, DEEP DOWN
THAT NEVER, NO, NEVER
NO, NEVER
IT'LL NEVER BE THE SAME

ABRAHAM/ELIZABETH

WE'RE TOO DIFFERENT
PEOPLE
WE'LL NEVER BE THE SAME
WE'RE TOO DIFFERENT
IT'S LEGAL
BUT SOMEHOW I SEE
IN YOUR EYES
THE BRIGHTEST LIGHT
COMING FROM INSIDE
SOMEHOW I SEE
AND I'LL NEVER BE

Enter MARY.

MARY

What are you up to?

ABRAHAM and ELIZABETH leap apart.

ABRAHAM

Nothing.

ELIZABETH

Talking.

MARY

Funny, I thought you were tired.

END OF ACT I
ACT II

MARY in her lounge, at her vanity, peacocking.
ELIZABETH stands outside the scene.

ELIZABETH
(to the audience) Y’all get y’all’s snacks? Your water, your sodapop, y’all good? I can keep talking then, nobody’s going to be interrupting me, yes? Let’s just watch for a minute. You see her? A gift from the heavens, bestowed by the Lord himself, like a plague or something.

At Least I’m Me

MARY

I’M NOT MODEST
I’M NOT HUMBLE
ALL THESE MEN
THINK THEY CAN
PLAY ME LIKE A PIPE
BUT BABY, I AM
TROUBLE

DON’T PRETEND TO BE
ANYTHING I’M NOT
THINK YOU FORGOT
WITH WHOM
YOU’RE DEALING
SORRY BUT NOT
SORRY FOR ALL YOUR
LITTLE THOUGHTS AND
PRECIOUS LITTLE
FEELINGS

I’M A LOT
BUT AT LEAST I’M
ME

ELIZABETH

Duty calls.

ELIZABETH steps into the scene.
MARY

Ugh, there you are. Come here!

ELIZABETH helps MARY undress.

MARY

MY HUSBAND
OVERFLOWS WITH TEARS
AND SORROW
WHEN TOMORROW COMES
ALL THE WORK IS DONE
IT'S YOURS TRULY
YOU SHOULD FOLLOW

HE'S GOT THESE DREAMS
YEAH, FALL FOR THAT
"HE PROMISED"
HONEY, PLEASE
DO YOU REALLY THINK
ANY MAN IS
COMPLETELY HONEST?

DON'T PRETEND TO BE
ANYTHING I'M NOT
THINK YOU FORGOT
WITH WHOM
YOU'RE DEALING
SORRY BUT NOT
SORRY FOR ALL YOUR
LITTLE THOUGHTS AND
PRECIOUS LITTLE
FEELINGS

I'M A WOMAN
I'M AN UNDERDOG
I'M TOP PLAYER
IN THE GAME
THEY ALL
FLIRT WITH ME
TALK DIRT TO ME
BABY, THEY ALL KNOW
MY NAME

I’M A LOT
I’M NOT MODEST
BUT I’M HOTTEST
I’M A LOT
I FORGET MYSELF SOMETIMES
YEAH, I’M A LOT
BUT AT LEAST I’M
ME

ELIZABETH

THAT MAY BE
BUT WHEN YOU
TALK ABOUT
DREAMS
YOU DON’T SEE
THE BEAUTY IN THEIR
WINGS

MARY

I MAKE MINE HAPPEN
I DON’T NEED
YOUR MAKE BELIEVE

ELIZABETH

HIS EYES
SEE A WORLD OF
COMPROMISE
WHERE MY
COLOR DOESN’T HINDER
AND I THRIVE THROUGHOUT
THE WINTER
OF MY PROBATION
HE CAN SEE A NATION
WHERE WE
ARE FREE
FREE LIKE WE’RE MEANT TO BE!
FREE TO LOVE AND FREE TO CHOOSE
MARY

I’m a lot, but I don’t make up stories.

MARY

That man is such a nightmare.

ELIZABETH

Ma’am?

MARY

That man is such a nightmare.

ELIZABETH

Mr. Lincoln?

MARY

The dinner, Mr. Lincoln, whatever. I have an object in view. There is so much gossip surrounding me, you would not believe! And because of these ravenous hounds that plague us at the White House, trying to bite at my husband-

ELIZABETH

Because of the gossip…

MARY

I can’t allow them near him!

ELIZABETH

Is any of it true?

MARY

He is too good. It would be unchristian of me to allow such, such evil to worm its way into his head.
He’s a grown man.

An impressionable one.

He can think for himself.

He’ll think himself into his grave! And what then? If he isn’t president, then—Then…!

Then, what?

What will happen to me? …We have to win.

You will.

You don’t know that.

If he’s the wrong choice, the North’ll be the last to admit it. The South made his election a pretext for rebellion, so replacing him with someone else would look like a surrender.

He has no idea what goes on in these campaigns.

Unlikely.

He thinks he can just go back to being a lawyer and everything will work itself out.

He’s more economical than you give him credit.
MARY
There’s more at stake than his simple, silly dreams.

ELIZABETH
Seeking peace in the world isn’t-

MARY
His “generous allowance” can’t supply all my wants. The people scrutinize everything I wear to the smallest detail; a favor to you, I might add. My patronage has made you rich, like so many others.

ELIZABETH
Not so.

MARY
Tut tut, don’t be embarrassed. I’ve paid you well. The disgusting Republicans shouldn’t be the only ones reaping reward from our successes.

ELIZABETH
You’re not- prostrating yourself without Mr. Lincoln’s knowledge!

MARY
These men owe me. They benefit from his contentment.

ELIZABETH
He’s anything but content.

MARY
How would you know?

ELIZABETH
It’s in his eyes.

MARY
He doesn’t even suspect what I’m up to, yet he calls me paranoid. If he knew the truth of my debt, he’d go mad. …confess to the public and ruin us all. Save for you. You’d move on to new clientele, hot on the heels with, “her fancy clothes couldn’t save her, that cow Mary Todd!”

ELIZABETH

100
I’d never.

MARY

All my friends would.

ELIZABETH

Mrs. Edwards would do that?

MARY

She’d laugh in the face of my misfortune, with all of Washington.

ELIZABETH

You’re mistaken.

MARY

Oh, Lizzy.

ELIZABETH

I don’t like seeing you so troubled.

MARY

I’m hardly troubled. Perturbed. Agitated, maybe.

ELIZABETH

Annoyed?

MARY

Yes!

ELIZABETH

The gossip comes from all these men you talk with.

MARY

For political purposes. Mr. Lincoln’s too innocent to work out dealings with the likes of them.

ELIZABETH

If you’d socialize with them less in public–
And entertain them in private? I think not. We all chose our lots in life, Lizzy, at one point or another.

ELIZABETH

I was enslaved for thirty years.

MARY

And now you’re here, aren’t you? A free woman, with a thriving business and friends with opportunity. Congratulations!

ELIZABETH

Abraham means to free the slaves.

MARY

Mr. Lincoln will do what he will. I give you work enough you shouldn’t have time to worry about what my husband does.

ELIZABETH

I don’t.

MARY

Too much work is a blessing and a curse! How about we put a hold on your future projects, excluding the dress I mean to wear at the next levee, and go on a trip?

ELIZABETH

I can’t afford a trip right now.

MARY

Pish posh, darling, you will go with us.

ELIZABETH

Where?

MARY

Down the Mississippi. We’ll soon capture the Confederate capitol, and when we do, my husband will go down with the War Department to collect information and give a speech to the remaining troops.

ELIZABETH

It’ll all be over.
If we free the slaves.

He’s already discussed it with you?

I’m his wife.

Richmond will fall?

This week, next week. You will come with us.

Why?

Because I’ve asked you to.

…I’m grateful for the invitation.

As you should be. Goodnight now.

Goodnight.

I’ll see you tomorrow. Oh, and Lizzy?

Yes?

I’ll try on my dress for the levee tomorrow, if you please.
ELIZABETH
I don’t know if it’ll be ready tomorrow.

MARY
Bring it anyway. I’m sure there’s a ruffle or two I’d like to adjust, it’s such fun.

MARY exits.

As ELIZABETH speaks, the scene transitions to a steamboat slowly passing greenery.

ELIZABETH
(to the audience) And such fun it was, for me to work candle to candle in the witching hours to finish it in time. Turns out I was none too soon, for as Mrs. Lincoln predicted, Richmond did fall. It wasn’t the end of the war by any means, not yet, but it was the beginning of something else. Mrs. Lincoln, Mr. Lincoln, and I on a steamboat overlooking the lushest, most prosperous land of the whole country. It was a lovely, lovely getaway.

ELIZABETH remembers herself.

ELIZABETH
To be clear, I did not have a rendezvous with the President. It was a political engagement. I wasn’t too involved in that part, though, it was a sort of…family trip, with some business on the way. I’m not sure what you’re all thinking, but I’m offended.

ELIZABETH settles into the scene, watching the river.

ELIZABETH
The route to the fallen Confederate capitol passed by my hometown, so if nothing else, I-

The sun begins to set over a destroyed, desolate St. Louis. The Fall of St. Louis plays. ELIZABETH, shocked, is stricken with grief. Enter MARY.

MARY
Good God, Lizzy, I- what? You shouldn’t need sea-legs on a river.

ELIZABETH
There’s nothing left.
MARY
If you must be sick, do it quickly. My husband will be joining us next port and it’s imperative we make a good impression. The decorations, the lights- Are you listening?

ELIZABETH
Sorry.

MARY
The party’s in only a few hours!

ELIZABETH
You don’t mean to dress now?

MARY
Mr. Lincoln, Senator Sumner, distinguished gentleman will be seeing me very soon, and-

Enter CAPTAIN, a white man.

CAPTAIN
Madam President?

MARY
Yes?

CAPTAIN
The River Queen’ll be making port shortly.

MARY
Wonderful.

CAPTAIN tips his hat and exits.

MARY
Now, please.

MARY and ELIZABETH exit. St. Louis slides out of view as the last refrain ends.
Enter MARY and ELIZABETH, well-dressed. They lurch to the side as the boat stops, the fog horn bellowing.

CAPTAIN (offstage)
Mr. President!

MARY hurriedly ushers out a BAND of black performers: a trumpeter, a snare drum, a violin, a cello. She hastily conducts as the musicians fumble with their instruments. The BAND plays *The River Queen*. MARY turns just as ABRAHAM enters, followed by an entourage of three white gentlemen and their wives. ABRAHAM greets MARY with a kiss on the cheek. As MARY warmly welcomes the gentlemen aboard, ABRAHAM takes both of ELIZABETH’s hands in his; they look at one another. Night falls. ABRAHAM releases ELIZABETH.

ABRAHAM
What wonders they have in the South.

MARY
Nothing we don’t have at home.

ABRAHAM
The stars, mother.

ABRAHAM winks at ELIZABETH.

ABRAHAM
There are no such stars in Washington.

MARY
No such smells, either.

ABRAHAM
Did you hear that?

MARY
A lot of prattling on about nothing.

Stop the music!

The BAND stops abruptly. A frog call is heard over the groaning of the engine.

What is that?

ELIZABETH

Just a little bullfrog.

ABRAHAM

Stop the boat!

MARY

What has gotten into you?

ABRAHAM

Stop!

MALE ENSEMBLE (offstage)

Stop! Stop the engine! Anchor!

The engine sputters and slows to quiet, the boat lurching to a stop. A huge splash; everyone all but topples over. Enter CAPTAIN.

What’s wrong?

CAPTAIN

Look! Do you see it?

ABRAHAM

Everyone peers over the edge of the boat to where ABRAHAM points in earnest. Varying degrees of interest. The sounds of a Southern summer night.
ABRAHAM

Just there, look. Tell me you see it.

A frog call.

MARY

A frog!

ABRAHAM

Shh! Madam Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH

…I believe the president’s spotted a terrapin.

MARY

A what?

ELIZABETH

A turtle. There, on that log by the bank.

ABRAHAM

Fancy I could catch it?

MARY

You will not!

ABRAHAM

Ah, but you agree I could?

MARY

Abraham Lincoln, your turtle-catching days are long behind you. I don’t know who you think you are-

ABRAHAM

The president of the United States?

MARY

You’re not some low-life, country ruffian!

ABRAHAM

108
I hate to correct you, mother, but the word you’re looking for is bumpkin.

MARY
Excuse me?

ABRAHAM
Country bumpkin, it’s a very common expression.

MARY
Common. Start the music. Music, I say!

The BAND scurries to play The River Queen.

MARY
Captain, continue. We apologize for the interruption.

CAPTAIN tips his hat and exits. Slowly, the engine groans and the boat begins again down the river. ABRAHAM and ELIZABETH watch the turtle as they sail away. MARY ushers the gentlemen and their wives to dance.

ELIZABETH
For the record, I’d’ve loved to see you try.

ABRAHAM
You doubt me?

ELIZABETH
Splashing around in those big old shoes?

ABRAHAM
A sight for sore eyes. Better we didn’t disturb him, poor fellow. … I’ve missed the river.

ELIZABETH
Oh?

ABRAHAM
I once ran a ferry on the Ohio.
ELIZABETH

You, a ferryman?

ABRAHAM

President Ferryman to you! When the crowd had cleared, I would sit on my boat and watch the river go by.

ELIZABETH

Sounds nice.

ABRAHAM

It was.

ELIZABETH

And quiet.

ABRAHAM

Heavens, I’ll never have that again. Mary’s…

ELIZABETH

Resistant?

ABRAHAM

Incapable. It’s always noise, noise, noise, and she hardly likes anything.

ELIZABETH

She likes you?

ABRAHAM

Sometimes.

MARY pulls on ABRAHAM’s arm.

ABRAHAM

Dance?

ELIZABETH

But there are so many people-

MARY and ABRAHAM are already gone.
ELIZABETH watches as they dance, ashamed that she thought, even for a moment, that ABRAHAM was asking her to the dancefloor. Meanwhile, MARY’s movements are graceful and practiced, ABRAHAM’s clumsy.

_Nightmare_

ELIZABETH

BARELY, I SEE IT
FAINTLY, I DREAM
I REMEMBER A TIME WHEN
THAT DANCE DIDN’T SEEM
A NIGHTMARE
A NIGHTMARE

Enter JAMES, who spins ELIZABETH into a dance, mirroring ABRAHAM and MARY.

ELIZABETH

HIS ARMS AROUND ME
TIGHT LIKE A VICE
HIS VOICE SO TENDER
YET NOT VERY NICE
A NIGHTMARE
A NIGHTMARE

LOOK HOW HE HOLDS HER
LOOK AT HIS EYES
LOOK HOW SHE HOLDS HIM
TIGHT LIKE A VICE
A NIGHTMARE
A NIGHTMARE

HER VOICE ISN’T TENDER
HER WORDS COLD AS ICE
HOW CAN YOU BE CRUEL
TO SOMEONE SO KIND

ELIZABETH ends up in ABRAHAM’s arms.
A NIGHTMARE
A NIGHTMARE
A NIGHTMARE
A NIGHTMARE
ELIZABETH

A NIGHTMARE
ELIZABETH

A NIGHTMARE
ABRAHAM

BARELY, I SEE IT
FAINTLY, I DREAM
I REMEMBER A TIME WHEN
THAT DANCE DIDN’T SEEM
WHEN THAT DANCE SEEMED
ELIZABETH

JAMES creeps upon the dance.

JAMES steals ELIZABETH away.

A NIGHTMARE
MY VOICE CAN’T BE TENDER
I’VE BEEN THROUGH TOO MUCH
I CANNOT HOLD HIM
I’LL BREAK AT HIS TOUCH
ELIZABETH

ELIZABETH runs into ABRAHAM, off the dance floor.

ELIZABETH

A NIGHTMARE
A NIGHTMARE
A NIGHTMARE
ABRAHAM

A NIGHTMARE

What’s wrong? Are you ill?

ELIZABETH vomits overboard. The boat scene disappears.

ELIZABETH

(To the audience) A golden memory. We headed up the river to Washington soon after, and—
…the inauguration. Abraham won the election.

ELIZABETH braces herself, still recovering from feeling ill at the memory. Enter ABRAHAM; ELIZABETH straightens immediately, but relaxes somewhat when she sees who it is.

ABRAHAM

How do I look?

ELIZABETH

Fine.

ABRAHAM

My hair’s a bit stick-up-ish.

ELIZABETH

Not bad.

They both tap at his hair. ABRAHAM gives up, and ELIZABETH can’t quite reach.

ABRAHAM

Here.

ABRAHAM sits in a chair.

ABRAHAM

Do you mind?
ELIZABETH
No! Not at all. Do you have a-

ABRAHAM fishes a comb from his jacket.

ELIZABETH
Thank you.

ELIZABETH combs his hair in silence.

ELIZABETH
…You’ve got a very stubborn cow-lick, Mr. President.

ABRAHAM
I don’t know if I can do it.

ELIZABETH
Do what?

ABRAHAM
Be president again.

ELIZABETH
Little late for that.

ABRAHAM
They want this- lion for the Republic, Elizabeth, I can’t do it anymore.

ELIZABETH
If you’re as weak as you pretend, I’m surprised lesser men can walk.

ABRAHAM
They’ve heralded me.

ELIZABETH
The Moses of our people.

ABRAHAM
Or Pharoah.
ELIZABETH
No, sir, see... Pharaohs are bald.

ABRAHAM
I've never sought to be a great man. Only a good one.

ELIZABETH
And it's led you here.

ABRAHAM
I look at my goats in the mornings. They skip and play like children, grateful for everything. They feed on my bounty, and jump with joy over the bushes and things in the garden.

ELIZABETH
As goats are wont to do.

ABRAHAM
Yes, but they're far above the real bounty-jumpers. I'd rather wear his horns and hairy coat than demean myself to the level of the man who plunders the national treasury in the name of patriotism.

ELIZABETH
Abraham.

ABRAHAM
The man who enlists in the army and deserts as soon as he gets a paycheck is bad enough—some even do so repeatedly, but the men who manipulate the grand machine for their own-

ELIZABETH
You're not those men.

ABRAHAM
Some would beg to differ.

ELIZABETH
And others would call you Moses, Deliverer. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't be interested in a man who fancied himself a Moses.

ABRAHAM scoffs.
ABRAHAM

Interested.

ELIZABETH pulls a little roughly with the comb.
ABRAHAM jumps, wincing.

Hey!

ELIZABETH smiles.

Oops.

ABRAHAM chuckles incredulously.

Never Be the Same (Reprise)

ELIZABETH

YOU KNOW I SEE
IN YOUR EYES
THE BRIGHTEST LIGHT
COMING FROM INSIDE
YOU KNOW I SEE
AND I'LL NEVER BE

You’re a good man, Abraham. And you make a fine president.

MARY (offstage)

Where is he?!

ELIZABETH

Go swear that oath and prove it. Oh, and-

ABRAHAM

Anything.

ELIZABETH

The glove you’ll wear at the inauguration ball, when you shake everyone’s hand? I’d like it.

ABRAHAM
You want my dirty glove?

ELIZABETH

Hundreds of good Americans wishing you well...

ABRAHAM

Do you wish me well, Madam Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH

Of course.

ABRAHAM

Say so.

ELIZABETH

I wish you well, Abraham Lincoln.

ABRAHAM

And my dirty glove.

ELIZABETH

And your dirty glove.

ABRAHAM

I never got the impression you were one for gifts.

ELIZABETH

Anything you send me, I’ll be sending it right back.

ABRAHAM

A remembrance, then.

ELIZABETH

A substitute.

ABRAHAM

For what?

ELIZABETH

They won’t allow me backstage.
ABRAHAM
That’s absurd.

ELIZABETH
It’s the inauguration of the most hated- and loved -President of the United States.

ABRAHAM
I’ll be sure of it.

ELIZABETH
And what would Mary say to that?

MARY (offstage)
Abraham Lincoln!

ABRAHAM
I don’t care.

ELIZABETH
I do.

ABRAHAM
Mary adores you, she’d love it.

ELIZABETH
That isn’t the point.

ABRAHAM
You're…afraid to be seen with me.

ELIZABETH
People’d get the wrong-.

ABRAHAM
What, that you mean something to me?

ELIZABETH
It’s a bad idea!
ABRAHAM
Am I not allowed a poor choice? After all I’ve done?

ELIZABETH
Are you saying I owe you something?

ABRAHAM
No! Of all the decisions, can I not once choose for myself?

ELIZABETH
Think of your title, the president-

Enter MARY.

ABRAHAM
Damn your stubbornness!

MARY
What are you doing?

ELIZABETH
He had a-

MARY
We have to go!

MARY starts fussing over ABRAHAM’s hair as she pushes him toward the door.

ELIZABETH
…Cowlick.

ABRAHAM
I’m fine.

ABRAHAM brushes her hands away. He catches them and glares at MARY.

ABRAHAM
I look fine.
MARY
You look like a-

ABRAHAM
A low-born, good for nothing cowhand, I know…I know.

ABRAHAM glances back at ELIZABETH with a wounded expression. He sighs and leaves. MARY follows.

ELIZABETH
(to the audience) …And then I was alone again. Mary did give me the glove, by the way, on his behalf, but… But the night the war ended, I realized… I realized after that night that I’d never see him again. A friend told me first, through the din of the fireworks, that the President was shot. When I heard the words I felt as if the blood had been frozen in my veins, and that my lungs must collapse for want of air. The streets were alive with wondering, awe-stricken people. Rumors flew thick and fast, and the wildest reports came with every new arrival. The words were repeated with blanched cheeks and quivering lips, “Moses is shot!” The house would not hold me. Not a mortal hand on God’s Earth could keep me from those doors.

The Assassination

ELIZABETH
THERE WERE BANNERS ON THE WALLS
THERE WERE FLAGS UP IN THE HALLS
THERE WERE PEOPLE MARCHING
IN THE STREET
THERE WAS MUSIC FROM THE WINDOWS
AND THE ROOFTOPS AND THE SHINGLES
THERE WERE PEOPLE CRYING,
“IT CAN’T BE.”

THERE WAS CHEERING
THERE WAS WAILING
IT WAS SUCH A JOYOUS DAY
FOR THE UNION HAD JUST WON THE WAR
BUT I FELL TO MY KNEES
AND SAID, “NO, GOD, PLEASE,”
‘CAUSE THE PRESIDENT
MR. PRESIDENT
ENSEMBLE

MR. PRESIDENT

ELIZABETH

Has been shot.

A gunshot.

ELIZABETH

AND I TRIED TO MAKE IT THROUGH THE CROWD
BLOCKING THE WHITE HOUSE FROM VIEW
BUT THE GRIEF WAS JUST TOO LOUD
I TOLD THEM, “BUT I KNOW HIM,”
BUT THEY SHOWED ME TO THE DOOR AND
IN MY BED
I DIDN’T SLEEP
I ONLY CRIED
COULD ONLY WEEP
IN MY BED
I PRAYED TO GOD
TO SAVE HIM FROM THE BULLET IN HIS HEART

ENSEMBLE

THERE WERE BANNERS ON THE WALLS
THERE WERE FLAGS UP IN THE HALLS
THERE WERE PEOPLE MARCHING
IN THE STREET
THERE WAS MUSIC FROM THE WINDOWS
AND THE ROOFTOPS AND THE SHINGLES
THERE WERE PEOPLE CRYING,
“IT CAN’T BE.”

ELIZABETH

THERE WAS CHEERING
THERE WAS WAILING
IT WAS SUCH A JOYOUS DAY
FOR THE UNION HAD JUST WON THE WAR
ELIZABETH

BUT WHAT A LOSS

ENSEMBLE

WHAT A LOSS

ELIZABETH

AT WHAT COST

ENSEMBLE

AT WHAT COST

ELIZABETH

MR. PRESIDENT

MR. PRESIDENT

…Has been shot.

The WHITE ENSEMBLE enters, the BLACK ENSEMBLE makes room, careful not to touch or cross lines. They all are wary of one another. All look skyward.

ELIZABETH

(to the audience) We watched the blood sun rise red over the horizon and we knew. I knew. We were witnesses to the ascension of the finest man born on God’s Earth, and we screamed.

BLACK ENSEMBLE cries out, staggeredly falling to the earth. ELIZABETH shakily begins to sing.

_The Freedmen (Reprise)_

THE DAYS ARE UNKIND
TO THE NEGRO
THE FREEDMEN ARE FREE
BUT WHAT IS IT FOR?
THE FREEDMEN ARE FREE
BUT MOSES IS FALLEN
THE FREEDMEN ARE FREE
FOR A MAN WE ADORED

OH, WHERE IS MY SAVIOR?
OH, WHERE IS MY PEACE?
OH, WHERE IS MY SOLACE?
OH, WHERE’S MY RELEASE?
OH, WHERE IS THE DE-CEN-CY
OH, WHERE IN THE WORLD?

ELIZABETH
(to the audience) The universe was swathed in funeral black. The War was over, but what now? Abraham Lincoln's blood was a salve for the loss of the Confederacy. Their rage was sated. Only bitterness remained, on both sides.

The WHITE ENSEMBLE and BLACK ENSEMBLE look uneasily at one another, distrusting. They back offstage in opposite directions.

ELIZABETH
But it wasn’t over. Not for me.

ELIZABETH turns to see a white sheet hiding a BODY.

ELIZABETH
A lion for the Republic.

She chokes up.

ELIZABETH
A Moses. …A Samson.

Slowly, she pulls back the shroud. ABRAHAM, cold and dead.

ELIZABETH
–Abraham-

ELIZABETH cannot bear to look, but cannot look away. She won’t allow herself. She will look.

ELIZABETH

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Abraham.

She reaches for his hand, flinching at its coldness. She holds it anyway. She touches his hair, fixes it just so. She touches it more. She runs her fingers through it, cradling his face, looking into his closed eyes.

ELIZABETH
(to God) How many, Lord? How many have to die before I learn?

She puts her forehead to his as she heaves quiet sobs.

ELIZABETH
You have leveled me- knocked down my tower, God. What use is a name when my heart is shot and my soul is shot and my body can’t carry anymore pain? What is it for? (to ABRAHAM) …If there’s any part of you listening, I- Abraham, I- –Damn me to Hell if I say it outloud!

ELIZABETH wails. When we sobs lessen to weeping, enter MARY.

MARY
You…Where have you been?

ELIZABETH covers the body and stands, wiping her face quickly.

ELIZABETH
Ma’am?

MARY throws her arms around ELIZABETH.

MARY
I sent for you so many times…

ELIZABETH
The White House was on lockdown, they wouldn’t-
Why didn’t you tell them I needed you? No one understands how I suffer! No one cares, oh, God-- no one cares… I'll be buried with him.

ELIZABETH

Of course-

MARY

Today!

ELIZABETH

Don’t be foolish.

MARY

I have no one… You love me, don’t you? Don’t you?

ELIZABETH

Let’s get you in bed.

MARY

Answer me!

ELIZABETH

He loved you so much.

MARY

That's not what I asked.

ELIZABETH

…I'll love you.

MARY

I have your word?

ELIZABETH

Yes, ma'am.

MARY

Good…I have something for you.

ELIZABETH
You don’t have to give me anything.

MARY

He’d want you to have it.

MARY fetches a coat spattered in blood.

MARY

Take it. Take it!

ELIZABETH takes the bloodied coat with trembling hands. She holds it to her chest.

MARY

You and Abraham were close, so we have to stick together now. And if you love me, you'll…you'll come when I call you, no matter what.

ELIZABETH

No matter what.

MARY’s bedroom. ELIZABETH helps MARY to lay down.

MARY

You gave me your word. You promised.

ELIZABETH lays in bed with MARY, still holding the coat. The redness of the blood spatter glares at the audience.

MARY

If you leave me-

ELIZABETH

I won't.

MARY

I'll kill myself. And if you turn against me, I'll…I'll ruin you. You'll be nothing without me, do you understand? You'll love me always.
ELIZABETH

I will.

MARY tries to sleep as ELIZABETH stares, clutching the coat tightly. Her voice is hollow.

ELIZABETH

(To the audience) The adoring crowds that fawned at his casket scorned his widow, spat upon her when she passed and laughed over tabloids exploiting her pain.

ELIZABETH brushes MARY's hair out of her face.

ELIZABETH

(To the audience) I did everything I could. I neglected my business, fundraised, I used every connection I had for her. No matter what I did, it wasn't enough. Made things worse, she said. The colored people would do anything for Moses' widow.

MARY

(from bed) I won't take money from negroes.

ELIZABETH

(To the audience) She exhausted all my resources. My clientele was practically in dregs, not from lack of demand. I saw J. D. Green's book, and Mattie Jackson's, and twenty or so others’, I thought, what if I wrote a book? I could give her the money. I could work with a publisher who understood…make sure my story came out right. She ruined me. I ruined myself, I… It’s getting late, folks.

ELIZABETH rises to put on a proper coat and hat, a regal lady of proper, respectable station.

ELIZABETH

…it’s no good rewriting old books so young people like them better. No, I… I’d rather move forward. Into a new day.

Enter ENSEMBLE.

ELIZABETH

Oh, and one more thing.
ELIZABETH pulls a copy of her book out of a handbag and tosses it on the floor.

ELIZABETH
They spelled my name wrong on the cover.

ENSEMBLE
IN THIS DAY
THERE'S A NEW DAWN A'BREAKIN'
IN THIS DAY
THERE'S A PLACE FOR US ALL
IN THIS DAY
THERE'S A NEW GENERATION
IN THIS DAY
IN THIS DAY
IN THIS DAY
WE HEAR THE CALL

ELIZABETH
FREEDOM IS HARD TO BE

ALL
WON

Curtain Call Medley
V. Conclusion

Elizabeth Keckly was a successful business owner, a mother, a confidante, a friend, a social justice advocate, a slave, and a black woman. In her time and after, she has been disrespected and slighted in treatment and in name, a footnote in history despite her overwhelming example of Black Excellence and humanity. My musical seeks to undo some of that bias against her with another side of her coin. I seek to provide another option to these tired versions of her identity as a black person, a historical figure, a name in a book. I want the world to see her the way I want the world to see me: real, and tangible. Through my research and play at her character, I have found that lost person, or an idea of her, that treats her with empathy and respect. My hope is that this work of study and art can bring to pass change in the way Americans perceive black pain, and the way we impose harmful stereotypes on those who merely exist while being black, or worse, dare ask for sympathy. Elizabeth was a person who lived and died in the dirt, without even a grave to mark her. Yet, she memorialized herself in her own word, immortal in print. It is time we remember her.
Referenced Works


Keckley, Elizabeth. Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave: And Four Years in the White House. G. W. Carleton & Co., 1868.


Appendix

*The War Room*

MARY

I DON’T KNOW WHERE HE IS
BUT I KNOW WHERE HE WENT
IF I MUST DECLARE IT
I WOULD VENTURE TO GUESS

HE’S LIKELY IN THE WAR ROOM
ALWAYS IN THE WAR ROOM
IN THE WAR ROOM
DAY AND NIGHT AND DAY
HE’S LIKELY IN THE WAR ROOM
BROODING IN THE WAR ROOM
MOVING ALL HIS LITTLE PAWNS
PLAYING HIS LITTLE GAME

Enter ABRAHAM.

ABRAHAM

Mother, I'm-

MARY

GOING TO THE WAR ROOM
I KNOW IT, TO THE WAR ROOM
TO THE WAR ROOM
THEY’LL DO JUST WHAT YOU SAY
RATHER BE THERE IN THE WAR ROOM
CAVORTING IN THE WAR ROOM
IN THE WAR ROOM
YOU GET TO HAVE YOUR WAY

ABRAHAM

DEAREST,
I'M NO STRATITITION

MARY
That's not a word.

ABRAHAM

STRATEGIST, THEN.
I DO MORE ASKING THAN I'D LIKE.
I GO TO THE WAR ROOM
TO DO MY DUTY TO THE NATION

MARY

AND WHAT ABOUT YOUR DUTY TO YOUR WIFE?

YOU'RE ALWAYS GOING TO THE WAR ROOM
ALWAYS TO THE WAR ROOM
TO THE WAR ROOM
DAY AND NIGHT AND DAY
HE'S LIKELY IN THE WAR ROOM
BROODING IN THE WAR ROOM
MOVING ALL HIS LITTLE PAWNS
PLAYING HIS LITTLE GAME

ABRAHAM

THIS IS NO GAME.
MEN ARE DYING
THEY ARE DYING EVERY DAY.
TOWNS ARE RAVAGED, CITIES BURNED.
AND THE WOMEN AND THE CHILDREN IN THEM,
ALL LOST TO THE SCOURGE.
AND THE FREEDMEN,
THE FORMERLY ENSLAVED,
THEY STARVE AND WALLOW
RIGHT BEFORE MY FACE!
WHAT CAN I DO
BUT INQUIRE FOR THEIR WELFARE
IN THE WAR ROOM

MARY

IN THE WAR ROOM
ALWAYS IN THE WAR ROOM
IN THE WAR ROOM
DAY AND NIGHT AND DAY
HE'S LIKELY IN THE WAR ROOM
BROODING IN THE WAR ROOM
MOVING ALL HIS LITTLE PAWNS
PLAYING HIS LITTLE GAME

ABRAHAM

I'M GOING TO THE WAR ROOM
 ALWAYS TO THE WAR ROOM
 TO THE WAR ROOM
 DAY AND NIGHT AND DAY
 OF COURSE I'M IN THE WAR ROOM
 PLEADING IN THE WAR ROOM
 IF YOU COULD END THE SUFF'RING-

MARY

WAR IS THE ONLY WAY!

MARY
IN THE WAR ROOM
ALWAYS IN THE WAR ROOM
IN THE WAR ROOM
DAY AND NIGHT AND DAY
HE'S LIKELY IN THE WAR ROOM
BROODING IN THE WAR ROOM
MOVING ALL HIS LITTLE PAWNS
PLAYING HIS LITTLE GAME

ABRAHAM
I'M GOING TO THE WAR ROOM
 ALWAYS TO THE WAR ROOM
 TO THE WAR ROOM
 DAY AND NIGHT AND DAY
 OF COURSE I'M IN THE WAR ROOM
 PLEADING IN THE WAR ROOM
 IF YOU COULD END THE SUFF'RING
 IF YOU KNEW WHAT'S AT STAKE

MARY

IN THE WAR ROOM
ALWAYS IN THE WAR ROOM
IN THE WAR ROOM
DAY AND NIGHT AND DAY
HE'S LIKELY IN THE WAR ROOM
BROODING IN THE WAR ROOM
MOVING ALL HIS LITTLE PAWNS
PLAYING HIS LITTLE GAME

MARY
YOU'RE NOT A HERO!
A NOBODY FROM NOWHERE
AND WITHOUT ME YOU WOULD BE NOWHERE STILL

ABRAHAM

I'M NOT A HERO!
ONLY A STEWARD FOR THE HEROES-

MARY

YOUR POETRY IS GOING TO GET YOU KILLED.
Where are you going now?

ABRAHAM

To the War Room.

ABRAHAM exits.
Jennifer Fleischner: It should be recording. It is.

Selah DeGering: It is.

Jennifer Fleischner: A transcript.

Selah DeGering: I hope so, otherwise I'll just be.

Selah DeGering: going through it myself.
Jennifer Fleischner: And I think it does.

Selah DeGering: yeah, so I do have five prepared questions to make it easier for everybody.

Selah DeGering: Okay, so my first question is: what is remarkable about the relationship between Elizabeth Keckly and Mary Lincoln?

Jennifer Fleischner: um.

Jennifer Fleischner: You know.

Jennifer Fleischner: I’m not– you know, I wrote a book 20 years ago and that title, the word remarkable was not mine.
Jennifer Fleischner: But I would say that um.

Jennifer Fleischner: It's remarkable, to the extent that it was noticed, it was observed, you know Keckly was a known figure.

Jennifer Fleischner: At the time, noticed in the White House.

Jennifer Fleischner: After people understood their closeness, you know, that they.

Jennifer Fleischner: They had.
Jennifer Fleischner: I don't know how they understood the closeness exactly, but carefully. It was, you know, the language of the time, put it in the way you would imagine Keckly’s loyalty to Mary Lincoln.

00:01:43.650 --> 00:01:51.780

Jennifer Fleischner: You know, helpfulness, loyalty, it wasn’t- wasn't- it's not that they were seen as equals within the relationship itself, you see.

00:01:55.170 --> 00:02:00.870

Jennifer Fleischner: Suggestions or evidence of their.

00:02:02.190 --> 00:02:03.480

Jennifer Fleischner: A kind of.

00:02:05.010 --> 00:02:19.140

Jennifer Fleischner: exchange that went on, for example, Keckly asking Mary, you know, one of the things Keckly did with her freedom and her money was to.

00:02:20.280 --> 00:02:30.840

Jennifer Fleischner: create a Contraband Association and other words to you know, put it- put her money and her freedom to move around and do what she wanted.
Jennifer Fleischner: towards racial uplift so opening a school, you know, essentially training black women to be.

Jennifer Fleischner: Dressmakers, seamstresses.

Jennifer Fleischner: And then the Contraband Association, so she, you know, she felt she could ask Mary Lincoln for money and Mary Lincoln would give it to her for that cause— for her causes.

Jennifer Fleischner: She, after.

Jennifer Fleischner: Lincoln's death— assassination— a couple years later, when they met in New York for what became the old clothes sale, I assume you've read my book, um.
Jennifer Fleischner: There was.

Jennifer Fleischner: You know, Keckly felt.

Jennifer Fleischner: It reasonable and comfortable sort of trying, you know, enlisting Frederick Douglass.

Jennifer Fleischner: And others- other black activists- to, you know, give a lecture series to help Mary Lincoln out, in other words, there was this [unintelligible] Keckly felt.

Jennifer Fleischner: Um.

Jennifer Fleischner: I think that suggests that kind of freedom, a sense of herself in a relationship with this woman that transcends- clearly transcends being, you know, a hired dressmaker. [unintelligible]
Jennifer Fleischner: You know, women and their dressmakers, women in their, you know, hair salons even today, I suppose, you know, you have this— you talk, you know, there's a kind of— can be a gossipy, it can be a relationship, I think this did go past it— go beyond it.

Jennifer Fleischner: And so, and again, you see, in Mary's letters, certainly the word friendship come up.

Jennifer Fleischner: There's not.

Jennifer Fleischner: Keckly doesn't use it in her book, she wouldn't use it in her book is my guess, but.

Jennifer Fleischner: There aren't letters. We don't see letters currently that are, you know, I haven't seen any, you know, which that's— but, you know, she—
Jennifer Fleischner: Even early on, you know, when she was in slavery, there's the one letter you can read to the, you know, one of the women who was her half sister and not- she had never been.

Jennifer Fleischner: You know, in the position of a mistress and wasn't.

Jennifer Fleischner: Fanny but this letter to Fanny speaks Keckly's sense of herself as.

Jennifer Fleischner: Equal you know, even though not, of course, right, but the way she writes, The self possession, the [unintelligible] gossip frankly.

Jennifer Fleischner: It comes from herself is the thing.

Jennifer Fleischner: So maybe in the end that stands out.
Jennifer Fleischner: I think that stands out and that's very striking, yeah. Does that help?

Selah DeGering: Yeah.

Selah DeGering: So these questions are the way that they are because I’m writing a revisionist history, and I am expecting the historical community to eat me alive.

Selah DeGering: So.

Selah DeGering: um so.

Selah DeGering: I don't have the exact quote like on my person right now um but in Elizabeth’s book which i've been studying rigorously, for the past two years um.
Selah DeGering: She says something to the effect of Mary’s business, the dress business, all of that, after, you know, the New York dress sale and things,

00:06:50.700 --> 00:06:56.670

Selah DeGering: have been constant trouble to her, um, which, I believe that sounds stressful.

00:06:58.170 --> 00:07:14.340

Selah DeGering: And she mentioned that she doesn't- she mentioned that Mary asks her about her personal life sometimes but less out of less because she cares and more out of curiosity.

00:07:14.700 --> 00:07:20.820

Selah DeGering: She says, and that Elizabeth’s brief answers were not always satisfactory.

00:07:21.090 --> 00:07:23.070

Selah DeGering: I can pull up the direct quote if you want, but it was.

00:07:23.820 --> 00:07:25.650

Selah DeGering: Essentially, that.
Selah DeGering: yeah um and.

To me, so I was raised in a white family that had race issues with black people.

um so.

To me, you know I read this and I looked at it and I was like, “oh that doesn't sound like.

An equal friendship, because we see Mary confiding in Elizabeth all the time, and Elizabeth always seeking to be sympathetic more or less, um, and yet Elizabeth states that when Mary occasionally asks about how things are going, she doesn't feel comfortable.

doing the same and confiding in Mary.
Selah DeGering: And, you know, that's—I feel like that's to be expected, with the relationships at the time.

Selah DeGering: But simultaneously when you Google Elizabeth Keckly.

Selah DeGering: All of that comes up or all of these articles about how they had this great friendship and everything was perfect and.

Selah DeGering: You know.

Selah DeGering: [unintelligible]

Selah DeGering: Yeah and I’ve found it very frustrating, um, there is the—what museum, is it the Museum of the Daughters of the Revolution? I believe, um, yeah, so I have a friend that works there.
Selah DeGering: She's getting her PhD in history as well and [unintelligible] so they.

Selah DeGering: Are looking to put in an exhibit about Elizabeth Keckly and um.

Selah DeGering: [unintelligible]

Selah DeGering: [unintelligible]

Selah DeGering: Some of my questions are have they read a book and or have they spoken to a black person about race relations ever.

Jennifer Fleischner: You know, I think that the- what you're talking about, you know, if you read W.E.B. duBois’ “The Veil”, you know, the problem, the 20th century, have you read “Souls of Black Folk”?
Jennifer Fleischner: He makes a point and I think this is the point you're making. You should look at that, look at the opening chapter.

Jennifer Fleischner: He wrote in 1903 and he talks about living behind the veil and one of the, you know, black people behind the veil and one of the points he makes, and this is what you're talking about and I think it's true.

Jennifer Fleischner: And certainly true and Keckly, you know, and Lincoln’s relationship is that the black person knows way more about the white person, then.

Jennifer Fleischner: Right, and that has to do.

Jennifer Fleischner: With who's the one who's- who's watching, you know? Who's the one who's- who's got the stake in knowing everything, and, you know, Mary Lincoln.
Jennifer Fleischner: um, yeah, I mean that- so the dynamic is not a mutual friendship and that's where, in my book, I did- again, this is 20- plus years ago, you know, say something about the problematic nature of the friendship, but, but the investment in.

Jennifer Fleischner: You know, it comes up all the time, the investment in making Mary out to be so-

Jennifer Fleischner: Seeing herself- them as equals it's just not.

Jennifer Fleischner: [unintelligible]

Jennifer Fleischner: And Keckly.

Jennifer Fleischner: I think the other thing to keep in mind is.
Jennifer Fleischner: If you read

Jennifer Fleischner: Other- if you read slave narratives, Keckly's is not a slave narrative.

Jennifer Fleischner: But.

Jennifer Fleischner: It's- it's pretty clear in this long tradition that [unintelligible]

Jennifer Fleischner: That one of the.

Jennifer Fleischner: Benefits, one of the gains of being free is you don't have to tell everything, you know, [unintelligible] you- you- you don't tell everything, right, you keep things to yourself. Writing freely is calculated. She talks about writing freely in her preface.
Jennifer Fleischner: That- that people will complain that she wrote too freely.

Jennifer Fleischner: [unintelligible] really means not saying, not being obliged, right, to say everything, and so I think also, again, I wanted to distinguish between Keckly’s sense of the relationship.

Jennifer Fleischner: From Mary’s and I would say that Keckly.

Jennifer Fleischner: It's possible that Keckly.

Jennifer Fleischner: Understood herself as equal.

Jennifer Fleischner: And, but not from the other side, and so you know, Mary wouldn't have seen it that way or couldn't get past a certain point, except when she.
Jennifer Fleischner: And it's very clear how much dependence on [unintelligible] right.

Jennifer Fleischner: And so, in some ways.

Jennifer Fleischner: That dependence.

Jennifer Fleischner: Gives Keckly a certain kind of power, though of course not, you know because it costs a lot.

Jennifer Fleischner: Right at the end, she doesn't want to go with her, she, you know, the Old Clothes business, you know, there's a lot of costs there.

Jennifer Fleischner: Yeah, so, no, it's right to absolutely question that. I'm kind of.
Jennifer Fleischner: Surprised to hear that you don't and that what you're reading, the criticism you're reading or whatever it is you're reading.

Jennifer Fleischner: Doesn't say that because my impression is that a lot of the criticism written certainly [unintelligible].

Jennifer Fleischner: Does address the problem at, you know, the- the problematic, you know.

Selah DeGering: So, like other adaptations of this story, so there's a play I believe, it's called “Mary T and Lizzie K” um there's a novelization.

Jennifer Fleischner: Yeah.

Selah DeGering: Yeah.
Jennifer Fleischner: You know, I get annoyed, so I just.

Selah DeGering: Oh, no, I understand.

Selah DeGering: I don't blame you um yeah I personally avoided reading the adaptations because I didn't want them to color my interpretation of the record, but my mentor, my Professor-advisor person did read them.

Selah DeGering: He was reading what I wrote and he was like, "this is not synonymous with what is in these other adaptations that are present" and what I have noticed is that a lot of these adaptations, that some of these.

Selah DeGering: I want to say, lazy interpretations [unintelligible] I feel like anybody [unintelligible] into it in context can see that there's a dynamic issue.
Selah DeGering: But.

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Selah DeGering: Anyways.

120

Selah DeGering: I've seen a lot of.

121

Selah DeGering: Predominantly white women doing this and that's not— I mean, my husband’s white, my kids are mixed, like it's not, like, explicitly a race thing, but like, as far as perspective is concerned, I think that, um, you know, may be possible.

122

Selah DeGering: That, I don't know, wanting to see yourself in the story and identifying with whoever is closer to you which may be Mary

123

Selah DeGering: You know, we're talking about the Civil War race relations, things are kind of tense there.
Selah DeGering: And wanting to see, like, one example of a white person that isn't terrible in the Civil War or trying to tell a story of hope in the Civil War, that kind of thing, um.

Selah DeGering: You know, and it leads to a lot of defense of Mary Lincoln, a lot of “not her fault, she was mentally ill” or “it's not her fault and it doesn't matter because she was a feminist icon” and.

Selah DeGering: You know, just the historical community. So.

Selah DeGering: My friend who is getting the PhD.

Selah DeGering: She has written her former theses on—we’re from Louisiana um, by the way, just for context, um, [unintelligible] she wrote her previous theses on.

Selah DeGering: How.
Selah DeGering: We talk about the black families and slaves that served in plantation homes.

Selah DeGering: So she, you know, went around to various plantation homes and went through their tours and she took notes on whether they mentioned those families at all, whether we know their names.

Selah DeGering: And her current work is on trying to restore.

Selah DeGering: Some of that history by trying to track down some of these relatives of these families and seeing if they have any oral history about who was there.

Selah DeGering: So that's her work and.
Selah DeGering: Well.

00:17:57.360 --> 00:18:00.510
Selah DeGering: I forgot where I was going with that, but it was relevant.

137
00:18:02.190 --> 00:18:02.850
Jennifer Fleischner: Okay.

138
00:18:03.150 --> 00:18:03.930
Selah DeGering: I swear.

139
00:18:05.040 --> 00:18:06.540
Selah DeGering: Oh, but.

140
00:18:09.150 --> 00:18:23.220
Selah DeGering: Yeah just there there's a disconnection between, um, what may be considered realistic for the time and what we are wanting to see now looking back because we're in.

141
00:18:24.870 --> 00:18:27.240
Selah DeGering: A new era of race, war, I feel like.
Selah DeGering: There's just a lot of contention surrounding that topic and it's been building up for a long time.

Selah DeGering: And so I can see the appeal of trying to tell a story of hope um about that, through these characters given that.

Selah DeGering: You know, it's based on a true story so.

Jennifer Fleischner: Yeah.

Selah DeGering: I think- I think that was where I was going.
Jennifer Fleischner: [unintelligible]

149

Jennifer Fleischner: [unintelligible]

150

Jennifer Fleischner: Mary Lincoln relied on Keckly for many, many, many things, you know, beyond [unintelligible].

151

Jennifer Fleischner: Mean, I think that would be a really interesting angle to take. Why a musical?

152

Selah DeGering: Ah.

153

Jennifer Fleischner: Just curious. 154
Selah DeGering: So, from my reading of Elizabeth’s book, like, the kind of person that she was, she, with reason, kept a lot of things herself.

Selah DeGering: She seemed very opinionated.

Selah DeGering: Um, you know, knew her perspective on things and.

Selah DeGering: Was smart enough not to share it most of the time.

Selah DeGering: And so, a musical gives her the opportunity to speak her mind and express her feelings outside of the context of dialogue and.
Selah DeGering: Yeah, so we get the opportunity to see more of her as opposed to watching her watch others the whole time.

Jennifer Fleischner: Mm hmm.

Selah DeGering: Right, it also helps with, like, time skips and some.

Selah DeGering: Right, I can say this happened, and this happened, and this happened, this happened.

Selah DeGering: But it's not boring because there's a catchy tune behind it.
Jennifer Fleischner: [unintelligible]

Jennifer Fleischner: And do you see yourself in the musical? I assume that you mean it's like an interior monologue, she's singing something that she that she's not necessarily saying to another person, right?

Selah DeGering: There are, yes, so the rule with musicals that I’ve learned in college is.

Selah DeGering: That.

Selah DeGering: There is only a song when the feeling, or the energy is so strong that it cannot be communicated in any other way but song.
Jennifer Fleischner: Right, right.

173
00:21:36.690 --> 00:21:38.010

Selah DeGering: Um so.

174
00:21:38.700 --> 00:21:59.610

Selah DeGering: Right, yeah, and like I said in the beginning, I feel like Elizabeth’s sense of humanity as a historical figure has been stripped. I mean, she's not the only one with that issue, but I saw her, I felt touched by her story, I saw myself in it, um, and I wanted to bring that out.

175
00:22:00.330 --> 00:22:04.230

Jennifer Fleischner: Um do you use her own words in the music?

176
00:22:04.950 --> 00:22:05.130

So.

177
00:22:06.240 --> 00:22:08.280

Selah DeGering: I do, so there are.

178
00:22:10.350 --> 00:22:24.660
Selah DeGering: So Elizabeth narrates her own story. She has, you know, interjections where, you know, dialogue isn't happening, where she's like, “and for historical context, this is where we are, this is what's going on.” I take quotes from the book and.

Jennifer Fleischner: That's nice.

Selah DeGering: Discuss that yeah.

Jennifer Fleischner: I'd love to see it.

Selah DeGering: I hope you like it.

Selah DeGering: So the big.
Selah DeGering: Revisionist of the history as far as this is concerned, is that I.

Selah DeGering: Okay, I wanted to give Elizabeth a sense of power over the narrative.

Selah DeGering: And I wanted her to be more than just someone who knew about all of these white people, um, so there's that and then also, in her book, I feel that the sections where she gets the most passionate in talking about her life are.

Selah DeGering: Essentially anytime she's talking about Abraham Lincoln. He's like.

Selah DeGering: The best, you know, he's the noblest on God's earth, he, you know, she will just pontificate on and on about how great amazing he is and he's so emotionally available, etc, followed by a snide comment about, “by the way, Mary hates flowers and animals and everything.”
Selah DeGering: And then she, like, won't elaborate.

Selah DeGering: Just seems very petty to me.

Selah DeGering: So I wrote a version of the story, wherein Elizabeth falls in love with Abraham Lincoln, um, and there's not— there's no, like, raunchy affair that happens— um, I wanted to be respectful of what was.

Selah DeGering: What— what probably happened, which is nothing.

Selah DeGering: I wanted to be respectful of the people involved um so it's not written to be this great scandalous drama it's just two people that are struggling through grief that have a lot, kind of, on their plates.

Selah DeGering: That don't receive.
Selah DeGering: Comfort from anybody else, they don't have confidants of their own until they turn to each other, um, you know the moment in Elizabeth’s book, where she.

Selah DeGering: Discusses watching Abraham Lincoln cry over his dead son and how he talks to her and confided in her about that, and how that touched her and how that changed her perspective. Moments like that, I feel, are.

Selah DeGering: Indicative of some degree of softness on her part, how far that goes I don't think we can ever know just because we weren't there and they're not here to tell us, but.

Selah DeGering: Yes.

Jennifer Fleischner: Yeah, so, um, you know, that scene is the inspiration for George Saunders novel “Lincoln at the Bar” which, if you haven't read he quotes Keckly's book quite a bit and that novel, it's a really good novel.
Selah DeGering: I will look into it.

Jennifer Fleischner: Yeah well anyway, what other questions? You had a few others.

Jennifer Fleischner: Yes, yeah.

Oh.

Selah DeGering: To your knowledge did Elizabeth have any close confidants?

Jennifer Fleischner: Um.
Jennifer Fleischner: I don't know what you mean. You know, I, she had friends.

Jennifer Fleischner: And she had a circle of people.

Jennifer Fleischner: The point of her book was not to.

Jennifer Fleischner: Write about.

Jennifer Fleischner: That.

Jennifer Fleischner: I mean, I think that's The other thing, so, you know, the end she doesn't mention. You.

Jennifer Fleischner: Have this idea about Lincoln she doesn't mention other relationships, she believes that, you know, her mother, I found a record of Aggie- Aggie having a son, you know,
there are lots of things left out, and I think that um, you
know, her age, she had an aim in writing and less.

Jennifer Fleischner: Memoir and in that sense, I mean the
book was written at a time and a place it was pitched to
sell.

Jennifer Fleischner: And she talks anyway, about the reason she
wrote it.

Jennifer Fleischner: And she talks anyway, about the reason she
wrote it.

Jennifer Fleischner: In the preface so- so she does not dwell
on her personal life.

Jennifer Fleischner: Outside of.
Jennifer Fleischner: The house, right, so.

220
00:27:14.430 --> 00:27:24.300

Jennifer Fleischner: She definitely had a circle of friends, the middle, you know the black Community she lived in the churches, she was a member if you can find.

221
00:27:25.440 --> 00:27:30.300

Jennifer Fleischner: I talked a little bit about that, you know, the- the families.

222
00:27:30.510 --> 00:27:33.720

Jennifer Fleischner: The families, she lived with, um.

223
00:27:35.610 --> 00:27:39.750

Jennifer Fleischner: But she does not talk about that- that's not.

224
00:27:40.110 --> 00:27:42.120

Selah DeGering: She- she mentioned that she.

225
00:27:44.100 --> 00:27:46.890

Selah DeGering: Was invited as a bridesmaid and six weddings.
Selah DeGering: One summer.

Jennifer Fleischner: When she was in slave and wasn't you know, and she has no.

Jennifer Fleischner: She hasn't mentioned, you know, missing anybody and also it's not clear there.

Jennifer Fleischner: What that means, you could be a bridesmaid like literally obeyed and they're watching people getting married.

Jennifer Fleischner: True, we- it's not clear to me what that means.
Jennifer Fleischner: And so, or who I tried to figure out.

Jennifer Fleischner: You know, just- just.

Jennifer Fleischner: So, you know, the reason I wrote the book was her- Keckly [unintelligible] and so it was to bring her in history, the way you know rather than revise that history um but you know she- she tells us.

Jennifer Fleischner: You know, she- she's the reason we know about her, right, you know?

Jennifer Fleischner: She wouldn't be- you know, if not for her own writing the book.

Jennifer Fleischner: And she's going to control what's in it.
Jennifer Fleischner: So she doesn't suit—so—I don't know, you know, the way to get at that.

Jennifer Fleischner: Would be through not her own words, it would have to be through someone doing the research on other middle class blacks are on the churches, I looked at the church records to see where her name came up, it would have to be.

Selah DeGering: Yeah, I was just asking because I personally couldn't find anything, but I feel that in her book, there are places where she mentioned friends, she just doesn't name.

Selah DeGering: Where she's—she's walking through the town with friends or she mentioned.

Selah DeGering: A close friend of mine and doesn't.
Selah DeGering: Say who, [unintelligible].

Jennifer Fleischner: Or she- right, or she- she organizes the contraband association with the, you know, people in the Church.

Jennifer Fleischner: Yeah.

Selah DeGering: Yeah. Oh, I make a joke about that in the script about her being very fun at parties.

Selah DeGering: And Abraham Lincoln's like “or very good friend” and she was like “yeah.”

Jennifer Fleischner: yeah.
Jennifer Fleischner: it's worth your reading if you- I think I quoted from it, but the.

Jennifer Fleischner: You know, the [unintelligible] you know, there was a eulogy that- that was you know, she was eulogized when she died. It was a fairly long eulogy and it's in the top, you know he talks about her presence.

Jennifer Fleischner: But.

Jennifer Fleischner: Yeah, you know it's a good question. You'd have to.

Jennifer Fleischner: invent that.
Selah DeGering: I do have to. Like, the context of the way she is telling the story is that she has an apprentice that she's gotten very close to who asks her about what her book is about and what is in there, because she can't read.

Selah DeGering: And Elizabeth then tells the story that we find in the book.

Jennifer Fleischner:
Yeah.

Selah DeGering: So I got to put it in there, because I wanted to talk about the people that she helped and the struggles that she saw, I wanted-

Selah DeGering: So essentially, Elizabeth's arc, I suppose, the purpose of her being there or main objective as a character.

Selah DeGering: Is that she's very loving and she.
Selah DeGering: Wants to serve others and help other people.

Selah DeGering: And her caring about how other people feel so much.

Selah DeGering: Is ultimately her downfall, I suppose, as far as, like, the narrative is concerned.

Selah DeGering: Yeah, um.

Selah DeGering: Where she wants things to be proper, she wants things to be correct.
Selah DeGering: You know, she wants to serve her role in its fullest everywhere, she goes on to a detriment to herself.

Jennifer Fleischner: She mentions good friends hear Lincoln's last speech.

Jennifer Fleischner: In the White House before he was assassinated.

Jennifer Fleischner: The night before, a couple of nights, his last speech he gave on a Tuesday I think it was, so a few nights before she- she asked to bring a friend to the White House and that's in her book.

Jennifer Fleischner: Yes, yeah.

Selah DeGering: I definitely wanted to put in there that she has a life outside of.

Um I definitely found it frustrating reading it through the first couple of times because I was like, “Okay, but what about you?”

Jennifer Fleischner: Remember her audience.

She pointed.

Out a purpose and to show her.

Jennifer Fleischner: Also to- to show.
Jennifer Fleischner: Herself as a free black woman, you know, in a white world.

00:33:17.430 --> 00:33:20.010
Selah DeGering: Yes, I think that she does a very good job of that.

00:33:21.270 --> 00:33:32.160
Selah DeGering: [unintelligible] self possessed and intentionally navigating this maze of social expectations, yeah, yeah.

00:33:36.930 --> 00:33:50.460
Selah DeGering: So um, let's see.

00:33:33.480 --> 00:33:35.700
Selah DeGering: What is your opinion, if any, on the relationship or potential relationship of, like, which any, like, any kind: friendship, a confidant.

00:33:36.930 --> 00:33:50.460
Selah DeGering: A person that works in your house, um, between Elizabeth and Abraham Lincoln?
Jennifer Fleischner: Well, I don't read that, I don't see what you're talking about seeing her but, um, but that's okay.

Selah DeGering: I didn't expect you to.

Jennifer Fleischner: I also don't see her as loving.

Jennifer Fleischner: In the way you're describing actually.

Jennifer Fleischner: Okay, um, but- but that's okay, too.

Jennifer Fleischner: I think.
Jennifer Fleischner: I think that.

Jennifer Fleischner: One of the things she—she.

Jennifer Fleischner: Talks about a lot is Mary Lincoln's, like, out of control. This.

Jennifer Fleischner: And particularly around the mourning, around that scene, and I think in that stoicism that she.

Jennifer Fleischner: Learned to prosper, probably the self to survival.

Jennifer Fleischner: Part of her identity.
Jennifer Fleischner: Something that I think, and I think also she might have seen mean, I think that her.

Jennifer Fleischner: connection.

Jennifer Fleischner: Such as is to Lincoln had to do with it kind of respect and, and.

Jennifer Fleischner: And he was a depressive guy, he was depressed, you know. That kind of connection in terms of mourning and doing in a different way and.

Jennifer Fleischner: And so.

Jennifer Fleischner: I think, maybe some of it had to do with that and some of it, maybe had to do with they're both.
Jennifer Fleischner: In the position of having to deal with Mary.

Jennifer Fleischner: Actually.

Selah DeGering: Yep.

Jennifer Fleischner: And so I see that. I see also, Lincoln is pretty accessible.

Jennifer Fleischner: And that scene they're looking at a window there you know with the goats and all that comment about not you know, Mary doesn't like goats is a comment, I think, partly to establish.
Jennifer Fleischner: The what she shares, you know sort of a real connection, where she actually shares with Lincoln or identifies.

Jennifer Fleischner: And Lincoln, you know, when he writes about.

Jennifer Fleischner: Slavery before he's President and he talks about he talks about is the system of Labor.

Jennifer Fleischner: And you know as race, you know, he was racist, he had this idea blacks and whites can't live together, it all sorts of things you know, I didn't- in the Douglass-Lincoln debates.

Jennifer Fleischner: You know, he doesn't offend race and so when he talks about slavery, it is a system of Labor where you don't get the fruits of your Labor and that's the injustice of it like that's profoundly the injustice, and I think his understanding of work and Labor.
Jennifer Fleischner: Would have been something correctly understood.

Jennifer Fleischner: She talks about that explicitly, you know, being worth her salt. She's very bright, all of that, about Labor and we're getting paid for it and not getting paid for it.

Jennifer Fleischner: So I find I, my impression, like, if I were going to-

Jennifer Fleischner: So, no, but also, you know, Lincoln lived in a man's world, so he's- he's not going to have a close friendship with her.

Jennifer Fleischner: And I mean the White House was a man's.
Jennifer Fleischner: World I mean that was part of Mary's problem with it too.

Jennifer Fleischner: But.

Jennifer Fleischner: So I think that, to the extent that there's a connection, it's around.

Jennifer Fleischner: Work, it's around ways of mourning and.

Jennifer Fleischner: And also an alliance to, you know, around managing Mary, frankly.

Selah DeGering: That is actually- those points that you just listed are actually exactly what I talk about.
Selah DeGering: Um and.

Selah DeGering: You know that's- that's- that, um I was intrigued by.

Selah DeGering: Elizabeth's portrayal of Abraham Lincoln, because I feel like it's different than a lot of the others that we see on the internet and, like, the historical narrative.

Selah DeGering: Where Abraham Lincoln is melancholy, and probably chronically depressed, and.

Selah DeGering: Um, does a lot of.
Selah DeGering: Um, moping and brooding, whereas in all of these, like, little scenes that Elizabeth chooses to write out about Abraham Lincoln, he's telling jokes and being clever.

00:39:18.660 --> 00:39:20.580

Selah DeGering: Or he's merry.

Jennifer Fleischner: Heart of man, I mean that's a big part of his.

00:39:22.380 --> 00:39:42.270

Jennifer Fleischner: The historical record on him, and if you read, like, you know, there's tons of stuff on Lincoln but both of those are written about a lot. The depressive Lincoln and the rock, the rowdy, raucous guy- like, liking-to-tell-stories Lincoln.

00:39:24.960 --> 00:39:42.270

Jennifer Fleischner: Yeah, yeah.

Selah DeGering: I tried to incorporate both, um. I just felt it was.
Selah DeGering: I don't know.

Selah DeGering: Funny.

Selah DeGering: Interesting, it was interesting to me that she seems to address that part of him more than the part that broods endlessly.

Selah DeGering: The kind of angsty, um.

Selah DeGering: Yeah, I just thought that was interesting- an interesting note, um, for me.
Selah DeGering: Yeah, um.

00:40:23.250 --> 00:40:28.350

Selah DeGering: Have you received any backlash or negative attention for telling the story, and if so, why?

00:40:30.420 --> 00:40:31.770

Jennifer Fleischner: Again, you know.

00:40:34.140 --> 00:40:40.860

Jennifer Fleischner: Again, when I, this was a of work of the 1990s and early 2000s.

00:40:41.970 --> 00:41:01.950

Jennifer Fleischner: And I am white and I also wrote- the book I wrote before this was on women slave narratives and it was this psychoanalytic reading, actually, about the legacy and it was talking about a mixed race identity and I got a lot of.

00:41:03.870 --> 00:41:07.650

Jennifer Fleischner: Lots and lots of- it was considered a breakthrough book.
Jennifer Fleischner: Literally called that, and that book and.

And Keckly.

Again, you know it still stands, I don't understand why it's the only biography of Keckly. there's a lot of work to be done. If someone- if people would do it, there's one person doing it, but I think that.

Jennifer Fleischner: To the extent I got backlash, it was then, at the time.

And it was.

Kind of basic.
Jennifer Fleischner: Well, the backlash came from all sorts. I’m a Northerner, so it came as.

Jennifer Fleischner: “Yankee coming to tell us about us.” Now, some that came from white people, and now that is totally different now. Totally different scene. It also came a little bit as being white and going into this.

Jennifer Fleischner: And the support I got was very important to me.

Jennifer Fleischner: From- from the places I got it, the scholars, the people who really supported my work and made a huge difference to me at the time.

Jennifer Fleischner: [unintelligible] but, when it strikes me now, more than anything is that the interest then.

Jennifer Fleischner: Always the invitations, I thought, everything was from the Lincoln world, the Lincoln world, and
and the interests of Mary Lincoln, and it was very much focused on that.

00:42:53.430 --> 00:43:17.340

Jennifer Fleischner: And, and yes, Keckly was absolutely interesting and part of it, but as I think you've pointed- you pointed out consumed into that narrative. Now it's totally the opposite. Every- and I get a lot of calls- [unintelligible] and it's about Keckly because now, the interest is as it should have been then.

00:43:18.750 --> 00:43:28.890

Jennifer Fleischner: But it wasn't on the black woman who was the whole point of my writing the book, but I couldn't have sold it as a

biography of.

00:43:18.750 --> 00:43:28.890

Jennifer Fleischner: But it wasn't on the black woman who was the whole point of my writing the book, but I couldn't have sold it as a

biography of.

00:43:30.000 --> 00:43:38.220

Jennifer Fleischner: A black. As her stand alone it wouldn't have worked anyway, the Lincoln’s have to be part of it, so I think that.

00:43:39.660 --> 00:43:41.250

Jennifer Fleischner: You know, that's where.
Jennifer Fleischner: I would like to see more being done on Keckly as you're suggesting, apart from the Lincoln's. Is it possible, is it even-

Selah DeGering: Is there a.

Jennifer Fleischner: -A point to it, I don't know, so.

Jennifer Fleischner: And

Jennifer Fleischner: You know, I am also not as close to it all, as I used to be.

Jennifer Fleischner: Yeah, it's not like I've gone on to do amazing other things, but it's been a long time- a lot of it sticks with me more than I.
Jennifer Fleischner: Thought possible.

Jennifer Fleischner: Given the way my memory is, but, and my complete mission to make it still is, you know, I'm incredibly delighted that she's had the recognition—she's had an obituary in the New York Times.

Jennifer Fleischner: A couple years ago.

Jennifer Fleischner: Historical markers with her name spelled correctly, you know, just all sorts of recognitions— the PR, and I am very proud of that, had to have—having it had a hand in some of that.

Jennifer Fleischner: But I would love more work to be done.

Jennifer Fleischner: That would require, you know, that requires you know the archival work.
Jennifer Fleischner: Also.

You know, there's got to be one out there.

Jennifer Fleischner: You know, so, but- yeah, the pushback I got was.

Particularly not so much about the Keckly book, but the one I wrote before. The one particularly about speaking about trauma and child abuse and.

Selah DeGering: How dare you.

Jennifer Fleischner: About mixed race.
Jennifer Fleischner: You know, slave women who wrote about having a white mother and a black mother, two mothers in my family, black and white, I sort of weighed all that.

Jennifer Fleischner: Yeah, at that time, and that was.

Jennifer Fleischner: New territory and particularly, again, being a white more than, say.

Jennifer Fleischner: You know.

Jennifer Fleischner: I think that was.
Jennifer Fleischner: That's where the pushback came, not- no- more, I mean, I come from, you know, much younger people certainly, and rightly so, so, you.

Jennifer Fleischner: Have many different ways of approaching this from how I did, you know, again, that many years ago.

Selah DeGering: I was just, um.

Selah DeGering: Oh.

Selah DeGering: Let's see.

Selah DeGering: So part of my thesis is about [unintelligible], okay, so I have the musical portion and I also have the written portion where it's- where i'm talking about.
Selah DeGering: You know, my research, and my methodology, how I went about writing this, who I talked to, etc.

Selah DeGering: Where is this book.

Selah DeGering: Anyways, you've just given me so many book recommendations, I wanted to give you one, but I can't find it on the Internet.

Jennifer Fleischner: You can email me.

Jennifer Fleischner: You know, one of the things that I think would be interesting, perhaps, maybe not, you know, Keckly's sense of her.
Jennifer Fleischner: Multiple, you know, multiple racial origins or origin, so, you know, white black, native, certainly, indigenous— you can see it in her face, I mean.

Jennifer Fleischner: How she actually navigated that, you know the connections to her half sisters, you know, visiting and back afterwards, I mean, that was not uncommon, that— the trip back.

Jennifer Fleischner: You could see others do it, but, but, that would be sort of interesting to explore. She— she's very aware of her son’s.

Jennifer Fleischner: You know, whiteness.

Jennifer Fleischner: He, I think, as the next generation.

Jennifer Fleischner: Had he lived.
Jennifer Fleischner: It would have been interesting to see what kind of path he chose, you know.

Jennifer Fleischner: He took—used the name Kirkland.

Selah DeGering: He takes up a good portion of the first act, so.

Jennifer Fleischner: Yeah, I mean all of that, it's really interesting and worth.

Jennifer Fleischner: Exploring I think.

Jennifer Fleischner: Not sure.
Selah DeGering: Yeah, so I'm black, white, and Native American as well.

00:48:48.660 --> 00:48:52.260
Selah DeGering: So, you know, and I- like I said, I grew up in a white household.

00:48:52.380 --> 00:48:54.570
Selah DeGering: Right, and a white neighborhood.

00:48:55.380 --> 00:49:15.600
Selah DeGering: Well, I mean I would have, and still do have, you know, strangers hold open the door for me, I had someone, like, look me in the face, who, who was white and and asked me “What are you?”
Selah DeGering: Or, you know, have had people approach me or introduce themselves to me and then, like, stopped mid introduction and go, “By the way, if you don't mind my asking, like, what's your identity, you know, where do you come from?”

Selah DeGering: And

Selah DeGering: It gets tricky, really uncomfortable, but at this point I just kind of go “You tell me. Guess.”

Selah DeGering: And then they get uncomfortable and it's a very fun game.

Jennifer Fleischner: I mean, I would love to.

Jennifer Fleischner: See some research done on that somewhere [unintelligible].
Selah DeGering: So I did find the book, it's called “Beyond Black: Racial Identity in America.”

Jennifer Fleischner: [unintelligible] send me an email, I mean, I.

Jennifer Fleischner: Mean, it's probably better, yeah.

Selah DeGering: I could send it to you.
Selah DeGering: But yeah, that was among.

Selah DeGering: the great stuff that I read because I've read a lot of studies, a lot of studies on.

Selah DeGering: Race Relations. I read a study about- I'm.

Selah DeGering: Sorry, my children are crying.

Selah DeGering: Now, so- they're now crying so, my- my mind is “whoo.”

Jennifer Fleischner: Yeah, yeah.

Selah DeGering: I read a study about doctors in the medical field.
Selah DeGering: And about, like, the average American populace.

Selah DeGering: Wherein they surveyed Americans at varying degrees of medical training and they asked them about pain tolerance.

Selah DeGering: Overwhelmingly, the average American perception of people with and without medical training, I'll find that quote: “the white body”- no. “The black body is stronger than the white body.”

Selah DeGering: And you know I've also experienced that going into.
Selah DeGering: The emergency room.

00:51:53.250 --> 00:52:06.150

Selah DeGering: And having no record of pain medication abuse, no record of actively going into doctors offices complaining of pain, like, no-no record to suggest that I was lying.

00:52:07.620 --> 00:52:11.250

Selah DeGering: And been treated as though.

00:52:12.720 --> 00:52:33.600

Selah DeGering: They thought I was there for drugs. Just outright, um, and that was horrific and very traumatizing for me, but you know, I took that experience and I went, like, “Wait a minute, does that translate into how we talk about.

00:52:34.740 --> 00:52:39.450

Selah DeGering: Black people? Does that translate into how we see black people? Probably!

00:52:41.400 --> 00:52:57.570

Selah DeGering: Um, where does that come from?” And you know, so I started reading slave narratives and I started digging back into, “Where does this come from, what, what, what is this nonsense that we see in our modern medical system?”

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Selah DeGering: You know, and, “How does that apply to.

Other stereotypes and other ways that we-
other ways that white society, as it were, has.

Selah DeGering: You know, how to deal with black society.

Jennifer Fleischner: Yeah.

Jennifer Fleischner: So maybe- I actually had a student
coming in 11, she's.

Jennifer Fleischner: Okay, [unintelligible] but that's it
that's really interesting and important.
Jennifer Fleischner: Yeah, you know, while you were talking—stop the recording.
Music Sample

In That Day

Avery DeGering

Amy Loertscher

Elizabeth

\[ \text{A life-time of romance and sorrow, of} \]

Black Ensemble

White Ensemble

Piano

B♭ Bass Clarinet

Violoncello

Concert Snare Drum
Elizabeth

day-dreams, of real-zed tom-or - rows. A life-time, a

Black Ensemble

White Ensemble

Pno.

Bs B. Cl.

Vc.

Con. Sn.
Freely, expressively

Elizabeth

hundred years, a hundred wars, a
hundred tears, a hundred people, hundreds of people,
hundreds of thousands of people, in that day.
In that day,

In that day,

In that day,

In that day,

there were

there were

Pno.

B♭ B. Cl.

Vc.

Con. Sn.
Elizabeth

Black Ensemble

In that day,

White Ensemble

horses and buggies, in that day, there were

Pno.

Bs B. Cl.

Vc.

Con. Sn.

In that day,

horses and buggies, in that day, there were
In that day,

In that day,

gal- as and balls. In that day, there was

gal- as and balls. In that day, there was
In that day,

In that day,

hon-or and glo-ry, in that day,

hon-or and glo-ry, in that day,

there were

there were

Pno.

B♭ B. Cl.

Vc.

Con. Sn.
Elizabeth

Black Ensemble

White Ensemble

sum-mers and falls.

In that

sum-mers and falls.

In that

In that

In that

In that

In that

In that

In that

Pno.

B's B. Cl.

Vc.

Con. Sn.
day, there was trade on that-lan-lan-tic, in that day, there was trade on that-lan-lan-tic, in that

In that

In that

Pno.

B♭ B. Cl.

Vc.

Con. Sn.
Elizabeth: day, there were cries of th'a-bused. In that

Black Ensemble: day, there were cries of th'a-bused. In that

White Ensemble: day, In that

Pno.

B's B. Cl.

Vc.

Con. Sn.
day there was sermon on Sundays, in that

In that

In that
Elizabeth

day, there were p'lice in the pews. In that

Black Ensemble

day, there were p'lice in the pews. In that

White Ensemble

day, In that

Pno.

Bb B. Cl.

Ve.

Con. Sn.
Elizabeth

Black Ensemble

White Ensemble

Pno.

B♭ B. Cl.

Vc.

Con. Sn.

day, their chains were hard-fast! In that
In that day the masters were kinder, in that day

Elizabeth

Black Ensemble

White Ensemble

Pno.

B♭ B. Cl.

Vc.

Con. Sn.
hard to be won,

hard to be

hard to be

hard to be

hard to be

hard to be
hard to be won,

hard to be won,

hard to be won,

hard to be won,
Elizabeth

won. In that day,

Black Ensemble

won. In that day,

White Ensemble

won. In that day,

Pno.

B♭ B. Cl.

Ve.

Con. Sn.
blood stained the soil,
mothers and daughters,
blood stained the soil,
blood stained the soil,

Pno.

B♭ B. Cl.

Vc.

Con. Sn.
Elizabeth

Black Ensemble

White Ensemble

Pno.

B♭ B. Cl.

Vc.

Con. Sn.

The generations

The generations

The generations

fathers and sons.
wailed from the ditches' chest! The ancestors

wailed from the ditches, ancestors

wailed from ditches, ancestors, they
screamed from the mud! And from that day of
screamed from the mud!
From that day of
Elizabeth

b - dage and vio - lence,

Black Ensemble

b - dage and vio - lence,

White Ensemble

From that

Pno.

B♭ B. Cl.

Ve.

Con. Sn.
From that day of day of day of
From that day of
From that day
God given law, from that day of
God given law, from that day
ff
ff
ff
ff
righteous contention, came a
Elizabeth

voice, came a voice,

voice, came a voice, to tell it all...

Black Ensemble

voice, a voice,

voice, came a voice, to tell it all...

White Ensemble

voice, came a voice,

voice, came a voice, to tell it all...

Pno.

voice,

voice, a voice,

voice,

B♭ B. Cl.

Vc.

Con. Sn.
Little Lizzy Hobbs, Elizabeth, you
Little Lizzy Hobbs, Ooo

Elizabeth

Black Ensemble

White Ensemble

Pno.

B♭ B. Cl.

Vc.

Con. Sn.
Elizabeth

Black Ensemble

White Ensemble

Pno.

B♭ B. Cl.

Vc.

Con. Sn.

God...

Freedom, hard to be won, hard to be won.

Freedom, hard to be won, hard to be won.

Freedom, hard to be won, hard to be won.
Freedom, hard to be won, hard to be won.