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**SMOKEBOX:
WRITING INTO EMBARRASSMENT**

by

JULIA STORCH

B.A. English
Davidson College 2019

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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Dramatic Writing**

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SMOKEBOX**WRITING INTO EMBARRASSMENT**

By

Julia Storch

B.A. ENGLISH, DAVIDSON COLLEGE, 2019.

MFA DRAMATIC WRITING, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, 2023

ABSTRACT

Engaging with theoretical concepts and dramaturgical tools, this essay follows my journey through The Dramatic Writing MFA program at the University of New Mexico, focusing on the production of my thesis play, *Smokebox*. In Part I, I give the background and development of my journey as a playwright, exploring the obstacles I faced and overcame through my engagement with coursework and staged readings. I map out the development of *Smokebox*, from its humble beginnings as a class assignment, to its transformation through workshop, and finally its realization through an intense rehearsal and production process. In Part II, I utilize my academic background in performance studies to critically analyze my own work and suggest how it fits into the tapestry of feminist and queer theory. Through both sections, I use my experience in the program to formulate a mode of artmaking and critical engagement which provides the foundation for my future goals in theatre, film, and beyond.

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Part I: Development and Process

I often joke that I wrote my first play two and a half years ago, when I began the Dramatic Writing MFA program, but that is not quite true. When I was a senior in high school, I took a creative writing class, and our teacher tasked us with writing a play. My piece was a blatant rip-off of *10 Things I Hate About You* (the ABC Family television show), a fact that only my sister picked up on, as she was probably the only other person alive that watched that show. I took the characters from the show and imagined them ten or twenty years later, heightened the dramatic stakes by making one of them a criminal on the run, and let the romance that had captured my attention as a teenager play out.

My teacher submitted my piece to a small private college's creative writing competition. I won first place and was offered a generous scholarship if I attended their institution, but I had already committed to Davidson College, a liberal arts school of 2,000 students, just outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. I was certainly flattered, but quickly dismissed the award as a one-time fluke. I did not write a play for the next four years, instead immersing myself in literary and film theory with the occasional venture into prose fiction and screenwriting. I spent much of my time refining my aesthetic taste and analyzing the creative work of others through a critical lens, which allowed me to understand how the art I love *works*. Still, I leapt at every opportunity to generate and workshop my creative writing.

I think there was a part of me that was afraid to make creative work, to reveal myself in ways I didn't have to when researching the work of others. What if I failed? What if I couldn't live up to the works that I loved? What if my language, which I had honed to A+ status in analytic writing, fell apart when I tried to create? When I was in middle school, we were instructed to run four timed laps around the school track. That time would determine into which

P.E. group we were placed. I knew I wasn't a very good athlete, but I played soccer and could have run at least some of the Mile Test. Instead, I chose to walk the whole thing. If I didn't try, I wouldn't feel badly for not doing well. But if I had put all my efforts into that run, and still performed poorly, I would have been humiliated. I still sometimes find myself falling into this mindset, holding myself back so that if I am criticized, it does not fully reach me, because I didn't put as much of myself into my endeavor as I could have. Maybe this is one reason I was so hesitant to write creatively, even though that's really all that I wanted to do.

After teaching Playwriting I for a few weeks this semester, I found myself struggling to explain to my students why I was assigning so much reading, both craft essays and plays. When I write, the process is not structured—I am not consciously thinking about the plot vs the story vs the narrative of my piece—I am simply writing. Still, I know these definitions and tools. They sit in the back of my mind as I write, and while I may not be conscious of them, they infuse every work. They are more obviously useful to me in the editing process, yet I seldom refer to them when I revise. I have read many plays in various genres and styles, which have expanded my own taste, but these plays rarely manifest explicitly in my work. Reading plays and reading about plays allows me to name and follow creative impulses in my own work, which I hope my students will start to do for their own work as well.

I had known for a while that I wanted to work in the medium of film, though it took me some time to admit it to myself. My freshman year at Davidson, I still held onto the hope that I would find myself inspired by Political Science or discover I was a coding prodigy. Instead, I signed up for classes about the role of desire in literature and how memory alters and is altered by cinema. If Davidson had offered a film major, I would have surely graduated with that degree. Instead, I graduated with a BA in English, a minor in Film & Media Studies, and almost no

experience with the actual process of producing and filming screenplays, writing a stage play, or studying performance theory.

But I don't think this time of critical analysis was wasted. Recently, a professor who was teaching a subject new to his students and to himself, told us that "You have to know something before you can love it." And I would argue that you also have to love something before you can do it.

After graduating, I returned home to Albuquerque and fell into a series of menial jobs in film, working as a production assistant in various departments. I was working in my desired field and making connections with people who were doing the very thing I aspired to, but I looked at my portfolio and realized that I would have to improve and expand my craft in order to be taken seriously. Working over 60 hours a week drained my energy, and I found I could not easily switch into a creative mindset, even when I had a few hours of free time. My mother suggested I apply to The Dramatic Writing Program at UNM. At first, I was hesitant, wary of the program's emphasis on playwriting over screenwriting. I didn't think I was qualified, given my lack of exposure to theater, and I did not believe I would get in. When I did get in, I realized I had been hoping that I would be accepted despite all of my rationalizations to the contrary. I was hungry for a community of writers. I could see only benefits in learning how to utilize another medium and expanding my creative horizons. I started the program a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic, thus beginning my graduate school journey over Zoom. Standing now on the precipice of graduation, I see with more clarity the growth I underwent as a writer over the past three years. While the work itself was challenging, I think my three greatest challenges came from within.

The first obstacle I encountered came from my background in film, a medium which foregrounds the visual. The notation of a screenplay supports equal emphasis on *action* and *dialogue*. The reader needs to know what the camera is seeing in order to imagine the full effect of the proposed scene. Screenplays, from the commercially successful to the indie darlings, follow a rigorous plot structure, which requires that the screenplay hit certain beats on certain pages. In a traditional 120-page screenplay, by page thirty the exposition must be done, and an inciting incident or event must occur to catapult our protagonist into the confrontation or dramatic journey. Structural guidelines such as these allow for play with the content, but much less play with the form itself. Playwriting, on the other hand, allows for much more freedom. Playwrights such as Sam Shepherd include incredibly detailed descriptions of set, action, and character, while others, such as Branden Jacobs Jenkins in *Everybody*, include almost no description beyond the most crucial movements and leave much up to director interpretation.

Plays are free from the potential drawbacks of mechanical reproduction, which allows them to offer a different sensibility and source of pleasure than images on a screen. Walter Benjamin writes that the deterioration of the aura (uniqueness, duration, time, and place) of art as a good thing, as mechanical reproduction (photography, film, prints, etc) allows art to proliferate among the masses rather than be kept hidden in the homes and venues of the rich and powerful. "The instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics" (Benjamin 6). Yet the aura of a play is often key to its political power, just as the accessible nature of mechanical reproductions are key to their political power. Theatre, because it is inherently specific, can lean into its restrictions.

In 2022, I attended *Guide to Surviving Maculinist Territory* by Pintozor Productions, a piece of performance art that took the form of a guided walking tour through the city of Edinburgh. As I walked, I listened to a recorded performer who spoke of the dangers of walking alone as a woman, tied specifically to the uptick in violent acts against women by self-proclaimed incels. While I could have listened to the recording anywhere, the specific act of walking through a city (protected by a group of others, also listening to the recording) gave the piece its dramatic edge. Meaning was created by who I was, where I was walking, and who I was with. Reproductions, such as a film in a standard movie theater, can rarely say the same.

My second obstacle was an aesthetic one. My parents did take me to the theater growing up, and I took a few years of Drama class in high school, but my performance taste had stagnated with the Naturalists of the mid-century. I had not been exposed to much experimental theatre, and when I was, I was inclined to dismiss it rather than engage with it critically. When I saw *Bootycandy* by Robert O'Hara, I dismissed the complete nudity of the only white male character as shock value, rather than including it in my analysis of O'Hara's work to interrogate the exploitation of black bodies by our society and specifically the theatre audience. Far too often, I heard my parents critique a work for not being realistic enough. I understood that realism was the end goal of art, that a play was best when it was a "close and objective observation of life, no matter how squalid or elevated" (Brockett and Hildy 360). Realism attempts to understand the truth of human nature through a scientific and pragmatic lens. Naturalism goes a step further, removing all nonrealistic devices and portraying characters whose "behavior is attributable to hereditary or environmental forces. Internal psychological motivations are given even greater emphasis than external visual detail" (Brockett and Hildy 363). I understood such "slice of life" dramas to be worthier art than pieces which played with the abstract, with fourth-wall breaks, or

with absurdism. Naturalistic plays often “obliterated virtually all distinctions between art and life,” and I began my playwriting journey believing that this obliteration was the highest goal to have (Brockett and Hildy 364).

I can’t pinpoint exactly when this sensibility began to shift. For my very first Linnell Festival, a semi-annual reading series of new works from the Dramatic Writing MFA students, I debuted a realistic 20-minute piece about a group of friends quarreling over a board game, entitled *Settling*. However, that same semester I began to work on a piece about a teenage girl who writes fanfiction and whose characters speak to her, even outside of their joint creative endeavors. She begins to lose control over her characters as they encroach on the real world, complicating the boundaries we accept between the real and the fictional. I have continued to develop this play in multiple classes over many semesters. Unlike the first piece, which sought to examine the relationships between the characters through completely realistic dramatic devices, my next piece, which I called *Author’s Note*, staged fantasy and imagination because that was how the protagonist coped with her insecurities. Bringing her imagined characters to life was not just contrived to further the plot, but also to afford this character respect that she didn’t feel she ever got in her normal life, confined by the real. I hoped, also, that this might lead the audience to empathize with this protagonist, as the imagined characters, embodied on stage, are just as real to the audience as they are to the narrator. The mutual betrayal of growing up would have been muted by realism. This may be why there are so many supernatural shows aimed at teenagers—the harsh, dramatic emotional reality of being a teen cannot be rendered fully with realism, because being a teenager feels more like running away from a werewolf than failing a math test.

My critical work in performance theory showed me why I, and many other playwrights, are frustrated by the limits of naturalism. Conventional narrative theatre allows the audience to

lose themselves in the action taking place on stage. The spectators are content to enjoy a story. Even realistic plays which tackle difficult topics, such as racism or homophobia, are conveniently self-containing, showing the audience a part of life without requiring any self-reflection or causing discomfort. Any playwright who wishes to disrupt the status quo instead of reinforcing it will find this difficult if they adhere completely to the pursuit of realism.

I explored the limitations of realism in one of my performance theory classes, where I was introduced to the work of Young Jean Lee, who explores identity politics through absurdism rather than through realistically driven dramatic devices. Her plays are also very funny, a tactic often used to put the audience at ease, yet Lee instead disrupts audience expectations: “satiric scenes prevent the audience from absent-mindedly activating automatic laughter and leads to reflective laughter and discomfort” (Hwang 126). A critical catharsis is created by the absurdism and discomfort, which forces viewers to interrogate their own relationship to the piece, instead of feeling safe to absorb the material without reflection. Critical catharsis, as theorized by Dani Snyder-Young, “relies on a degree of reality seeping into the theatrical event. If a theatrical event feels too fictional, we aren’t motivated to take action in the real world” (Snyder-Young 25). Lee’s pieces provide critical catharsis not through hyper-realism, but through the destruction of the imagined boundary between play and audience. Audience members are directly addressed, their assumptions directly subverted, and their own realities reproduced until they can no longer fully disassociate from the critiques that Lee levels against them.

My thesis play, *Smokebox*, contends with the realistic subject of a relationship, domesticity, and the creation and destruction of family, yet I moved away from the realist style in order to render the queer couple, and specifically the troubled protagonist, to their fullest extent. Torsten Graff argues that “gay drama has always been helplessly caught up in the

conventions of American naturalistic drama, thus unwillingly but inevitably reproducing the structures of both a normative heterosexual set of formal conventions and a traditional spectatorial relationship between stage and audience” (13). No matter how subversive the content of a play or performance, the radical potentialities of the piece are hampered when sticking to conventional form. Shedding conservatism in content and form has a precedent, as “the history of the gay and lesbian community is one in which the gradual liberation from a heterosexual imperative is at the same time mirrored by, and an effect of, the emancipation from conventional art forms” (Graff 13). Though I was not cognizant of it, my studies in the MFA program led me to the belief that in order to create plays that had something to say against the set order of our current society, I had to be bold and break the conventions of style. And I found that I was in good company by making this step, as performance, “like queer theory, is frequently employed to deconstruct and denaturalize assumed allegiances between bodies and identities, spaces and practices, and norms and subjectivities” (Davies 25). The embodiment of marginalized identities on stage lends itself perfectly to the critical interventions I’d like to pursue, specifically those theorized by feminist and queer studies.

My aesthetic move away from realism could only come after I interrogated its limitations through critical analysis. I am not explicitly interested in teaching an audience anything or even wanting the audience to leave one of my plays with a changed perspective on the themes or the material. Still, I think there are more powerful dramatic tools to be found in absurdism, satire, or even melodrama, than can be found in realism. This is also not to say that I would not write another completely realistic play again. There might still be a story or universe that I wish to explore, which would be best served by such a mode. It is also important to note that realism and naturalism’s heyday arose from a political and social need, a desire to make sense of a

complicated world of industrialization, increasing social and economic inequity, and two world wars. In our now hyperconnected yet deeply fractured and precarious state of the world, realism simply isn't providing the same artistic response that other dramatic modes can.

My third obstacle was my aversion to writing about any topics that felt too personal or too embarrassing. The refusal to explore the personal in my own writing led to a repression of themes and an unintentional abstraction of emotion. Plus, a lot of the work was boring. After three years of workshopping new plays, I believe playwriting is simply the process of embarrassing yourself over and over again until the play is good enough to be worth the humiliation. Anne Bogart writes:

To avoid embarrassment is a natural human tendency. Feeling truly exposed to others is rarely a comforting sensation. But if what you do or make does not embarrass you sufficiently, then it is probably not personal or intimate enough. Revelation is necessary to warrant attention. The feeling of embarrassment is a good omen because it signifies that you are meeting the moment fully, with an openness to new feelings it will engender. (116)

Through generative writing exercises which emphasized creative output over perfection, I began to explore the defamiliarization of the personal and was able to abstract the details of events that I experienced, people that I knew, and emotions that I'd felt, to the point of being able to compose full-length plays that drew on my life without being about me. For class, we were asked to write a monologue which describes a different setting and scene than the one presented on stage. I had been looking for a new rental house at the time and couldn't shake the feeling of discomfort I got in houses which were beautiful and new but lacked history, love, and quirks. I wrote this monologue about a woman who lived in such a house, the sterile environment and her matching husband driving her mad. "You fit into the apartment so well, like you were born here and will die here. All sharp lines and grey accents. Clean. Rich. Cold. Empty."

I don't wish to privilege creative work based on personal experience above other approaches, but I do wish to practice a variety of methods in my own work; I want to be comfortable in whatever mode I am drawn to, in whatever mode I feel will best render my story.

In class, a professor asked us to write a list of elements that many of our plays have, a list of things we would never do in our plays, a list of things we'd like to see in our plays, and a list of ways our plays embarrass us. The first list was easy; I think many creatives are self-aware to a debilitating level, and I have certainly stood in the way of my own work, caught in a cycle of trying to reinvent my writing while continually being drawn to the same topics and techniques. Some common things I noticed throughout my work include a main character with mommy issues, an overly descriptive monologue, that I use humor to diffuse tension, and that I often avoid the real dramatic moments by talking about them rather than showing them. The list did not ask us to be critical, yet I found it almost impossible not to be. If asked to describe a classmate's play, I would have never used such judgmental language. Most of the list I generated of things that I would never do in a play still holds true (e.g., I would never write a play with no characters or no dialogue) but one item declared that I would never use poetic language heavily in a play of mine. Although I think my language is still grounded in the easily comprehensible, my latest play for my final Linnell Festival reading found a lot of joy and meaning in the flourishes of language and I played with the evocative imagery of descriptive language that stage plays can most uniquely support.

My list of attributes that I would like to see in my play were largely hyperbolic; themes or concepts which I'd never utilized but maybe one day would.

My list of ways that my plays embarrass me were as follows: 1. my main characters often have my own complexes, 2. my language isn't developed enough, or too blunt, 3. my characters

have desire, they are lustful, 4. I don't pay enough attention to props/set and the visual or material life of the play, 5. my dialogue is not lyrical enough.

The first point was embarrassing because it often felt like I was cheating, that I was putting myself into the position of the main character and asking the audience to feel sympathy for me. I felt that the main character in *Smokebox* was so obviously me, but after the play was staged, many people came up to me with very unique readings on the main character, which led me to realize that she only reflected me to myself. To other audience members, she reflected parts of themselves or of their loved ones. Even my friends, who knew I had put much of myself into this piece, read her as a once-me, or a maybe-me, but understood that she was at once bigger and smaller than the playwright who had created her. Audiences are looking for themselves, even in specific plays which deal with situations they would never find themselves in and my vulnerability in putting this character on stage functioned as a mirror rather than as a window.

For points two, four, and five, I was embarrassed by what I perceived as my lack of skill and refinement as a playwright. Often, I would be proud of how I finessed a problem with my plot, only to discover during workshop that I had neglected to properly dramatize the moment I thought was most important. I found my dialogue very on the nose, with characters saying exactly what they thought. In contrast, I loved hearing the elevated language of my cohort's plays, but found myself balking against writing in that manner myself, convinced that from my inexperienced hand it would sound contrived. There was no longer an aesthetic reasoning against it, simply my own insecurity standing in my way. Just as I had made the move away from realism in writing my plays, I knew that even though it was uncharted territory and I was opening myself up to new criticism and potential embarrassment, I had to at least try to write with lyrical, heightened, evocative language. Unlike the mile that I walked in middle school

instead of running, I was ready to see what I could accomplish if I poured all of my time, energy, and creativity into my playwriting. I did feel very vulnerable and I still often do. But more than that, I feel proud when reading over my work and listening to it performed, knowing that it was the best I could give at the time and that my next play will have even more of me in it.

As to point number three about characters that lusted, I found this desire to be what I repressed most in my work, primarily sexual desire, but also other forms of wanting that left my characters vulnerable. Unfortunately, if a character does not want something, even if it is subconscious, they tend to be boring to watch and follow. My characters' desires were often hidden from me as I was writing, as I was afraid to pinpoint and unveil their embarrassment for fear of revealing my own. In class, when I was asked for my main character's motivation in *Author's Note*, I would talk in circles about acceptance, when the reality was that she wanted male validation, which women are often taught is the highest form of acceptance possible but which embarrassed me, as the playwright. I thought I was too educated and too aware of the patriarchy to write a character so obsessed with receiving male attention, but characters cannot think their way out of their problems. Look at *Hamlet*, for example. Since then, I've been working on being able to name my character's desires more explicitly. Even if they do not know what they need, I, as the playwright, should be aware of it. Often, what a character (or a person) desires is at odds with what they think they should want. If the desire were straightforward and socially acceptable, it would be easy to fulfil and not very dramatic. The play allows us to express these irrational desires, which social convention dictates we cannot express outside of the container of the theater.

Only when I overcame the three obstacles of structural conventions, aesthetics, and embarrassment was I able to begin working on the piece, which would become my thesis play,

Smokebox. *Smokebox* was born, like many of my longer works, out of a shorter exercise assigned during class. This particular exercise asked me to write a scene based on a song. I chose *Barricade* by Stars, a melancholic song in which the narrator looks back on a past relationship forged in the bellows of a revolt.

In Harmony Street we beat a man
 Just for standing there
 I held my breath as I watched you swing
 Then run your fingers through your hair
 [...]
 Years later on, I saw your face
 In line to catch the morning train
 You looked like you'd been softened
 Like you never really loved the pain

I loved the dramatic question posed by reuniting with someone years after knowing them and loving them. Rather than abstract this idea completely, I contemplated a fictional reunion with my first partner, a relationship that had ended disastrously for both of us, but, for me at least, had been tempered by the passing of time. Much of this original exercise remained in my production version of *Smokebox* as the first and second encounter between the ex-girlfriends in their middle age. However, the staged iteration depicts the characters choosing to give their relationship another try, a choice that the first exercise shies away from. I wanted to imagine the “what if” of that first relationship; what if I had not messed up, what if we had been able to talk it out, what if I hadn’t been judged unredeemable by my partner? I am quick to dismiss my actions as a 17-year-old, to invalidate the feelings of inadequacy that arose from my mistakes and my actions. But those feelings informed how I perceived myself as well as my relationships with other people for many years afterward, and I think it’s natural to consider who I might have been without this experience, or how a slightly altered series of events might have changed who I am.

When I told my mother the framing device for *Smokebox*, she laughed. The main character, Greta, is looking back at her relationship with Alexis from old age, after having developed some form of memory loss. I have used this device previously, fascinated with the unreliability of the mind. My first serious and concentrated attempt at a screenplay followed a grown woman returning home to take care of her father, a famous author and negligent parent, now slowly sliding into senility, who has taken to going on distasteful rants out of nowhere. When I was a teenager, a distant relative with early dementia showed up to a family event and went on a deeply offensive tirade. No one was sure if this was really what my family member believed, or if his brain had created new neurological pathways at odds with what his mind had previously held true. My mother remarked that this event must have affected me deeply, and it did. I can't think of anything more frightening than being betrayed by my own thoughts.

Unlike *Smokebox*, my screenplay focused on the daughter of the man with dementia, who must now deal with the consequences of her father's actions, even if they are not his own. His dementia also does not mitigate the fact that he was an absent father, so the daughter must find enough strength in filial loyalty to protect him. In *Smokebox*, Greta's mind betrays her, but it also protects her from the harshness of her own mistakes and guilt. I wanted the audience to be unsure of the events presented on stage, as all of them were produced by an unstable source.

Smokebox portrays Greta at three stages in her life simultaneously. At the beginning of the play, Greta (80) wakes up in her bed, stands up, and the stage becomes a train station where she runs into Alexis (40). Then there is a scene with Greta (16) and Alexis (16), at which point the boundary between memories begins to break down and Greta jumps through her interactions with Alexis in a non-linear fashion, triggered by emotions, words, and associations. Greta is always on stage, the lynchpin of the memories that expand around her and flood through her.

Greta notices Alexis (50) in the kitchen, even as she is reliving her first kiss with Alexis (16). The memory distorts a little as Greta stares off into the distance, and these moments of decay accumulate and grow into the climax of the play, in which Alexis (80) reminds Greta that their daughter Elle, who has been on stage and interacted with Greta and ostensibly with Alexis, has not been in contact with them for many years. Once the rules of the play-world are altered in a way that allows for the fracture and manipulation of memory, the whole play must be put under scrutiny. Greta could have, unconsciously, misremembered that which is presented as true earlier on in the play. Whether she did or not is for the audience to interpret.

Smokebox was the first play of mine ever produced, and the first production and rehearsal process that I have ever been present for. I was very lucky to work with two experienced directors (Rhiannon Fraizer and Erik Ehn) as well as talented scenic, lighting, and sound designers. I found that the rehearsal process was not linear as I had imagined, but rather a constant renegotiation of meaning and movement. The very first step, that of the audition process, actually completely redesigned the materiality of the play. In workshop, I imagined three sets of actors for the couple at the three distinct ages I was exploring (teenage, middle, and old age). Right before we invited the first actors in for callbacks, Rhiannon proposed that the main character, Greta, be portrayed by the same actor throughout, as the events of the play were taking place in her mind and her memory. This moment clicked the play into place for me, and allowed me to fully embrace the opportunity for experimentation that live performance offers. I asked the audience to interpret the same actor as Greta at three different ages, despite the fact that she did not change her appearance. Theatre invites the audience to actively participate in the making of meaning by imagining that which isn't shown but described through language. Tzachi Zamir writes:

The audience is thus not merely present in the theatre as a passive recipient of a creative offering, spending some of its lifetime simultaneously with the actors, but is completing the act of acting by recognizing and responding to the actor as character. Actors need an audience not just because only an audience can praise their artistic success or because of financial motives, but because only a spectator is able to give the external indication that the actor momentarily exists in this amplified form. The audience provides the inter-subjective context of recognition, playing along with what the actor undergoes, (Zamir 229)

Although Zamir focuses specifically on the craft of acting, the reciprocal relationship between audience and performer on stage creates space for the playwright to ask more energy of the audience than would be required by film or novel. I had to trust the audience to follow the protagonist through time and space once I established the rules of Greta's mind, demonstrating how she moves through time by moving through the space on the stage.

Now cast with two fewer actors than anticipated, we began the rehearsal process with a read through of my script. I found it energizing to hear new voices reading my words and making different choices after a semester of workshopping the piece with members of the Dramatic Writing cohort. I was excited to see actors making the choices that I had envisioned, and when they didn't, I was able to reflect on why my meaning wasn't clear enough in the text. Some small moments or movements were lost or altered, but I trusted my collaborators in making these decisions. For instance, I had envisioned more beats with Greta after she runs into Alexis (40) at the train station, in which the audience would see her inhabit other iterations of herself. I wrote:

Greta (16) enters her bedroom. She's wearing pajamas. She stands in front of a mirror, performing various body checks. She sits down and curls her hair. She's not very good at it and burns herself occasionally. Once finished, Greta (16) walks to the middle set, becoming Greta (40).

While I still enjoy this moment as it relates to character, the play had not yet established the rules of the world yet and I think much of its meaning would have been lost as audiences might have

struggled to understand who this character is and why she was doing these things. I also recognized that such a contemplative start to my piece would slow the dramatic action and momentum when I really wanted to encourage my audience to come with me. Sometimes it takes an outside perspective to understand what is truly beneficial in driving the play forward, and what is left in because of sentiment or partiality.

Because this was my first rehearsal process, I made the choice to be more of an observer than an active participant in the interpretation of my writing. I found, more often than not, that I was rewarded for withholding didactic feedback—after some experimentation, the directors and actors usually found their way to expressing exactly what I had hoped would be expressed, and I believe had a deeper understanding of the characters and the text because they arrived to the meaning on their own.

After becoming familiar with the text, the actors moved into movement and character work, which I found bore a resemblance to the writing process. Rhiannon asked the actors to play with the extremes of the characters, an exercise I'd been asked to do with writing in order to discover what it was I really wanted to express. "Get in late, get out early," was a writing tip that my work often elicited from my professors, who wanted me to get to the dramatic more efficiently. Similarly, Rhiannon advised the actors to keep a sense of urgency in their movements, because the characters, unlike the actors, did not know what was coming next. I designed the scenes to impart the impression that my characters were in the midst of the most important moments of their lives, and the actors had to be able to convince the audience that this was true. They could not behave as if they had just walked in from offstage, but rather that they were walking with purpose to find their lost girlfriend or run away to their bedroom after a fight.

At the third rehearsal, on September 12th, I made a note that the “stage is not set up as I expected.” My original staging had involved a teenager’s bedroom on stage right, a middle space which would function as an apartment dining room, train station, abandoned warehouse, and liminal/abstracted area, and that same bedroom on stage left, only 70 years later. Rhiannon combined the two bedrooms on stage right, left the liminal space/train station/warehouse in the middle, and placed the apartment dining room for my middle-aged characters on stage left. My next note reads “kinda makes sense since it’s the same bedroom.” Not only does it make sense within the text, but this change also cleaned up the staging, providing a clearer picture for the audience to follow.

There were also moments in rehearsal which helped clarify the play to me, even though I had created it. I have noticed this in workshop as well, that other people are able to explain to me things about my play which had only existed in my subconscious. By naming what I was doing, I was liberated to explore these phenomena more and expand upon them. While refining the blocking, the director explained that the world doesn’t exist without Greta thinking about it, which is why the partner at various ages does not linger on set until the second half of the play, when Greta’s mind begins to deteriorate even further. Greta then begins to mix up her partners and they converse with her even when she’s not in her memories. I did not write a realistic piece, and abstract blocking further distorted Greta’s memories of her partner at younger ages, moving into what my director called “funhouse.” This staging tactic reinforced Greta’s unreliable mind and her drive to map her desires onto her memories.

I found that these funhouse moments, which I ended up liking very much, provided a bit of a challenge for my directors. One stage direction reads “everyone but Elle and Greta (85) start to glitch,” which, due to its vagueness, was hard to interpret in the space. I wanted to leave this

moment open-ended because I wasn't sure how to stage this convincingly on my own. I knew this moment needed guidance from someone who understood the meaning I wanted to convey and had the experience to convey it without dialogue. No dialogue or concrete stage direction would be able to say exactly what I wanted to say in that moment. This "glitch" was the crack in the glass expanding, just before crumbling to pieces. It was a signal to the audience that the very foundation of the play they were watching was going to crumble beneath them. What else but a metaphor could communicate such a thing? Realism could convey the actions of memory loss, but it could only hint at the emotional devastation. When my great-aunt took up permanent residence in a nursing home, she could still communicate well, ask relevant questions, and respond intelligently. Then she would ask the exact same question again and we would respond the same way again, smiling despite the new cracks in our hearts.

Each of my directors proposed a different tactic for the glitch (one, an abrupt cue, like a soldier standing to attention, the other, a more gradual shift into the impossible and uncanny) and I found both served the play in different ways. Each option fit in perfectly into each director's interpretation of my piece. Because of this, I'm not interested in refining some of the purposefully vague stage directions. One of the things that fascinates me about playwriting is how different each interpretation of the written words can be. The words I wrote were very precious to me, and I had a firm idea of what I envisioned, but I wanted to see how much of my original meaning my words were able to convey to a third party. Although there are many playwrights who stay in the room for rehearsal or even direct (and act) in their own pieces, I know that this method of production is not always the case. Especially now, as I start my career in theatre, I imagine I will often choose to send my scripts away to an unknown entity, without even being in the same room during the rehearsal process. Even if the piece is interpreted

differently than I thought, as long as the director understands my play, I won't mind the changes as they would be in service of the director's vision. In this scenario, it is up to my words alone to convey that meaning. Rather than shift away from the abstract, this process motivated me to lean further in and trust that someone can and will be able to stage the emotion my abstract language tries to convey.

As I write this dissertation, I am in the process of preparing my final installment for the Linnell Reading Series. My piece, entitled *Hurt/Comfort*, contains stage directions such as "they explode at the proximity," which, because of my experience with *Smokebox*, I trust will be conveyed to an audience even when there is no one there to read stage directions. And if it's not, perhaps the director did not find it added anything to the piece, in which case I would need to revisit the text to clarify my meaning or cut what does not add to the work.

Watching someone else make their own meaning out of my writing was challenging, especially when choices were made to cut certain lines or certain actions. However, this feeling of protectiveness over my work is something I have been trying to curtail over the past three years. I believe the most important part of being any type of creative is the ability to receive feedback, but there is no exact science to receiving it. Just as workshopping and rehearsal can give name to what exactly I am doing in a play, so too can it give name to the gaps in my work. I know that a piece of critical feedback is worth considering and acting on when it calls out a deficiency that my subconscious already knew was there, but I chose to not deal with or address yet. These are the responses that have me nodding my head (sometimes in shame) instead of squinting, unable to see the fault that someone else found. Though I entered this program ready and excited to learn, it was hard for me to hear that something I felt very emotionally close to wasn't working in a script or a screenplay. But this, I think, is one of the biggest benefits of the

workshop process, more useful than advice on structure or pacing. It wasn't until I was able to be less precious about my work and take feedback without feeling like it was pointed at me as well as my writing that I was able to actually incorporate the criticism I was given. There were times I wanted to shout out during rehearsal, telling the actor that's not what the line means or ask my director to stick to the original layout, but I chose to trust my collaborators and was rewarded with a play that was not staged exactly the way I imagined, but carried the same meaning, perhaps even in a clearer manner than if I had imposed my will on the production.

But others, in addition to the directors and actors, also had to interpret what I was trying to say in *Smokebox*. When first presented by the rendering of the proposed scenic design, I admit I may have teared up a little bit. Scenic designer Insueng Park had, without ever having to consult with me about my vision, created a stage that presented a simulacrum of naturalism, taking the bed and the kitchen table (in my head, very reminiscent of the real world) and abstracted them, making the entire set black and white. This interpretation actually enhanced what mattered in my play, by foregrounding the interpersonal relationships and emphasizing the constructed nature of Greta's memories. Greta cares about her relationship with her partner and her daughter, not necessarily where she was. Her memories color in the people, but not the places. The set bent up in the back, as if the floor kept going further, stretching out the space and added to its feel of timelessness. Between the two white light fixtures hung a cloud which could be lit with different color lights. I was very excited about this piece of the set, feeling like it completed the abstraction of Greta's world necessary to convey her state of mind. However, during our cue-to-cue, my director raised the concern that if the light changed every time Greta's emotional state altered (red when she was angry, blue when she was sad, etc) it would act more like a mood ring than a piece of the set, minimizing the emotional nuance of the scenes. By

utilizing slower light transitions and not correlating them concretely to the dialogue, the cloud remained a set fixture, rather than a character or narrator.

There was also a challenge, I believe, with lighting the stage in general, as my script begets quite a bit of movement as Greta moves in between memories. At the end of our cue-to-cue rehearsal during tech week, we tallied up 102 light cues for a 65-minute play. While my director and I agreed that areas on stage not inhabited by characters should go dark, this cue-to-cue worried us because rather than the seamless melding of a dreamscape, the lights created a harsh boundary in time and space. What precisely was done with the lights, I'm not sure. After the cue-to-cue, I decided to not attend the rest of tech week. I had attended every rehearsal previous, and my brain was struggling to intake any more information about the piece. I thought that taking a few days off from my words might make the first performance more impactful for me, and I might have achieved the distance to see the play in a new light. I think I made the right choice, though I'm sure I missed some moments of polishing which may have taught me something. Still, on opening night, I barely noticed the lights at all. There might still have been 102 cues, but now they were practiced, and blended seamlessly into the action. Or the cues might have been pared down into their most essential, lighting only the most necessary.

The vast majority of the feedback I got after the play was positive. I took this with a grain of salt, knowing that most people would be hesitant to say something critical to the playwright. Many of the responses I heard primarily spoke about the quality of the acting or the visual aspects of the play, such as the set design. After spending so much energy fixing plot holes and elevating dialogue, I was a bit surprised to hear this feedback. Now, however, I take it as a positive sign, that my struggles through earlier drafts were resolved to the point that there was no longer any physical evidence of their existence. Some audience members admitted to being

confused by the play rules for longer than I would have wished, but others seemed to have grasped what was going on just as the memories revealed themselves for what they were. The audience laughed at the moments I tried to make funny, but also at moments I didn't realize had any humor in them until the actors embodied them. Everyone I spoke with told me that they enjoyed the story, but I recognized that I could make the reveal of Ellie's absence more dramatic by increasing her presence on stage beforehand, a note that several viewers reiterated to me. I attended all three performances, fascinated by the small variations between each one. The variations felt monumental to me, having been in the rehearsal room for most of the process, yet, to my knowledge, they did not alter the audience's perception of the piece.

Part II: A Critical Analysis of *Smokebox*

As I look back on my play analytically, the theories and critics I have read throughout my time at UNM begin to peek through the creative writing. Performance studies was not the first time I encountered the scholarship of Judith Butler, but her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" took on new weight when considered in the framework of performance. As long as I have been writing analytical work, I have been working through a feminist lens. Though I cringe when I look back on some of my early work, in which pop feminism was my primary framework, my fascination with what constitutes the category and representation of "woman" has been longstanding. I became interested in feminist theory as I started to ravenously consume media in high school and took to online forums to see what other people had to say. Commentators spent a lot of time arguing over what was "good representation" and "bad representation," whether a "Mary Jane" or "Strong Female Character" was more subversive, and ultimately feminist. Feminist, when used in these contexts, was completely divorced from the

academic theory, and had been appropriated to mean anything a woman did that made her feel empowered, rather than working toward the abolition of the inequity itself. Under this usage of feminism (which I refer to as pop feminism but has also been called enlightened sexism by Susan J. Douglas), plastic surgery is feminist, not having a job is feminist, having a job is feminist, wearing makeup is feminist, etc. The only thing that isn't feminist, it appears, is critically examining the behavior of other women, as this would not be seen as empowering. Pop feminism seems to have achieved its conservative goal of diluting the meaning of feminism so completely as to lose any semblance of political power. Many of these pop feminist arguments miss the point—"gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler 187). These acts are performed to the point that the actors themselves believe the performance is reality. A "Strong Female Character" in media will do little to upset the hierarchy of power imposed by the patriarchy if the piece of media does not strive to perform subterfuge on the overarching construction itself.

In this analysis of my work, I want to make it clear that I am focusing on the importance of the female subject, not because I believe that "the presupposition of sexual difference is necessary for all discourse," but rather to analyze "not only of how sexual difference is constituted to begin with but how it is continuously constituted, both by the masculine tradition that preempts the universal point of view, and by those feminist positions that construct the univocal category of 'women' in the name of expressing or, indeed, liberating a subjected class" (Butler 196). Greta's performance of femininity is not inherently important, but rather gains meaning as it is set in contrast to the dominating cultural rhetoric, which emphasizes the masculine performing subject. Greta and Alexis were both young activists who then choose to

settle down, choosing office jobs, marriage, and parenthood over more subversive lifestyles. Greta specifically seems to experience joy when she performs womanhood correctly, as for so long she felt deep anxiety at performing it incorrectly. The goal of *Smokebox* was not to cast moral judgements on this choice, but rather to reflect the power of the patriarchy and gender binary on the imagination, even when men and male points of view are not depicted on stage.

Smokebox is concerned with the category of woman in a very specific and personal sense, but I believe that the personal expands to accommodate the political and vice versa. Butler writes, “[m]y situation does not cease to be mine just because it is the situation of someone else, and my acts, individual as they are, nevertheless reproduce the situation of my gender, and do that in various ways” (190). While pop feminism would like us to believe that each action a woman takes, which gives her the feeling of empowerment is an outgrowth of feminist theory, the truth is that these acts often reinforce the performance of gender for all its actors. Greta suffers from the anxiety of performing woman-ness, but this does not stop her from inflicting that performance on others, namely her daughter. Without the tools or framework to understand her own cultural suffering, Greta reinscribes that pain onto the next generation. Jeanie Forte writes, “the pain women experience because they are female in a patriarchal culture [...] is a fact of political power through covert systems, however, and not an overt act of war, perhaps partially explaining how it is possible for many women to participate in or support the activities that result in the torture of other women, or even of themselves” (252). Pop feminism has given women a set of tools for beginning to articulate their pain at the hands of the patriarchy without requiring them to fully understand who is inflicting the pain and how it can be eradicated, thus allowing them to perpetuate that pain onto other women, just as Greta does to her daughter.

I agree with Butler, that “it remains politically important to represent women, but to do that in a way that does not distort and reify the very collectivity the theory is supposed to emancipate” (197). Although gender is a performance and not an essential truth about humanity, the way women and other non-male identities are treated by society necessitates advocacy on their behalf. On stage, “the body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities,” including gender, race, and ability (Butler 188). I hope that my play is successful in pointing out Greta’s hypocrisy while still granting her empathy—she is a victim of a society that necessitates performance as much as she is a perpetuator of it, just as most of us are. “Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure,” and while most of Greta’s experiences with gender reveal the pain and anxiety, there are moments of pleasure as well (Butler 197). In Greta’s second dialogue, she compares herself to another mother at the park and finds the other mother’s performance of appropriate femininity lacking. By juxtaposition, Greta, for once, is finding pleasure in her own performance. While uncomfortable to witness, this victory exemplifies the competition among subjected groups that allows systems such as the patriarchy to retain imaginative control over its subjects, even when only women are present. Again, there are never male characters on stage in *Smokebox*, yet the effects of performing a gendered identity resonate throughout the piece.

“[O]ne is not born a Woman (with a capital *W*), but [...] being born in a female body has immediate determining ramifications of one’s cultural experience” (Forte 348). The body, as Forte theorizes it, is a locus of social control, where meaning is projected onto it, creating real outcomes for the person whether or not they buy into the system or the performance. Greta, age 16, does not yet have the ability to articulate the pressures of “womaness” that she feels, yet the standards are projected onto her nonetheless. She continues to feel the pressures throughout her

life, obsessing over what people think about her, her body, and even her daughter, who is an extension of self. This conflict between body, self, and society is best communicated through theatre, because “the body’s material presence is a condition of the circumstance. Interestingly, one is that of pain, and another is that of live performance: two cases when the body must be acknowledged, when it becomes visible/palpable through inhabiting temporally a process that depends fundamentally on its presence” (Forte 251). Although Greta is a fictional character and the actor is playing the role of Greta, to have Greta embodied on stage emphasizes the conflict proposed in ways that the written word or film cannot fully manifest. Actors must accept the audience’s projection of the character portrayed onto the body presented. The actor did not just perform Greta, but also performed Greta’s gender which is inextricably tied to presence.

In Greta’s first monologue, she struggles with the fact that she does not perform gender adequately, though she does not have the language to describe the situation thus. While “gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions,” there is a dark side to this freedom, as “[i]n the theatre, one can say, ‘this is just an act,’ and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real” (Butler 194). When gender is performed incorrectly, the person performing is put at risk of social punishment or violence. Often, performance is a place and time where transgressions against the norm are permissible, explored, and enjoyed. Events like drag brunch, plays like *Cloud 9* by Caryl Churchill or even as far back as Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, allow for play in gender performance that is not often tolerated in our society at large.

Before I sound too idealistic about theatre’s radical interventions in gender, there is still a type of hegemony at play. Alok, during a one-person performance piece, *ALOK*, at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2022, combined standup with deeply personal performed poetry, an artistic

choice which made the laughter turn sour in viewers' throats, as we transitioned from the jokes everyone was in on the painful realistic consequences of being marginalized. The following comes from a performance review I wrote after I saw the piece:

To me, the radical intervention of this play was the jolting transition from humor to deeply intimate poetry, which points to, among other things, the actual pain that Alok faces as a marginalized person. As an audience, our laughter is stifled and curdles into silence which forces us to reckon with the fact that “we are part of this performance and the social problem in which it intervenes” (Snyder-Young 43). Though Alok’s poetry begins with a reflection on their grandfather’s death, it eventually turns to an indictment of the audience that sits in front of them. I only feel safe on stage, Alok says, and we, the audience, smile. We’ve done it, we’re good people who have acted in a way which provides this chronically ill, brown, queer, trans person safety. *I only feel safe on stage, Alok says, because I am only acceptable to you when I entertain you.* We have felt comfortable laughing at their jokes because we are “good white people,” even if we have not materially worked to improve the circumstances of marginalized people and only engage with them when we watch *RuPaul’s Drag Race* or *Atlanta*. But laughing at the right jokes isn’t the same thing as activism and finding *ALOK* funny or moving or both doesn’t materially improve the lives of brown queer people (even though it may support Alok financially). The form of *ALOK*, genuinely funny comedy undercut by vulnerable poetry, alienates the audience in precisely the way necessary to create critical self-reflection. Alok really only acknowledges this once, when referencing the objectification of their body that the audience was performing in that very moment, which was still somehow safer than the violence inflicted on them in the streets.

Though theatre and performance may create a sort of safe space to explore gender non-conformity and marginalized modes of sexual expression, the fact remains that such exploration is only radical and transgressive up to a point. I believe there are ways within theatre to make such interventions more effective, such as *ALOK*’s hybridity, and I hope in my play, with the breaking of the fourth wall.

As with my discussion of realism, I don't believe all plays (or works of art) have to *do* something to be worthwhile. I believe most art that is trying to change people's minds will never even reach the people whose minds they would like to change. At the same time, I am wary of smug art, art that seems directed at those who seek confirmation in their opinions and rightness. I seek out art that will show me the world through a different perspective than my own, which expands my world and my taste and my understanding. I don't believe this means that the art must be political or didactic in nature, and I certainly don't think *Smokebox* is either of these things. *Smokebox* is a work of art from my perspective, which I hope was able to expand the world of the audience to some extent.

My early forays outside of pop feminism began as I read film theory and was exposed to Laura Mulvey's theorizing of the male gaze in cinema, which proposes that the camera is irrevocably linked to the male viewpoint, rendering all women shown on screen as objects, acted upon by either male characters or the camera itself. While Mulvey's theory does not translate to the stage, her writing piqued my interest in the ways that women are depicted both through character and through their environments. Rebecca Schneider explores the way the explicit female body engages with and subverts the male gaze in her book, *The Explicit Body in Performance*. While my play does not engage with the explicit or naked female body, women are the only people on stage, seeing, moving, doing, and hopefully to some extent rejecting the marker of symbol that representations of women have been stamped with for centuries. Greta directs her monologues to the audience, both of which deal with themes of desirability politics and the value of womanhood in society which places male approval on a pedestal. In Greta's second monologue, she embodies the male gaze in the way Margaret Atwood describes in *The Robber Bride*, "you are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own

voyeur” (Atwood 442). She has internalized the harshness of object-hood from a lifetime of experiencing it, and now turns that vision onto another woman, deeming her unworthy in the same male-led paradigm which she has struggled to find value in. By addressing the audience, Greta threatens “the ability to see at the same time that that body, as representative of desire in the scopic field, reminds the viewer that he wields the prerogatives to master, to acquire, to possess—the prerogatives of unioocular, one-way vision. Perspective depends on its blind spot—but more specifically, on its blind spot remaining blind” (Schneider 82). Greta, in these moments, does not remain blind, hopefully reminding the audience of their role in her subjugation, as participants in a society which upholds gender performance as personal truth. Greta embodies disembodiment by facing “the challenge of recognizing misrecognition, like seeing blindness, or blind sight” (Schneider 100). In these moments and throughout the piece, Greta tangles with what it means to be a woman, “constantly caught in a symbolic chase in which she is given to be uncatchable, caught as that which cannot be caught, known as that which cannot know or be known, meant as that which cannot mean” (Schneider 71). Greta knows there are rules to womanhood, but cannot articulate them, as they only become apparent when the rules have been broken. The pursuit of performing femininity perfectly is futile. Greta is an “emblem of consumptive desire and designated capitalist consumer, she sets out to consume herself in an anorectic frenzy of the logic of the vanishing point—attempting to consume her own inaccessible image, chasing after disappearance infinitely” (Schneider 71). We are brought back to the importance of the cyclic nature of performing gender, as Greta passes on her own gender anxiety onto her daughter, commenting on her daughter’s appearance, obsessing over her daughter’s wardrobe. Still, there is hope—Greta’s daughter distances herself from Greta, which hurts, because the audience has come to sympathize with Greta and understands the

love she feels for her daughter, but points towards a freedom away from consumption of image. *Smokebox* is not political in its aims, nor do I believe that personal freedom translates to political revolution, but I believe Butler's assertion that the personal can expand to embody the political in some respects, especially given the radical potentialities for performance.

Greta must deal with being not only a woman, but a woman desiring other women, specifically her wife, Alexis. In my piece and its attempt to push back against the male gaze, I see both Greta and Alexis as desiring subjects, rather than as objects projected for consumption. "[T]he articulation of female desire in performance has the capacity to produce the most powerful subversion of ideology" (Forte 255). The queerness of Greta and Alexis's relationship is not the chief conflict of the play, but it informs every relationship and interaction in the piece. I see *Smokebox* participating in "queer failure" as theorized by Tina Takemoto, who states: "[q]ueer failure can engage the psychic and emotional dimensions of loss, failure, disappointment, and shame that accompany LGBTQI existence as well as the Utopian potentialities of failure as a mode of resistance, intervention, speculation, and queer world making" (Takemoto 86). Queer failure resists falling into the blissful ignorance of the belief that progress is inevitable and the political strides of queer activism have paid off in full. There are no overt moments of homophobia in my piece, but the intricacies of being a woman in love with another woman in a world that posits male validation as the highest achievement are explored through Greta. While Greta and Alexis grow old together, whether their existence is a happy one or not is up for debate. Greta is not an uncomplicated queer protagonist; she contains and enacts as much unkindness and hatred as goodness and love. There is political merit in such complications as Carmen Maria Machado writes in her memoir:

"And that's pretty exciting, even liberating; by expanding representation, we give space to queers to be—as characters, as

real people—human beings. They don't have to be metaphors for wickedness and depravity or icons of conformity and docility. They can be what they are. We deserve to have our wrongdoing represented as much as our heroism, because when we refuse wrongdoing as a possibility for a group of people, we refuse their humanity. That is to say, queers—real-life ones—do not deserve representation, protection, and rights because they are morally pure or upright as a people. They deserve those things because they are human beings, and that is enough” (Machado 114)

Greta is cruel and insecure and her relationship with Alexis isn't utopic, but it doesn't need to be, just because they are both women. I did not set out to write a piece about queer failure, but rather sought to write a play about my own experiences and perspectives which inherently present complicated and contested circumstances.

Writing this paper has proven itself to be a difficult task, asking me to look back on the growth I have experienced in the past three years and then go on to name and quantify it. But the task has been vastly rewarding, as I have been able to chart my progression and tease out the relationship between my creative work and my background in literary and film criticism during this exploration of my portfolio. Moving forward involves much uncertainty—for three years I have been a student, focusing most of my attention and energy on the creative work that I love. Soon, I will have to find a way to balance my artistic endeavors with work in a way that sustains me in mind and body. In my writing, I am excited to continue to explore what I can find in the fractures of reality, in the eloquence of language, and in the dramatization beyond language into the visual. I want to improve on what I believe are the weaker areas in my repertoire, such as my inclination toward talking about what happened rather than showing what happened, diversifying the forms I create in, and further dramatizing the important sequences in my pieces. In the near future, I'd like to produce one of my plays in the Albuquerque community and simultaneously

expand into screenwriting and short film production. While screenwriting has been my career goal for many years, playwriting has offered me completely new tools and language which can only enhance my other artistic pursuits.

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APPENDIX: *SMOKEBOX*

MFA Dissertation Play

Linnell Festival of New Plays, University of New Mexico

October 6th-8th, 2022

Production Draft: September 12th, 2022

Since the October 6-8th, 2022, run of *Smokebox*, I haven't altered much in the script. I wrote the very first iteration on February 15th, 2022 and worked on the piece continually from then until September 12th, 2022, both for class and on my own, as I knew I would have to polish the piece for it to be ready for staging. I'm very happy with the script, though I know if I have the opportunity to revisit this piece that I will want to revise certain elements that I felt didn't land as well during the show as I would have liked.

As discussed in my dissertation, the largest change that my script underwent during the production process was the consolidation of multiple actors to portray Greta into one. The original character descriptions read: "Greta and Alexis at various ages. Greta (40) and Alexis (40) should be played by the same actors as Greta (50) and Alexis (50) with some sort of visual indication that they are younger and have not yet reconciled. Greta (85) is the only one who can see and hear the other sets (at first)." In implementing the change to having one Greta throughout the play, I had to go through the piece and revise the stage directions to reflect that Greta could not be in multiple places on stage at the same time. Surprisingly, not much of the dialogue was affected, but I took this as a sign that the update was the correct choice. Rather than Greta (85)

sitting on stage, watching her memories, Greta becomes a much more active character, moving in and out of scenes.

During the rehearsal process, I also expanded Elle's presence, as previous drafts only hinted at the rift between her and Greta, leaving Greta's mistreatment up to the audience's imagination. However, during rehearsal I discovered that this lessened the impact of Elle cutting off contact with her mother, and so I added in Elle's monologue in scene XII. This work is very much driven by character, so much of my rewriting focused on clarifying character motivation or figuring out how to drive the action of the piece forward in ways that felt true to the characters I had created.

SMOKEBOX

By Julia Storch

Setting: 3 stages.

Stage left is a bedroom.

Stage right is a kitchen.

Center stage is liminal space.

Characters:

Greta and Alexis at various ages. Alexis (40) and Alexis (50) are played by the same actor. Greta is portrayed by the same actor throughout.

Elle is their adopted daughter.

I

Greta wanders across stage. Alexis (16) lounges in Greta's childhood room. Alexis (85) putters around the hospice bed.

Noise grows. It's a train station.

Greta (40) pushes through a crowd of teenagers exiting the train station. She is swallowed by them for a moment, disappearing among them. She emerges on the other side, absentmindedly fixing her dishevelment.

She picks her ticket out of the machine. Still looking at her phone, she walks to the train platform.

A train pulls into the station on the opposite side of Greta's platform. Greta (40) pays it no mind. The train pulls away. Greta (40) looks up. Exactly opposite her, on the other platform, stands Alexis (40). They make eye contact. Alexis softens. Greta stiffens. Alexis follows the crowd of passengers as they flow out, heading towards Greta.

Greta's train pulls in. The doors beep. Greta (40) hops on, quickly. The train drives off. Alexis (16) and Alexis (40) exit.

II.

Simultaneously:

Greta (16) enters her bedroom. She's wearing pajamas. She stands in front of a mirror, performing various body checks. She sits down and curls her hair. She's not very good at it and burns herself occasionally. Once finished, Greta (16) walks to the middle set, becoming Greta (40).

Alexis (85) continues to clean up the various tissues and glasses and bowls littered throughout the left bedroom.

Greta (40) sits on a bench. She unfolds a checkered napkin beside her. From her purse, she pulls out two sandwiches in store packaging. She removes them from their packaging and arranges them artistically on the napkin. She hides the packaging in her purse. She adds a handful of fruit to the napkin and some crackers. She takes out two wineglasses and a bottle of red wine and sets them next to the napkin.

She reconsiders, pulls out a corkscrew and opens up the wine bottle with some difficulty. She pours a full glass, and quickly drinks it down to half. Greta continues to drink the glass throughout.

Alexis (40) enters.

Alexis (85) comes to stillness.

Greta (40) stands up, moves towards Alexis (40).

GRETA (40)

Do you want a glass of wine? I have beer too. And harder stuff.

Greta (40) holds up her purse. It's heavy. Bottles clink together. Alexis (40), embarrassed, pushes the bag back down. It's funny.

ALEXIS (40)

No, thank you.

Greta (40) quickly places the wine bottle under the bench.

ALEXIS (40)

I'll take some water, if you have it.

Greta (40) pulls a bottle of water out of her purse.

GRETA (40)

You're in luck.

Do you remember when we thought FIJI water was the most lavish and ridiculous thing you could buy with money?

ALEXIS (40)

Yes. God, we would laugh at people drinking it.

GRETA (40)

One of the worst things about growing up was finding that expensive water does actually taste better.

ALEXIS (40)

And here you are, still drinking generic brand water.

GRETA (40)

I'm a simple woman.

ALEXIS (40)

The hell you are.

This isn't where I expected to find you. I thought you would be a famous underground writer in New York at this point.

GRETA (40)

Famous underground is a contradiction.

I didn't realize you were back home.

ALEXIS (40)

My company wants me to transfer to the branch here.

GRETA (40)

Are you going to?

ALEXIS (40)

I'm still deciding.

I don't think so.

GRETA (40)

Max and I haven't talked in a few years and he was my only friend who knew where you were. I looked for your name in the news, for your face rushing past on a bike. Tried tuning my ears to your frequency.

ALEXIS (40)

Max and I haven't talked in a while either.

GRETA (40)

I can't believe you recognized me here. I look so different from how I looked 20 years ago.

ALEXIS (40)

No you don't.

GRETA (40)

No?

ALEXIS (40)

Not a bit. I mean, you recognized me too.

GRETA (40)

Yeah, but you've always looked good.

ALEXIS (40)

What do you mean?

GRETA (40)

I still had to grow into myself at 16. I changed a lot about myself since we last saw each other.

Alexis (40) scrutinizes Greta (40).

GRETA (40)

And I mean, sure, I recognized you, but you look different. Softer.

A misstep.

GRETA (40)

I mean, your face. It's less pinched. Stressed. On edge.

ALEXIS (40)

Yeah.

GRETA (40)

You were always thinking about something serious back then.

ALEXIS (40)

That's not true.

GRETA (40)

Yes it is.

ALEXIS (40)

I was very funny.

GRETA (40)

I was funnier.

ALEXIS (40)

Fuck you.

But yeah.

You were never serious.

GRETA (40)

I'm sorry.

ALEXIS (40)

Good.

GRETA (40)

I'm sorry for being too chicken shit to break up with you.

I'm sorry I stopped texting. Calling. Visiting. I'm sorry I didn't tell you that I couldn't look your
brave, loud love in the face anymore.

ALEXIS (40)

Okay.

GRETA (40)

Okay?

ALEXIS (40)

You destroyed me for a bit there.

Maybe you didn't think you could hurt me. You did. I loved you.

But it was ages ago.

GRETA (40)

I know. I'm still sorry.

ALEXIS (40)

This is pretty good.

GRETA (40)

The bread got soggy on the way here.

ALEXIS (40)

It did, but I wasn't going to say anything.

ALEXIS (40)

It did, but I wasn't going to say anything.

GRETA (40) (joking)

I guess people can change.

ALEXIS (40)

We have to.

GRETA (40)

I didn't think you would. You seemed already complete. Finished. Fully developed.

ALEXIS (40)

I was a teenager.

GRETA (40)

And you had 45 year olds taking order from you.

Do you remember the anti-police protest you organized downtown?

ALEXIS (40)

Of course.

GRETA (40)

How that man came up to you and starting yelling in your face? And you just let him do it, let him call you every horrible word in the world. I could see them bounce off you.

ALEXIS (40)

Don't.

GRETA (40)

And when he had worn himself out and turned around to leave, you kicked his knees out.

Everyone jumped on the guy, but I was watching you. Your face didn't change at all. It's like you knew it had to be done, but didn't care either way. And when you said stop, everyone stopped. He was hurt, but not badly. Not enough for the news station to call us violent. It was only when he scrambled away like an animal, urine puddling where he'd been curled up, that you looked at him with disgust.

ALEXIS (40)

I'm not proud of that.

GRETA (40)

I was. Proud of you. He deserved worse.

ALEXIS (40)

You cried the whole night.

GRETA (40)

But I wanted to fuck you.

I used to cry a lot.

[REVISED]

GRETA (40)

I used to cry a lot.

ALEXIS (40)

You don't anymore?

GRETA (40)

I can't. I'll feel the pressure building, my chest getting heavier, my throat spasming, and...
nothing. Like a cork. All that feeling with nowhere to go.

Silence.

GRETA (40)

Why did you look me up?

ALEXIS (40)

Well I saw you on that platform and—

GRETA (40)

Bullshit.

ALEXIS (40)

I just wanted to meet up with an old acquaintance. Relive my youth. All those good things.

GRETA (40)

Oh.

I thought about you a lot. In flashes. When you asked me if I loved you and I tripped my way around my words trying to find “no.” The scrapes on your knuckles that appeared out of nowhere. How your lips were chapped from the summer heat when they bit out the word “coward.”

I think about you a lot.

ALEXIS (40)

Are you drunk?

GRETA (40)

I wanted to believe you were still in love with the pain.

With the pushing back.

ALEXIS (40)

I realized we were ineffectual kids. Hearts in all the wrong places.

You didn't stick with it either.

GRETA (40)

I know. I tried. Tried to keep on doing the right things. Protesting the things that needed protesting. Followed the outrage. I boycotted the store down the block, then the one up the street, then the one down the block again. I lost track of who I was supposed to hate. Just doing enough to fool myself into thinking I might still be a good person.

ALEXIS (40)

Did it work?

GRETA (40)

Sometimes, for a bit.

I would have rather been... Never mind.

More berries?

ALEXIS (40)

I'm full.

You've barely touched your food.

GRETA (40)

Nervous.

ALEXIS (40)

Is this not going how you imagined?

GRETA (40)

No. I'm talking way too much.

ALEXIS (40)

I don't think so. You're more honest than I remember.

GRETA (40)

There's a protest downtown tomorrow.

ALEXIS (40)

About what?

GRETA (40)

Does it matter?

Do you want to go?

ALEXIS (40)

I can't.

I have to tour the office tomorrow.

Look, when I got a real job, the kind my parents always wanted me to get, I couldn't... do that, anymore. I got out. And I just stayed out.

GRETA (40)

That's good.

ALEXIS (40)

Really?

GRETA (40)

I always thought you would let yourself be torn to shreds before quitting.

ALEXIS (40)

I thought so too, before you left. You're not disappointed in me?

GRETA (40)

I'm glad you put yourself first.

ALEXIS (40)

Can I kiss you?

III.

Alexis (50) is doing dishes in the kitchen.

Greta (16) has changed into a fancy dress; the kind high schoolers wore to dances in 2012. She looks out of place. A doorbell rings. Greta exits. She returns with Alexis (16) dressed in the same style of dress, but it looks more natural on her. Alexis drops a stuffed backpack and pillow on the floor.

ALEXIS (16)

You look nice.

GRETA (16)

YOU look nice.

Do you think I look tanner?

ALEXIS (16)

Uh...

GRETA (16)

You're right, I look the same.

ALEXIS (16)

No/

GRETA (16)

/It's okay, honestly. Tonight, we rage.

Do you think anyone will dance with me?

We should leave soon so we can meet the others for dinner.

What's the matter with you?

ALEXIS (16)

Can we sit down?

They sit down.

ALEXIS (16)

You know how you told me

Us

That you think you're bisexual?

GRETA (16)

Yeah.

I mean, I'm not like, sure.

I just think I want to make out with girls and boys.

Not that I've made out with anyone at all.

ALEXIS (16)

You're one of my best friends/

GRETA (16)

You're shaking. Are you okay?

ALEXIS (16)

I'm nervous, I'm trying to tell you/

GRETA (16)

Tell me what?

ALEXIS (16)

I think I want to make out with girls too!

GRETA (16)

Oh. Wow. Okay.

ALEXIS (16)

You're the first person I've told.

GRETA (16)

Thank you?

ALEXIS (16)

So. Yeah. That's all.

GRETA (16)

Are you sure?

ALEXIS (16)

I don't know.

Yes.

GRETA (16)

Cool. I mean, cool that we're both bisexual. Or however you want to label yourself.

ALEXIS (16)

You're sure it's okay? You don't think I'm copying you or something?

GRETA (16)

Multiple people can be queer at the same time. Actually, I imagine one person coming out leads to more people coming out, which leads to a phenomenon of/

ALEXIS (16)

/Actually, that's not all I wanted to say.

GRETA (16)

Oh, okay. You're also a furry?

ALEXIS (16)

Shut up.

Don't

Joke.

I-

I really only want to make out with one girl.

GRETA (16)

You like someone??

ALEXIS (16)

Yeah/

GRETA (16)

/This is so exciting, I can try to find out if she likes girls cause I'm really good at being a wing-woman/

ALEXIS (16)

/shut up!

GRETA (16)

Sorry. I'm rushing things. I just get too excited and/

ALEXIS (16)

It's you! I like you.

You.

GRETA (16)

Huh.

ALEXIS (16)

No pressure, or anything. I just wanted to tell you.

GRETA (16)

Me? Honestly?

And it's not just because I'm the only gay girl you know?

ALEXIS (16)

Of course it's not that.

I like you.

GRETA (16)

How do you know?

ALEXIS (16)

I want to be around you all the time. You make me laugh. Your lips look soft.

GRETA (16)

Okay, I

I like you too.

Yeah.

ALEXIS (16)

Oh, thank God.

GRETA (16)

Yeah. I mean. Look at you. You're gorgeous. You're one of my best friends.

So, what now? How does this work?

ALEXIS (16)

Well, do you want to go to this dance with me? Officially?

GRETA (16)

My mom can't find out.

ALEXIS (16)

We won't have to tell her.

GRETA (16)

Okay. Yeah. Yes. That sounds fun.

Do we tell our friends?

ALEXIS (16)

Why don't we figure that out later?

Alexis (16) reaches out and touches Greta (16)'s face. Greta (16) laughs nervously.

GRETA (16)

What are you...?

ALEXIS (16)

Can I kiss you?

Greta (16) nods.

ALEXIS (50)

Hi baby. You're home early. You're not going to give me a kiss?

GRETA (16)

My first off-stage kiss.

Alexis (16) laughs.

ALEXIS (16)

Don't remind me that you're a theatre kid right now.

GRETA (16)

Hey! I'm not. I just dabble.

Alexis (16) leans in again.

GRETA (16)

We're really doing this, huh?

ALEXIS (16)

Don't make it awkward.

GRETA (16)

No promises.

Alexis (16) moves her face closer to Greta (16)'s. Greta looks over at Alexis (50).

ALEXIS (16)

What are you looking at?

GRETA (16)

I'm nervous.

ALEXIS (16)

Me too.

Greta (16) leans in. They freeze. Greta (16) removes herself and slips out of her dress.

Center set. Greta (50) enters wearing cheap business clothes.

GRETA (50)

God, I'm exhausted. I had to talk to my mom's doctor for an eternity during my lunch break.

She's "deteriorating rapidly."

How was your day?

ALEXIS (50)

Busy, but not too bad. I just got home and folded the laundry/

GRETA (50)

/I quit my job.

ALEXIS (50)

Very funny.

GRETA (50)

I finished talking to my mom's doctor, hung up the phone, and told my boss I wouldn't be back tomorrow.

ALEXIS (50)

I hope to God that you're joking because this would be the 3rd job you've quit in two years.

GRETA (50)

I want to do something that brings me joy.

ALEXIS (50)

Working doesn't bring anyone joy!

You think I enjoy sitting in front of a computer monitor for 8 hours a day, fixing code for 23 year old boys who get paid more than I do?

But it means that at the end of the day, I get to come home to my family.

GRETA (50)

There has to be more. I'm going to find it. I really quit, Alexis.

ALEXIS (50)

What the fuck?

GRETA (50)

Shh!

ALEXIS (50)

Don't shush me.

Elle isn't here.

She's at a friend's house.

GRETA (50)

On a weekday?

ALEXIS (50)

What do you want me to do? I had to stay late at the office.

GRETA (50)

I'd like you to prioritize our daughter.

ALEXIS (50)

Well I guess now you can stay home and cook and clean and go to PTA meetings while I break my back trying to make your life possible with only one source of income.

GRETA (50)

I was miserable.

I would support you if you decided to quit your job.

ALEXIS (50)

Well, that's the difference between us, isn't it?

I would never put you in this position.

GRETA (50)

I put my phone down. I saw my desk, cluttered with all the things I bought because I thought they would make time pass less gratingly, messy no matter how many times I organized everything. A cheap essential oil diffuser, the white plastic yellowing around the edges. Three sets of pens to make notes with, untouched in favor of the free pen from the bank that never stutters or runs out of ink. The picture frame that I uploaded every picture of us I could find into, that's supposed to change every hour, but the last week it's been stuck on a screenshot I took of us FaceTiming our last year of high school before/

ALEXIS (50)

/Before you broke up with me.

GRETA (50)

I'm not happy.

ALEXIS (50)

What do you even like to do?

Alexis (50) throws down her dishrag and storms out. Greta (50) sits down heavily. She freezes.

IV.

When Greta (50) stands up again, she is Greta (16) but speaks with the hindsight of a far older self.

GRETA (85)

I think it must have been pretty easy to be considered cool at my high school, but I still couldn't manage it. My post-pubescent body was a little too lumpy for skinny jeans, my sweat glands a little too active for the plain t-shirts with Hollister emblazoned across the front in tacky rainbow lettering. I knew better than to think any boys had crushes on me, the way that they liked my friends. And somehow, I knew that I was worth less because of this.

GRETA (85)

My biggest problem, I think, was that I was too loud, too talkative, and I had an abrasive laugh. I couldn't lie or manage to act like I didn't care about the things I cared about.

Ryan (16) enters.

GRETA (85)

Ryan was a prospective student with light brown hair and an unbelievably tan complexion. Someone pawned him off on me to take to my next class. I leaned against a table, crossing my arms in an attempt to push my minimal cleavage into his line of sight. As people passed by, I relished what they might think about us; me with a handsome, strange boy.

Alexis (16) enters.

GRETA (85)

She approached us. She was one of my closer friends, beautiful with an open face and tightly wound curls. She wore yellow blouses that complimented the warmth of her skin and dirty converse that we drew on in 7th grade.

GRETA (85)

I introduced her to Ryan.

Movement increases, passing period begins.

GRETA (85)

She told me she'd save me a seat at our lunch table.

Exit Alexis (16).

GRETA (85)

I took Ryan to Spanish class.

Greta and Ryan sit down next to each other.

GRETA (85)

Every single one of my cells vibrated at the proximity. I couldn't focus on anything but my peripheral vision. I was scared he would notice my shaky exhales I couldn't quite manage to steady. I obsessed over what I looked like to him—my image refracted through his long eyelashes. Finally, the bell to free me from my self-inflicted torture.

Greta and Ryan stand up.

GRETA (85)

I told him that I hoped I would see him around next year.

He nodded. Suddenly I saw that he was nervous.

“Can I ask you something?” he said.

My throat closed.

I nodded.

He asked for my friend's number.

Lights explode.

Ryan freezes.

Greta collapses.

GRETA (85)

It felt like heat. Warmth, but coupled with my stomach devouring itself and the complete certainty that everyone knew: knew that I had thought Ryan was interested in me, knew that I wanted him to ask for my number, knew how humiliated I was in that very moment. I ducked my head, hoping that maybe I obscured my transparent face swiftly enough for him not to see the shock in the downturn of my lips, the glazing of my eyes, or the red bleeding from my cheeks up to my forehead and down to my neck.

Greta stands up, dusts herself off.

Ryan unfreezes.

GRETA (85)

I gave him her number. That night when I dreamt, I was full of anger.

Ryan and Greta move mechanically, stilted, wrong.

GRETA (85)

I am in school, but the ends of the hallways dissolve into smoke and the doors lead to nothing. There is Ryan.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I said.

No response. There it is again, sneaking up on me before engulfing me completely. Red lines expand from my form, creating an aura. Discovery is imminent.

GRETA (85)

A girl walks by. I don’t know her well. Ryan pushes her. She falls down, tiny as she is. The walls bend in and out around me.

The walls bend.

GRETA (85)

Discovery of a different sort. I should not be humiliated, Ryan should be. All that time I was desperate for him to look at me and see me, when he was just another brutal, cruel man. I move, fast at first, then my movements catch. I've been slowed down but nothing else around me is. Tension is all I feel. My body trying to move forward and the air pushing me back.

GRETA (85)

I am exhausted by the time I reach Ryan. His eyes are drained swimming pools in the winter, freckled with dead leaves. My right hand curls into a fist, swings backwards, and begins to push toward Ryan's face. Ryan falls backwards, despite my punch being slowed to a tap by the invisible molasses surrounding me.

GRETA (85)

I stand over his prone form, my hands alternate their assault on Ryan's face, but their effect is even less than the first attempt. I scream, but the air chokes the sound out of me.

Ryan exits. Greta returns to normal.

Alexis (16) enters.

GRETA (85)

I told my friend about the dream, of course. It was funny that nice, golden Ryan would push a girl he had never met. We laughed thinking about how ineffectual my attempt to protect her was. I didn't tell my friend how the frustration still welled in me, unable to find a release even through a ridiculous construction of my subconscious.

GRETA (85)

She confessed to me that she wasn't interested in Ryan. She was beautiful enough to have that luxury. I told her so.

GRETA (85)

She rolled her eyes and put her hand on mine.

GRETA (85)

She told me I was beautiful too.

GRETA (85)

I laughed her off. I knew I wasn't beautiful in a way that boys liked, just left of lovely. She shushed me. I wanted to be wanted by guys the way she was. I think at this moment, I was close to understanding. But I still don't. I just keep going back.

Alexis (16) and Greta go to cuddle on Greta's bedroom floor. Alexis (85) enters, looks for Greta (85).

ALEXIS (85)

Come back to bed, Greta. It's late.

Greta (16), confused, leaves Alexis (16) and goes to Alexis (85) who leads her to bed.

V.

GRETA (85)

Where's Elle?

ALEXIS (85)

Last we heard, New York.

GRETA (85)

Oh New York! I love New York. I drove all the way there.

ALEXIS (85)

I've never been.

GRETA (85)

When's she coming back?

ALEXIS (85)

Don't worry about that.

GRETA (85)

School trips are usually, what, a week?

ALEXIS (85)

Yes.

GRETA (85)

Huh.

.

Did we go outside?

ALEXIS (85)

Yes, we went on a walk around the park. Do you remember?

GRETA (85)

No... No I don't.

Greta (85) gets up, talking to all versions of Alexis simultaneously.

ALEXIS (85)

Don't worry, it was beautiful outside. Just like any other fall day

GRETA (85)

Why don't I remember?

ALEXIS (16)

What do you think you're going to study in college? You're really good at English.

GRETA (16)

I have so much that I want to do, you know. Like, I want to spend my adulthood just collecting experiences. I think people are just made of experiences.

ALEXIS (85)

Do you remember our honeymoon?

GRETA (85)

Prague. Even the bricks in the street were beautiful.

ALEXIS (16)

There's so much I haven't done.

GRETA (16)

I guess I don't want the only thing I remember to be cheap polyester blouses and the flash heat of a copier.

ALEXIS (85)

We couldn't afford to fly anywhere yet. But we had so much fun, just the two of us.

GRETA (85)

Copenhagen. The bikes would rush past, and you'd have to pull me out of the road by my jacket.

ALEXIS (16)

We should plan a trip together, when we graduate high school.

GRETA (16)

Yes! A roadtrip. Just the two of us.

GRETA (85)

Lake Atitlan. We rode in a boat painted white and baby blue. We jumped off a cliff into the water and I bruised my entire ass.

Alexis (16) giggles.

GRETA (85)

Can you shut up? I'm trying to remember my honeymoon.

ALEXIS (85)

I didn't... I wasn't saying anything.

GRETA (85)

No, not you. Of course not you. Never you.

Alexis (50) reenters the middle set.

GRETA (50)

Please don't yell at me again.

ALEXIS (50)

I'm not going to yell. I overreacted. You know I want you to be/

/I don't want you to be unhappy.

But I can't do this on my own.

GRETA (50)

I can freelance.

ALEXIS (50)

You haven't written more than a paragraph in 25 years.

GRETA (16)

We should go to California first, go to the beach.

ALEXIS (16)

I really want to see New York. I've never been.

GRETA (50)

Because my brain was too focused on

Not killing myself.

ALEXIS (50)

We still need to pay the bills.

GRETA (50)

Quit acting like we're destitute! What about Elle? She needs to see her parents for more than a few hours a week!

ALEXIS (16)

My parents want me to go to school for computer science. I'm going to be the first person in our family to go to college.

GRETA (16)

That's a lot of pressure.

ALEXIS (16)

I know it's cheesy, but I want to actually make the world a better place, not just earn money.

ALEXIS (50)

Why are you even here, if all I do is tie you down?

GRETA (50)

I think you make me a good person.

ALEXIS (50)

I gave up so much.

GRETA (85)

I didn't ask you to.

ALEXIS (85)

What?

GRETA (85)

I don't want to hurt you.

ALEXIS (85)

You won't. I love you too much.

GRETA (85)

Exactly. That's the whole problem.

ALEXIS (16)

We'll have to map it out.

GRETA (16)

Maybe I can convince my parents to pay for the hotel rooms.

ALEXIS (16)

I can save up money from my summer job.

ALEXIS (85)

Have you been planning any trips?

GRETA (85)

Oh yes.

ALEXIS (85)

Maybe you can tell me about them in the morning?

GRETA (85)

Of course. Don't let me forget.

VI.

Alexis (85) and Elle are outside of the bedroom. Greta (85) lies in bed, but she can hear them. She struggles to get up when she hears them talking.

ALEXIS (85)

She's delicate.

ELLE

When isn't she?

ALEXIS (85)

More than usual.

Alexis (50) and Alexis (16) walk through Greta (85)'s bedroom.

ALEXIS (50)

Stop being so sensitive.

ALEXIS (16)

Why do you take everything so personally?

ALEXIS (85)

Thank you for coming.

ELLE

This is the last chance. Her last chance.

ALEXIS (85)

It means a lot to her.

ELLE

I'm doing it for you, mom.

Greta (85) moves to the middle set, where she begins folding laundry.

ALEXIS (85)

She loves you so much. She asks about you every day.

ELLE

Let's not do this. I'll be nice. I promise.

Alexis (50) enters the kitchen.

GRETA (50)

Did you buy Elle this shirt?

ALEXIS (50)

Yeah, isn't it cute? She loves it.

GRETA (50)

Alexis, baby, I told you that peplum isn't a flattering cut for her.

ALEXIS (50)

She's 8.

GRETA (50)

I don't want the other kids making fun of her.

ALEXIS (50)

Why would they make fun of her?

GRETA (50)

This looks like a shirt for a 30 year old.

ALEXIS (50)

It's just a shirt.

GRETA (50)

No it's not! It's not.

Greta returns to the left bedroom.

Elle follows Alexis (85) into the bedroom.

ALEXIS (85)

Honey, you're up.

GRETA (85)

I thought I heard voices.

ELLE

Hi mom.

GRETA (85)

Elle.

Sweetheart.

My baby.

Come closer.

Let me look at you.

ALEXIS (85)

You should lie back down.

GRETA (85)

No, no. Elle, come here.

You look beautiful.

ELLE

Thank you.

GRETA (85)

A little tired, maybe. Have you been getting enough sleep?

ELLE

Does anyone?

GRETA (85)

Are you still using the eye cream I bought you? The one with caffeine in it? I can pick up more for you when I go to Macy's. It'll help with the swelling.

ELLE

I-

Okay.

Sure.

You can pick some up for me.

GRETA (85)

Good. Good. That's a nice shirt. Did I get it for you?

ELLE

No.

GRETA (85)

Oh. Well, you've always had good taste.

ELLE

Are you alright?

GRETA (85)

Oh, I'm great. Just yesterday I was—

We went on a walk, didn't we?

ALEXIS (85)

Not yesterday. You were too tired.

GRETA (85)

I'm not tired now. Let's go for a walk.

ELLE

Are you sure?

Are you alright?

GRETA (85)

Why do you keep asking me that? Do you think I'm wacko or something?

Greta (85) blows a raspberry to emphasize her point.

ALEXIS (85)

She'll be fine.

GRETA (85)

I'll be fine.

Greta (85) crosses to her childhood bedroom, begins to cry.

Alexis (16) enters Greta (16)'s room.

ALEXIS (16)

Greta? Your mom said you were in here.

Are you okay?

GRETA (16)

My mom and I had a fight. It's stupid.

ALEXIS (16)

Oh fuck. I'm sorry.

Did you tell her about/

GRETA (16)

/God, Alexis, no.

No, she...

Same old fossilized arrowheads. I'm just never good enough. You'd think I would have built up a plate of armor by now.

She's just being herself.

ALEXIS (16)

Listen, Greta.

Someone told my parents about us.

Outed me.

GRETA (16)

Oh god.

What did they say?

ALEXIS (16)

They were mad I didn't tell them myself.

My dad/

/my dad thinks it's somehow his fault. For not being around enough.

I'm scared they won't love me as much.

It's dumb.

But otherwise fine.

Not great.

But fine.

GRETA (16)

Do you think they'll tell my mom?

ALEXIS (16)

I hadn't thought about/

I don't think so.

GRETA (16)

The same person who told your parents my tell my mom. Did they say who told them?

ALEXIS (16)

I didn't ask/

GRETA (16)

Okay, you figure that out and I'll/

I'll plan how to tell my mom.

ALEXIS (16)

Really? You're gonna tell her?

GRETA (16)

I think I have to.

Alexis (16) grabs Greta (16)'s face and covers it in little kisses.

ALEXIS (16)

I love you. I want to love you everywhere.

GRETA (16)

We should get going. Just let me put on some makeup.

ALEXIS (16)

Hey. I/

I/

I think you're beautiful, Greta.

GRETA (16)

You're pretty sexy yourself, hot stuff.

ALEXIS (16)

No I'm

Being serious.

GRETA (16)

Oh. Thank you.

Greta (50) is plating food in the kitchen. Alexis (50) enters.

ALEXIS (50)

You look beautiful.

GRETA (50)

Can you grab the other tray?

ALEXIS (50)

You look beautiful.

GRETA (50)

Please, we're running late.

Elle, come downstairs! We have to catch the train.

Will you go and make sure she's wearing the dress I laid out for her?

ALEXIS (50)

Which one did you lay out?

GRETA (50)

It's pink with flowers.

Don't scunch your face like that at me.

ALEXIS (50)

It sounds like something your mom would make you wear.

GRETA (50)

My mom has good style.

ALEXIS (50)

She made you wear a sweater vest when you were 15.

GRETA (50)

And you loved me anyway.

ALEXIS (50)

How could I not?

GRETA (50)

Just go check on Elle.

ALEXIS (50)

Why can't she wear what she wants?

GRETA (50)

I don't want her to have a harder time making friends than she already has.

ALEXIS (50)

She'll get there. She just has to find her tribe, the fellow weirdos.

We found each other, didn't we?

GRETA (50)

Miraculously.

Alexis (50) goes to check on Elle. She returns. She's upset.

ALEXIS (50)

She wanted you.

GRETA (50)

Oh my god, okay. Will you grab the iced tea out of the fridge? My mom likes the unsweetened kind.

ALEXIS (50)

Fine.

GRETA (50)

Was she wearing the right dress?

ALEXIS (50)

Yeah, she said she wanted your help with her hair.

GRETA (50)

Why didn't you just do it?

ALEXIS (50)

She wouldn't let me!

GRETA (50)

I'll do it.

It doesn't matter.

I'll do it.

ALEXIS (50)

You look beautiful.

Greta returns to the present.

GRETA (85)

You look beautiful.

ELLE

Thanks.

GRETA (85)

Where do you live, now?

ELLE

New York.

GRETA (85)

The subway system was different there. I thought you had to swipe the card, or something.

People were rushing past me and I was trying to get the card to work but I was holding it wrong.

A man yelled at me. I don't remember what he said, but I felt so stupid. I didn't know. The subway system was different.

.

You look so beautiful.

ELLE

Excuse me.

Elle exits.

GRETA (85)

Is she leaving?

ALEXIS (85)

She's left.

GRETA (85)

Why?

ALEXIS (85)

.

GRETA (85)

You look beautiful.

ALEXIS (85)

You never tell me that.

VII.

Greta (50) and Alexis (50) tiptoe into their kitchen. They've just fucked. They're giddy and a little hungry. They can't stop touching each other. Alexis (50) pulls out a joint and lights it up. Greta (50) takes a hit and wanders off.

GRETA (16)

So, I've never had sex with a woman before.

ALEXIS (16)

Yeah, I know. Me either.

GRETA (16)

I'm just thinking maybe we should define what sex means. To us. Since we don't adhere to the penetration equals intercourse paradigm.

ALEXIS (16)

Right. What's a paradigm?

ALEXIS (50)

I almost broke up with you right after we started dating.

GRETA (50)

What the fuck? Why?

You're the one who asked me out.

ALEXIS (50)

I didn't ask you out. I told you I liked you and then we were dating.

That's how high school works.

GRETA (50)

Whatever. You're the one that wanted me.

ALEXIS (50)

Oh, you made that very clear.

GRETA (50)

Why did you want to break up with me?

ALEXIS (50)

You said:

GRETA (16)

I'm defining sex as oral. Which means we haven't had sex yet. Do you agree?

ALEXIS (16)

I—

ALEXIS (50)

When you sat me down like a month into dating to talk about sex. You were so assertive.

Clinical. Like that's all we were doing.

GRETA (50)

No, I wasn't. I was shaking.

ALEXIS (50)

You were? You always seemed so confident to me.

Greta (16) loses her confidence, starts shaking.

GRETA (16)

Can we maybe choose a day when we want to have sex? So I can shave?

ALEXIS (16)

Shave?

ALEXIS (50)

You made me feel like shit, Greta. I'll be the one giving Elle the sex talk.

GRETA (50)

I was insecure. I thought you expected us to have sex.

ALEXIS (50)

Why?

GRETA (16)

I know you've dated other people, so I just wanted to get this out in the open, you know?

ALEXIS (16)

Okay, yeah. Yeah, that sounds good.

GRETA (16)

So when should we do it?

ALEXIS (16)

Uhhh

ALEXIS (50)

You were insecure. So was everyone else.

GRETA (50)

Not like me. You wouldn't understand. You could never understand.

No one wanted me.

ALEXIS (50)

I wanted you.

Wasn't that enough?

GRETA (50)

No!

I mean

It wasn't,

Then.

ALEXIS (16)

Can we wait a little longer? Feel it out?

GRETA (16)

Oh, of course. Yeah, we can wait.

Let's wait.

ALEXIS (50)

Oh.

GRETA (85)

I'm sorry, Alexis/

ALEXIS (85)

Wha—

VIII.

Train station. Alexis (40) and Greta (40) run into each other.

ALEXIS (40)

Well, hi.

GRETA (40)

Hi.

ALEXIS (40)

Thank you for lunch last week.

GRETA (40)

Yeah. It was nice to catch up with you.

ALEXIS (40)

Yeah. Maybe the next time I'm in town/

GRETA (40)

/you're leaving?

ALEXIS (40)

Yes, I don't want to transfer right/

GRETA (40)

/I thought I just wanted you to forgive me. For how I ended things between us.

ALEXIS (40)

I told you that I do.

GRETA (40)

I know but... Maybe it's not enough.

We were kids the last time I saw you.

GRETA (40) (con't)

That was the last time I really felt joy.

Do you think there's a universe where we stayed together?

Where we got married and had kids and my mom stopped caring.

And we bought a little two story house with a yard for a dog.

And your dad helped us paint it and my mom helped us decorate it and we threw crazy parties and then less crazy parties and then we threw dinner parties where you cooked and I made fancy cocktails.

And I loved you as much over a slow, Sunday breakfast as I loved you as we snorkeled with sharks. Maybe a quieter love. But just as deep.

ALEXIS (40)

I thought you didn't want all that stuff.

You told me that.

GRETA (40)

I didn't. But maybe I could have been different too.

ALEXIS (40)

Don't you have to catch your train?

GRETA (40)

What if I don't?

What if I create a new timeline.

One where we stay here.

Live here. In the station.

We sleep on the benches and eat the food that they throw out at the end of the night.

GRETA (40) (con't)

We fight the pigeons for the best spots to hang out on the roof.

ALEXIS (40)

I hate pigeons.

Look, it's been nice to see you, but I can't keep living in the past or with the what ifs.

GRETA (40)

You never have to go back to your coworkers or look at another computer screen ever again.

You can roll your eyes at my jokes.

Greta grabs Alexis's hands.

GRETA (40)

Your hands, as soft as ever, will brush mine, sending shockwaves to my hair follicles and down to my toes.

And it's just.

Us.

ALEXIS (40)

Are we us, without the world?

GRETA (40)

I hope so. I think we might even be more us.

I broke up with you because I fell out of love with you.

But I never fell in love with anyone else.

ALEXIS (40)

So I'm what? Your second choice?

GRETA (40)

No! No. I don't have a choice.

You were it for me.

My only chance.

And I just got too distracted and fucked it up.

ALEXIS (40)

Can I kiss you?

Greta kisses Alexis.

IX.

A rave. Alexis (16) waits awkwardly. Greta (16) talks to an unseen presence. She pops something into her mouth. Greta (16) grabs a wristband from Greta (85)'s bedroom table but isn't paying much attention. She's too busy focusing on every ounce of serotonin suddenly flooding her brain. Greta (16) puts on the bracelet and returns to Alexis (16).

ALEXIS (16)

Where were you?

GRETA (16)

Bathroom.

ALEXIS (16)

Don't run off on me like that.

GRETA (16)

Do you know anyone else here? Besides Max?

ALEXIS (16)

A couple people.

GRETA (16)

I just met this guy named Chris by the bathroom. Do you know him?

ALEXIS (16)

Do I know a guy named Chris? I know many Chrises.

GRETA (16)

Right sorry that was vague my bad. He's uh tall and has floppy brown hair and he's wearing all black.

ALEXIS (16)

Just point him out to me when you see him I guess. Why? Was he hitting on you?

GRETA (16)

Ha. Ha. Very funny.

No, we were just talking.

He said he could sell me some drugs.

ALEXIS (16)

But you already have a plug.

GRETA (16)

Yeah for weed.

ALEXIS (16)

Greta.

GRETA (16)

What?

ALEXIS (16)

Nothing.

GRETA (16)

You want some gum, baby?

Alexis (16) softens.

ALEXIS (16)

Baby? You've never called me that before.

But I'm okay.

Greta (16) pops gum into her mouth and starts chewing obnoxiously.

ALEXIS (16)

Do you ever think about how you're just chewing on your own saliva when you chew gum?

GRETA (16)

Well now I do.

Greta (16) spits out the gum.

ALEXIS (16)

How long do you wanna stay? It's kinda dead.

GRETA (16)

We just got here!

We can wait and see if more people show up.

I wanna daaaaaance.

ALEXIS (16)

You can go dance.

GRETA (16)

The dancefloor is empty. Come with me.

ALEXIS (16)

Fine.

Greta (16) goes ahead while Alexis (16) is stopped and talks to an unseen presence.

ALEXIS (16)

Greta.

Greta!

The lights confuse Greta (16) and she stumbles to the hospice bed. She stands up, tries to go to Alexis (16).

GRETA (85)

Here! I'm here!

The lights disorient her again, and she stumbles back onto the dancefloor, and begins dancing.

ALEXIS (16)

Greta!

Greta (16) turns around after a moment when she realizes Alexis (16) is no longer with her. She returns to where Alexis (16) stands.

GRETA (16)

What's going on?

Greta (16) pops another piece of gum into her mouth.

ALEXIS (16)

They're saying that I need a wristband.

GRETA (16)

Really?

ALEXIS (16)

You have a wristband.

GRETA (16)

I do? I do. Oh right, I got it from... Chris?

ALEXIS (16)

Chris?

GRETA (16)

My friend I was telling you about!

ALEXIS (16)

Now you're friends?

GRETA (16)

Huh?

ALEXIS (16)

Whatever. I can't get onto the dance floor without a wristband.

GRETA (16)

That's wack.

We should find you a wristband, baby.

How do we get wristbands?

ALEXIS (16)

I don't know! You're the one who has one!

Whatever.

I'm over this.

I think I wanna go home.

GRETA (16)

Are you serious? Over a wristband? We can figure this out. Let me find Chris.

ALEXIS (16)

Fuck this. Fuck Chris. This place sucks, it's basically empty and no one is dancing and you didn't even want to come in the first place.

GRETA (16)

Okay.

We can go.

But can you drive us?

ALEXIS (16)

What the fuck. Are you drunk, Greta?

GRETA (16)

No!

But I am...

Chris gave me some stuff.

ALEXIS (16)

You took drugs from a stranger?

GRETA (16)

We're friends now. Anyway, I feel amazing. I was trying to find you to see if you wanted to do some too. But I figured you wouldn't want to. I was going to offer anyway! Then I couldn't find you.

ALEXIS (16)

You weren't going to tell me?

GRETA (16)

You're being pretty judgmental.

Alexis (50) enters their kitchen, oblivious to the rave happening beside her.

ALEXIS (50)

Sorry that I don't think "Yonic Tonic" is the height of digital media.

GRETA (50)

Sounds prettttty homophobic to me.

ALEXIS (50)

That's not funny.

GRETA (50)

Sorry, you know I—

ALEXIS (50)

Always have to make a joke out of everything. Oh, I'm aware.

How's the job search going?

GRETA (50)

Fine.

But if "Yonic Tonic" selects my piece I'll get \$500 right off the bat and then maybe more depending on the ad revenue so/

ALEXIS (50)

/Don't you have to pay to submit shit like that?

GRETA (50)

It's just a couple bucks.

ALEXIS (50)

Why do you always put me in this position?

GRETA (50)

What position?

ALEXIS (50)

Being the bad guy!

GRETA (50)

I just wanted you to read it, Jesus! I don't have to submit it if it's going to fucking bankrupt us!

ALEXIS (50)

I'll read it!

GRETA (50)

Forget about it!

ALEXIS (16)

I'm supposed to forget that my girlfriend took drugs from a stranger when she was supposed to be hanging out with me?

GRETA (16)

Let go of me!

ALEXIS (16)

Greta, wait!

Greta (16) runs away.

ALEXIS (50)

I'll read it. Of course I'll read it.

Alexis (85) enters the bedroom, lays her hand on Greta (85)'s shoulder. Greta (85) is startled.

GRETA (85)

Stop following me!

ALEXIS (85)

Please take your medicine.

GRETA (85)

I'm not supposed to take drugs from strangers.

ALEXIS (85)

I'm not a stranger. It's me, Alexis. It's your wife.

I'm your damn wife!

GRETA (85)

I have a wife?

ALEXIS (85)

Yes! We got married 40 years ago. Do you remember? It was a small ceremony. Just in your parents' backyard, the same backyard we took prom photos in.

GRETA (85)

Alexis?

ALEXIS (85)

Yes, it's me.

GRETA (85)

You took me back?

ALEXIS (85)

You're the one who broke up with me, silly.

GRETA (85)

You were out of my league.

ALEXIS (85)

I still am.

GRETA (50)

I don't like it when you try to be funny.

ALEXIS (50)

I'm not trying to be funny. You can't put this shit out there, Greta.

GRETA (50)

What are you talking about?

ALEXIS (50)

This is personal. It's clearly about your mom, and me, and Elle.

GRETA (50)

No it's not. It's fiction.

ALEXIS (50)

You can't deny that it was based on us.

The bitchy mom.

The controlling wife.

The strange, inaccessible daughter.

GRETA (50)

Is that bad?

ALEXIS (50)

Would you love me if I didn't love you first?

GRETA (85)

Did Max come to our wedding?

ALEXIS (85)

No. Not a lot of people did. We didn't know many people anymore.

GRETA (85)

That doesn't sound like us.

ALEXIS (85)

People disconnected. You didn't like your coworkers. I hated mine.

GRETA (85)

My mom cried.

ALEXIS (85)

Yes.

GRETA (85)

Was she happy or sad?

ALEXIS (85)

I don't know.

Does it matter?

She made cucumber sandwiches.

ALEXIS (16)

Did a girl just come this way?

GRETA (85)

I'm not supposed to remember that.

ALEXIS (85)

Cucumber sandwiches are a bit gauche, but at least your mom came.

GRETA (50)

But you do love me, right?

ALEXIS (50)

What's your mom going to think? Elle, when she grows up and finds this online?

GRETA (50)

Who cares?

ALEXIS (50)

Who cares? We're not 20 anymore. Our actions have consequences. Your mom still fucking talks to you. Maybe just try to keep the peace?

Alexis (50) goes upstairs.

GRETA (50)

Why is it always my job to keep the peace?

Greta (50) stomps out.

ALEXIS (85)

Do you want me to help you in the bathroom?

Greta (85) nods. Alexis (85) and Greta (85) exit.

X.

Greta (16) is doing homework. Alexis (16) knocks.

ALEXIS (16)

I haven't heard from you in a few days. Since the rave.

GRETA (16)

I thought you would be mad at me. Still.

ALEXIS (16)

Yeah, well, I am.

You can't just ignore me.

GRETA (16)

.

ALEXIS (16)

You never text me first. Do you not want to talk to me anymore?

GRETA (16)

No, I do! It's that...

I think we're moving too fast.

ALEXIS (16)

We've been dating for like, 8 months, Greta.

GRETA (16)

It's me, I'm just freaking out. I've never been in a relationship before. I just wanted to have fun and dance. I'm not used to thinking about someone else beside myself.

ALEXIS (16)

Some of us have been doing that since the day we were born, Greta. So why did you stopped texting me? And calling me? And started avoiding me at school?

GRETA (16)

What are you talking about?

ALEXIS (16)

Don't play stupid. What about our plans? Our roadtrip?

GRETA (16)

I'm sorry, I

I thought it would hurt less if

ALEXIS (16)

If you ghosted me?

GRETA (16)

I was going to talk to you! After you staged the walk out over the dress code, I was going to pull you aside/

ALEXIS (16)

/But you didn't.

GRETA (16)

You seemed so busy. Important. I didn't want to distract from what you did/

ALEXIS (16)

You haven't told your mom yet, have you?

GRETA (16)

What?

ALEXIS (16)

I am sick of you hiding. Behind me, behind your parents, behind pretending to be a good person.

GRETA (16)

Alexis/

ALEXIS (16)

/Let me finish!

You avoided me because you didn't want to feel uncomfortable. Not because you give a fuck about my feelings. If you cared about me, you would have talked to me.

I love you, Greta. Do you love me?

GRETA (16)

I don't know what love is.

ALEXIS (16)

Do you want to break up with me?

XI.

Kitchen. Alexis (50) is pouring over some bills on kitchen table. Greta (50) enters.

ALEXIS (50)

I think we have to move.

GRETA (50)

Okay.

ALEXIS (50)

Okay? Okay?

We barely fit into this apartment as it stands.

And Elle just keeps on growing.

.

What about your mom's place?

GRETA (50)

What about it?

ALEXIS (50)

I mean, how much longer do you think she can live there by herself?

Her doctor says she's going to start fading pretty quickly, right? We can help her.

GRETA (50)

I'm not going to ask to move in with her.

ALEXIS (50)

Are you serious?

GRETA (50)

Do you know how much groveling I would have to do?

ALEXIS (50)

I told you not to publish that article.

GRETA (50)

I thought we were okay!

ALEXIS (50)

You humiliated her. Everyone got to read what you really think about her. And you know how fragile she is right now/

GRETA (50)

She can't just hide her head in the sand!

ALEXIS (50)

She'd do it for Elle.

GRETA (50)

We can find another place. There are cheaper spots in town.

ALEXIS (50)

This is really where you draw the line? When I ask you for help? I don't want to live in some rat infested concrete block with 3 roommates.

GRETA (50)

We could put up a beer pong table. Like old times.

ALEXIS (50)

You're not funny.

GRETA (50)

We had fun, back then, right?

We weren't always fighting?

ALEXIS (50)

No, we weren't always fighting.

I think it's hard to remember the good times because the bad times fit into a pattern.

The good times came out of nowhere.

GRETA (50)

How do we find them?

ALEXIS (50)

Maybe you could ghost me again.

GRETA (50)

I don't think we have another 20 years to wait to get back together, though.

ALEXIS (50)

Hey, I plan on living until 100.

GRETA (50)

That's too bad because I will be participating in physician assisted suicide the second I get my first wrinkle.

ALEXIS (50)

Well, I have bad news for you.

GRETA (50)

Don't say it.

ALEXIS (50)

I think you might have some—

GRETA (50)

If you point at my forehead, I'm going to kill you.

ALEXIS (50)

--Right up there.

GRETA (50)

This is how you ask for favors?

ALEXIS (50)

No wonder I haven't been promoted in 10 years.

GRETA (50)

Ha!

ALEXIS (50)

I have jokes too.

GRETA (50)

I know you do.

You just didn't have to base your whole personality on making people laugh during your formative years because you were pretty.

ALEXIS (50)

What are you talking about?

I can't believe it's still a competition for you.

I can't believe you still talk about high school like it matters.

XII.

Elle and Alexis (85) are outside the bedroom. Greta (85) is listening.

ELLE

I think I'm going to my hotel.

ALEXIS (85)

You're not staying here?

Your bedroom is the exact same as it was.

ELLE

That's actually creepy and not endearing at all. You know that, right?

ALEXIS (85)

Please stay?

ELLE

I can't/ I/

Can't.

Her love hurts.

ALEXIS (85)

She didn't know there were other ways to love. To be loved.

Loved enough.

ELLE

Didn't you show her?

ALEXIS (85)

I tried.

But I couldn't change her.

She always thought I loved in spite of/

Not because.

She was a good mom, for the most part.

Spent all her time with you or worrying about you.

ELLE

That's what made it worse.

If she'd only been horrible to me, that would have been easy.

But she loves me so much. And then she would tell me things and I knew it was out of love but they felt like qualifiers. And I begged her to stop, that I was 18, that I was 26, that I was 30 and I knew how to take care of myself. But she couldn't stop trying to help. And I forgave her. Every time. But it felt like I was losing something of myself while I was doing it.

I know that she thought I was weird. She was worried I was unlovable. But I wasn't. I found love. Fine, he was older, and people thought he was unattractive, but he was perfect to me. A little more traditional, but I didn't mind. I liked being taken care of. We were going to be together forever. I know mom thought I could do better. I wonder if that's really why she wrote that stupid fucking article.

ALEXIS (85)

I know what she did/

ELLE

/Listen to me!

He already had kids. I didn't want any. I didn't want to pass on my own shit to anyone else. It was going to stop with me.

Mom took me to the clinic. She gave me a heat pad for my stomach. She made me tea. And then she wrote about it. Maybe she fancied herself an activist again. Turning the personal into the political. My personal.

I lost him, mom. I couldn't lose any more parts of myself. While I was trying to keep the peace.

Greta (85) stands up.

XIII.

Park.

GRETA (85)

Heavy, hot, humid, acrid smell of wet trees overpowers the grounded scent of damp soil. An older man walks his black Schnauzer. The dog doesn't even look at us. The path goes from dirt to asphalt to stone back to dirt and suddenly we're fully on a forest path, completely isolated. We're at my old playground, the one that used to be enormous but now seems tiny, unimportant, unimaginative.

GRETA (85)

I sit on a bench as I watch Elle start to play. I imagine that I am a different version of myself. I wear jeans and a striped long sleeve shirt, somehow not affected by the moisture in the air. My hair is the color of clover honey, straight. I listened to my mother when she told me not to date girls. I observe the other mothers and pass judgement on them—their clothes are cheap and ill fitting and my eyes linger on another mother who shows too much cleavage. But that mother is me, too. She didn't have a mother to tell her to hide her body, to interpret every side-long look as a criticism. The mother with too much cleavage sits down next to me.

Ryan enters.

GRETA (85)

A father walks through the playground, the only man in sight. Most of the mothers straighten their posture and cast their eyes downward. I notice that I have too. I watch as the woman next to me pulls out some sickly pink lip gloss that smells like a vanilla candle and slug it onto her lips. Then she pulls out powdered donuts, the ones that I only see at the gas station. The woman unwraps the donuts, powdered sugar crumbling onto the tight black jeans that sit below the woman's waist, forcing her stomach to bulge over the waistline. I try not to stare. I can't stop. The powder sticks to the woman's lip gloss as she eats. The woman hums as she dusts the white sugar off of her clothes. Then there is silence. She seems content, at ease in her body in a way I have never even dreamed of. I am surprised the woman isn't talking—she seems like the kind of person who never shuts up.

GRETA (85)

The playground is pirate themed. There's a half-submerged wooden ship sticking out of the sand and treasure chests scattered around. Elle wears her pirate outfit, though I told her not to. I'm worried my daughter is too weird to make friends. The woman next to me leans down and picks something off the ground.

GRETA (85)

My wedding ring. It must have slipped off of my finger. I've been losing weight recently, worrying about Elle and her grades and her lack of socializing in school according to the teachers. I only wear it so guys don't hit on me, despite not having been hit on in years. I look at the ring, glinting in the woman's powdery hands. Maybe it was all a mistake. A risk that never paid off. A jump with a broken ankle at the bottom. And the bone had healed, crooked, and now someone has to help me walk.

GRETA (85) (con't)

The woman glances at me, hands the ring back. Some concealer has caked in her crow's feet.

Sweat rolls down to my upper lip. I press my lips together tightly. The woman smiles at me. I

stand up.

XIV.

Elle helps Greta (85) into her bedroom.

Alexis (16) lies on Greta (16)'s floor.

Alexis (50) sits in their kitchen.

ELLE

I'm flying home tomorrow, mom.

GRETA (85)

Oh, okay. Where's home?

ELLE

New York.

GRETA (85)

Oh, I love New York! I visited with your mom when I was 25, right after college.

ELLE

Mom said she's never been to New York.

ALEXIS (16)

I don't want to do anything without you.

GRETA (16)

It's just one summer. And then we can go on our roadtrip.

ALEXIS (50)

I wish I could have come along back then.

GRETA (50)

It was just one week. New York isn't even that nice anyway. Hot and stinky and pigeons.

ALEXIS (50)

I hate pigeons.

GRETA (50)

We'll go back together.

We'll take Elle.

ALEXIS (16)

Will you write me letters?

GRETA (16)

Letters? Sure. I mean, we can just text.

ALEXIS (50)

I wrote you letters. After we broke up.

GRETA (50)

Did you keep them?

ALEXIS (50)

I had to throw them out. They made me too angry.

ALEXIS (16)

Do you think we'll stay together?

GRETA (16)

Of course we will.

ALEXIS (50)

Recreate everything we missed those 20 odd years we were apart.

GRETA (50)

Do you think we would have made it if we'd stayed together?

ALEXIS (50)

I hope so.

ELLE

Mom? Where did you go?

GRETA (85)

To Alexis.

ELLE

Mom I/

/I wanted to let you know that

Everyone but Elle and Greta (85) start to glitch.

ALEXIS (16)

I forgive you

GRETA (16)

Okay.

ALEXIS (50)

I forgive you.

GRETA (50)

That's all I ever wanted.

ELLE

I forgive you.

GRETA (85)

Thank you.

ELLE

Do you know what you did to me?

GRETA (85)

I think I must have hurt you.

ALEXIS (50)

Why are you still here, if you resent me so much?

GRETA (50)

If it weren't for Elle, I would leave you right now.

ALEXIS (16)

You can't just run off on me!

GRETA (16)

Can you stop being so clingy? I'm allowed to have other friends.

Stop trying to change me.

ELLE

What are you talking about?

GRETA (85)

Can you hear them?

ELLE

I can hear you.

GRETA (85)

Yes, it's me. But it's also not.

ELLE

Where do you go?

GRETA (85)

Times I wish I could change. Places where I want to stay forever.

ELLE

Is it better than here and now?

GRETA (85)

Yes.

Even when it's bad it's/

/solid.

There's ground beneath my feet instead of just floating through, no gravity.

ELLE

No atmosphere. You land here and get pushed away by the impact.

GRETA (85)

I just want to breathe.

Are you going home to New York?

ELLE

I/

You remember?

GRETA (85)

That's where we were always going to go, Alexis.

Elle exits. Alexis (85) enters.

ALEXIS (85)

Who were you talking to, Greta?

GRETA (85)

Elle. She was saying goodbye.

ALEXIS (85)

She hasn't been back in a few years.

GRETA (85)

I just saw her! She forgave me.

ALEXIS (85)

You never apologized. She left.

You broke my heart.

GRETA (85)

Why do you keep letting me hurt you?

ALEXIS (85)

You taught me that's what love is.

GRETA (85)

/There you are. Let's go home.

ALEXIS (85)

We are home.

GRETA (85)

No, I want to go to our apartment.

ALEXIS (16)

What, that shithole?

ALEXIS (85)

We're at your mom's house. Your childhood room.

GRETA (85)

It's too big. You're too far away.

ALEXIS (85)

I'm right here.

GRETA (85)

You're in Kyoto. You're calling me from Cape Town. You sent me a video of you in Buenos Aires.

ALEXIS (85)

Those were work trips.

GRETA (85)

You were supposed to take me with you.

ALEXIS (50)

You went places without me too.

GRETA (85)

Do you forgive me?

ALEXIS (50)

You never apologized.

GRETA (85)

Visiting Max in LA.

Running down a street in Munich.

Holding Elle as she threw up in a Smiths across from the park.

Where were you?

ALEXIS (16)

I'm right here.

ALEXIS (50)

I'm here now.

ALEXIS (85)

I forgive you.

XV.

The rave. Alexis (16) is still looking for Greta (16). Alexis (50) sits at their kitchen table, looking at bills. Greta (16) returns to the rave. Alexis (16) hugs her tightly.

ALEXIS (16)

Don't run off like that again.

Alexis (50) starts to notice the rave around her.

ALEXIS (50)

Stop daydreaming. Elle will be home soon. We don't have time/

GRETA (50)

/Come dance with me.

Greta (50) pulls a protesting Alexis (50) to her feet. They join the rave.

Alexis (85) enters her bedroom.

ALEXIS (85)

Greta? Where are you?

Greta (85) goes back to her bedroom.

ALEXIS (85)

Where did you go?

Greta (85) grabs Alexis (85)'s hand and leads her to the rave.