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### Bells Like Hooves

Elizabeth Mixer  
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# BELLS LIKE HOOVES

By: Liz Appel

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts Playwriting, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

[2022]

May 3, 2022  
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Thesis Sponsor: Christine Scarfuto  
Second Reader: Robert Cowan

CHARACTERS:

XANTHE: female-identifying, late 30s, and other people.

INEZ female-identifying, early 30s, and other people.

JO female-identifying, late 30s, just Jo.

SETTING: An island populated mostly by summer homes and also an Observatory. In winter the water is turned off, and only a single caretaker stays on through spring to keep watch. There are many reports of strange happenings over these dark months, but by summer such things seem like distant memories, and perhaps only dreams.

*(XANTHE in a pool of light,  
addressing the audience:)*

XANTHE

We come to the door.

It's evening, but it's summer so it still feels like the afternoon

The light is butter yellow and when Jo answers the door there's a crispness to the air around her, like it's just been rinsed clean. She's brilliant standing there, like something outside time.

We go inside and everything looks just as you'd imagine.

*(Lights go fully up to reveal XANTHE, INEZ and JO standing in the living room of JO's cottage. It's small and spare with lots of wood and a white rug to catch the pine needles and sand and other bits of life dragged in. There's something cooking in the oven, the table is set for one, a plate of half-eaten salad, a half-drunk glass of wine, a candle that was lit half an hour ago.)*

*XANTHE turns to JO:)*

XANTHE

How are you?

JO

I'm ok, you know

I am

probably in shock

INEZ

When's your flight?

JO

Tomorrow at three.

Ugh. I have so much to do

XANTHE

We'll take care of it

JO  
The fridge

INEZ  
Don't worry about it

JO  
The garbage

XANTHE  
After you leave, tomorrow  
we'll come by

JO  
Really? Thanks.  
I don't want to come back and it's all  
just sitting there  
*(Small break  
JO surprises herself with a sob)*  
I'm sorry

XANTHE  
No no

INEZ  
It's good

JO  
It's just  
They said she was just sitting there  
On our bed.  
Propped up against the pillows

INEZ  
Oh my god

JO  
Like she was reading, or had just sat down for a minute

XANTHE  
What do they think happened?

*(Sound of a cellphone ring.  
The ringtone is like an old-fashioned telephone ringing)*

JO  
They don't know, I've been trying to reach the medical examiner

*(Ring)*

JO  
But it looks like maybe a heart attack?  
She was having this—

INEZ  
Is that your phone with the old fashioned ring?

*(We all hear it ringing louder)*

JO  
Oh that's me, hang on it could be him

*(JO exits)*

INEZ  
Argh.

XANTHE  
I know

INEZ  
I can't stop smiling  
I think it's a nerves thing?  
When I was in first grade there was a kid in my class whose mom died, and the principal called me into his office to be like the kid's buddy until his dad got there to pick him up, and I turned into this like grinning idiot, and when I tried to hold his hand he was like get the fuck away from me

XANTHE  
Of course they pick you

*(INEZ smacks her face trying to get the smile out)*

INEZ

Is she still on the phone?

XANTHE

I think so,  
should we help her pack, or—  
What's that??

*(XANTHE notices something starting to smoke in the oven,  
goes to turn it off)*

XANTHE

Ugh, she must have been cooking when she got the call  
I think maybe we should just...clear up

*(XANTHE pulls the smoking beast out of the oven.  
INEZ starts clearing the table, puts clean things away,  
Dirty things in dish washer—she knows where things go.  
Clears the plate, leaves the candle.)*

INEZ

Is it wrong of me that one of the main things I'm feeling right now is  
disappointment that we can't tell her?

XANTHE

No, we definitely cannot

INEZ

I know that, I'm just saying I'm disappointed  
I just feel—GAHHHHH  
I want to tell her!

XANTHE

Was this a stew do you think?

*(INEZ goes over and kisses XANTHE)*

XANTHE  
Or like a casserole?

*(INEZ sniffs)*

INEZ  
Yuck tuna.

XANTHE  
It's not for this world anymore, whatever it was

INEZ  
Does she have compost?

XANTHE  
If it's tuna we can't

INEZ  
Disposal?

XANTHE  
Um  
*(XANTHE looks around for the switch  
Looks under sink, reads note attached)*

XANTHE  
"Do not use, exclamation mark, exclamation mark, exclamation mark"  
Ok we'll just have to chuck it  
Can you, all this

*(INEZ starts clearing the counter.  
JO is clearly someone who doesn't clean as she cooks;  
there are opened cans, chopped vegetables, a couple of plastic bags  
strewn around. XANTHE puts the stew/casserole on the table to cool.)*

INEZ  
When was the last time we saw her?

XANTHE

Who

INEZ

Jo's...?

XANTHE

Wasn't she up here...Memorial Day?

INEZ

Yeah, I don't think she was here

XANTHE

Remember she sliced all those onions for the mushroom and onion thing

INEZ

Oh my god I love that dish,  
let me just imagine it in my mouth for a minute  
*yum*

But yeah, no, she was supposed to come but then something happened—  
Hey don't throw those bags out!

XANTHE

They're used already

INEZ

We can re-use them  
They just had vegetables, I'll wash them out—here

XANTHE

Jo went to go pick her up at the airport—  
But then something weird happened...

INEZ

No, Jo was supposed to pick her up, but there was a problem with her flights  
She had to stay overnight somewhere...  
With some stranger she just met on the plane??

XANTHE

I swear I can picture her at that counter slicing onions

INEZ

No that's Jo telling us how she spent that whole Wednesday bent over the counter

XANTHE

And then you made that dumb joke

*(XANTHE takes the garbage bag out of the receptacle  
Scrapes the stew/casserole into it)*

INEZ

She said she was sublimating all of her sex drive into cooking because they'd been apart for three weeks, and how her back was killing her from all the chopping because she couldn't stop until they—

*(UH OH the garbage bag ripped!  
Stuff is spilling onto the floor!)*

XANTHE

Oh shit!

Here can you help with

INEZ

Don't move!

God, I always tell her not to use the tall kitchen bags, you have to use the heavy duty

XANTHE *(as it's leaking)*

Ok, can you just bring it over

*(INEZ gets a heavy duty bag and they  
struggle to get the broken bag into the new bag)*

XANTHE

How do you want me to

INEZ

Just lift

XANTHE  
Its ripping!!

INEZ  
I'm saying get it off the ground

XANTHE  
Can't you just bend down

INEZ  
Listen to the words I'm saying:  
Lift. It. Up.

XANTHE  
I don't want it to explode everywhere!

*(Struggle struggle struggle  
Looks like it might break—  
Ah they did it!)*

XANTHE *(looking down)*  
Quick get me the paper towel!

INEZ  
Can't we use cloth?

XANTHE  
This is garbage juice, and it's disgusting, and she's traumatized  
I just want it clean  
Can you hold this

INEZ  
I just think if there's an eco-friendly option—

XANTHE *(wiping up with paper towel)*  
Yes generally, but just not right now, is there room for this in there—

*(XANTHE puts the soppy paper towels in the garbage bag.)*

INEZ

You know we all have to shift our frameworks, right?

Like not: let's go for the green option when it's convenient, but let's always reach for the greener—

*(XANTHE kisses her.)*

XANTHE

You're right.

I'm sorry.

I love you.

*(JO comes back in)*

JO

I'm so sorry that was—

What happened?

INEZ

There was a problem with the—

*(INEZ mimes 'Smoke coming out of the oven!' but maybe it looks more like: 'A huge jellyfish came in and attacked all the nonexistent little children who live here...!')*

*XANTHE and JO just stare at INEZ)*

XANTHE (to JO)

Who was on the phone?

JO

The sister in law.

INEZ

The mean one??

JO

She just has a sharp tongue.

She's also been talking to the medical examiner

And there's some confusion about records or insurance, I don't know

INEZ

Do you have to talk to her more?

JO

No they just

I need to go back to the apartment and...

Her wallet, some papers

XANTHE

Will you have anyone with you?

INEZ

Can someone meet you at the airport?

XANTHE

How are you getting to the airport?

JO

No, I'm fine

I'm driving, I have to drop off the rental—

INEZ

We could drive you and drop it off?

XANTHE

We have to do a grocery run anyway—what time are the boats tomorrow?

JO

No really, I'd rather just

go on my own

XANTHE

I understand

INEZ

We could ride the ferry with you? Just into the harbor?

JO

No, thank you, I just want to go back  
Be the first one in our space. I'll call you

XANTHE

Look at me:

**I see you.**

**Don't get lost.**

INEZ

Are you sure about the airport?

JO

I'm sure

...

Do you want some lasagna, it must be done by now

INEZ

That was lasagna??

XANTHE

I'm sorry we just—it was really burned

*(Maybe INEZ does a little reprise of the Jellyfish...)*

JO

Did I leave the stove on?? God, I could have started a fire

Do you want a, a glass of wine, or...?

INEZ

Sure

XANTHE

Actually Jo:

Do you want company right now?

JO

I don't

I don't know?

XANTHE

Ok, how about this:

Why don't we go out to the porch

And you can just be in here

And we'll be right out there

We'll just watch the sunset and if you want to join, come out

Or tap on the window, and we'll come in

We'll just stay there until it gets dark.

We're right there, ok?

*(JO nods.*

*XANTHE holds the door open for INEZ  
who has started awkwardly weird-smiling again  
as she waves/bows on her way out.*

*And the door closes behind them.*

*And JO is alone in the space.*

*She looks around at her now perfectly clean kitchen.*

*She picks up the wine glass looks at it, almost like she doesn't know what  
to do with it. Sticks her fingers in it.*

*Flicks the wine in the direction of the audience.*

*Looks out—almost sees them.*

*She pours the rest of the wine out on the rug.*

*It makes a satisfying wine-colored stain.*

*The sun sets as Jo turns and blows out the candle.*

*Shift back to XANTHE in a pool of light:)*

XANTHE

**Catastrophe.** Literally defined as a **sudden turn**, a **turning over**, from the Greek, *cata*, for **down** or **away**, and *strophe*, to **turn**.

You know when you've done something bad?

Like you're cleaning, or chopping vegetables, and you see the knife getting too close to your fingers, and just a second before it happens you think, *oh god this is going to be bad*, and then there goes a piece of your finger into the sink

XANTHE (CON'T)

Or with accidents— you're walking down a staircase and you see the stair you'll miss right before you trip and fall, or the car that'll hit you just before it runs the red light— All these things, it's like your body gives you a split second advance warning And I used to think this was to prepare you, to get the shock response going But I'm starting to think it's something different That we have these images in our minds Not because we're foretelling a particular future But because we've experienced a universal past Somewhere, in some corner of time, all of these things have always already happened And so folded into our minds is the ability to know this in advance And I've been thinking: What does this tell us about ourselves, and our relationship to **disaster**? Do we *need* a **catastrophe** to access this part of our brains? The part that doesn't just fear, or imagine, But **knows** what's about to happen?

*(INEZ enters and it's a bit later and they're back in JO'S cottage. They're going through the fridge throwing out perishables. XANTHE is conspicuously holding a heavy duty garbage bag.)*

INEZ

Just like, what did Jo see in her?

XANTHE

I don't know, Jo likes a project,  
Said she went over her past like picking a scab  
I think Jo thought it was sexy—pickles?

INEZ

Chuck. But save the bottle!

*(XANTHE makes a face, but does it)*

XANTHE

Personally I find that the opposite of sexy

INEZ

Was that you crashing around last night?

XANTHE

Couldn't sleep, came down for a snack

INEZ

Do you want me to get you that tea? Plus I heard something upstairs, I think it was coming from your mom's office—?

*(XANTHE pulls out several packs of butter)*

XANTHE

Ohmygod, how much butter can a single person eat??  
You know Jo's mom used to eat butter straight?  
I'd come down after a sleepover and she'd be slicing these cubes onto a plate and eating them with a tiny little fork—

INEZ

Rich people are weird

XANTHE

Jo's grandmother was the one with the money—  
Jo's mom was always scraping, she almost had to sell this place, which makes me cry even to think about, I basically lived here every summer

INEZ

What about your cottage

XANTHE

Mom was always working, she needed quiet

INEZ

What happened to Jo's grandma's money?

XANTHE

She left it all to some animal hospice thing

INEZ

That's nice, I guess

XANTHE

Do we want cream cheese?

INEZ

We always want cream cheese

*(XANTHE holds up an unopened container of yogurt)*

XANTHE

And we're sure Jo won't come back—

INEZ

Toss it. Keep the container.

And I just mean when exactly did Jo find out—

XANTHE

Even for a long weekend?

INEZ

*That she was still alive??*

XANTHE

I

I don't know? At the hospital maybe? Or somebody left her a message—

INEZ

You didn't ask??

XANTHE

No, when she called she was just—

*(some kind of flapping/out of control gesture)*

I could barely understand her

INEZ

No, see, when someone dies, there's a whole set of things that have to happen  
Something's off

XANTHE

Jo's in shock

*(XANTHE sees the carpet with the stain)*

XANTHE

Oh my god—  
Is that...blood???

*(XANTHE holds it up, INEZ inspects)*

INEZ

Blood dries darker brown.  
Wine.

XANTHE

Thank god you know these things.

INEZ

I just got a text that my Tuesday fell trying to get out of the shower—  
I told her daughter she needs a railing

XANTHE

They're texting you on your personal phone?

INEZ

They might need me

*(INEZ gets seltzer and starts working on the stain  
XANTHE continues with the fridge.)*

INEZ

Anyway, I'm just saying the police don't call  
And tell you someone's dead unless that person is well and truly dead

XANTHE

They make mistakes

INEZ

Not fucking 'This person is dead but they're actually alive' mistakes!

XANTHE

No, I feel like I heard a story

INEZ

No no, this is not a podcast  
This is real life

XANTHE

About this guy who was already in the coffin?  
And it was open casket, and at some point during the service  
he just woke up—like *tada*

INEZ

I'm saying something doesn't scan about this entire situation

XANTHE

Can you imagine that family—?

INEZ

No. Look at me.  
The whole. Relationship. From the start.

*(JO enters and we are in a hospital.  
INEZ becomes NURSE.)*

JO

I know I'm not immediate family, but we were in a relationship—she was my fiancée  
And I got a message that she was taken to this hospital  
But I can't seem to find any record

NURSE

I'm sorry we can't release that information

JO

I'm actually not asking for  
Just is there any record of her being admitted here?

NURSE

That's the kind of information we can't give out

JO

She was having this thing, her heart was racing?  
And at home, when I was going through her papers, I found a letter saying that a few months ago she was admitted *here*, overnight, for some kind of observation  
And the police told me she was brought here yesterday

NURSE

The police shouldn't have released that information

JO

No, I found the papers at the home that we shared  
I'm talking about now

NURSE

I'm sorry, but I can't help you

JO

Is she lost?  
The police said they found her non-responsive, no pulse  
And that she was brought here and that she died  
But the person on admissions said there was no record of anyone by her name being admitted here and  
Look: Here's her insurance card, I'm just trying to see if there's been a mistake, can't you help me understand if there's been a mistake

*(NURSE takes the card, types silently)*

NURSE

I'm sorry that I can't reveal any information that I may have found here about whether this individual was recently admitted to this hospital

*(she shakes her head no)*

And I wish you luck on your journey.

*(pause)*

You might want to check the morgue?

*(Shift back to XANTHE)*

XANTHE

The truth is I didn't check when, or why, or how Jo found out, because there was something in her voice when she told me that was very familiar:  
It was the feeling I had the first time I showed up at my mother's door and she didn't know who I was.

*(XANTHE turns and is now MORTUARY ASSISTANT  
JO is at the morgue.)*

JO

But how do you know who they are?  
Aren't there supposed to be tags?

MA

We don't do that anymore

JO

On their toes, so you know who's who

MA

We have better ways of keeping track

JO

But even the billboards on the side of the road against drunk driving,  
they show toes with tags on them and that means  
Death?

MA

Can I help you?

JO

Is it always so cold in here?  
No, sorry, dumb question, of course it's cold  
No wait  
I know what you're about to ask me, but just listen  
I'm here because my  
My love  
Disappeared  
And maybe died

JO (CON'T)

And maybe didn't die  
And the police said  
And the hospital said  
And now I'm here to see what you can say?

MA

You're not here to identify a body?

JO

I might be?  
*(this hits her)*  
I might be.

*(JO turns and she's on a call with XANTHE and INEZ  
who are back in JO's cottage.  
JO's got them on speaker as she fiddles with a laptop.  
The fridge is empty and is propped open with a dish cloth.  
They are wiping the empty shelves and surfaces.)*

XANTHE

What does the sister-in-law say?

INEZ

Don't we hate the sister-in-law?

JO

She just doesn't realize how aggressive she sounds  
Particularly over text

INEZ

Oh now I remember—the bees

JO

What about the bees?

INEZ

Didn't she keep bees and she made you guys tend to them or something?

JO

Yeah, she let us stay in their house when we were,  
Remember that thing with our landlord?  
And it was super generous  
But there were like all these weird conditions  
And one of them was the bees. I got stung.

XANTHE

Have you seen the sister-in-law?

JO

No I  
I tried calling her parents but I haven't  
Managed to connect

XANTHE

What do they think happened?

JO

I don't know

INEZ

They don't know?

JO

I left a message but  
They haven't called back.

*(INEZ steps away from the phone  
motions to XANTHE: THIS IS REALLY WEIRD!!  
XANTHE—Shhhhh!)*

XANTHE

Is there... is there a reason for that do you think?

JO

...

INEZ

Jo

Jo are you still there?

Hello?

*(Shift to XANTHE)*

XANTHE

Hello? My mother said

And looked at me like I was a stranger. Or some kind of ghost.

Which, to her, I guess I was.

**Ghost**—the pre-Germanic form, meaning fury or anger.

The original sense of the word actually meant the **soul** or **spirit**, the principle of life, a meaning that still lingers in the phrase “**to give up the ghost**”

My mom was an astronomer. She started out studying variable stars—stars that emit varying degrees of light at different times—our sun is one of these—and then she moved on to binary stars—stars that are locked into a particularly oppressive and fucked up view of the world—just kidding, binary stars are just pairs of stars that are tied to each other by gravity, and then she landed on ghost galaxies, which is where she stayed. These are huge areas of space detectable through mass, but emitting very little light. Dark spots in the universe. Ancient elders, places where unknown things have already happened that we’re only just now able to see.

I do words. English teacher. Professor if we’re being all smug about it.

And my mother kept her office on the third floor of our cottage and whenever we left at the end of every summer, that was the one room she locked.

And. Ever since she died. I just kept it that way. A closed door.

**Disaster**. Literally: a coming apart of the stars.

And I wonder, if they’re looking down at us right now, at this moment in time:

What do those stars know?

*(Back on the call)*

JO

They didn't know about us.

INEZ

But you were living together

JO

They thought we were roommates

INEZ

You're thirty nine.

JO

People have roommates.

INEZ

JO??

JO

I don't know why

INEZ

You never asked her??

JO

It wasn't part of our—

You know what's so weird right now, is I'm trying to get into her Gmail but her password won't work? And I can't get in.

XANTHE

Jo, do you want me to come there and help you?

INEZ

Um, we could both come

JO

No, I just want this to work

XANTHE

This is too much

JO

I just need the password to work

Fuck. FUCK.

It's not working.

XANTHE

I could fly back, I'll be closing up here soon, too

*(INEZ just looks at XANTHE)*

JO

Why won't it fucking work??

INEZ

What's the password?

*(JO turns and is on the phone with INEZ  
who is now Google Customer Service Rep)*

JO

It's MotherofJohn double O seven with a capital J—it's her name, what it means, she thought it was funny to add like James Bond, I don't know

GCSR

We can't actually help you break in to an

JO

Right, I'm not asking to *break in*, I actually know the password, it just won't work

GCSR

Are you sure you're typing the correct

JO

Yes I'm sure!

GCSR

Could she have changed the password?

JO

No, see, we shared all our passwords  
She wouldn't have, not without telling me

GCSR

Have you tried the password recovery process?

JO

What I'm saying is *I don't need to*—the number on the recovery thing is actually my number, but when I try to log in, it's not sending me a text

GCSR

Well I'm sorry to say that in that case

JO

Can you check to see if it was hacked???

GCSR

For privacy reasons if you aren't the account holder we really can't—

JO

I'm saying someone might be in danger

GCSR

You can submit a legal request to access data from a deceased person's account

JO

I'm not saying deceased! I'm saying in danger!  
That's the whole point she's not deceased, I just don't know where she is!

GCSR

...

You can submit a  
Request

JO

Can you tell me if the recovery number has been changed??

If so, can you tell me when??

If so, can you tell me where??

CAN YOU TELL ME ANYFUCKINGTHING??!!!

I'm sorry

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm just

It's like, we all know you're spying on us, reading all of our stuff—I mean look at the ads, the ads are tailor fucking made—and then when we ask for one tiny thing from you that has to do with the SAFETY of one of your users you hide behind this privacy bullshit

GCRS

Privacy works both ways

JO

What was that?

GCRS

I said you can submit a request

JO

Fine. Where?

GCRS

Let me transfer you to—

*(GCSR turns back into INEZ, and they're back in Jo's cottage a bit later XANTHE enters holding one end of a heavy wrought-iron bench, INEZ is holding the other end, and they're pulling it in from the porch.)*

INEZ

It's like a rustling, right above our room, I'm pretty sure it's coming from your mom's office—

XANTHE

I didn't hear anything

INEZ

Yeah well I rolled over and you weren't there—did you try the tea?  
I'm just saying I don't want to ignore it and then suddenly get attacked by like a rabid  
ferret

XANTHE

There aren't any ferrets on the island—ouch!  
Don't rush me around the corner!

INEZ

Sorry sorry

XANTHE

Do I have enough room behind me??

INEZ

Yes, take one more step back...  
And release.

*(They lower the bench down.)*

XANTHE

That was really heavy

INEZ

But seriously, I don't understand

XANTHE

Oh not this again, it's like you're making it a moral issue

INEZ

I'm just saying: Why wouldn't she want Jo to meet her family?

XANTHE

Even the way you're phrasing it, it's like  
You're interrogating this poor woman who's probably dead

INEZ

Is she?

XANTHE

I don't know!

INEZ

But just, *why??*

XANTHE

I don't know that either!

INEZ

It's like this: I think back to all the times we met her  
And it's like there's this black hole where her face should be

XANTHE

You remember, she had that pixie

INEZ

No, I know that, and I can tell you her hair color and  
But like her face, the thing that makes someone specific  
No idea

*(XANTHE takes out a pile of sheets)*

XANTHE

Here

*(Throughout the following they cover the furniture.)*

INEZ

I took you to meet my family right away

XANTHE

I know you did

INEZ

I was proud to take you home

XANTHE

It was a little more complicated than that

INEZ

What's that supposed to mean?

XANTHE

Can you grab, no the corner

Oh come on, I mean, it was no secret you'd just been dumped

INEZ

Wow.

XANTHE

What? It's totally true and totally normal that that affected your self-esteem

And it was important to you to show your family that you were already back out there

INEZ

Is that, wait a minute, this is—

You've been thinking this for *seven years*???

XANTHE

Hey come on

Pick that up please

I know that wasn't the only reason

INEZ

You bet your ass it wasn't

XANTE

But it was part of the reason, and I was fine with that

I am fine with that

INEZ

I thought you were the strangest looking thing I'd ever seen.

XANTHE

Careful there, I'm not sure my ego can handle so much flattery

INEZ

Not like a monster, exactly

XANTHE

No, really, you outdo yourself

INEZ

I'm being dead serious. There is something fucking elemental about you.  
It is totally fucking weird and gorgeous and I love it.  
It's got nothing to do with you not being conventionally beautiful.

XANTHE

Why thank you and fuck off

INEZ

And I could barely keep from staring at you that whole time we were there  
And I wasn't trying to show you off  
I was trying to bring something to them  
To all of us  
That felt like love

*(Shift to XANTHE)*

XANTHE

When I first met Inez, we were both in other relationships.  
No, don't think that, I mean the attraction was undeniable, but neither of us did anything. It wasn't until a couple of years later when we re-met at a friend's birthday party, and Inez was a little hurt, and a little drunk, and she was railing against the disposable plates, and even though it was the night after my mom died, I was feeling powerful and open and light, and I just saw her and I thought, yes.

*(Back to XANTHE and INEZ in the cottage  
Almost everything has been covered)*

INEZ

I wasn't showing off.

XANTHE

Where's the vacuum?

INEZ

Looks so weird in here with everything all covered up.  
Like the furniture is alive but it'll only wake up once we leave.

XANTHE

It's getting really cold at night.

INEZ

Yeah I was thinking,  
Maybe September will be too late?

XANTHE

Too late for what?

INEZ

Maybe we should do it in August?  
And I'm rethinking our decision on a live band.

XANTHE

I can't talk about this right now

INEZ

Why??

XANTHE

There's too much stuff happening

INEZ

What stuff

XANTHE

Well, politics

INEZ

No, politics was happening when we decided

XANTHE

And this thing at work—I don't want to review Brad's dumb book.  
Can't we be done with Hamlet??

INEZ

Don't hide, tell me why

XANTHE

And Jo

INEZ

What about Jo?

XANTHE

The whole situation with her right now is...!!!

It feels wrong to go ahead and plan this big celebration while she's...

I mean she was the one who inspired us...!

INEZ

Listen. I love you

XANTHE

No, it's not

INEZ

Shhhhht.

I love you and if you're having second thoughts, there's space for that.

*(Shift to JO on the phone*

*We hear two generic rings and then an automatic voice saying:*

*The number is unavailable right now, please leave a message)*

JO

Hi, um, it's Jo, it's your daughter's...

Jo

and I was just wondering if maybe you could call me back as soon as you get this because I'm really trying to figure all of this out, and I'm just wondering if you could please call me back?

*(Shift back to XANTHE)*

XANTHE

It's not second thoughts, it's just that ever since Jo got that call, it's like a space opened up.

You know, early on there was another moment when I really saw Inez:

I was in the car waiting to pick her up and I saw her across the street.

She was helping an older man cross the road. She'd taken one of his grocery bags and he was holding onto her elbow and they crossed the road together, gently, at his pace.

But there was a moment about midway through where she looked up to see if anyone was watching. To see if anyone had been a witness to her being so good.

And I wondered: What makes someone need that so badly?

And does her need to be good somehow eclipse her need to be truthful, and that makes me wonder if she can see this new space between us, or if there's just been a shift, and now we're walking next to each other with this big chasm in between.

*(Shift back to XANTHE and INEZ)*

INEZ

I'm saying there's space for everything.

I'm right here.

I'm not leaving.

*(INEZ exits as XANTHE'S phone rings*

*Her ring tone is the sound of a satellite, think:*

*<https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/blogs/earthmatters/2018/06/28/the-sounds-of-satellites/>*

*JO's in her apartment.)*

JO

Fucking memorialized accounts, fucking legacy contacts

This is the stuff these corporations are telling me

XANTHE

What are these?

JO

Before you die

You have to have set up in your privacy settings

Specifically what happens to the account otherwise

XANTHE

I didn't know that

JO

And now her Facebook  
which she almost never used, by the way,  
all the user settings have been changed on that too

XANTHE

Why are you trying to get in?

JO

I want to see if she left any [clues]—  
I want to delete it.

XANTHE

Why?

JO

Because there are people posting weird things on it and I don't think she'd like that

XANTHE

What things?

JO

Things like: **See you on the other side**  
And: Devastated to hear the news  
And I don't even know what news they're referring to because  
Nothing is confirmed  
Except for the fact that nothing is confirmed

XANTHE

Are you, can you sit where you are?

JO

I can't

XANTHE

Do you want to try a breathing exercise together?

JO

I can't  
I'm sorry I just  
I have too much energy right now  
Did you know the morgue doesn't use tags anymore?

XANTHE

The morgue??  
Jo were you at the—

JO

And I should just stop looking at Facebook, it's just insane and

XANTHE

Have you been sleeping?

JO

Not really  
I lie down  
I "go to sleep"  
But then I'm up in an hour and then  
I'm just thinking thinking thinking

XANTHE

Maybe take a pill?

JO

Once I took an Ambien but then I got super stoned and texted people I barely know  
and woke up naked in the bathtub with a bag of marshmallows, I don't know

XANTHE

Ok, not Ambien, but what's your pharmacy again?

JO

I don't want anything

XANTHE

I'm thinking something super mild  
Over the counter, just to take the edge off

JO

I need the edge  
I need to be sharp

XANTHE

I just think sleep is so important

JO

I DON'T WANT TO GO TO SLEEP

...

I'm sorry

XANTHE

I was being really pushy

JO

No, I just  
I don't want to  
Because, well, of course there's dreams  
But then also there's there's there's  
You have to wake up and remember it's all real again

XANTHE

That sounds really hard

JO

And the thing is  
Her password is just her fucking name  
Same as her email,  
has been since we met.  
I mean, I guess that's not the most secure—

XANTHE

Could it be that—

JO

No, I already asked and they said there were no signs of hacking

XANTHE

Could it be that she had a different name?  
Than the one she told you?

JO

...  
...  
...

*(And JO turns and is on the phone; she's got in on speaker,  
and we hear the same automatic message from earlier:  
The number is unavailable right now, please leave a message  
As JO's talking, she's scrolling through her phone.)*

JO

Hi there, it's, um, Jo  
And I left you a message  
But I'm not sure if it went through, or if this is even the right number  
But I'm calling because  
I just want to see  
If her name is her name?  
I mean, what's in a name, but  
I'm trying to understand some of what's going on and the complete fucking—sorry—  
strangeness of it all and, like I'm searching online right now and I'm starting to think  
maybe I don't, maybe I never, if you could just get in contact—

*(JO sees something on her phone  
that stops her breath.  
Shift to XANTHE)*

XANTHE

You see, I'd cut off contact.  
With my mom.  
Right after college, for almost ten years we didn't speak  
I was angry.  
And I tried to explain to her it wasn't just one thing, it was the whole apparatus of—  
Growing up the only daughter of a single mother, it was like my world stopped at the  
limit of her. And maybe because she was a scientist, she tended toward absolutes,  
zeroes and ones, and her worldview could be very...binary.  
And I told her I couldn't be those things

XANTHE (CON'T)

I needed to be these things.

I'd try to explain, but when she looked at me it felt like I wasn't even there.

I told her I just needed space.

Which was ironic, given her field of study, but I made it clear—

*(pointing up)*

not that kind of space

*(pointing between herself and the audience)*

This kind of space

And that deep silence

Was so vast.

And life-giving. For me.

...

I don't know how it was for her.

...

Because in those years

She got sick.

And I didn't know that

And when I was finally ready to come back

I came to the door

But by that time the gaps in her mind had already progressed such that when she opened it she didn't even know my name.

*(Shift to JO in a FUNERAL HOME*

*And she turns to INEZ who is now*

*FUNERAL DIRECTOR.*

*JO is holding out a picture.)*

FD

What's her name?

JO

I know this is weird but—

Have you recently had a funeral for this person?

FD

But what's her name

JO

That's a matter of debate  
Could you look at her picture?

FD

She's hiking

JO

Yes, she liked to do that

FD

Cute puppy

JO

True story  
Do you recognize her?

FD

She looks really healthy

JO

Can you just tell me if—

FD

It's just generally people, when they come here  
They're not  
Running around outside smiling and with their dog

JO

No of course not

FD

Because they're dead

JO

I know that

FD

So that makes them look different.  
And there's a whole process where we  
Try to—you know—makeup and

JO

Yeah, she never wore makeup

FD

But here often families want a bit more

JO

Ok, whatever you're saying, you don't know

FD

I'm just saying it's really hard to say  
I could get my assistant

JO

Sure yes please

*(XANTHE comes in as FUNERAL ASSISTANT)*

FD

She wants to know if you've seen this woman

FA

Where?

FD

Here

FA

What's her name?

JO

I, I don't know just  
She's missing and I thought maybe

FD

Remember those milk cartons?

With those little square pictures on the back and it would spell out  
MISSING in all caps? It made me feel sick every time I ate cereal

JO

So: I don't know where she is

and I think she might have died

And I think she might have had a funeral and

Based on something I saw, I think that funeral might have been here

FA

Let me see

Aw cute puppy

JO

Do you recognize her??

FA

Sorry, I can't really tell one way or the other from this.

But she looks like a really good person.

*(Shift back to XANTHE and Inez at Jo's cottage—everything is covered,  
furniture has been moved back against the walls. XANTHE is running an  
old unwieldy vacuum, INEZ is supposed to be wiping countertops but  
she's looking at an on old photo album)*

INEZ

It's not clover

*(XANTHE can't hear because of the vacuum)*

INEZ

Hey

Xan!

XANTHE

What?

I can't hear!

INEZ  
IT'S NOT CLOVER

XANTHE  
IT'S NOT OVER?

INEZ  
CAN YOU TURN THAT  
*(as she's turning it off)*  
OFF!  
Sorry. Thanks.

XANTHE  
What's up?

INEZ  
It's not clover.

XANTHE  
What are we talking about??

INEZ  
The album from upstairs with all the flowers pressed in it from all the weddings they've had here for like a hundred years, you said this one was clover but it's not, it's actually this clover impersonator

XANTHE  
...  
Ok.  
*(XANTHE goes to turn on vacuum)*

INEZ  
No wait—come look!

XANTHE  
I believe you

INEZ

No I want to show you, because I was thinking about how we could maybe use it, it's a wildflower and—

XANTHE

Let's just—get this done and

INEZ

It'll take two seconds

Please

*(FINE. XANTHE puts the vacuum down.  
Stays where she is)*

INEZ

So look how the petals...

*(XANTHE cranes her head from a distance)*

INEZ

You can't see from there

XANTHE

Yes I can

INEZ

Not the detail—c'mere, I want to show you how the petals make this pattern

XANTHE

I can see!

*(INEZ crooks her finger: come here please.  
XANTHE inches a step closer)*

INEZ

Um

Is there a reason you don't want to come over?

XANTHE

Yes because we're in the middle of closing this place down and we still have a lot of our own shit to do

INEZ

What's going on??

XANTHE

Nothing?! What about the fucking petals!!

INEZ

Ok, you know what  
Forget it, let's just  
Get this done

XANTHE

Oh come on

INEZ

Can you hand me the bag please

XANTHE

Don't do that

INEZ

I'm not doing anything, I'm trying to get us out of here faster, like you wanted

XANTHE

I'm sorry it's just  
I find it really weird to be in here without Jo  
Every week that passes it's like...something's going dark

INEZ

Yeah, your mood

XANTHE

I'm having a hard time sleeping

INEZ

And I get what you're saying, being in here without Jo is weird  
But just then, when I asked you to come over it was like  
You didn't want to get too near me.  
Like you don't want to touch me?

XANTHE

That's not true

INEZ

And  
I'm just trying to understand  
Because it's not just in here, it's when we're at home, when we're on the couch...  
And I really do want to know:  
Have I done something?  
Am I making you uncomfortable in some way?

XANTHE

I'm sorry I haven't been in the mood since Jo left

INEZ

I don't mean sex  
I mean even when I try to—

*(INEZ makes a move to reach out  
XANTHE winces)*

INEZ

Wow. Yeah, that.

XANTHE

I'm sorry

INEZ

What's changed?

XANTHE

Nothing

INEZ  
What is it??

XANTHE  
There isn't—

INEZ  
Just tell me!

XANTHE  
You smell different!

INEZ  
I smell??

XANTHE  
Different  
The smell of you has changed.

INEZ  
How

XANTHE  
It's not better or worse it's just  
ever since Jo left, since it's been getting colder

INEZ  
You always said I smelled like a wolf

XANTHE  
You did

INEZ  
You said you loved my musk

XANTHE  
I did, I *do*

INEZ

What do I smell like now?

XANTHE

A bit...earthier.

INEZ

I mean

I take less showers here

I'm trying to conserve water

XANTHE

It's not about being clean

INEZ

So...what does it mean?

XANTHE

Nothing

I don't know, I'm just getting used to it

INEZ

...

Maybe you've changed your smell too.

XANTHE

I doubt it

INEZ

How would you know

*(coming closer)*

Let me check

XANTHE

Nezzy

INEZ

I'm getting balsam

XANTHE

Stop

INEZ

Surface of a pond

XANTHE

Pondscum lovely

INEZ

A secret pond in the woods you'd never know was there

XANTHE

"Not seen because not looked for"

INEZ

But I looked.

I looked.

*(Shift to JO in a graveyard. She's trying to look at something when she bumps into INEZ, who is UNIDENTIFIED MOURNER)*

JO

Sorry, I'm just looking for—

Um, do you know if all of these are marked?

UM

They're gravestones

JO

I know

UM

That's kind of their job

JO

Actually their job was originally to hold down the troubled dead

But I'm just trying to read through all the names here, is there like an organizing principle, or...?

UM

Are you looking for someone specific?

JO

Most definitely

UM

And you know they're buried here?

JO

I'm actually

On Instagram it said...

UM

Have you checked with the office?

They can give you a map

JO

They were closed

UM

With some new ones you have to wait for the stone to get put in

JO

It doesn't come at the burial?

UM

No, there's a whole process

They have to get the ground solid again

And I guess it also depends on how special you want it

Ours is pretty simple.

Just his name. It still took a couple of weeks.

JO

I'm sorry

UM

Me too.

JO

It's a

It's a really nice grave.

UM (*you're clearly new here*)

How long has it been for you?

JO

I don't even know? If she's here?

And if there's a gap, like you say, maybe she is, and it's just not marked yet?

UM

You could ask him

*(UNIDENTIFIED MOURNER turns to  
XANTHE, who is now GRAVE DIGGER  
And it's funny, UNIDENTIFIED MOURNER and GRAVE DIGGER are  
speaking a language that JO can't understand.  
But we can understand what they're saying.  
Just JO can't.)*

UM

How long does it take to get a grave stone?

GD

You waiting on one?

UM

She might be

GD

She doesn't know??

JO

I'm sorry, why can't I understand you?

UM

She seems a little lost

JO

I must seem a little—I'm not lost  
Someone I love is lost

GD

What's her name

UM (*so JO can understand*)

What's your name

JO

Jo.

UM

Jo

GD

Not her, whoever she's

UM

No, the person you're trying to find

JO

I don't know?

UM

When was the service?

JO

I don't know that either  
Listen, I know how this sounds

GD

Not our place to ask questions

JO

It's just  
She maybe died,  
and maybe didn't  
And maybe was buried,  
and maybe wasn't

UM

It takes a while for it to seem real

JO

Yeah, no, that's not what I mean

*(GD turns and speaks to JO even though  
she can't understand)*

GD

I see families wandering around here  
Looking at all the other headstones  
Except the one that's theirs

JO

But she's mine or  
She was mine, we were  
Each other's  
I'm just trying to find her to

UM

To what?

JO

To ask her if it was real?  
If any of it was real?

UM

Real in what sense?

GD

Real like this?

*(GD lifts out a skull)*

JO  
Is that real??

UM  
Do you know whose it was?

GD  
Looks like someone with a good sense of humor?

JO  
Could I  
Hold it?

*(GD hands it over)*

GD  
You'll be surprised how light it is

JO  
It's so heavy, wow!  
Looks like a nice face  
Like, if it had a nose

GD  
It's like a photo  
Just one way of seeing someone

UM  
What did she look like  
Your...

JO  
She was kind of...  
She was really....

UM  
What?

JO

It's hard to describe her without  
Flattening her out?

GD

Do you want to keep that?

JO

Is he saying he wants it back?

UM

Do you want to give it back?

*(Shift to XANTHE)*

XANTHE

In high school I once stayed over at a friend's house—it was friend I was trying to woo  
but she just thought I was a friend—anyway

She put me in the guest room, which was her old room, and in the middle of the night I  
was woken up by the feeling of someone sitting on the bed. And you'd think I'd have  
been through the roof, like maybe she was finally going to make a move, but it wasn't  
like that, the feeling of it was more...maternal. And so slowly, very slowly I opened my  
eyes

And there was no one there.

But there was.

A presence.

I could feel her on the bed. And she was a mother. And she was someone or  
something from very long ago. And I could tell she was just looking at me, curious.

And I felt her hand come down near my face, and then she was gone.

And when I got home that day I told my mother about this, and she asked some very  
detailed questions—**how did you know it was a woman?**—the feel of her weight on the  
bed—**how did you know she was a mother?**—she communicated it to me somehow—  
and she just nodded and said.

**Ghosts are about lack.**

**You're mistaking absence for presence.**

**Careful there.**

*(Shift to JO on the phone, we hear the same automatic message:  
The number is unavailable right now, please leave a message)*

JO

Hi um

It's me again and um

If you could just let me know the reason you're not returning my calls

I mean, is it something I did? To you?

To her?

Is it the thing where

If you stop seeing someone

The way they want to be seen

Do they start to disappear?

*(XANTHE and INEZ in JO's cottage, just after vacuuming scene.  
Bit of a détente, now they're looking through the photo album together)*

INEZ

That's not you

XANTHE

Yes it is! You've seen pictures of me as a kid before

INEZ

Not like this

You're so open here

This is like Xanny before she got all wise

XANTHE

Before she got braces

Anyway—there's Jo

INEZ

Oh my god is she smoking??

XANTHE

I know—she was eleven

Such a fucking rebel

INEZ

Where was her mom??

XANTHE

We used to joke—my mom studied space  
Her mom lived there—  
And this is us dressed up for some party  
Here's Jo's mom, drunk at said party  
Whatever, I'm not judging

INEZ

Yes you are

XANTHE

No I'm not—I'm not that kind of person

INEZ

What's "that kind of person"?

XANTHE

A judgy person!

INEZ

Ummmmmm

XANTHE

I don't! I'm completely not

INEZ

You kind of, how can I say this in a kind and tactful way, where you feel seen,  
but that's also, well, the fucking truth: You're an incredibly judgy person.

XANTHE

OHMYGOD! Give me an example!!!  
Aside from people who abuse their pets or children

INEZ

People who send their kids to private school  
(even though you went to a big fancy school)

XANTHE

Ok no, see that is an ethical difference  
And I was *sent* there, I didn't have a choice—

INEZ

People who don't vote

XANTHE

That's a different understanding of our collective civic and political duty

INEZ

Slow-talkers

XANTHE

I mean  
Are you seriously looking at me and  
Am I supposed to not have feelings about people who want you to lean in and listen to  
their whispery slow fucking monologues

INEZ

Your mom.

XANTHE

...

She was the one who was judging me

INEZ

I know you felt that

XANTHE

I didn't "feel that", I *know* that—that's what she did

INEZ

I just,  
You think you're still angry at her  
But—no please, listen—

XANTHE

I can't believe you'd even bring her up

INEZ

But I think you're angry at yourself  
For something that happened a long time ago and  
Maybe that's what's getting in the way of...  
Silence is not crime you know

XANTHE

...

My mom once gave me the silent treatment for six months.  
She was away – some conference—  
And I threw a party  
That's when Allie Furness kissed me

INEZ

She was the one with the

XANTHE

Tongue ring, yeah

INEZ

So slutty

XANTHE

You don't need to be jealous of a tenth grader—and don't slut shame!

INEZ

ANYWAY

XANTHE

And my mom found out.  
Six months, just the two of us in our four hundred square foot apartment,  
My mom didn't say a word to me.

...

It was like she was erasing me a little bit more every day  
Don't tell me silence isn't a crime, I know exactly what it does

...

And then I did it to her. For ten years.  
How am I different from her?

(Shift to XANTHE)

XANTHE

And then once when I visited my mother at the memory care place—it went very fast with her: hospital, memory care, hospice—and even though by this point she didn't remember she'd ever had a daughter, my mom could snap back at unexpected times. And at one of those times she said—**Remember the woman?**  
Who, I said

**The one who sat on your bed when you were trying to fuck your friend**

I guess she wasn't as clueless as I thought

Yes, I said

**I've seen her**, she said.

Where, I said

**Here. She sat on my bed**

How did you know it was her?

**Just like she told you she was a mother. She told me it was her.**

And then she looked at me and said:

**Looks like we're sharing a ghost.**

*(And JO is about to leave another message  
when she is suddenly interrupted by two lost souls,  
INEZ is LOST SOUL ONE and XANTHE is LOST SOUL TWO  
\*I've used the pronouns "he", but this can change.)*

LS-ONE

I can't believe he's here

JO

I'm sorry, where's here?

LS-TWO (*taking in LS-ONE*)  
Are you fucking kidding me??

JO  
Do you two know each other?

LS-ONE                      LS-TWO  
YES!                              NO!

LS-ONE  
Ok don't try that bullshit with me

LS-TWO  
Have we met?

LS-ONE  
He says that every time we meet,  
Yeah, I've been introduced to you only a thousand times before

LS-TWO  
I'm sorry, I can't recall

LS-ONE  
Who the fuck says "recall"???

JO  
Ok, so I can tell that there's something going on here, but could one of you just explain to me where are we? Is this a dream or—

LS-ONE  
More like a fucking nightmare!

JO  
Ok really, I don't have time for this  
I've got to find someone

LS-ONE  
I was looking for someone too  
Only he turned out to be a snake

LS-TWO

It was one fucking night!!!  
How does that make someone a snake?

LS-ONE

I told you before  
That whole time we were talking I explained to you that I do not fuck and run  
That I have this problem where I have sex with someone, and then I get very attached  
And that I was only looking for a serious committed long term relationship

LS-TWO

I thought that was just you flirting

LS-ONE

HOW IS THAT FLIRTING??

LS-TWO

You were so clear!  
Boundaries are sexy!

LS-ONE

...

LS-TWO

What do you want me to say??

LS-ONE

You gave me your number

LS-TWO

I was being polite

LS-ONE

I fucking called you  
You never called me back

LS-TWO

I...didn't get your message...?

LS-ONE

Was it me?

Was it something to do with my body?

LS-TWO

No of course not!

LS-ONE

Well what was it then!??

JO

I'm sorry to interrupt but

I'm wondering if maybe you know where the fuck we are because I'm in the middle of something truly fucking urgent, and the last thing I remember is I was on the phone and then—

LS-TWO

That's weird

LS-ONE

Oh my god

JO

What?

LS-TWO

Last I remember I was

Walking down a staircase, and I missed a stair

And then I tripped and fell —

LS-ONE

I was crossing the street

When out of nowhere this car runs a red light—

JO

So...?

LS-ONE

I didn't want to say anything before but  
When I talked about my body just then  
I looked down and

...

Nothing was there

LS-TWO

What are you talking ab—  
Oh my god.

JO

I have a body

LS-TWO

Holy shit!  
What the fuck  
Oh my god I feel so light!

LS-ONE

I feel dizzy

JO

Wait, I see your bodies

*(They both turn to her)*

LS-TWO

I think that means you're not supposed to be here

LS-ONE

You look like you don't belong

JO

Where the fuck is here??

LS-TWO

Well, if we're figuring correctly  
He and I...Died.

LS-ONE

Oh my god  
It's true

LS-TWO

And now we're kind of  
Neither here nor there  
What's that place called?

LS-ONE

Purgatory.

JO

How do you get out of here??

LS-TWO

Find grace?

LS-ONE

Ask for forgiveness?

JO

How?  
HOW?

LS-TWO (*takes a deep breath*)

I'm sorry I did that to you  
I did know what you meant.  
I knew you wanted something more and  
It felt good to not give that to you.

LS-ONE

I  
Never meant to call you.  
I knew you didn't want me to.  
I give up my body like it's nothing  
Like it means nothing  
And I know the emptiness of those transactions begets more emptiness  
And I was seeking fullness through you.

JO

All I want is to find her  
Is she here?

LS-TWO

I'm too full with the things I have grabbed

LS-ONE

I have these massive gaping holes

*(It's working*

*They start to change in some way, suggesting a move out of purgatory.)*

JO

I'm sorry but what the fuck is going on?  
I'm not dead!  
How do I get out of here?!

LS-ONE

What were you doing right before you got here?

*(And then we hear the sound of JO's phone ringing,*

*the old fashioned ring from the beginning , and she turns and)*

JO

Hello??

*(Shift to XANTHE)*

XANTHE

The word **ghost**, as a verb, used to mean **to haunt**, or the state of being haunted by, as  
in: I'm ghosted by the things I never said  
Or by the things I wish I hadn't

*(Shift to XANTHE and INEZ at JO's cottage.*

*They're unplugging things, turning off taps*

*XANTHE is putting on a pair of rubber gloves.)*

INEZ

Are you kidding me with those?

XANTHE

What? We've got to get near the outlets, and I hate getting shocked

INEZ

If they're latex you're gonna get a rash—

XANTHE

Oh crap, I forgot to look

*(XANTHE begrudgingly takes them off*

*INEZ blows one up and makes a funny glove-balloon-hand thing)*

INEZ

I do this for the grandkids who visit—

*(She waves with it)*

Hey stranger

XANTHE

Ok. Let's start with the big things

*(XANTHE reaches down behind the fridge)*

XANTHE

I think there's something stuck behind here—

*(A furry animal runs out from under it!)*

XANTHE

HOLY FUCK WHAT IS THAT

*(XANTHE grabs a broom and starts swatting wildly)*

INEZ

DON'T HIT IT!!!

XANTHE

GET IT AWAY FROM ME

INEZ  
STOP, IT JUST RAN OUT—  
*(avoiding swats)*  
Jesus—just—STOP!

XANTHE *(catching her breath)*

...

I'm going to pretend that never happened. Let's just get this done and go.

*(They go about unplugging appliances  
INEZ does the fridge, of course  
No way XANTHE is looking behind there)*

INEZ  
Do you think Jo feels guilty?

XANTHE  
That we're taking care of her house?  
No I think she appreciates it

INEZ  
That she wasn't home  
That she didn't find her

XANTHE  
It's not Jo's fault she was here

INEZ  
Guilt isn't really about fault

XANTHE  
Jo's not really like that

INEZ  
I just think we should make space for that possibility

XANTHE  
Ugh, I feel like you're projecting your stuff

INEZ

What's my stuff??

XANTHE

You know your stuff, you feel guilty about everything

INEZ

No I don't

XANTHE

Your family, every time we see them, you feel like it's never enough  
Every time you talk shit about someone, it's like you have to do some personal penance

INEZ

I mean, I have character flaws I'm not denying that

XANTHE

Congratulations

*(INEZ picks up a small dried up plant)*

INEZ

Poor guy. Should I try to resuscitate?

XANTHE

Just put it in the sink for now.

*(INEZ takes it to the sink)*

INEZ

And I mean fuckit, I know I can be prideful, and you're right, you know maybe I do expect a lot from people, and I do talk shit way more than I should  
Especially about Dan the amoeba in my ceramics class

XANTHE

Ohmygod Dan!

INEZ

Yeah class starts in the fall and I cannot fucking believe they let him in to advanced

XANTHE

Why do you hate him so much??

INEZ

I don't hate him, I'm just better than him  
And I want him to acknowledge that  
And then YIELD TO MY AWESOMESS

XANTHE

You forgot to mention your competitive streak

INEZ

You love my competitive streak  
Router?

XANTHE

Yes

INEZ

But I don't have some nebulous guilt complex for no reason

XANTHE

Ok

INEZ

I don't

XANTHE

Fine.

INEZ

And, you know, maybe I have things to feel guilty about!!

XANTHE

Don't we all  
Are we done?

INEZ

Things you don't know about!

XANTHE

Oh yeah, like what?

*(going through a checklist)*

Kettle, coffee maker, toaster—

INEZ

Like thoughts I have sometimes!

XANTHE

Ooooooh Inez and her Impure Thoughts!

INEZ

No, I'm serious!

Like with my clients—I'm there, we're working out a meal plan, or I'm checking their pill holder thingies, and can I just say: those are all plastic, it's like why can't we just make a metal one, or some biodegradable silicone—

XANTHE

You're losing me

INEZ

And then, right in the middle of like setting everything out for her, I'm thinking of this one woman I actually love, my Monday, Muriel, she's ninety and she's like this tiny little bird, anyway, I'm organizing all her things really carefully and then I have this thought that's like: I hope I don't grab all the pills in every bottle and grind them all together and put them in Muriel's tea and fucking hold her head down and force her to drink it

XANTHE

...

Wow.

INEZ

DON'T LAUGH

XANTHE

It's funny!

INEZ

No it's not! Or like, I'm sitting across from her at her little tea table and I'm like: Well, I hope I don't reach over and fucking kick the shit out of her!

XANTHE

I'm sorry that's hilarious

INEZ

It is not, it's—of course I feel guilty I'm  
Trying to be a good person, I mean what good person has these thoughts?!

XANTHE

Oh please

INEZ

You're not taking me seriously!  
You know—I know you're going through something,  
I hear you wandering around like every night now  
But I need a little more from you, you know?

XANTHE

You need more from me? Now that's really funny

INEZ

What's that supposed to mean?

XANTHE

You're always right there, over my shoulder, **how am I doing?**  
And **do I need tea?** And **what's going on with me?**  
*And it's like I feel you touching me all the time, your voice, your smell, your endless  
fucking questions always pecking at my brain—it's like I have no privacy!*  
Or like this—with the crazy thoughts that are just really fucking comical, you bring them  
to me like they're some sacred part of yourself you're sharing, only you're not sharing at  
all, you're constantly asking for my approval and forgiveness which is totally fucking  
draining, and if it isn't clear what I'm saying, it's that you need too much already!

INEZ

...

XANTHE

...

INEZ

...

XANTHE

...

That was really harsh

INEZ

I didn't know

You experienced me that way

XANTHE

I didn't, I don't, I haven't been sleeping?

INEZ

Just let me hold some of what you're carrying—

XANTHE

My hands are fucking empty!

INEZ

...

XANTHE

...

INEZ

I'll just um,

I think maybe we need to—

XANTHE

Nez

I'm just tired.

INEZ

...

I'll run the sink.

*(A little bit of sad quiet while the space reorganizes itself  
Then INEZ turns on the disposal under the sink  
and we hear a crazy metal crunch sound and then  
something flies out from the drain, INEZ screams)*

XANTHE

WHAT HAPPENED???

*(INEZ turns around and a bit of her finger has been sliced off  
Just a little, but these things bleed a lot.  
XANTHE grabs a dishcloth and wraps it around  
INEZ's hand, and herself around INEZ,  
as the white cloth gradually turns red,  
not unlike the wine stain on the white rug.)*

XANTHE *(as she's applying pressure to the wound)*

I did this.

I'm sorry.

Forgive me.

*(Shift to JO on the phone)*

JO

Is this, are you finally calling me back—hello? Can you hear me?

I can't hear you, you're breaking up, we've got a really bad connection—?

Are you fucking kidding me, this is how it's going to go, well fine, fuckit, I don't care if you can hear me or not, I've got a few things to ask you like: How do you think it's ok to pretend you don't know who your *daughter* is, or who *I* am, or who we are, or were—

And is this some kind of weird punishment for something I don't even know I've done and you know what, I don't even care anymore, can you just tell me where she went??

*(INEZ and XANTHE are sitting at opposite ends of a covered up bench. INEZ is wearing fingerless gloves with a big bandage on one of her fingers. They're surveying JO's covered and tidied and emptied home. They're wearing puffy jackets and drinking from a shared thermos of hot chocolate.)*

INEZ

What do you think it looks like when people leave?

XANTHE

Um... are you thinking of....

INEZ

I just mean Jo's....

Or your mom. By the way, I can still hear something upstairs in her office, are you sure you don't want to just—

XANTHE

How's your hand?

INEZ *(holding up her bandaged hand)*

I'll still crush Dan the loser bad potter.

XANTHE

Glad to hear.

INEZ

Well, I would've liked to have met your mom.

She would have loved me...Ha.

XANTHE

She would have respected you.

INEZ

Do you think it's like they walk into the light or

Disappear in a haze of fog...?

XANTHE

Or run away screaming

INEZ

I'm serious

XANTHE

Maybe it's just like  
People slip  
A little now, a little later  
And then soon  
They're on the other side of a waterfall

INEZ

Because I just want you to know:  
I can't make you want to touch me the way I want to touch you.  
And I can't change my smell.  
But I can release you.  
And if you walk out the door, I would find love again  
But not this love  
Not this one.

*(Shift to XANTHE)*

XANTHE

Why do we need ghosts?  
What do they give us that we can't find in this world.  
Is it just the dream of **messages left behind**, in traces and remains?

And I think of the ghost galaxies my mom studied, those residues of ancient light, and I wonder, what was she looking for out there, what was she trying to find?

And I'm guilty of this, too.  
Because the night Jo got that first call **something cracked loose in me**.  
And I **opened** the door to my mother's office, which had been locked since the day she died.

And it was just as I'd remembered—her desk by the window, piled high with her notes and journals, which I've been reading, night after night, when I can't sleep—

And it's like I could smell her—dried paper and salt and ink.

And sitting in the middle of the floor was a box labeled  
"Chrysanthemum"  
Which is my real fucking name, ok just get it all out now—  
It said: "Chrysanthemum  
Do not open"  
So of course, I open it.

And inside there's another box with a little label that says:  
"Chrissie,"  
(which I hate only slightly less than Chrysanthemum)  
"Listen to your mother"

Of course, I open that too

And then I find a smaller one  
With a little knife taped to the lid.  
"I mean it."

It's like Christmas, open open open

And inside that one was a thin little envelope that said:  
"If you open, use wisely."

And so of course, I opened that too.

*(Back to JO on the phone,  
continuing from earlier)*

JO

Because I've just gotten to the point where I think maybe she was sick in some way I didn't know about, and that maybe she died unexpectedly, and maybe had a funeral, and maybe was buried, and I somehow missed all of that, or maybe she just got lost somewhere, and I'm over here, and she's over there, and I don't know what door to open to get to her, and if you could just give me a clue, or just shove me in the right direction, I mean literally come here and fucking shove me, push me, fucking beat the shit out of me, I don't care, but just throw me in the right direction so I can finally—

*(And JO throws down her phone  
As INEZ comes and gently touches JO on the shoulder  
And moves her just a micro-step forward where she discovers she is now  
Right at the gates of heaven and INEZ is SAINT PETER)*

JO  
Hi

SP  
Hi

JO  
I'm trying to find someone

SP  
Me too

JO  
Who are you trying to find?

SP  
You first

JO  
Oh she was my  
Fiancée actually.  
She's lost.  
Or I think maybe she died.  
And I'm wondering: is she here?

SP  
Oof. Here as in, where you and I are standing?  
Or here as in, in that great place over there?

JO  
Well, I don't think she's literally here  
Is she in there?

SP

What do you think?

JO

I think

Her heart was really big

And that she

Definitely made some mistakes in her life

But that she really loved people

She really loved me

And maybe that's curative in some way?

SP

Good question.

JO

You don't know? Isn't that your job? To *know*?

SP

Oh that's so funny.

No. I just basically stand here and

You know, they come, and I get like a sense of them

And then I make a call.

You know, give it my best guess.

JO

Your best fucking guess??

To get into heaven???

SP

I know right?!

But really, how else could it work?

JO

Aren't you a fucking Saint?

SP

Totally

JO

Aren't you supposed to know?

SP

Where's the fun in that? But seriously, if I knew before they came,  
Or the minute they showed up, or from the time they were born, or their parents,  
or their parents' parents....I mean, what would be the point?

JO

The point would be to give it some meaning  
To give it all a measure of value—  
But you know what, fine, I don't care, is she in there?

SP

What do you think

JO

I think stop fucking around with me  
Is she in there

SP

What's her name Jo?

JO

It's—I don't know for sure.

SP

What color are her mother's eyes?

JO

What does that have to do with anything??

SP

Have you heard the line: those are the pearls that were his eyes?  
If she had a daughter, do you think her eyes would be like pearls?  
Opalescent and glittering, reflecting tiny worlds in every microscopic fold?

JO

Where do people go if they don't go here?

SP

You know what I always liked?  
That three-headed dog that guarded the River of Souls  
I wouldn't mind a cute puppy

JO

I just want to find her

SP

And do what?

JO

Ask her

SP

Ask her what?

JO

If it was **true**  
Our life, our  
Love  
And  
*Is she ok*  
Wherever she is, I just need to know she's ok...  
Is there somewhere beyond this?

SP

This? Oh yeah  
This isn't the end of anything

JO

There's more?

SP

Of course more

JO

How do I get there?

(Shift to XANTHE)

XANTHE

And just as the noun **ghost** shifted over time from meaning “life” to signifying death, the verb **ghost**, originally meaning **to haunt**, to stay close and not let go, also transformed into its opposite, meaning: **to leave**, to cut off contact, to end all communication with no forewarning or hope of reply.

And so, is this a case where Jo was ghosted in only the most catastrophic way?

And did I ghost my mother?

*(And then an asteroid rips through the play.  
Everything cuts out, all sound and light.  
It looks like a technical glitch.  
Wait....wait...wait...  
And then JO comes back in view.  
She's now in a rocky landscape  
like something you'd imagine on the moon.  
It's like there's no air here, there's no nothing.  
Darkness all around. But we can see JO.  
She looks out at whoever is watching, addresses them directly)*

JO

Hello??

Is anybody out there??

...

Isabelle?

Bells, can you hear me?

It's like there's no sound

Except the sound of your voice

And I'm just here to ask you:

Was the thing that I had in my heart

The same as the thing that was in yours?

And to tell you that I didn't,

I never gave up on you

JO (CON'T)

And, I don't know what I believe anymore, but I believe in the power of at least asking:  
If you're out there, if you're listening  
Will you show me a sign?

*(And then, just for a moment XANTHE joins JO)  
and reads her mother's letter)*

XANTHE

'Think of a person you've loved and lost.  
(broke your heart, beat your soul to a pulp)  
Break your feelings down into zeroes and ones.  
Look up.  
Score this feeling into the sky.  
Make new stars with the shards of yourself.  
Morse code out the words I'm sorry over and over and over again  
Feel the reflected light come back over and over and over again.  
Don't forget to breathe.'

*(XANTHE looks at JO, and it's almost like she can see her)*

XANTHE

What did she mean?

*(And it's almost like JO can see XANTHE  
Maybe they're in the same position from the first scene when  
XANTHE said to JO: I see you, don't get lost  
And then XANTHE turns into the GRAVEDIGGER again)*

GD (to JO)

Can I have my skull back please?

JO

Oh, sure, of course, I didn't realize I still...

*(JO hands it over)*

JO

Hey, I can understand you!

GD (*turning to go*)  
Thanks

JO  
Wait, why can I understand you?

GD (*sad smile*)  
I'm sorry for your loss.

*(And XANTHE turns back into herself  
And the skull turns into the letter she was holding)*

XANTHE  
Is this a ghost story?

Or is it about the way we live with each other, and through each other, in all these  
different folds of time  
You might not be my ghost  
But I bet you're someone else's

*(Light on JO, who stays through the following)*

JO  
Bells, I just want to tell you:

XANTHE  
Because it's dawning on me now that  
Maybe my mother was writing about me  
And about what I  
Inflicted on her,  
But maybe it's also a map  
Of how to reach out  
When you feel so alone it's like your bones are breaking  
Maybe it's just about the attempt to send a message  
And all that matters is just reaching out your hands—

JO  
Whatever has broken between us,  
Wherever you've gone that I can't follow

XANTHE

And maybe that's what I'm trying to do **now**, telling stories, and excavating memories, and trying to put together these shards of a *real life*, because the one person I need to talk to right now isn't here and I can't, I haven't been able to, *and I just need to—*

MOM!

I AM NOT A GHOST!

I'm sorry I went quiet  
For all those years  
You must have felt like you were in outer space  
And by the time I came back it was too late.  
I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry

JO

I forgive you.

*(And then lights down on JO.  
Maybe XANTHE can feel JO leaving?  
And then XANTHE looks back down at the letter:)*

XANTHE

And then. For the first time I see. On the back of the letter.  
My mom's written  
the word **catastrophe**  
And she's circled the root word—**strophe**, to turn.  
...Maybe she was reaching out to me, too?  
And it hits me now that maybe it's not just a sudden **turning over**, or a **turning away**,  
but maybe it's also a **turning toward**:

*(And XANTHE turns toward INEZ  
And invites her into the space: )*

INEZ

We lock Jo's cottage and return to ours to finish packing.  
And that night, for the first time since Jo got that call, Xanthe sleeps.  
She dreams of floods. Of great ships cracking open, of water seeping through  
pavement, of being trapped in a car with water pouring in the sides of doors and

INEZ (CON'T)

windows. And she doesn't connect these things right away with that time at the beach when she almost drowned, when all the air had gone out of her lungs, and her vision darkened at the edges with painful little pinpricks of light running up and down her arms and legs that made a strange sound like glass hooves on cobblestones until her mother heaved her out, and pounded on her back, and gave her life again.

Fall comes, and the water is turned off, and no one is on the island.

And then winter, when everything freezes over, even the waves freeze mid crest when it gets cold enough, and there are intricate patterns of ice in the sand that sits above the tidal line. Strange creatures come inside and make homes in corners and closets, in boots and pots, but they'll move out again in spring, and then we'll be back on the island in summer.

We'll keep watch over Jo's cottage.

Hoping she might come back

*(Shift to XANTHE*

*But she and INEZ continue sharing space)*

XANTHE

And I keep reading, my mother's books and papers, and I read about a black hole that's in the process of incorporating a nearby star, and how the energy of that act is creating a weird cosmic jet stream where the black hole isn't just absorbing matter around it, but also sending matter back out to all corners of the universe like some bizarre interstellar morse code. And I think of my mother—scoring it's pain, zeroes and ones—

INEZ

We'll open and close Jo's cottage for a few years, keep it just as she liked it

But we know she won't come back

XANTHE

And we know, Inez and I, that even though we discovered those deep holes in ourselves, those distances which we still can't traverse, that there is something about love, unexplained love, deeply flawed love, that will nonetheless endure and bind us together across all the fractures and broken things until the day Inez dies, peacefully and at home when she's eighty six, which I know because I'm right beside her helping her make that final crossing.

**Door**, originally a plural form, which comes from the idea of shutters or gates, two pieces coming together, forming a single threshold into something new. Perhaps we are all doors to each other, across endless swathes of time.

INEZ

And just for the record  
If I was on one side of a waterfall  
And I knew you were on the other side  
I wouldn't try to shout, because I know you'd never hear me  
I'd do this instead:

*(INEZ reaches out her hand. XANTHE takes it, and kisses it.  
Then light only on XANTHE)*

XANTHE

And I'll live for ten more years—wow—and my eyesight will go but I can still hear  
and one morning, not long before I, too, cross over,  
I hear her. I hear Jo.  
She comes back to me as a starling  
I'll hear its call and I'll remember what it looks like:  
bright and black, it's feathers shining like the surface of an oil slick  
And it's tricky to tell because starlings are notorious mimics  
But I'll remember that we used to think of them as fortunetellers  
Speakers of all languages and times, bringers of omens, decipherers of codes,  
Especially between we babel-struck humans and all of the things we lose when we talk  
And how they usually come in vast flocks, but this one is just on its own  
And I'll know it  
And I'll picture it as it finally flies off with its wings outflung like it'll tear right through  
the sky and into something else, and I'll hear the sound of this, which will be like a  
sharp inhale, not too different, I expect, from what will happen on the day I...  
But first,  
love.  
Just love  
This love.

*(A sharp inhale.*

*Blackout.*

*End of Play.)*