

BY THE DIM AND FLARING LAMPS

A play in three acts

Cast of Characters

- Seth Henshaw: Quaker-turned-spiritualist and grieving widower, early 60s. A true believer.
- Amanda Keogh: Seth's devoted daughter and caretaker, about 40; war widow. A reluctant skeptic.
- Amelia Keogh: Amanda's daughter, roughly age ten.
- Elliot Beeson: Artist and spiritualist medium, about 20.
- Malinda Beeson: Elliot's mother and Seth's estranged daughter, about 35. A non-believer.

An optional number of additional cast members will be needed as sitters at the séance and to provide the spirits' voice and presence. At least three will be needed to portray the spirits of MR. KEOGH, MR. BEESON, and a VEILED WOMAN. All members of cast and crew are advised to read Emma Hardinge Britten's pamphlet, "Rules to Be Observed When Forming Spiritual Circles."

Epigraph:

"So from the world of spirits there descends
A bridge of light, connecting it with this,
O'er whose unsteady floor, that sways and bends,
Wander our thoughts above the dark abyss."

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Scene

The home of Amanda Keogh. Henry County, Indiana.

Time

Late summer, 1863.

ACT I

SETTING:

The home of AMANDA KEOGH. There is a small vestibule with a hall tree and umbrella stand. In the parlor is a pump organ, a large round table, six wooden chairs, and other typical furnishings. There is a vase of sunflowers, the symbol of American Spiritualism. On the wall is a collection of oddly ethereal portraits and landscapes depicting scenes and visitors from the Summer Land—the "other side." On the round table is an oil lamp, and there are smaller lamps around the room. Above the organ is an oval mirror and an ornately framed picture of a Union soldier. A setting sun pours red light through the windows.

AT RISE:

SETH HENSHAW sits comfortably on the sofa reading the Bible while AMANDA and AMELIA pull the table to the center of the room. AMELIA lifts the ornate lamp and AMANDA spreads a black lace tablecloth over the surface. The lamp is returned, along with a small handbell. SETH wears a black suit and large glasses; mother and daughter are in white dresses. AMANDA covers the mirror with a black cloth and kisses the Union soldier, while AMELIA places six chairs around the table. AMELIA closes the curtains while AMANDA lights the room's various lamps, including the oil lamp on the table.

When everything is set, AMANDA sits at the organ and begins playing "IN SUMMER LAND." She is clearly practicing, so there is much shuffling of pages, trying out stops, and the like. AMELIA sits beside SETH playing with a doll in a Zouave uniform.

SETH

(Reading to AMELIA from the Bible.)

The Lord spake unto Moses, saying, "Send thou men, that they may search the land of Canaan, which I give unto the children of Israel." So they went up, and searched the land. And they came unto the brook of Eshcol and cut down from thence a branch with one cluster of grapes. And they returned after forty days and came to Moses, and to Aaron, and to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and brought back word unto them, and shewed them the fruit of the land. And they said, "We came unto the land whither thou sentest us, and surely it floweth with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it."

AMELIA

Like the grapes we have on the fence, Pappy?

SETH

If only they were! These grapes were so large that two big men had to carry one bunch.

AMELIA

That would make a lot of jam.

SETH

Let's hope the children of Israel had large enough biscuits. Do you know what this story is trying to teach us?

AMELIA

That it is good to share? And to have enough for yourself that you can have plenty to give to others who also like grapes.

SETH

That is not a bad lesson to learn, Flower, though it is not the one I have in mind. Do you remember what Pappy said that the Promised Land of Canaan represents?

AMELIA

Our home in Summer Land?

SETH

That's right! And just as Moses sent out Caleb and the spies to search out the goodness of that land . . .

AMELIA

. . . we send our loving thoughts to those who cross to the other side.

SETH

You have been listening!

AMELIA

Who do you think will come tonight, Pappy?

SETH

It is best not to plan. Caleb did not cross the Jordan river looking for those grapes.

(SETH reverently sets down the Bible, removes his glasses, and takes AMELIA on his knee. AMELIA embraces SETH, with her arms around his neck.)

When the spirit telegraph reaches into Summer Land, any of the residents there can get on the line!

AMELIA

Oh mama, I hope Daddy reaches us tonight.

AMANDA

(Flustered and looking at the photograph of the Union soldier, AMANDA plays a few "off" notes.)

Just as Pappy said, Flower, it is best not to plan.

SETH

You know, it is like going out on the lake: you'd like to catch a walleye, but don't take it too hard if a nice perch bites the line. Either way, we are having fish for dinner! Just like Jesus and his disciples at the seaside . . .

AMELIA

. . . They got fish for breakfast; we get ghosts for dinner!

(AMANDA and SETH laugh, AMELIA moves to the table and plays with the bell. AMANDA moves to the vestibule and looks out the window.)

AMANDA

Now you are sure he is coming, papa? The train has missed our station before. I'm worried. He didn't write to confirm.

SETH

He will come, I was told so by the Chief last night.

AMANDA

Yes, I scribed the Chief's message. But papa, I would feel some relief if Mr. Beeson himself had notified us. . .

SETH

I have the Chief's word that a legion of angels ran alongside that train car all the way over from Cincinnati. Our Artist *will* come.

(AMANDA is uncertain as SETH moves to the table. AMANDA looks toward the organ but is distracted by a crooked picture frame, which she straightens. She then takes out a handkerchief and wipes the soldier's portrait. There is a knock at the door. AMANDA opens. Enter ELLIOT, holding his hat, awkwardly supporting a large sketching tablet and a box of pencils under his arm. SETH gives AMANDA a knowing look.)

ELLIOT

Is this the home of Sister Keogh?

AMANDA

It is, indeed! You must be the Spirit Artist we've read so much about—and have been waiting for—Mr. Beeson?

Elliot

Please: Brother Elliot. Let's leave unchristian formalities out of tonight's sitting. I'm sorry for the insult to my hosts: the train nearly missed the station and I almost had to hop out of a moving car.

AMANDA

(With a knowing look.)

Welcome in, Brother Elliot!

(Taking his hat and escorting ELLIOT into the parlor.)

I am sister Amanda. This is my daughter, Amelia. . .

AMELIA

. . . Flower!

AMANDA

That's right, our sunflower. And my father. . .

ELLIOT

. . . Father Henshaw! I never miss your column in *Banner of Light*; I've been revisiting your interviews with the Founding Fathers. They nearly transport my soul.

SETH

It was to my immense joy that the patriots condescended to join me at this humble table! That they agreed to sit for an interview was graciousness itself.

ELLIOT

If only President Lincoln knew how closely General Washington still watches over our boys in blue.

SETH

Oh, he knows! The president and Mrs. Lincoln are enlightened types. The lights in the Mansion's parlor have been kept burning into the darkness of many a night. Well, so I've heard. Please, sit, child. You arrived an angel unawares and in due season. We were just about to begin our nightly Communion.

(ELLIOT sits at the right side of SETH and begins setting up his pencils and tablet.)

ELLIOT

I wasn't sure if *Banner of Light's* contributors read the newsletter as faithfully as America's everyday spiritualist; it was an honor to receive your invitation to come and sketch, to know that Father Henshaw himself saw my little card in the back of the *Banner*.

SETH

(Motions to the large collection of framed artwork behind him.)

Spirit art, child, has become my holiest text. Windows to eternity.

(Rising and gesturing.)

This one! It was my first. A blind medium from New Orleans passed through and she painted for us what she saw. Do you recognize it?

ELLIOT

I don't know the exact location, sir. But I know that the Summer Land is large. . .

SETH

. . . This is my home over there! My wife, Asenath. She went on ahead of me. She has made it a House Beautiful. Roses around the door that never lose their scent. What do you suppose they smell of, child?

ELLIOT

Roses, but more so?

SETH

So you have been there!

ELLIOT

I have seen roses of other varieties in the Summer Land.

(AMANDA is playing softly on the organ.)

SETH

Roses are the flowering of pure love, Elliot. My Asenath's love on earth was so pure, so potent, that her garden in Summer Land bloomed long before she went to tend it. My Guide has told me that

angels curate the flourishing of our soul flowers before our time of entry. Though I have yet to reach one of these celestial gardeners.

ELLIOT

Then who from the Summer Land has called on you here?

SETH

(Motions toward another picture.)

This is my Guide, the Chief, Squanto's elder brother. He accepted the gospel of eternal life taught by our Pilgrim Fathers and then accepted the post of Summer Land psychopomps.

ELLIOT

How long has he been with you, now?

SETH

Nearly thirty years. When Asenath crossed over, she sent him to me.

ELLIOT

Has she made it to these sittings, too?

SETH

(Distantly.)

She's tending her roses until I get there.

(Focus returns. Gestures at a picture of a young man.)

This portrait is of our last child, Manasseh. Our only boy.

ELLIOT

A fine young man!

SETH

Of course, he is pictured here as he is in Summer Land. His birth pulled Asenath to the other side. It took all I had not to join her when the medium got this picture to me, and I saw those eyes—eyes that never opened on earth—pouring deepest love into my heart.

ELLIOT

(Beat.)

He resembles his father.

SETH

God is his father, child, and he's coming up a sturdy boy under the care of angel tutors. Nothing but good reports.

(AMELIA welcomes guests at the door while AMANDA softly plays "IN SUMMER LAND" on the organ while AMELIA directs the guests to their seats and SETH addresses the room.)

SETH

Children, this world is a bridge. We are travelers. Take up your beds and walk, don't lie here where we are meant to journey. *"No one will lose the way / Nor ever go astray / In Summer land."* Tonight, we will listen for them: those who have crossed the bridge, who rest in the shadowless realm. You may hear them calling you, whispering behind your ear. You might feel the pull of spirit fingers or their light touch of assurance on your resting arm. Let them embrace you. Let them speak. And together, we will journey across the bridge. Please, let us sing about our home that is already tended and waiting.

(All sing a few verses of "IN SUMMER LAND." AMANDA darkens the lamps, the stage is dark, except for the ornate lamp on the table, which is lowered but not put out. AMANDA sits at the table.)

SETH

David sang, "The spirit in man is the candle of the Lord." This spirit lamp shines a beacon of living flame into the darkness of earth. Through it, Summer Land Spirit will join our number.

(He takes up the bell. Rings it, then places it flat on the floor in sight of the audience.)

Just as Aaron the high priest wore bells of pure gold on the fringes of his cloak as he entered the Holy of Holies, so we leave this bell for Spirit as we enter the Presence of unseen Friends. Let us join hands.

(SETH, ELLIOT, AMANDA, AMELIA, and guests press palms flat together in a circle. There is a one-minute silence. The lamp flickers slightly. Silence. The bell rings. Knocking sounds. The table rises slightly and falls with a soft thud. All are calm. Silence. A spirit voice comes from offstage. ELLIOT breaks the circle to begin sketching, the two on either side of him resume the circle.)

SPIRIT

We have come, Father Henshaw.

SETH

Oh Spirit! Spirit of Consolation! Bringest thou my Guide, the Chief?

SPIRIT

He is already in us, Father. We will put him forward.

(A noticeable change in voice; stereotypical "Indian" voice. ELLIOT sketches quickly.)

Seth, we come from Summer Land with bright news. You have little girl here from Limbo, she travel many years to join wife of Seth. Smell of roses purify and make-um her ready for Summer Land.

SETH

My daughter! Malinda! So she had died.

(The table rises and falls with a hard thud.)

SPIRIT

She not make it far when leave home. But wander limbo many moons. Atoning for her leave-um home.

SETH

My daughter! After all these years of hoping! Did her baby survive?

(The lamp flickers and goes out. Moonlight through the windows. The bell rings. A shadowy figure appears on

stage, unseen by the cast and draped in white. The figure reaches for AMANDA and lightly touches her cheek. ELLIOT sketches furiously. Cut moonlight, stage dark, figure disappears. The picture of the soldier is moved imperceptibly from one end of the organ to the other. Then the lamp suddenly comes back on.)

SETH

(Little energy, lowering his hands.)

Children, the celestial telegraph has finished signaling today. Let us be grateful to God for his unspeakable gift of the proof of immortality.

(AMANDA begins returning the parlor to normal placement. ELLIOT packs away his pencils. AMELIA shows guests to the door, handing them hats, canes, etc. as they exit.)

SETH

Child, have you got enough to make the portrait?

ELLIOT

I have, sir! And its completion will be my highest priority.

SETH

Good, good. What an age to see. To be alive, knowing life will go on. You always will have a chair at my table.

(SETH moves to the sofa and begins to read the Bible. AMELIA sits at his feet, playing with her zouave doll; she has found a strand of purple beads belonging to her mother and pretends these are Canaan's grapes, under whose heavy load the soldier struggles. AMANDA and ELLIOT make their way towards the door.)

ELLIOT

(Tearing a piece of paper from his pad.)

Sister Amanda?

AMANDA

Yes, your hat!

(Brings ELLIOT's hat and brushes the top.)

ELLIOT

Thank you.

(AMANDA straightens his hat on his head, like a mother preparing her child for a walk.)

ELLIOT

"Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits. . ." The daughter he mentioned: she was not there. Tonight's message was not for your father. It was for you, sister.

(Hands paper to AMANDA, who looks at it quizzically.)
Your husband. The one who lies in Fredericksburg.

(AMANDA tearfully folds up the sketch and holds it at some length from her, as if looking at the face will sting her.)

AMANDA

"For Lincoln and Liberty" was all we heard from him for days. "Love never dies, Amanda." That's how his last letter closed. But. . .

ELLIOT

. . . You haven't heard him at the sittings.

AMANDA

(Almost silently.)

No.

ELLIOT

"The Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear." Invisible sitters ache to reach us, and even when they make it through to our side, they struggle to be felt. Often loved ones face us, smiling, calling our names.

AMANDA

(Stiffly. She tightly folds the sketch.)

Thank you, Mr. Beeson. My father anticipates your picture with great eagerness.

(ELLIOT exits and AMANDA returns to the organ. She tosses Elliot's sketch into the fire grate and plays hymns

softly. SETH looks down from his reading and notices AMELIA with the purple beads.)

SETH

What are you playing at, Flower?

AMELIA

The grapes from Canaan! Papa is bringing them back to us from his trip to Summer Land. They're too heavy, though. He can't hurry or he'll crush one. That's why he hasn't knocked on our table yet.

(AMANDA stops abruptly, moves to AMELIA and snatches the beads. She returns to the organ and resumes her hymn.

Lights fade, lamps stay lit.)

Entr'acte

PANTO: Elliot, dressed in the uniform of a Union soldier, mimes a confrontation with the rebels. After falling in battle, he is helped to his feet by Mr. KEOGH in uniform, and then welcomed by a fatherly figure (MR. BEESON) and a WOMAN in a thick black veil. The group share meaningful embraces. The lamp on the table grows astonishingly bright before cutting to black.

Act II

SETTING: Some months later. The Keogh house, late afternoon.

AT RISE: Lights up. AMANDA is wearing an apron and snood, putting fresh sunflowers in the vase, dusting her parlor, taking *objet d'art* of the shelves, straightening pictures, etc. There is a broom and mop bucket leaning against one wall. She sings "THE SANDS OF TIME ARE SINKING" softly while she works. A central vacant spot on the wall awaits the portrait from Elliot.

AMELIA

(Entering the vestibule carrying a large paper-wrapped parcel. The parcel is nearly as large as the girl, leaving only her lower legs and hands visible.)

Mama! Mama! It's here!

AMANDA

(Wiping her hands on her apron.)

So much for being Mr. Beeson's "top priority." Set it there, Flower. Papa! It's here!

(AMANDA begins unwrapping the parcel, using sheers from her apron pocket. Enter SETH excitedly and dressing quickly, just awoken from a nap.)

SETH

Don't you dare to hang it before I get there!

(AMANDA gets the picture unwrapped and holds it at arm's length, looking a bit puzzled. It is the portrait of a sophisticated middle-aged woman. When SETH enters, AMANDA hangs the picture on the wall's blank space, steps back, and all admire it. SETH dabs his wet eyes with the corner of his untucked shirt.)

SETH

She looks just as I remember her. "The dead shall be raised. . .
[Beat.] incorruptible."

AMELIA

Mama, who is this lady?

SETH

Flower, that's your grandmother. That's just how she looked when
she crossed over.

AMANDA

She seems to have gotten a new hairdo. She is very . . .
fashionable.

SETH

Oh Asenath devotedly read the Lady's Book. Her comeliness does not
surprise me; of course she has found a coiffeur on the other side.

AMANDA

Yes, even her dress seems to be the latest cut.

SETH

"She maketh herself coverings of tapestry. . ." You might not
remember that mother could make anew any dress she glanced upon.
Are not there Parisians in Summer Land?

AMANDA

(She removes her apron and snood. As if to herself as
she pats out her dress:)

Parisian men, perhaps, with bodies in Crimea. Widows now blacken
"gay Paris" like any common town in Indiana.

SETH

What was that?

AMANDA

Parisians, perhaps, and New Parisians from upstate Indiana.

(AMANDA gathers up the paper and disposes of it in the
fire grate. She then picks up her broom, mop, and duster,

putting them away as SETH pulls a chair near the portrait so he can sit before it admiringly, drying his eyes. AMELIA rubs his back and shoulders soothingly.)

SETH

Brother Elliot has caught it. My Asenath.

AMANDA

Papa, if we are going to have our communion tonight, you will need to go finish dressing.

SETH

(As if waking out of trance.)

Yes, you're right. We must try to reach beyond the veil tonight and thank her for sitting for this portrait.

(SETH replaces the chair, AMELIA grabs his hand.)

And if we do not get through to your grandmother, surely the Chief will thank her for us.

(Exit SETH and AMELIA. AMANDA begins arranging for the sitting, checking the table lamp, spreading a tablecloth. She then sits at the organ and begins shuffling through her music, before knocking down the soldier's photograph, which she picks up, dusts off, and places tenderly back in its original place with a sigh. She plays a few bars of "THE SANDS OF TIME ARE SINKING.")

Knock at the door. AMANDA glances at the clock, surprised. She crosses to the door and opens to find a smartly dressed middle-aged woman, the same from the portrait, but wearing a thin widow's veil. She is clutching a small notebook, open to a page with some scrawl. Under her arm is a flat, paper-wrapped parcel. There is a slight recognition between the women.)

MALINDA

Excuse me for calling at such an odd hour. Is this 23 Paradise Road, the Keogh house?

AMANDA

It is. Have you need to speak with the spirits this evening? You are a bit earlier than we usually expect sitters.

MALINDA

No, I am sorry to say I am not a Spiritualist. I've come for a very practical matter.

(MALINDA looks into the parlor and sees her portrait hanging on the wall. Showing relief, she brushes past AMANDA.)

This is why I have come! There had been an unfortunate confusion at the Post Office when Elliot sent out this portrait.

(MALINDA hands AMANDA the parcel from under her arm and shows her the notebook page.)

See? He meant to send this portrait to me! And for your address, here, was meant this larger portrait.

AMANDA

Your news will not be good tidings to my father, Miss. . .

MALINDA

Beeson. Elliot is . . .

AMANDA

. . . Your son, of course.

(AMANDA moves to the organ and takes out a tin box containing coins.)

Mrs. Beeson, my father is convinced that your picture is of my departed mother. Would you accept this in exchange, and as payment for not revealing the true sitter to him?

MALINDA

I must have the picture, Mrs. Keogh.

AMANDA

Look, this is all I've collected from our evening sittings—about twenty dollars, and far more than we paid Brother Elliot—Mister Beeson—for the commission. Please take it with you on your way back to Cincinnati.

MALINDA

(Sitting defiantly on the sofa, tossing the Zouave soldier doll to the floor. She begins unpinning her veil.)

I will wait here until that picture comes off the wall and is safely in my care.

AMANDA

Mrs. Beeson, please. Father Henshaw's spirit art collection is more than pastel portraits. They are the very word of life to him! Can we not borrow your likeness until. . .

(MALINDA weeps and takes out a handkerchief from her handbag. As she does, a *carte de viste* of a Union soldier falls to the floor. AMANDA picks it up, along with the Zouave doll.)

Oh. . . Elliot.

(MALINDA stops undoing her veil and snatches the CV. A pause.)

MALINDA

Mister Lincoln extended the draft.

AMANDA

So he is fighting. . .

MALINDA

. . . He has ended fighting.

(Beat. The women are holding back an embrace.)

We received word that he's buried somewhere in Georgia. Chickamauga. It doesn't sound like a real place. Elliot hadn't been in uniform four months before. . .

(AMANDA places the Zouave doll on the organ and brings her own soldier's portrait to MALINDA. She holds it out as if introducing one friend to another.)

AMANDA

Mister Keogh lies somewhere in Virginia. Took a bullet charging in Fredericksburg. The Army sent it to me along with the last letter he wrote in the hospital, and whatever else he had in his pockets when the infection finally reached his heart.

MALINDA

That I should be grateful for a sharpshooter's aim. . .

AMANDA

Mrs. Beeson, you were instantly made childless. That is a different pain, not a lesser one.

MALINDA

Please: Malinda. And shouldn't the Spiritualist be reassuring me of my forever motherhood?

AMANDA

Malinda?

(Enter SETH and AMELIA, dressed for the evening sitting.)

SETH

Ah our first to arrive for the evening's communion!

MALINDA

I am sorry, Father Henshaw, but I can't.

(AMANDA tries to persuade her to stay, but MALINDA brushes past and exits, emptyhanded. There are guests at the door. MALINDA has left the other picture from Elliot, still wrapped, leaning against the sofa. AMANDA puts it discreetly against the parlor's back wall. AMELIA welcomes in the guests while AMANDA quickly changes into a white wrapper offstage. She enters and softly plays

"THE SANDS OF TIME ARE SINKING" on the organ while AMELIA shows the guests to their seats.)

SETH

We are travelers tonight into Summer Land. It is not always an easy journey, but *"The King there in His beauty / without a veil is seen; / it were a well-spent journey, / though trials lay between . . . and glory, glory dwelleth in Emmanuel's land."* What do you hear, Children? Do you hear Spirit whisper calm assurance to you? Do you hear celestial voices join us in choir? Do soft zephyrs of Summer Land carry the murmurs of those you've loved, now gone before? They will speak if you will listen. Together, we will listen and journey into Emmanuel's Land. Please, let us sing about that land that is already speaking to our hearts.

(All sing a verse or two from "THE SANDS OF TIME ARE SINKING." AMANDA darkens all lamps except the central lamp on the séance table, then sits. The stage is dark but the portrait on the wall has a particular glow.)

SETH

This spirit lamp shines a beacon of living flame into the darkness of earth and the mists of separation. Through its light, those in Summer Land will see our table.

(He places the bell under the table.)

Just as Aaron wore golden bells on his cloak as he entered the tabernacle, so we leave this bell for Spirit as we enter the Presence of the unseen. Let us join hands.

(SETH, AMANDA, AMELIA, and the guests form a circle. There is a one-minute silence. The lamp flickers slightly. Silence. The bell rings. Knocking sounds. The table knocks a few times then rocks. Silence. A spirit voice comes from offstage.)

SPIRIT

We are here, Father Henshaw.

SETH

Spirit! Spirit of gentle comfort!

SPIRIT

Thou art needful of comfort, Father.

SETH

All the world seeketh such comfort, Spirit.

(Quiet, followed by a few knocks on the table and rings of the bell.)

SPIRIT

Thy spirit guide will not come hither tonight.

SETH

Spirit, Spirit. Do not leave me comfortless! I have come to thank thee for the portrait of my beloved! Please, Spirit. Do not leave me comfortless!

SPIRIT

There are others, Father, who wish to pass through. Perhaps they can bring thee comfort.

(The table knocks loudly, then begins to levitate. The table reaches the level of the heads of the sitters. The lamp shines very brightly then cuts out. SETH weeps loudly as the table picks up activity. It falls to the floor with a thud, the bell rings violently. Moonlight through the windows creates weird shadows. A strong scent of roses. Two feminine figures draped in white appear onstage and embrace, seen only by SETH. One kisses him lightly on the forehead. The women disappear, discreetly moving the portrait of the soldier from the organ to a nearby side table. Then the lamp suddenly comes back on; the table and sitters are mysteriously covered in fragrant rose petals. SETH has slumped over, unconscious.)

AMANDA

(Directing one of the guests.)

Take his collar. He needs to breathe.

(AMANDA gives AMELIA a folding fan from her dress pocket and directs her to fan SETH, who slowly awakens.)

SETH

Children, tonight's communion. . .

AMANDA

Papa, rest.

(She directs SETH to mimic her breathing and takes over fanning him while AMELIA takes guests to the door, though they do not exit, watching on concernedly.)

SETH

Did you see them? Did you see Asenath and our daughter?

AMANDA

It was a vision perhaps for you alone, papa.

SETH

The angels—I knew right away who they had been on earth—came and kissed me here.

(Motioning faintly to his forehead.)

AMANDA

Mama's greeting.

SETH

You remember! No matter what my day contained, I always knew that, at the end, I was coming home to Asenath's kiss just here.

AMANDA

She has finally reached us?

SETH

Undoubtedly. I am sorry, daughter, that she had no word for you and that her materialization was not meant for your eyes.

AMANDA

(Motioning tenderly to her breast.)

Mother lives here, with good company.

SETH

So she does. Would I had your faith, Amanda. Daughter, I need air.
Come, children, see God's starry sky.

(SETH slowly exits out the front door with the guests,
gazing longingly at the portrait on the wall. AMANDA
turns to dry her eyes, believing herself to be without
conviction. She and AMELIA begin returning the parlor to
its original placement.)

AMELIA

Mama?

AMANDA

Yes, Flower.

AMELIA

Where does the voice come from?

AMANDA

Where do you hear it from?

AMELIA

Well, pappy says it comes from Spirit. . .

AMANDA

And what is your question?

AMELIA

Pappy and Spirit never speak at the same time.

(They exchange knowing glances, then quickly divert
their eyes and focus intently on whatever task they are
doing. AMANDA picks up the Zouave doll and hesitates.)

AMANDA

Do you remember when I made you Captain Fulsome?

AMELIA

After we got the letter.

AMANDA

Why would a mama make her little flower a doll when it seemed like their whole world was falling apart?

AMELIA

Anything can be gotten through with a friend!

AMANDA

Captain Fulsome is your friend?

(AMANDA holds out the doll, which AMELIA snatches and cradles affectionately.)

AMELIA

Of course!

AMANDA

He makes you feel happy?

AMELIA

We laugh together every day. I don't cry so much anymore.

AMANDA

And where does his voice come from?

(AMANDA and AMELIA embrace. Nothing more needs to be said. AMELIA notices the wrapped parcel against the wall.)

AMELIA

Mama, what is that parcel?

AMANDA

Another portrait from Mr. Beeson.

(Affectedly.)

But the salon is out of room on its walls, *mais oui?*

AMELIA

Mais oui, madame!

(AMELIA stands her doll to attention and AMANDA jokingly plays a few bars of "PARTANT POUR LA SYRIE" at the organ. AMELIA dances lightheartedly.)

AMANDA

Alright, *mademoiselle*, time to turn in for the night.

(AMELIA wraps her arms around AMANDA, still seated at the organ.)

AMELIA

Mama, when the lady comes tomorrow to take the picture away, I can take Pappy for a walk.

AMANDA

You were in your eavesdropping spot again?

AMELIA

Captain Fulsome and I are the only ones who can fit!

AMANDA

(Embracing AMELIA.)

You remember what mama said about eavesdropping?

AMELIA

Are you mad at me, mama?

AMANDA

Not this time, Flower. You and Pappy have a nice walk around the lake tomorrow morning.

(AMELIA kisses her mother goodnight and exits. AMANDA looks wistfully at the soldier's portrait and begins to play "THE SANDS OF TIME ARE SINKING" on the organ.

Lights fade, the lamp on the séance table stays lit.)

Entr'acte

PANTO: Enter ELLIOT, MR. KEOGH, MR. BEESON, and the VEILED WOMAN carrying bouquets of white roses (these can be touched with luminous paint to give an other-worldly glow). They are child-like in sharing their roses with one another. ELLIOT makes a flower crown and places it on the head of the VEILED WOMAN, who pins a rose in his buttonhole. MR. KEOGH places one rose on the organ, near his portrait. It stays there throughout the remainder of the show.

Act III

SETTING: The parlor of the Keogh house, the following morning.

AT RISE: Lights up. AMANDA sits at the table drinking tea. She is wearing a black dress. There is a cup and saucer for an expected visitor at the place next to her. SETH and AMELIA are on their walk.

(There is a knock on the door. AMANDA rises, pats her hair and smooths her dress, checking herself in the mirror above the organ. She notices the rose but does not investigate. She moves toward the vestibule, picks up the Zouave doll from the floor and fluffs a cushion on the sofa. Enter MALINDA, also wearing black and a light veil.)

AMANDA

Mrs. Beeson! Good morning.

MALINDA

Good morning, Mrs. Keogh.

AMANDA

(Taking MALINDA's wrap, etc.)

I am sorry the clouds have decided to crowd out the sun on your last morning in Indiana.

MALINDA

It is normal this time of year. Ohio is not much better.

AMANDA

Have you fully arranged your travel back to Cincinnati?

MALINDA

(Unpinning and removing her veil while AMANDA fusses with the tea service.)

Yes, thank you. There is a train tomorrow morning.

AMANDA

Would you please sit and have some tea?

MALINDA

Thank you. There is that unrivaled Indiana hospitality.

AMANDA

It is a hallmark.

(AMANDA awkwardly serves the tea. Both women seem strained for small talk.)

MALINDA

Why, a hundred men lined up and I could tell the man from Indiana by the way he offers me a chair.

AMANDA

Was the late Mr. Beeson a Hoosier?

MALINDA

Elliot's father? Yes. Just a farm boy. Although he dreamt of going to college. He was studying for a Wabash scholarship when Elliot came.

AMANDA

An unexpected visitor?

MALINDA

Angels sent him from heaven just to redirect our lives.

AMANDA

Children seem to do that!

MALINDA

Mr. Beeson—Thomas—married me and never got to Wabash. Always hoped to get there, then we hoped for Elliot to.

AMANDA

Our Indiana gossips must have relished in your situation.

MALINDA

We got away as soon as we could. I haven't passed through Indiana in so many years, but I've found the people unchanged. Everyone just as *honest* as the prairies.

AMANDA

We do change, though.

MALINDA

I'm sorry?

AMANDA

We all change, Malinda. Even those who have never left Henry County. And we've changed because of those who have left us.

MALINDA

Of course. This war has brought us all into a new stage of life.

AMANDA

(Brushing her black dress.)

A stage with the reminders everywhere of parting.

MALINDA

Then get away from it all. All these pictures! All these spirit meetings! Do they not haunt you, Amanda?

AMANDA

They are father's. Papa needs his reassurances.

MALINDA

At least one of his reassurances is a lie.

(MALINDA rises and faces her picture.)

This portrait is no spirit. "Behold it is I myself: handle me and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have." Sister, I am standing here, facing you.

AMANDA

(Beat.)

Sister. Malinda.

(They embrace.)

MALINDA

The burden of thinking you couldn't see me. . .

AMANDA

Twenty years is no stretch of time for sisters. And besides, papa is right to see so much of our mother in your picture.

MALINDA

A married name. A few wrinkles. A graying head. But under it all, Malinda Henshaw.

AMANDA

Under all this black, are we really still the debutantes of Henry County?

MALINDA

Is a rose a rose when a few petals droop?

AMANDA

Or when those petals are strewn around the rosebush?

(AMANDA moves to the organ and wistfully plays "THE LAST ROSE OF SUMMER" from memory. MALINDA faces away from her and softly sings the final verse.)

MALINDA

*I'll not leave thee, thou lone one
to pine on the stem;
Since the lovely are sleeping,
go sleep thou with them.
Thus kindly do I scatter
thy leaves o'er the bed,
where thy mates of the garden
lie scentless and dead.*

(Brief pause.)

If papa wants my picture, it can stay here with my blessing.

AMANDA

No, sister! We couldn't in good conscience rob you of your link to Elliot.

MALINDA

(Touching her heart.)

Where did mother tell us the dead reside?

AMANDA

The only residence I've felt for certain lately is some field in Virginia.

MALINDA

A trench in Georgia.

AMANDA

All my hope lies there, too.

MALINDA

What keeps papa turning to these spiritualists?

AMANDA

His hope is not buried. It is thriving, growing on the vine.

(AMANDA moves to take the portrait it from the wall.)

MALINDA

Amanda, keep the picture.

AMANDA

It is a lie, as you said.

MALINDA

Is there any harm in the lie?

AMANDA

One glance at you and he will discover our deception.

MALINDA

An early morning train to Cincinnati prevents that possibility.

AMANDA

There is the harm.

MALINDA

Then let the picture be a comfort. He mourns in his own way, just as we all do.

AMANDA

He has mourned for you all these years. Last night's sitting brought something . . . new. He saw . . . what he thought was you, from the Summer Land.

MALINDA

He cannot see me now. The sap of hope that flows through him—through all these spiritualists—we cannot let that dry up. Amanda, keep the portrait. Tell him it is our mother, tell him whatever he needs to keep alive the hope that has withered in me. In us.

AMANDA

(Weepy, shaking her head in affirmation as she sits.)

Yes.

MALINDA

(Kneeling in front of AMANDA, placing her head in AMANDA's lap.)

I'll write to you. And when papa is gone, I will "resurrect" and come back to you.

AMANDA

But where have you been? Can you come back to Indiana from your life, your world, so easily?

MALINDA

Elliot was my world. He went to New York to study painting. There are Spiritualists there, too. I cannot seem to get away from them! He followed that path, so much like papa. And I followed Elliot. These paintings brought so much hope. I suppose I was jealous, wanting one for myself.

AMANDA

Jealousy is not what keeps memory alive, what dresses us in widows' weeds, leaves roses at simple shrines. We might not be grasping hope, but neither are we loaded with jealousy. Where papa sees the spirit hand, you see Elliot's. One of you is right.

(The sisters touch hands, palm to palm, like the sitters at Seth's séance. They share looks of deep longing, teary-eyed.)

AMANDA

Please, you should go if you plan to avoid encountering papa.

MALINDA

I will write.

AMANDA

And I will eagerly await your "resurrection."

MALINDA

(Rising and tenderly offering AMANDA the wrapped picture.)

"Now therefore come thou, let us make a covenant. This is a witness. . . *Mizpah* for The Lord will watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another."

(They embrace with much crying.)

Exit MALINDA.

AMANDA busies herself preparing the parlor for that evening's sitting. Enter AMELIA and SETH from their walk as AMANDA unwraps and hangs the portrait in a central space on the wall. The picture shows Seth surrounded by many spirits, including Amanda's husband in uniform and the veiled woman.)

SETH

"We are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses."

AMANDA

(Sitting at the organ and shuffling sheet music.)
And whose cloud do you hope will be on tonight's horizon?

SETH

Best not to plan, daughter, though since my Asenath has made contact, I suspect that she will again become mistress of my table.

(AMANDA begins playing "IN SUMMER LAND" while SETH and AMELIA take their places at the table.

Lights fade, but the table's central lamp stays lit.)

SETH

(Quoting from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.)

*There is no flock, however watched and tended,
But one dead lamb is there;
There is no fireside, howsoe'er defended,
But has one vacant chair.*

*The air is full of farewells to the dying,
And mourning for the dead.
The mother's heart, for her children crying,
Will not be comforted.*

*Let us be patient! These severe afflictions
Not from the ground arise,
But oftentimes celestial benedictions
Assume this dark disguise.*

*We see but dimly through the mists and vapors;
Amid these earthly damps
What seem to us but sad, funereal tapers
May be heaven's distant lamps.*

*There is no Death! What seems so is transition;
This life of mortal breath
Is but a suburb of the life elysian,
Whose portal we call Death.*

(AMANDA quits playing, takes her seat at the table, and the three form a circle by pressing their palms flat together.

Enter ELLIOT, with the VEILED WOMAN, MR. BEESON, and MR. KEOGH. The four stand silently around the table. ELLIOT places the sketch from Act 1, uncrumpled, on the table.

MR. KEOGH holds the Zouave doll, which he places gently on the table, and then softly kisses AMELIA's hair. All this is unperceived by the sitters, who still press palms together and sit silently with eyes closed.

Cut to black.

CURTAIN.)

Author's Statement

By the Dim and Flaring Lamps is a play about grief. When the idea for the script first came to me, I was living in a major U.S. city across the street from a hospital. It was spring 2020, and the city was hit hard by the coronavirus. Every day I walked past the hospital's mobile morgue units stationed on our street—white tents into which they carted bodies for whom there was no room elsewhere. At the time, I was working on my PhD and doing extensive research into nineteenth-century views of death and dying. The statistics of the Civil War particularly struck me: a full two and half percent of the U.S. population, soldier and civilian, was killed between 1861 and 1865. By late 2020, the percentage killed by COVID-19 was more than double. Suddenly, the rituals and representations of what scholars call the “Cult of Mourning” prevalent in the nineteenth century carried a startling familiarity. As my research continued, I knew I had to tell the story of how we grieve, and as my schedule filled up with zoom meetings and lengthy phone calls with distant relatives, I realized what my nineteenth-century mourning counterparts discovered: we grieve when communication is abruptly cut off, and our human solution is to attempt *more communication*. The Victorian Spiritualists took gentle rapping on a wooden table to be telegraphic code from heaven, the place they called the Summer Land, where dead loved ones continued to ache for communication just as much as the living. *By the Dim and Flaring Lamps* interrogates our contentment with grieving “solutions,” and seeks to find the point at which comforting illusions confront harsh realities.

It is my privilege to present *By the Dim and Flaring Lamps* to you as a complete and final draft. The show has never been produced, though I would love to know how producible the séance sequences are. These are based on eye-witness accounts of early Spiritualist phenomena, though I wonder how well they translate from the darkened parlor to the stage. However these end up being produced, it is imperative that the show maintains respect for the deep grief and longing of the Victorian Spiritualists, however misguided we might find what they termed their “investigations” into spiritual phenomena.