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Cast of Characters

NATHANIEL, a young man, 21, from Canton, Ohio

GIDEON, a reverend, 24, from Boston & Upstate NY

PEARL, a mother, 18, from Grassy Creek, North Carolina

HANNAH, a nurse, 22, from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Production Notes

All of the action of the play takes place in the same moment.

Acknowledgments

Consumption was originally produced at the Guthrie Theater in 2005 and directed by Daisy Walker with Megan Bartle, Elliot Eustis, Betsy Reisz, and Will Sturdivant. The dramaturgy for *Consumption* was by Amy Wegener

Special thanks to Amy Wegener, Michael Bigelow Dixon, the New River Dramatists, MZ Ribalow, Lucy Thurber, Blair Singer, Ken Washington, the Primary Stages Writers Group, Daisy Walker and the fabulous actors, Megan, Elliot, Betsy and Will for whom this play was written.

Consumption was commissioned by the Guthrie Theater, Joe Dowling, Artistic Director.

CONSUMPTION

by Courtney Baron

Scene 1: POOR DOGS

(Lights up.)

(Four beds side by side. NATHANIEL, GIDEON, PEARL, and HANNAH are each tucked into a bed. They are all coughing. They each cough into a white handkerchief. They are aware of each other, they try to suppress their coughs. A strange rhythm of coughing emerges, finally the coughing reached a crescendo, sudden silence. They turn their handkerchiefs towards the audience, the handkerchiefs are now all solid red.)

NATHANIEL. *(Smiling, pointing:)* A yellow finch. On that tree. There. See?

PEARL. See my momma, sitting with my papa. She's laughing. See my own baby. Bouncing on my momma's knee. He's fat.

NATHANIEL. I think about flight. About flying.

GIDEON. God look down. Good God look down on me.

PEARL. Worried on how much milk I got. Worried it ain't enough. Momma says goat milk's enough. Not to worry.

NATHANIEL. My dogs are here, but the birds stay. They were my father's dogs, now they're mine. Mine, I re-named them: Mary and Joseph. They sit by my bed. I walk these good dogs. In the woods, to the lake sometimes. We walk. Not today. Now, there are birds, these yellow finches. Mary and Joseph leave them be for me. These yellow finches make me think about flying. I'll beg my sister to kill Mary and Joseph when I go, bury them with me.

GIDEON. *(Holding up a Bible:)* The captain says the still water will slow us a day or more. Doctor Cheever said to go South. Recommended Cuba or further, but I only had enough for passage to Jacksonville. We'll arrive on Sunday. The Lord's day. Good gracious God, I will arrive.

PEARL. My baby. He's got my husband's gentle look. I could just

eat him up, he'd be delicious.

HANNAH. (*Singing:*) Breathe in the day. Breathe in the night. Breathe in morning, just after first light. Come down and sing this song with breath. Woman born in the day. Man born in the night. Child born in morning, just after first light. Come down and sing this song with breath. A special day, A special night, And we are gone in the morning, just after first light.

(*HANNAH stands.*)

HANNAH. And so we are the same. Nathaniel Joseph Moore, age 21. Canton, Ohio.

(*NATHANIEL stands.*)

HANNAH. Gideon Warren, age 24. On the Atlantic Ocean, heading South.

(*GIDEON stands.*)

HANNAH. Pearl Anne Jacobs, age 18. Grassy Creek, North Carolina.

(*PEARL doesn't stand.*)

HANNAH. Pearl Anne Jacobs, age 18. Grassy Creek, North Carolina.

(*PEARL still doesn't stand.*)

HANNAH. Come on Pearl.

PEARL. I don't wanna—

HANNAH. You haven't got a choice Pearl.

PEARL. I feel good today. I do, I feel real good.

(*HANNAH walks over to PEARL.*)

HANNAH. I know you do Pearl, I know.

(*HANNAH holds out her hand, PEARL doesn't take it.*)

PEARL. I'm gonna go on with my day—

HANNAH. I'll help you up Pearl—

PEARL. I don't even know them men.

HANNAH. Sure you do, that's Nathaniel and that's Gideon.

PEARL. Look at my baby. He's seven months. Pink as a pig. Look, we're good. I am.

HANNAH. Now Pearl.

PEARL. I know you're an angel.

HANNAH. I'm not. Hannah O'Flannery, age 22. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

PEARL. You look white like an angel.

HANNAH. I'm pale is all.

PEARL. Real pale.

NATHANIEL. Actually, her lips are pink and her cheeks.

HANNAH. Listen, Pearl, you got to stand up.

(GIDEON goes to PEARL.)

GIDEON. I have two girls.

PEARL. How old?

GIDEON. Twins. Two years old.

PEARL. Twins?

GIDEON. *(Smiling:)* Come on now.

(GIDEON holds out his hand. PEARL smiles shyly and takes it and stands. She keeps a hold of GIDEON's hand as they step forward.)

HANNAH. Good. We're the same.

GIDEON. *(To PEARL:)* We're the same.

HANNAH. Like I said. Sure, different places, but we are the same. We are, to say it plainly, young and consumed. Gideon?

GIDEON. I've had a pretty hard life. God's will. Like the ocean. God creates nature as a model, look at the terrain where you end and know your life. Born in the Adirondacks, I left home early. Up

to Boston. Boarded with a man of God, learned to preach young, learned to spread the Word where the Word was wanted. That's what I know, you can't just find those who need the Word, you must find those who want it. Reverend Jameson, knew what I wanted before I did. That's a gift. I had hoped for the same. I met him when I was sixteen. He didn't have a wife, so keeping his house was my work. But he knew my true calling. When I had just arrived in Boston, been there barely a month, he said:

NATHANIEL. (*As REVEREND JAMESON:*) Come'ere Gideon.

GIDEON. Yes Reverend.

NATHANIEL. (*As REVEREND JAMESON:*) Get that basin.

GIDEON. Yes Reverend.

NATHANIEL. (*As REVEREND JAMESON:*) Is the water very cold?

GIDEON. Not very.

NATHANIEL. (*As REVEREND JAMESON:*) Alright. Help me with my boots.

(*GIDEON does.*)

NATHANIEL. (*As REVEREND JAMESON:*) Sit here with me.

(*GIDEON sits on the floor at NATHANIEL's feet.*)

NATHANIEL. (*As REVEREND JAMESON:*) You know, a man's feet can only take him so far.

GIDEON. Yes Reverend.

NATHANIEL. (*As REVEREND JAMESON:*) Put your hand in the water. Go on. Good. Why'd you leave your mother?

GIDEON. Why'd I leave my mother?

NATHANIEL. (*As REVEREND JAMESON:*) Yes, Gideon, that's what I'm asking.

GIDEON. To come to Boston.

NATHANIEL. (*As REVEREND JAMESON:*) That right? That all?

GIDEON. To see Boston... To see a city bigger than where I'm

from.

NATHANIEL. (*As REVEREND JAMESON:*) No one leaves the mother they love just to see another place.

GIDEON. No.

NATHANIEL. (*As REVEREND JAMESON:*) You need to know yourself better. I know you Gideon. Touch my feet. They're rough. Old. Traveled. See, there, from my feet you can feel where I've been. Know where I've been. Now, now touch my heart.

(*GIDEON does.*)

NATHANIEL. (*As REVEREND JAMESON:*) Can you feel my heart?

(*NATHANIEL touches GIDEON's heart.*)

NATHANIEL. (*As REVEREND JAMESON:*) I can feel your heart. I can feel it beating.

GIDEON. You can?

NATHANIEL. (*As REVEREND JAMESON:*) You feel a man's feet and you know where he's been. You learn to feel a man's heart and you'll know where he's going. Do you understand what I'm saying?

GIDEON. Yes?

NATHANIEL. (*As REVEREND JAMESON:*) "Yes?" Gideon, love should never be a question. (*Beat.*) Go on. Get supper ready.

(*NATHANIEL goes back and sits on his bed.*)

GIDEON. Boston's far behind now. Too far maybe. The warmer climate of Jacksonville will help me breathe. Dr. Cheever said that Boston was killing me. Do I miss my wife?

PEARL. I married a little over a year ago. Second I turned sixteen, my uncle's cousin come over from Asheville and we courted and was married. He knew I'd been sick, but he agreed. Man needs a wife, he said. He's 'bout half a head smaller than I am. My papa said, "Pearl Anne, short men are as honest as they come." We was married just 'fore I turned seventeen. On my wedding night, my momma warned me, she said:

HANNAH. (*As MOMMA:*) Now, don't think you're gonna like it.

PEARL. No ma'am.

HANNAH. (*As MOMMA:*) Why you smiling?

PEARL. I'm not.

HANNAH. (*As MOMMA:*) You not young, Pearl. Don't act like you is.

PEARL. I'm not.

HANNAH. (*As MOMMA:*) There only one way to say it, Pearl. It's like pulling a tooth and then trying to force it back in.

PEARL. And my momma, she always right. Nothing to like in a wedding night.

HANNAH. (*As MOMMA:*) You just hope you with baby fast, then you don't got to do it for nine months.

PEARL. And I was pregnant fast. And when I got sick, she said:

HANNAH. (*As MOMMA:*) Nothing to do, Pearl. You come into the world small, too small. Small babies live small lives.

PEARL. My baby's big, fat.

HANNAH. I trained to be a nurse. I come from a progressive family. I always knew that's what I'd be. When I was seven, I nursed my grandmother through yellow fever. I was the only one who'd go near her. I never was afraid of sickness. I'm still not. I was first at St. Agnes' Hospital as a nurse, now as a patient. And I try to nurse myself. Use my gentle touch on myself. Lie to myself, like I lie to patients. I say, "Hannah, you're gonna get better." My doctor found lesions months ago, something I've had for years he said. I've always been coughing.

GIDEON. I come out of my cabin 'round noon to walk. It's the first time I see more than hands on deck. A man leans against the tall pile of rope. Looks out, then looks at me and smiles. This ship makes port in Jacksonville, but then'll keep traveling down on past Florida, down to Cuba. The sun is bright. The man motions for me to come over, I do. He doesn't say anything. Touches his chest and

like he's shattered the glass inside, he starts coughing. Coughing and smiling. I swear I've seen him before.

PEARL. I've always been coughing.

NATHANIEL. I've always been coughing.

HANNAH. We've always been... And all we are going to become is stories. Stories our families won't want to tell, shouldn't have to. When you die young, when that happens no one should have to remember you.

PEARL. We going to heaven?

HANNAH. I wouldn't know.

NATHANIEL. My father died of consumption. We want to remember him.

HANNAH. Sure, but then your mother would have to remember the both of you.

NATHANIEL. My mother'll want to remember me, my sister.

HANNAH. You said you remember your father?

NATHANIEL. We all do.

HANNAH. How does your mother feel when she remembers him?

NATHANIEL. I don't know.

HANNAH. How do you think she feels?

NATHANIEL. I don't know.

PEARL. Bet she feels sad.

HANNAH. What does she do when she remembers him?

NATHANIEL. She remembers him, I don't know.

PEARL. Bet she wishes he were alive.

HANNAH. When she remembers him, she must do something.

NATHANIEL. I don't know, she does what she does.

PEARL. Bet she cries.

NATHANIEL. You don't know my mother.

PEARL. You saying she don't cry when she's sad?

NATHANIEL. No, I just—

GIDEON. (*To HANNAH:*) You can't keep people from crying.

HANNAH. I hope nobody that loves me remembers me.

GIDEON. (*To HANNAH:*) You can't keep people from loving you.

HANNAH. These people here. They don't love us, it won't hurt them.

PEARL. I don't want to hurt no one. My papa said, I heard him, tell Momma, he said:

GIDEON. (*As PAPA:*) We oughtn't of named her Pearl. We're too poor to hold on to something so precious.

PEARL. I ought to have named my boy "Dirt."

NATHANIEL. (*Smiling:*) Mud.

PEARL. Mess.

NATHANIEL. Garbage.

PEARL. Slop.

NATHANIEL. Pocket with a hole in it.

HANNAH. (*As NATHANIEL's SISTER:*) Make yourself useful.

NATHANIEL. That's woman's work.

HANNAH. (*As SISTER:*) You bored?

NATHANIEL. So.

HANNAH. (*As SISTER:*) Here. Take a needle. Go on, take it. All-right, now take some thread. There. Now, look, watch, I take the thread and put it in my mouth, like this. Then I close my lips and pull it out. Like this. Go on. You do it.

NATHANIEL. I never saw Mother lick the sewing.

HANNAH. (*As SISTER:*) I'm not your mother, I'm your sister. Now

do it.

NATHANIEL. What else do you lick, the wash?

HANNAH. *(As SISTER:)* I licked the toast I warmed for your breakfast. Go on. Do it. There. That smoothes down the ends. Now, hold up the needle towards the window. See the light in the eye. Take the thread and aim it for the light in the eye. You aren't looking. Quit looking at me.

NATHANIEL. You know what I was thinking?

HANNAH. *(As SISTER:)* What?

NATHANIEL. You're the only girl close to my age that I'm ever gonna love.

HANNAH. *(As SISTER:)* Go on. Thread your needle. You're not trying. Come on. Your hands are like feet. Here, alright, now see the eye?

(She takes hold of his hands and guides them.)

HANNAH. *(As SISTER:)* Lick the thread again, you've frayed it. Alright, hold it up again.

NATHANIEL. Ouch!

HANNAH. *(As SISTER:)* Don't be a baby, come on try again.

NATHANIEL. Why is the hole so small?

HANNAH. *(As SISTER:)* Aim the thread for the light.

NATHANIEL. Women always make things difficult.

HANNAH. *(As SISTER:)* Father sewed. There, you almost—

NATHANIEL. I got it!

HANNAH. *(As SISTER:)* Of course you did. Now, pull the thread through. There. Good, you got it Natty, you got it. Watch me sew on this button. She sews on the button.

NATHANIEL. Let me try it. *(She hands it to him.)*

HANNAH. *(As SISTER:)* There. You got it. You're more sissy than you let on—

NATHANIEL. Shut up.

HANNAH. *(As SISTER:)* Good. Now, pull the button and make sure it's tight on there. Good, tie it off. Like this.

NATHANIEL. Pretty good, huh?

HANNAH. *(As SISTER:)* You're going to make a good wife.

NATHANIEL. You're going to make a good old maid.

(NATHANIEL has a coughing fit. HANNAH tries to prop him up.)

NATHANIEL. *(Coughing:)* Don't. I'm fine. Are there... Let me...

(He takes the needle and thread, tries to thread it while coughing.)

NATHANIEL. *(Coughing:)* I'll make a good wife... I got it... Go on. Go on...

(She watches him. He keeps trying to thread the needle. Keeps coughing. She takes off her jacket and rips off all the buttons. She places the jacket on his bed and folds the buttons into his palm. HANNAH steps away. He continues to cough.)

HANNAH. Going from nurse to invalid. It's like going from bride to widow.

(NATHANIEL is still coughing.)

PEARL. *(Going to NATHANIEL:)* Look there's a cardinal. Puffing out his red chest. You see it?

(NATHANIEL nods, coughing.)

PEARL. Funny, boy birds always a sight prettier than girl birds. Not that way with people, though, huh?

(He drops the buttons from his hand. PEARL goes to pick them up.)

PEARL. *(To GIDEON:)* I think he needs some water.

(Lights shift. The sound of water being poured transitions into the sound of water rushing.)

**Scene 2: FLOATING DOWN FEVER
DREAMS PART ONE (LEAVING IT BEHIND)**

(NATHANIEL lies back, the coughing subsides. HANNAH, GIDEON and PEARL sit on one bed. The sound of water rushing continues.)

HANNAH. We share the same dream.

(NATHANIEL climbs aboard the bed.)

HANNAH. The details may be slightly different, but the dream takes us all to the same place.

(PEARL drags her hand in the water.)

HANNAH. Soft water, muddy from movement, but clean.

GIDEON. This boat, this boat is different from the ship taking me South, taking me to Jacksonville, this boat: it's small and sturdy. It takes us on a trip for no apparent reason. Filled with these strangers that I seem to know.

HANNAH. Looking for something.

PEARL. See it. A small birch, on the banks. Its leaves whispering something. What's it saying? You hear it? Like words. Like something? You hear it?

NATHANIEL. Wshhhh...Wshhhh...

PEARL. Water so shallow, bottom's plain. There ain't fish down in here, where I the fish. What are them birches saying? You hear it?

NATHANIEL. "Be quiet. Be quiet." That's what the trees are saying.

PEARL. Look, now, water's deeper—

GIDEON. I see my house. My mother sitting on a porch. She's rocking like she always did. I'm passing, she waves. Passing too fast to wave back. Then Boston, I see Reverend Jameson, standing on the shores, he's come to baptize me, but I've already been saved, haven't I already been saved?

PEARL. Me too! Look there's the farm. Papa! Papa! Papa! He don't hear me. How come he don't—Papa! Here I am! Here! Paddle us

back.

(PEARL tries to “paddle” back, her arms flailing wildly, try to push against the water.)

HANNAH. Current’s too fast.

PEARL. Paddle back!

HANNAH. I pass the store, see it there, we live above it. My sister’s in the window. She’s always looking out.

PEARL. I can’t see it no more.

HANNAH. Pearl, pull your arms in. Current’s too fast.

GIDEON. And then the Hudson opens into the ocean—

HANNAH. The Delaware River opens into the Atlantic—

PEARL. New River pushes to the Mississippi and on down to the Gulf—

(NATHANIEL begins to point to a spot in the distance. He raises his hand in the gesture of a still wave. They quickly pass the spot of his focus and he looks back and then lowers his hand.)

HANNAH. This boat is small and sturdy in the rivers.

GIDEON. Aren’t you afraid it won’t take the ocean?

HANNAH. No. We’ll get to where we’re going, I know that.

PEARL. Hannah, I wanna go home.

NATHANIEL. You can’t go back.

HANNAH. *(Pulling PEARL close to her:)* This is the dream of leaving home, in a boat—

GIDEON. —with these strangers I seem to know—

HANNAH. —leaving the place we come from.

(Lights shift again.)

Scene 3: THE LINGERING FEELING

(GIDEON, HANNAH, PEARL, and NATHANIEL all return to their beds.)

GIDEON. I carry my family. Three sisters and a mother left behind. My father's a trapper. He traveled more than he was home. We lived near a free town, but up in the mountains we never felt free. But in Boston, in Boston, I felt free. I made a new family in Boston, married the Reverend's niece, thought of the Reverend as my new father. Leaving my mother, it was something I wanted to do the moment I could spell the word "leave."

(GIDEON begins to sweep the floor.)

PEARL. (As GIDEON's mother:) You got to keep your eyes on your work.

(GIDEON continues to clean the floor. He tries to keep his eyes on the job.)

PEARL. (As GIDEON's mother:) Why you always looking out?

GIDEON. —

PEARL. (As GIDEON's mother:) Pay attention to your work.

GIDEON. Mother...

PEARL. (As GIDEON's mother:) How do you know the floor's clean if you looking out towards nothing?

GIDEON. It's getting clean.

PEARL. (As GIDEON's mother:) You looking for your father to come home?

GIDEON. No.

PEARL. (As GIDEON's mother:) I can tell you what I know for sure, looking for him isn't going to make him come any sooner.

GIDEON. I'm not looking for him.

PEARL. (As GIDEON's MOTHER:) You look, though Gideon, like you're expecting something.

GIDEON. What do you think I could be looking for? A deer, a bird,

rain. I know: Nothing comes. I know it.

PEARL. (*As GIDEON's MOTHER:*) If there's nothing, keep your eyes on your work. Cleanliness is next to Godliness.

GIDEON. I know, I know, I know.

PEARL. (*As GIDEON's MOTHER:*) You know: Honor thy father and thy mother? You know that? You know that if you leave me, God won't look favorably on you. You got to stay with what you know, where you're known, it's the only way to keep safe. Your sisters will leave. They'll marry and have to.

GIDEON. You don't think I'll marry?

PEARL. (*As GIDEON's MOTHER:*) Not if you keep that look in your eye.

GIDEON. What about this look?

(GIDEON makes a silly face.)

PEARL. (*As GIDEON's MOTHER:*) You're going to have to marry ol' Henry Mention's blind girl, if you're going to look like that—

GIDEON. I'm staying here with my mother.

PEARL. (*As GIDEON's MOTHER:*) Don't make me call you a liar one day.

GIDEON. I won't. I'm staying.

(GIDEON continues to clean the floor.)

NATHANIEL. Liar, liar pants on fire

PEARL. Shut up.

NATHANIEL. You shut up.

PEARL. Gideon?

GIDEON. What?

PEARL. That's a sad story, hope my baby never leaves me.

GIDEON. You're not like my mother.

PEARL. And I feel like I'm gonna cry.

NATHANIEL. You're a cry baby.

PEARL. Shut up.

NATHANIEL. (*Mocking:*) "Shut up."

GIDEON. You can cry if you want to Pearl. There's no shame in crying.

NATHANIEL. No shame if you're a baby.

HANNAH. No one should. We should all fight it. But, no matter what, we do.

GIDEON. No matter what you do.

HANNAH. But you don't want to be the reason. You don't want to be the cause.

NATHANIEL. You can't make me cry.

HANNAH. No one is going to try.

PEARL. (*On the verge of tears:*) I could. I could make'im cry. I could.

NATHANIEL. Cry baby.

HANNAH. Mother's cry. Not just babies. Mothers and fathers. Uncles and aunts. Husbands and wives. Whole rivers. Oceans. Seas. The biological fact of it is that we're all made to cry. Put your fingers here, here on the duct and try as you might you can't plug it up. No one is that strong. That is what you learn when you're a nurse. I know all of us. I know all of them sitting out there. I know that they are just as weak as we are, but they don't know it. It's a terrible thing to know it.

NATHANIEL. Girls...

GIDEON. I've seen grown men cry, the moment they know the grace of God, they break down and weep like newborns.

PEARL. (*To GIDEON:*) You cry?

GIDEON. I've never really been a crier—

NATHANIEL. See?

PEARL. You didn't cry when you left your wife?

(GIDEON starts to sweep again and continues throughout the scene.)

GIDEON. No.

PEARL. How 'bout when you left them twin girls?

GIDEON. They cried. So did my wife.

NATHANIEL. But you didn't cry, did you?

GIDEON. No. I didn't.

PEARL. But you felt like crying, didn't you?

GIDEON. All of the time. All this water here is salted. Like I'm standing in the middle of a big pool of tears. I know where this ship is taking me.

PEARL. Jacksonville?

HANNAH. There's a woman in the bed next to me at St. Agnes's and she knits. Says she learned from her mother. Blankets wrapped around her shoulders, around her legs... I never had much use for such work, but now, I'd like to have more than books to keep me company.

NATHANIEL. What do you read? Romance novels?

HANNAH. I like to read just about anything.

NATHANIEL. Do you read the Bible? My father said, "That true edification will come from reading the scriptures."

HANNAH. Your father sounds like he was a good man.

NATHANIEL. The best.

HANNAH. What do you read?

NATHANIEL. I read as if I'm in college. Imagine what the others are reading in classes and I read those books.

HANNAH. But reading, reading doesn't give you the same thing that being in college would give you.

NATHANIEL. I know.

HANNAH. Reading doesn't give you comradery, doesn't give you a gentle pat on your back.

PEARL. Don't your husband come and look on you?

HANNAH. I'm not married.

PEARL. What 'bout your people?

HANNAH. I tell them not to.

PEARL. I got to have 'em all 'round me all the time.

NATHANIEL. You're just a girl.

PEARL. I got a husband and a baby.

NATHANIEL. Those things don't make you a grown-up.

GIDEON. It looks clean, doesn't it? My mother taught that. Ingrained it at a young age.

HANNAH. Sure, sure it does.

GIDEON. Cleanliness is next to Godliness.

HANNAH. That's what they say.

GIDEON. The wind isn't picking up. I ought to have stayed in Boston.

HANNAH. They say the warm climate is good for you.

GIDEON. Doesn't seem right for a man to leave two families.

HANNAH. Traveling is not leaving.

NATHANIEL. Hard work. And horseback riding. That's what my doctor says. I should get better. I love riding.

PEARL. Bet you don't love hard work.

NATHANIEL. It's alright. I don't mind it.

PEARL. You not working right now.

NATHANIEL. I've got a garden.

PEARL. What you got? A posey garden?

NATHANIEL. Tomatoes, corn, and cabbage. When I'm well again, I'll go back to college. Finish and be a lawyer like my father.

PEARL. You gonna be a lawyer?

NATHANIEL. Yeah? What of it?

PEARL. He's gonna stand 'fore a judge and say, "Your Honor, that man's a liar, liar pants on fire."

NATHANIEL. What are you going to do? Make babies and biscuits?

PEARL. My momma says the devil is a lawyer. Being a mother is a gift from God, what He wants from me...

GIDEON. It's six in the morning we're standing outside and Reverend Jameson says:

NATHANIEL. *(As REVEREND JAMESON:)* If God is anywhere...

GIDEON. Dawn breaking like fine china over the Charles River. The Reverend says:

HANNAH. *(As REVEREND JAMESON:)* You're fine, Gideon, you're fine.

GIDEON. I am shivering. Not for faith, but because of the chill in the air. He says:

PEARL. *(As REVEREND JAMESON:)* I never knew a man like you, Gideon. Never knew a man to have so much of Jesus in him.

GIDEON. It's just the two of us alone by the banks of the river and I am barely 18, it's only a year since I left my mother and he says:

HANNAH. *(As REVEREND JAMESON:)* You're handsome. An image of something good getting better.

(HANNAH takes his hand.)

GIDEON. His hand is softer than I imagined, he leads me closer to the bank. He says:

(HANNAH passes him to PEARL, who leads him to the shore.)

PEARL. *(As REVEREND JAMESON:)* Your heart is tight as a fist.

Your face is a warning. You're more than me.

GIDEON. "You're more than me." I'm trying to breathe. I have a secret that I won't tell until he's taken me to the water, until he's married me to his niece. I won't tell anyone I'm sick, not until...No one will know how often I cough, that I can't breathe until I'm family. He says:

(PEARL passes him to NATHANIEL who embraces him.)

NATHANIEL. *(As REVEREND JAMESON:)* Blessed is the Lord, wash away the sin. Bring him into your arms—

GIDEON. He hugs me like I am a man.

(NATHANIEL passes him to PEARL, who puts him the posture of baptism.)

PEARL. *(As REVEREND JAMESON:)* Blessed Lord, wash away his sin. Bring him into your morning's light.

GIDEON. I can't breathe.

(PEARL dunks him in the water.)

GIDEON. I can't swim.

HANNAH. *(As REVEREND JAMESON:)* Merciful God.

(PEARL brings him up from the water, she puts her hand on his brow, HANNAH and NATHANIEL kneel beside her. The three are now REVEREND JAMESON.)

ALL THREE. *(As REVEREND JAMESON:)* Merciful God.

GIDEON. I miss my mother and her vengeful God. This merciful God is too forgiving. I miss vengeance.

(Lights shift.)

Scene 4: MEDICINE IS GREAT.

(PEARL continues to cradle GIDEON. HANNAH makes the beds. NATHANIEL follows her, fluffing each pillow after she's done.)

NATHANIEL. I'm not having fun.

HANNAH. There wouldn't be any reason for you to have fun now.

NATHANIEL. But I don't like to be bored.

HANNAH. I don't think this is boring.

NATHANIEL. I think it's boring.

HANNAH. What do you want me to do about it?

NATHANIEL. Even when I'm lying in my bed, my sister'll come and tell me a story or something.

HANNAH. I'm not your sister.

NATHANIEL. Tell me something anyway.

HANNAH. What do you want to know?

NATHANIEL. Why don't you have a husband?

HANNAH. Why don't you have a wife?

NATHANIEL. I want one.

HANNAH. I know you do.

NATHANIEL. You do?

HANNAH. You have that look in your eye.

NATHANIEL. No I don't.

PEARL. You do too.

NATHANIEL. Be quiet!

HANNAH. Don't tease him.

NATHANIEL. Why'd you become a nurse?

HANNAH. I think because of my daddy.

PEARL. He wanted you to be a nurse?

HANNAH. No. But he said things. He's a great man.

PEARL. Yeah?

HANNAH. My daddy, he was big as a house.

NATHANIEL. You mean fat?

PEARL. Be nice.

HANNAH. Nathaniel, isn't there a gentler word? A college word?

NATHANIEL. (*Proudly:*) Corpulent.

HANNAH. My father was as corpulent as a house. Traded the goods in our store for bread, pies, turkeys, anything to eat. My mother'd say:

PEARL. (*As MOTHER:*) Man'd eat the President if he weren't in Washington.

HANNAH. He'd say:

GIDEON. (*As DADDY:*) Food is for eating.

HANNAH. He believed in bounty. That's about the only thing he believed in. He sat me down, when I was barely tall enough to stand.

GIDEON. (*As DADDY:*) Hannah-girl, there's no god, God is a mythology. The only thing to believe in is science.

PEARL. (*As MOTHER:*) Hannah, your daddy's going to force me to commit a sin big enough to join him in hell.

GIDEON. (*As DADDY:*) Don't you worry, I won't be lonely in hell. You're the one who's going to be sitting in heaven, looking 'round wondering where everyone's gone.

PEARL. (*As MOTHER:*) Don't you flatter yourself, you're going to be the only one who fits in hell if you eat that third piece of cake.

GIDEON. (*As DADDY:*) Science. You hear me Hannah-girl, don't worship something you can't prove.

PEARL. (*As MOTHER:*) God is a comfort.

GIDEON. (*As DADDY:*) A comfort? Roast beef is a comfort.

HANNAH. Comfort. I wish for comfort. Doctors are a comfort.

NATHANIEL. I've got the best doctor.

HANNAH. Doctors, my doctor is a comfort.

GIDEON. Doctor's are only a piece.

PEARL. Doctor's too expensive. Momma says, "Nothing a doctor can do but tell you what you know. Pearl, you sick."

NATHANIEL. My doctor knows what will heal me: hard work, riding. That's the best cure. My father tried the traveling cure, like you are, but it didn't save him.

PEARL. Don't say that!

HANNAH. Gideon's not your father.

GIDEON. The man on deck is a ghost. His wife comes up to bring him back to their cabin below. He's still leaning against the rope. She slips her hand behind the small of his back. He doesn't even start. Just stays as still as the water. They're going to Florida too, they have family in Jacksonville. An uncle. His doctor recommends the swamp air for restoration. She's hoping. I try not to think of my own wife, barely 18, left behind with my girls. I'll write to her soon. But I won't write:

PEARL. *(As the letter not written:)* I'm sailing with ghosts.

GIDEON. I won't write:

PEARL. *(As the letter not written:)* All this salt water. I'm covered in tears. I'm not sorry that I've left you behind.

GIDEON. I won't write:

PEARL. *(As the letter not written:)* You are beautiful. I love you. You will write:

GIDEON. The sea air does me good. I've seen whales. I think the girls should see them some day. The doctor was right, I think the heat is healing. Be strong.

HANNAH. You will write:

GIDEON. God is good.

HANNAH. And?

GIDEON. Medicine is great.

(Lights shift.)

Scene 5: FLOATING DOWN FEVER
DREAMS PART TWO
(THE DREAM OF WHAT WE WANTED IT TO BE)

(They all pile onto one bed, they're floating again.)

HANNAH. We share the same dream. Of floating. Of what we were going to be. Of who we ought to be.

GIDEON. We dream:

PEARL. I'm old. I'm old as Methuselah. My hair's snow white. I'm surrounded by my hundreds a children, some look almost as old as me. They stretch out for acres. They all named for pretty things: Lace, Daisy, Sunshine, Ribbons, Wheat, Ruby. My youngest, he's called Breath. Breath sits on my knee and I sing songs loud enough for 'em all to hear. I ain't got a husband. Just hundreds of children, so that where some of 'em are it's already winter, but where me and Breath sit it's still spring. Breath hops from my knee. He can run. Barely old 'nough to walk, but he's running. He makes it to where my winter children are and back 'fore I can blink. An' Breath jumps up in my arms and sleeps. Breath snores. We dream:

GIDEON. Jacksonville is nicer than I thought. I find a boarding house right off and get a nice room. I stay for a few months, I spread the Word. I do all the things I am supposed to do: I remember my mother. My sisters. I think about sending for them. I never left them behind. My mother says, "Gideon, you're honest as the day is long." I buy passage back to Boston, sailing's swift. I don't have a wife to come home to. Just Reverend Jameson and his house to keep. I don't have daughters. I have nothing. I learn to swim. We dream:

NATHANIEL. I got a pretty girl in my arms.

(Pause.)

(The others look at him.)

NATHANIEL. Really pretty. Really, really, really pretty.

(Pause.)

NATHANIEL. And the dogs are there.

PEARL. We dream:

HANNAH. I'm a nurse. Lying in a bed in St. Agnes's.

PEARL. We dream:

HANNAH. I'm a nurse. Lying in a bed in St. Agnes's.

PEARL. We dream!

HANNAH. I'm a nurse. Lying in a bed in St. Agnes's. And. And, I'm coughing.

(Lights shift.)

Scene 6: COLD FACTS

(They all climb into their beds. PEARL climbs into bed with HANNAH.)

PEARL. I think you ought to tell 'em what the coughing's like.

HANNAH. You can tell them.

PEARL. You're the nurse.

HANNAH. You cough as well as I do.

PEARL. Naw, you ought to tell 'em how it works. Like a nurse.

HANNAH. How does a nurse tell it?

NATHANIEL. Almost like a doctor.

(HANNAH puts on her nursing cap and rises.)

HANNAH. Almost like a doctor.

PEARL. Prettier than a doctor.

NATHANIEL. But not a doctor.

PEARL. She knows. Don't you?

NATHANIEL. These people don't want to know the gory details.

PEARL. People love gory details.

NATHANIEL. People like you.

PEARL. So?

GIDEON. Like us.

HANNAH. Three stages. Early diagnosis is difficult. A persistent cough. Maybe irritation in the throat, aches in the chest, a slightly sped up pulse. Easily the symptoms of any upper respiratory irritation. You think at first, maybe that you are simply “under the weather.”

(HANNAH tucks PEARL into her bed.)

PEARL. Out of sorts.

HANNAH. But a doctor wouldn't say, “You have consumption.”

NATHANIEL. Unless your father died of it.

HANNAH. Early symptoms alone. That's not enough. It may be a warning. But not grounds for a definitive diagnosis. The second stage: The cough... The cough intensifies. Producing mucous and pus. As time passes, it becomes thicker, less clear, green and yellow. There are fevers. Your heart speeds up.

(HANNAH tucks GIDEON into his bed.)

HANNAH. The fever rises fast. Cheeks begin to glow red. You look, well, healthier maybe. Pinkish. Like blush painted on. Then whiteness. Ulcers appear in the throat. But still, even then, it could be bronchitis and the pains, they could be rheumatism.

(HANNAH tucks NATHANIEL into his bed.)

PEARL. She's a doctor. In her talking, she's a doctor.

HANNAH. I'm a nurse Pearl, not a doctor.

PEARL. But you know all the things a doctor knows.

HANNAH. I know some. I don't know all of them.

NATHANIEL. You said “three stages.” You only described two.

HANNAH. You know the third.

PEARL. Like swallowing catfish bones.

HANNAH. Yes. Like that.

GIDEON. Like drinking the entire ocean and holding it in your chest.

HANNAH. Yes. Like that.

GIDEON. Like every bad deed you've ever done being shoved down into your lungs.

HANNAH. It's not punishment.

GIDEON. Isn't it?

HANNAH. No.

GIDEON. Then what is it?

HANNAH. Sickness.

NATHANIEL. I want you to sing Hannah.

GIDEON. Not yet.

NATHANIEL. She's like a bird singing.

GIDEON. Not yet.

PEARL. Maybe just a little humming?

NATHANIEL. Like a humming bird.

PEARL. I never had much of a voice.

HANNAH. It's hard to talk.

PEARL. I never had much problem talking—

NATHANIEL. Well, don't think we're happy about that fact.

GIDEON. It's hard to breathe.

Scene 7: LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

(PEARL throws off her blankets.)

HANNAH. You warm?

PEARL. No.

HANNAH. Then where're you going?

PEARL. I don't like this.

NATHANIEL. Neither do I.

GIDEON. None of us do.

PEARL. I want my baby.

HANNAH. Let me tuck you back in.

PEARL. No! I got a thousand things to tell my baby.

NATHANIEL. You're not old enough to have a thousand things.

PEARL. I am.

NATHANIEL. You gonna tell him what? That you know what?

PEARL. I can tell him how to get on in the world. I know so much, more than I can say, more than you.

NATHANIEL. Yeah? I've read more than you have—

PEARL. I know more than books.

NATHANIEL. Yeah? How much school have you had?

GIDEON. She's a mother.

PEARL. I'm a mother.

NATHANIEL. So?

GIDEON. Mothers know things.

NATHANIEL. She has a baby boy. Boys learn from their fathers. Fathers know more.

PEARL. (*Speaking too quickly:*) I say: Baby. Sweetest boy. Everything that smell good don't taste good. Watch me walk. Follow me. Do what I do. Love your papa. Watch me run. The whole wide world is the place where you live. I'm your Pearl. Come with me. Follow me. God loves you, specially if you're good. If there's thunder, bring in the wash. Watch me put food on the table. The warm eggs in the coop are the best. Always say "ma'am" and "sir" when you talking to someone taller, bigger. Sit up straight. Follow me. Love me. Be

me. I'm good. Be me. Home is the only place you ever need be. Leaving is wrong. Follow me. Stand tall, 'less you standing next to your papa. Then you be a little shorter. Come with me. Love more. Love me more than you love anyone. Love me most.

NATHANIEL. Fathers know more.

GIDEON. No. They don't.

NATHANIEL. I'm not leaving anything to anyone.

GIDEON. You always leave something.

NATHANIEL. What are you leaving?

GIDEON. A wife and two girls.

NATHANIEL. Those aren't things.

GIDEON. They're my things.

NATHANIEL. I don't leave anyone. Neither does Hannah.

GIDEON. Hannah leaves something.

NATHANIEL. What do you leave Hannah?

HANNAH. I leave my body.

NATHANIEL. Who wants that?

HANNAH. Nobody.

PEARL. Hannah's pretty.

GIDEON. You don't always leave what others want.

PEARL. Somebody wants Hannah.

GIDEON. That's not what I'm saying. When people die, there are things that get left behind, things that nobody has use for: our bodies, our problems, our debt. Those things.

PEARL. But there are good things to leave behind.

NATHANIEL. She's right. Maybe somebody will want to study a body, see what happened, learn from it.

PEARL. I meant love and good recipes.

HANNAH. Maybe Nathaniel's right.

NATHANIEL. See.

HANNAH. In so many years, a cure will be found.

NATHANIEL. A cure'll be found by someone who goes to college—

PEARL. By someone who goes to be a doctor, not a lawyer—

NATHANIEL. But who goes to college and has the world open up and who has the chance to be better—

PEARL. Better than who?

NATHANIEL. Better than me.

GIDEON. Going to college won't make you better.

NATHANIEL. Learning makes you better.

GIDEON. Nothing will make you better.

HANNAH. But in so many years, some others, they will be better.

NATHANIEL. You think?

HANNAH. I know it.

(Silence.)

NATHANIEL. This is what I'll leave.

(NATHANIEL holds out his hand.)

PEARL. What's that?

NATHANIEL. My hand.

PEARL. You gonna cut off your hand and leave it?

HANNAH. He means he's not getting married.

GIDEON. This is what I'll leave.

(GIDEON holds up a little house.)

PEARL. You leaving a house?

HANNAH. He's leaving home.

GIDEON. I've already left.

PEARL. Sure is small.

GIDEON. I've been carrying it a long way, it feels heavy.

(GIDEON puts the house in NATHANIEL's outstretched hand.)

HANNAH. This is what I'll leave.

(HANNAH holds up a small empty box.)

PEARL. A box?

HANNAH. All the things that could have filled it up.

PEARL. Don't look like it could hold much.

HANNAH. You're wrong.

(HANNAH puts the small house in the box and leaves it in NATHANIEL's hand.)

NATHANIEL. What do you leave Pearl?

PEARL. I don't leave nothing behind.

NATHANIEL. You leave your baby.

PEARL. I'm never leaving him.

GIDEON. It's God's will.

PEARL. Not mine. I don't will it.

NATHANIEL. You don't get to decide.

PEARL. I'll be saved.

GIDEON. We'll all be saved.

PEARL. I don't mean by God.

GIDEON. It's not yours to choose.

PEARL. My husband, he says:

NATHANIEL. *(As PEARL's HUSBAND:)* Be still.

PEARL. You're tickling me.

NATHANIEL. (*As PEARL's HUSBAND:*) Pearl, girl, be still!

PEARL. Aw, now, don't get mad. Why you always get so mad?

NATHANIEL. (*As PEARL's HUSBAND:*) Why you got to be such a child? Thought I married a woman.

PEARL. Alright, alright.

NATHANIEL. (*As PEARL's HUSBAND:*) Now. There. This gonna help you.

PEARL. I don't know what makes you think you dribbling water on my chest gonna help—

NATHANIEL. (*As PEARL's HUSBAND:*) Not just water Pearl. From the healer.

PEARL. You better not let nobody hear you say that.

NATHANIEL. (*As PEARL's HUSBAND:*) You put your faith in God, but who do you think made the Healer a healer?

PEARL. My momma'd tar you if she saw.

NATHANIEL. (*As PEARL's HUSBAND:*) Quit your squirming Pearl. You got to lie still, he said one drop for every year you been 'round.

PEARL. Looks like you already poured two lifetimes on me.

NATHANIEL. (*As PEARL's HUSBAND:*) You ain't gonna die Pearl. I ain't gonna let you.

PEARL. I ain't gonna die. I got a lot of years left. Don't worry.

NATHANIEL. (*As PEARL's HUSBAND:*) You got to believe in this healing Pearl.

PEARL. I know.

NATHANIEL. (*As PEARL's HUSBAND:*) I can't live without my heart.

PEARL. And I'm your heart?

NATHANIEL. (*As PEARL's HUSBAND:*) Shhhh. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen.

Fourteen. Fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen. Eighteen. *(Pause.)* Well?

PEARL. I feel better. I do.

NATHANIEL. *(As PEARL's HUSBAND:)* You got to believe Pearl.

PEARL. I will. I will.

(NATHANIEL, who earlier placed the box with the house to the side, gives the house back to GIDEON and the box back to HANNAH. NATHANIEL puts his hand in his pocket.)

(Lights shift.)

**Scene 8: FLOATING DOWN FEVER
DREAMS PART THREE (LIFE FLASHES BEFORE OUR EYES)**

(They all climb on to PEARL's bed.)

GIDEON. Still. It's so still. Hannah? Is this our dream again? Hannah?

HANNAH. Water's moving. I'm so strong. I say, "I'm so strong." But there ought to be a captain. There ought to be other boats. Way down below the surface, the water is rolling. I can feel the speed coming up. I can. I want to love you all. I can feel that I want to.

GIDEON. I don't feel anything. It's not moving. Nothing's moving.

PEARL. I feel the water moving Hannah, I feel it too.

NATHANIEL. Hold on.

(The following section should be overlapped, sometimes the actors should be speaking at the same time. These stories are their "lives flashing before their eyes." GIDEON is still and quiet, while the other three are seeing what they are describing. There should be a breathless speed to what they describe.)

HANNAH. I'm holding. This is fast. Fast. The water is picking up. I'm three and I'm small and fast. Like the water. I stop just at my mother's knee. I run into them and she falls over. I climb on top of her. We're laughing. I'm laughing. Everything is so good. I'm nine. I'm sitting in class. There is a problem. A mathematics problem on my paper. I solve it. I'm good at it. I'm smart. I think I'm the

smartest girl in my class, I'm the smartest girl in the world.

PEARL. The horse I love is taking crab apples from my hand. She eats them, I'm seven, I swear she's smiling.

NATHANIEL. My father is alive. He tells me things, I can hear him, but I don't make out the words. He's telling me everything I need to know. I should listen. But I can't. He's so pale. He keeps coughing. I think he's a ghost, I tell my mother. She slaps me. I try to listen harder. I know I should be taking it all in. I know I should.

PEARL. I'm wearing a long white dress. It was my momma's. It's gonna rain. Momma says it's a good omen. I don't want rain on my wedding. In the church yard I look up to heaven and say, "Don't God. Don't rain on my day."

HANNAH. I'm sitting in front of man smoking a pipe. He's old enough to be my father. He's asking me if I'm qualified to work in his hospital. "Yes!" He never smiles. I want to work for this man, he looks like I imagine all smart men look. He's a doctor. He's the head of a whole hospital and he's talking to me. He's asking me things, asking me if I can stand the sight of blood. That some women can't. I can stand the sight of blood. At first I think I'm nervous about getting the job. But when he leans forward to shake my hand, I realize I love this man. This doctor old enough to be my father. I love him. He's married. His wife is a nurse. She is not as good of a wife, she's not as good of a nurse as I would be. I love him. I work in his hospital and I love him.

NATHANIEL. My mother teaches me to dance. I'm twelve. She says I'm a better dancer than my father. I'm fifteen. I have my father's dogs at my side. I rename them. I pet them and tell them they're mine now. My mother is with my sister, I see them just inside the house. My sister places her hand on my mother's head. My mother collapses in my sister's arms. My sister looks up and catches my eyes. She smiles at me. My father is dead.

HANNAH. I'm standing by a patient. There is the sound of coughing. Loud and strong. I look to see if the patient is alright. She's older, her hair pulled back in a bun. She is looking back at me. The coughing is so loud. I don't know how she can be coughing and smiling all at once. I watch her. A hand is on my back and the

doctor is standing there, he's my doctor. His pipe in his shirt pocket. He rubs my back with his flat open hand and I look back at the patient. The coughing. I realize I'm the one. That I'm the one coughing.

PEARL. My baby is born. I'm almost seventeen. They take my boy and swaddle him. I'm coughing. I can't breathe. Everyone is worrying on me. I try to say, "Show me my boy." But only coughing comes out. Seven months pass. I'm still coughing.

NATHANIEL. My sister pushes my mother out of the room. My mother is crying. She's saying that she didn't want me to be so much like my father. That the coughing is killing me. It is. I think it is.

HANNAH. And I am alone. Surrounded by all of these beds full of people, no not people, patients. I am surrounded by patients. The word strikes me. The sound. Patients. Patience. I am not like anyone. That's what I've always thought. I am unique. I am special. My ash blonde hair. My perfect skin. My hands, so good at comforting. My mind, it works and works. It's different. I am different. Different enough to make my doctor love me. Different enough to make him see me. I am surrounded by all of these patients. I am alone. But I am not unique. I am not different. I am dying. We are. You are. All of you. It's just a matter of time, of patience, maybe, patience.

(GIDEON begins to cough. HANNAH, NATHANIEL, and PEARL freeze. GIDEON coughs quietly. He takes the "helm.")

GIDEON. I don't remember anything. I decide early on. The first sign of coughing, first I know that I'm going, the first my doctor says, "Travel Gideon, you should travel for your health." I decide not to remember anything. That I should look forward. But now I'm looking, I'm looking forward and there's nothing but still water. Nothing but stillness.

(Lights shift.)

Scene 9: THE RESISTANCE

(GIDEON climbs down from PEARL's bed. The other three follow him.)

GIDEON. There is no church on this ship stuck on the Atlantic wanting to make it's way to Jacksonville.

NATHANIEL. My mother calls in the pastor.

HANNAH. I call out for my doctor. It's past midnight. The ward is dark.

PEARL. My boy sleeping next to me. My husband gone with my papa to town for things. I touch my baby's back.

NATHANIEL. Why don't they call the doctor? I can't hear what the pastor is saying. What's he saying?

PEARL. He sayin' you don't need no doctor.

NATHANIEL. No.

PEARL. You can hear my baby's breathing. Gonna snore like his papa.

HANNAH. My doctor won't come. I know it.

NATHANIEL. What's the pastor saying? I can't hear him. He's sitting close, but I can't hear him.

GIDEON. He's saying, "Go with God now."

NATHANIEL. No. I can't hear. I don't think that's it. I think he's telling me how I'm going to be okay.

GIDEON. He says: Pray.

NATHANIEL. Pray for what?

GIDEON. Salvation. He says: Pray for your soul. Repent. Give yourself up to God.

NATHANIEL. God doesn't want me. I'll go to college. Do some good. Be as good as I can be.

PEARL. My baby is an angel.

HANNAH. I need my doctor. I call, “Doctor! Doctor!” I’m sure I’m screaming, but there is only a little whisper. The nurse, my nurse comes over. She is the wife of my doctor. She takes care of me, but like I’ve known all along, she is not a better nurse than I am. She will not help me get better. Doctor!

NATHANIEL. What does the pastor say?

GIDEON. He says: The Kingdom of Heaven will keep you. That glory awaits you. He opens the bible. He looks for the right psalm. He looks for it.

HANNAH. I have been a good nurse.

GIDEON. He reads: “In thee, O Lord, do I put my trust: let me never be put to confusion. Deliver me in thy righteousness, and cause me to escape: incline thine ear unto me and save me.” He closes his bible.

NATHANIEL. No. That isn’t what he says. He looks at me. Everyone looks at me.

HANNAH. Because you’re handsome.

PEARL. My momma takes my baby. It’s morning I guess.

HANNAH. I think, “refuse to go.”

PEARL. Refuse to go.

GIDEON. On a ship alone. On the still waters on my way to Jacksonville. It’s hot. This boat refuses to go. There’s no church here. I minister to myself. I say: Pray.

NATHANIEL. My mother, my sister, the pastor. Everybody is looking at me.

HANNAH. I know what dying people look like.

NATHANIEL. How do they look?

HANNAH. Beautiful.

(Lights shift.)

Scene 10: THE GRAVEYARD COUGH OR HOW WE LOOK

(HANNAH puts on her nurses cap.)

PEARL. Well, then he ain't dying. He don't look beautiful.

NATHANIEL. You must be fit as a fiddle.

PEARL. Shut up.

NATHANIEL. You shut up.

GIDEON. Hannah, how do we look?

HANNAH. Beautiful.

GIDEON. I thought so.

HANNAH. Young.

GIDEON. I don't feel it.

HANNAH. You look young.

GIDEON. I believe you.

HANNAH. The third stage. Emaciation. The cheeks are hollow. The eyes dropped in sockets like rocks in water. Lungs sound empty. Pain in joints. Accelerated pulse that then weakens. Excessive sweating. And a cough. Like someone is reaching down your throat, strangling and shaking at the same time. Tight and rattling. Like a thousand pennies in a can. When you walk down the ward, you can always tell the ones. We call it the "graveyard cough."

PEARL. Well, I'm glad you ain't my nurse. What you say? There goes another graveyard cougher. That ain't much comfort.

HANNAH. There isn't much comfort.

NATHANIEL. Then what happens?

HANNAH. Hemorrhaging.

PEARL. What's that?

NATHANIEL. Bleeding.

(GIDEON pulls his red handkerchief from his pocket, while the others are talking.)

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!

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