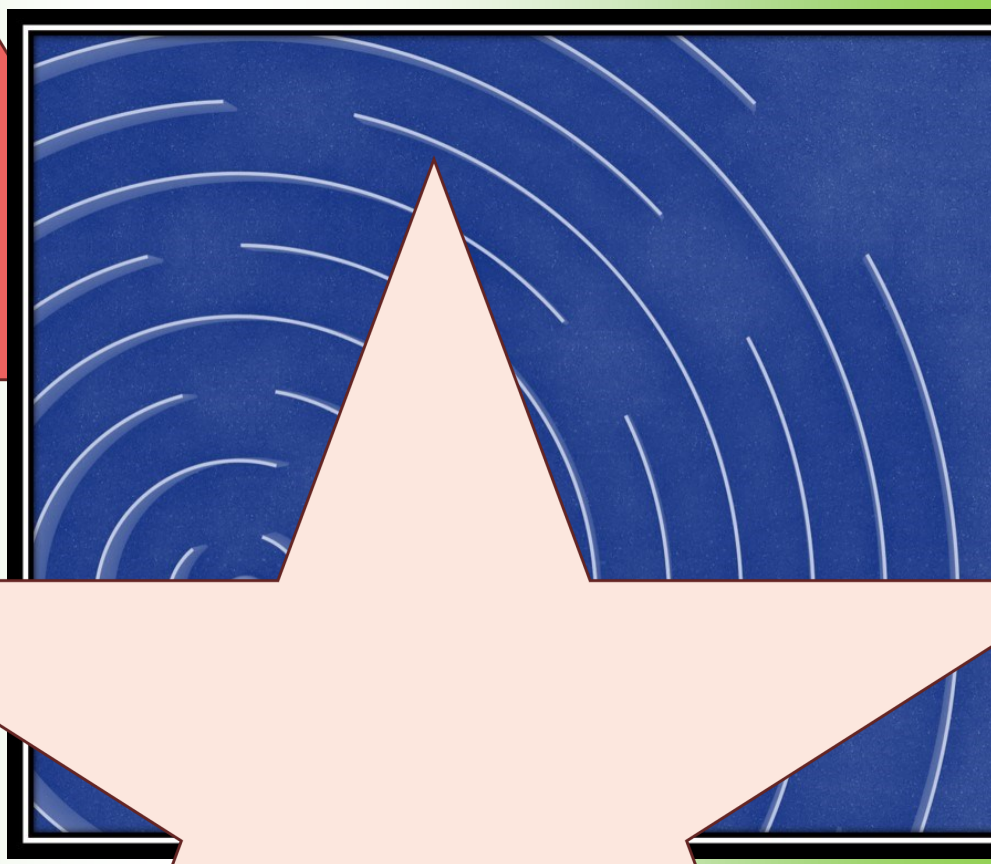
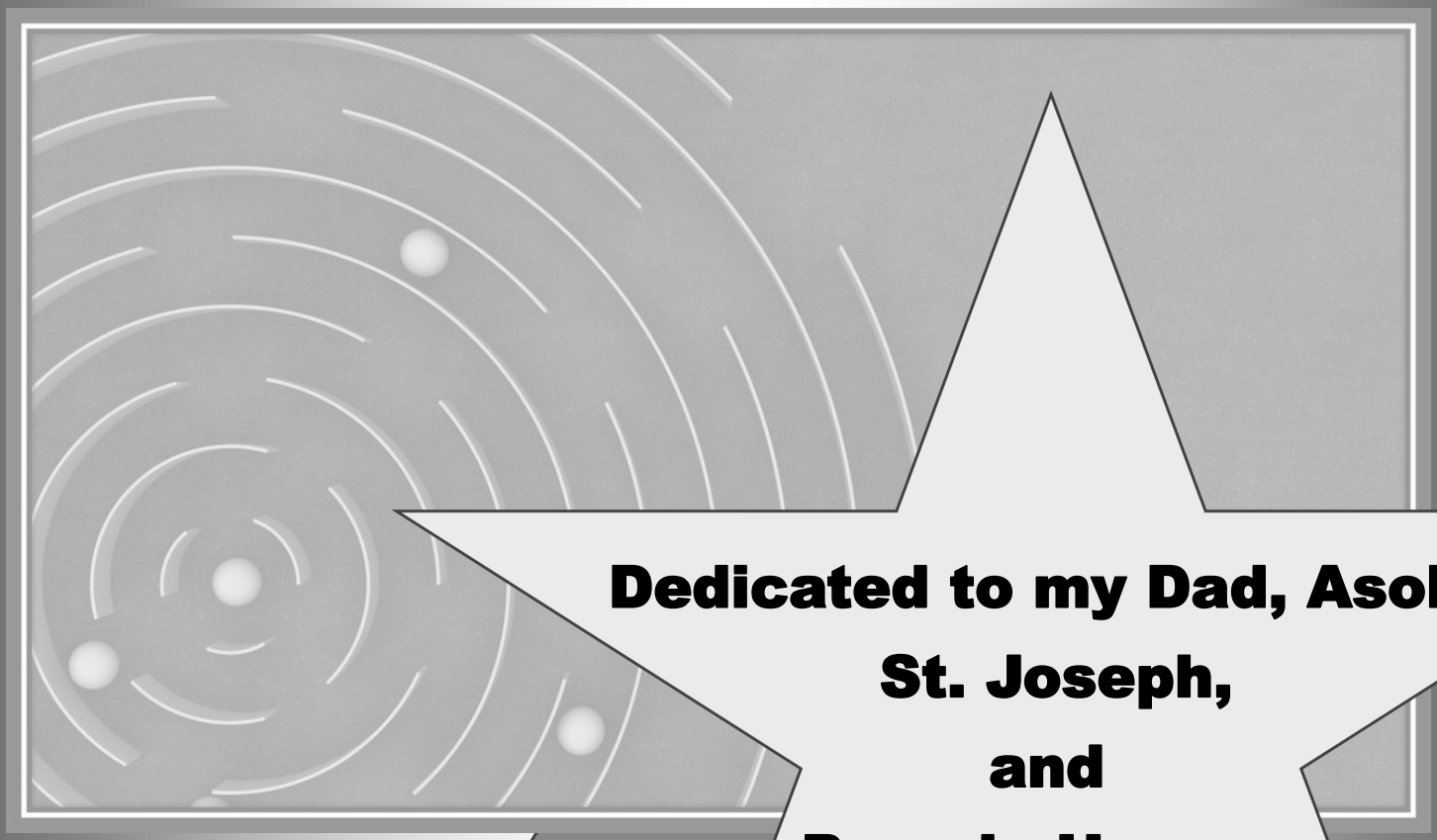
The True Obstruction on the Road to Freedom

A Play with History and Pictures

By Sara Kumar



The way to get started is to start pushing and to keep pushing



Dedicated to my Dad, Asok,
St. Joseph,
and
Papa in Heaven

The way to get started is to start pushing and to keep pushing

Dear Friends and Supporters,

It is my pleasure to submit for your consideration a play that begins on August 8th, 1863 in the city of Nashville, Tennessee.

On this day, then Military Governor of Tennessee, Andrew Johnson, made the decision to free his personal slaves. There is some debate as to the number of slaves he had. From notes supplied by the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, it can be said that he had at least 9 slaves in total. I will say more about two of these individuals in some moments after I talk to you about why I am writing this play with my collaborators.

Drama is an artform that depends on the input of so many players, you see. And when the play is performed, new epiphanies are discovered because of people present and people who have been present. When you bring something forward into the arena, you develop a liminal space, which is to say a developmental and hospitable physical space in which to discover something true. And so, the script is not a starting point but a point from which to start a public conversation.

I base my history plays on real evidence about what has happened, and I document my sources with care and love. The play began with a talk by Jared Cohen presented on NPR Radio about his book entitled, "The Accidental Presidents."

Former President Andrew Johnson was a President, who did not come into power by a democratic vote. However, history calls us to ask, what is by accident?
I want my participants to ask this question also about his rise to power. It is important, and this is why I thought people would care about this historical project. How would things have been if he had not become the 17th President of the United States of America, and now I can ask, which specific pieces of legislation were needed at the time for progress in the area of Civil Rights after the Civil War? Keep these two questions in mind as you begin to collaborate on this project with me.

Please listen to this excerpt from a letter that is written in Nashville from Military-Governor Andrew Johnson to President Abraham Lincoln on September 1st, 1862.

Note that Johnson addressed the letter to
"His Excellency Abraham Lincoln, Washington City."

"I am now compelled to state, though with deep regret, what I know and believe General Buell's policy to be. Instead of meeting and whipping Bragg where he is, it is his intention to occupy a defensive position & is now, according to best evidence I can obtain, concentrating all his forces upon Nashville, giving up all the country which we have possessed South & East of this place, leaving the Union sentiment & Union men, who took a stand for the Gov., to be crushed out & utterly ruined by the Rebels, who will all be in arms upon the retreat, of our Army."

Johnson believed the Union General Buell was very popular with the Rebels, most likely because of Buell's failure to secure Nashville from the South and East. Johnson, you see, was a pro-Union Democrat, and the only Southern Senator who stayed true to the Union cause and stood at his post. He believed he had pulled himself up by the bootstraps as a tailor and had worked his way away from an impoverished life, and he secured slaves in order to show his elevated financial status. Johnson boasted that he only had several slaves in comparison to Jefferson Davis, who owned some one hundred. Johnson believed the Southern moneyed plantation owners were prejudiced against working class white mechanics and worksmen, like himself.

The dealings of Andrew Johnson and the Southern applicants for pardon will be discussed after the play. This was a cause of great concern for the Republican-held Congress in 1865.

There are other transcripts of letters to Abraham Lincoln during the Fall of 1862, asking for Union reinforcements in Tennessee. No reply is given in the Papers of Andrew Johnson until March 26th, 1863, though there was some communication between the two men, as Johnson began a speaking tour in Indianapolis, Cincinnati, and Baltimore beginning in February, 1863. There is evidence in the transcripts that Lincoln and Johnson were providing a rationale for Northerners with a racially prejudiced worldview to support the Emancipation Proclamation.

In March of 1863, President Abraham Lincoln wrote to Military Governor Andrew Johnson the following, and this is the total private note:

"Hon. Andrew Johnson, My dear Sir: I am told you have at least thought of raising a negro military force. In my opinion the country now needs no specific thing so much as some man of your ability, and position, to go to this work. When I speak of your position, I mean that of an eminent citizen of a slave-state, and himself a slave-holder. The colored population is the great available, and yet unavailed of, force, for restoring the Union. The bare sight of fifty-thousand armed, and drilled black soldiers upon the banks of the Mississippi, would end the rebellion at once. And who doubts that we can present that sight, if we but take hold in earnest? If you have been thinking of it please do not dismiss the thought. Yours truly, A. Lincoln."

The Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to a military state like Tennessee that was occupied by both Union and Confederate soldiers, so that meant Johnson as Military Governor needed to free slaves in the State of Tennessee to allow them to take arms. The decision of Johnson to take action on Lincoln's request is where we start the play.

The Great Obstruction

A Play with History and Pictures

by Sara Kumar

~Notes to the Readers and Directors of Mysterious Love~

Treat the lighting design like a ballet,

without the stage going totally dark.

Let the action onstage unfold continuously in time,

if you can.

Let water be heard by the sound of bells.

~Notes to the Readers and Players of Mysterious Joy~

The plan will be something that comes from
study and contemplation.

I want to speak to you about dialect, and let it come as your reading mind works,
and if you have a question,

I answer emails as I can: therhapsodytheatre@gmail.com

You are such a blessing to me, and I wish you every success.

~Characters, In Order of Appearance~

Dolly, a woman in her forties who doesn't want to lose her freedom if she can bear it
Andy, a man in his fifties who loves to think about his days at Tusculum College
Stagehand-Henry, a man in his twenties who works so hard
Stagehand-Hamlin, a man in his fifties who loves his life
and keeps his eye on politics
Eliza, a woman in her fifties who keeps so much hurt hidden from others
Sam, a man in his thirties who waits for his sister to help him move in life
Frederick, a man in his forties who waits for his sons to move in life
Thaddeus, a man in his seventies who loves to think about children in his life
Charles, a man in his fifties who wants to be thinking
about women's clothing and votes
Mary, a woman in her thirties who wishes people could change
for themselves and more
Elijah, a man in his twenties who wants to care for children eventually,
even at the start
Ketch, a man who isn't afraid to listen to his heart that speaks
Angel of Greeneville, the Angel who loves a town and her people
Thomas, the voice of a former president named Jefferson, who needs to amend
Martha, a woman in her thirties who wants things to be done,
at a local level only, at the
start

Sara, the woman who needs a friend and who writes a script

Dolly Johnson was born in the year 1824. She was purchased by Andrew Johnson on January 2, 1843 when Andrew Johnson was a member of the Tennessee Senate. Dolly's grandson, Andrew Smith, became a bell boy at the Knoxville Hotel at age 21 in the year 1900. Her granddaughter, Mabel Smith, attended school at the age of 19 in Knoxville also.

This is a play about freedom.

What do you think is the obstruction?

This is a play about love also.

Civil War Envelope, Courtesy of Library of Congress

Addressed to Miss Mary A. Davis, Hawleyville, Conn.; bears 3 cent stamp; postmarked in New Orleans, Louisiana, May 1862.

DOLLY

I think I'm not a slave, Mr. Johnson.
I know I'm not a slave, Mr. Johnson.
And I just can't call ya Master know more cause I know it.
I'm Dolly but I ain't a Johnson.
I don't wants to be a Johnson.
I needs to tell ya it ain't guud wid it no more.
It ain't guud wid me.
I'll say it but I don't mean it.

ANDY

You say it, er I ain't gonna feed ya!

DOLLY

I ain't da kind ta die and die.
I ain't dat kind.
We needs to talk some more den.
We needs to talk and talk some more.

(And dey walk to center and sit down for awhile
before dey go in to da house in Nashville.

Stagehand-Henry arrives in Greeneville pullin a cart from Nashville,
and Stagehand-Hamlin departs the cart
at the Railroad Tracks in Greeneville, near Eliza's home.

Eliza stands by her window waiting on Mary to come in but she doesn't,
so she slowly walks over to her arm chair that is her bed.

She sits down in a normal way and covers herself with a gray blanket
that is not heavy.

Sam Johnson was born in 1830. He was purchased by Andrew Johnson on November 29, 1842. Sam married Margaret in the year 1858. Their daughter Dora was born in 1859, their son Robert in 1860, and their daughter Hattie in 1862.

Sam was given land for a church and a school in Greeneville, Tennessee after the Civil War in the year 1867. In the federal census for Greene County, in 1870, Sam is listed as a carpenter. Sam purchased real estate in Greeneville in the 1870s.

Margaret and Sam had another daughter who died in infancy in 1883. Sam became a widower in the year 1900. He enjoyed playing the violin.

The Emancipation Proclamation was signed by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863.

NOT EVERY STATE IN THE SOUTH WAS INCLUDED.

Emancipation Proclamation Picture, 1864
Courtesy of Library of Congress

Stagehand Hamlin begins a walk toward the Local Inn in town and sits at the bench.

It is August, and the year is 1863.)

DOLLY

Massa Johnson got me, was nineteen year old. Brother Sam jus thirteen years.
Remember da day?

ANDY

I'm rememberin, Dolly. You's said come and buy me. I ain't gonna die here.
Vicksburg's the nail that holds the South together. It'll break in two now,
just wait and see. You got it, Sam?

SAM

I'm a gettin it.

ANDY

You know I never went to school a day in my life.
Learned to read from the town physician while I was plying the needle
and shoving the hot goose.
Broke the chains and ran away to Tennessee like you did.

DOLLY

Oh I wish I was like you, Massa Johnson! My chains been broke already.

ANDY

Proud noble Southern fathers diggin the graves of their own flesh and blood
just so they can cling to their slaves at home.
Justice divine to punish sin moves slow.
The slower is her step, the surer is her blow!

THE BLACK POPULATION IN TENNESSEE WAS NOT YET FREE IN AUGUST 1863.

This is William Johnson, the son of Dolly Johnson, who was presented with a silver-handled cane when he visited then President Franklin D. Roosevelt in Washington, D.C. in the year 1937.

Courtesy of Library of Congress

DOLLY

You sure do got da words, Massa Johnson.

ANDY

What's today, Sam?

(Sam had been fixing Andy's Podium-Home so it stand steady on da floor.
One 'o da wheels been broke.)

SAM

I think your table is fixed, Massa Johnson. I done good like I do here for ya. I don't know da day, but it's Saturday alright. I need a good break, Massa Johnson.
Tame work for a Saturday. I need a good break.
I need to play awhile. Don't mind it do ya?

ANDY

I need the date.

(An Andy checks da podium
and sees it werks betta on da ground naw.)

DOLLY

It's August. Something August.

ANDY

I know the date. It's August eight, 1863.
Mark it, Sam. I'm granting you your freedom this day.

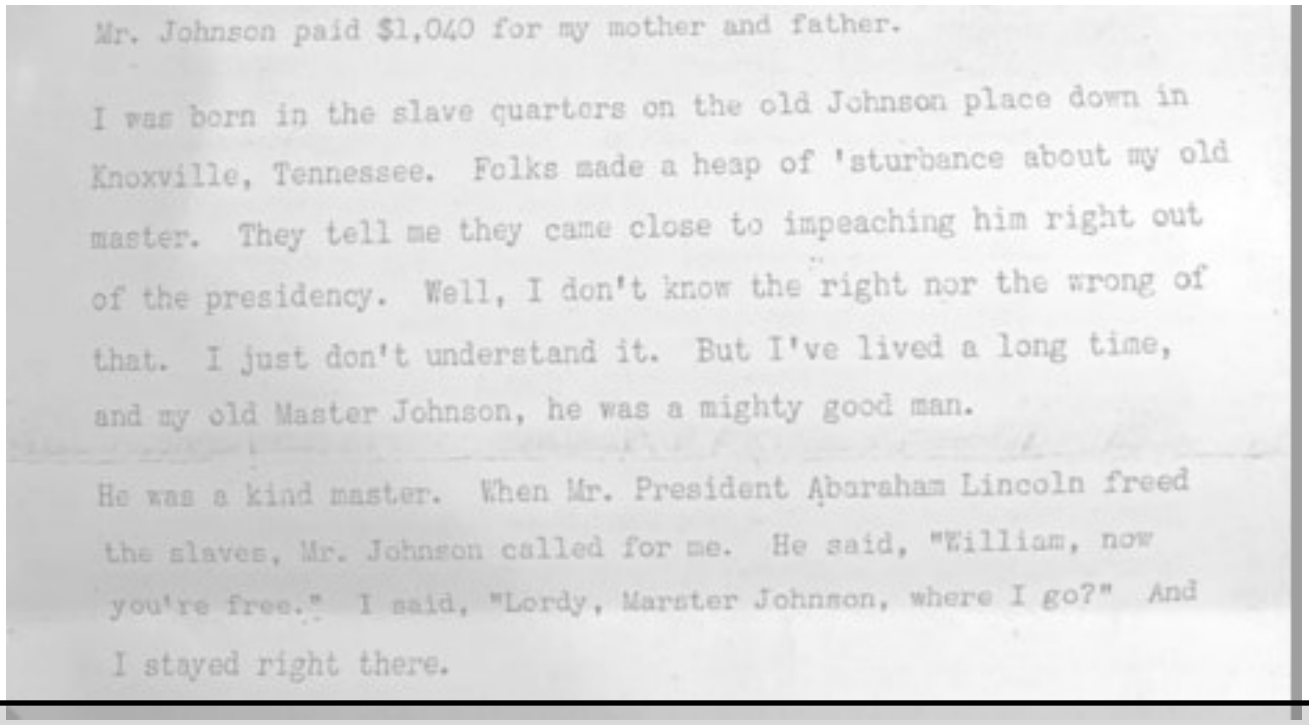
(And Andy writes on a papa he pull out from under da podium in a drawer.)

DOLLY

Oh now, what about me?!

William Johnson was the youngest of Dolly's three children, and he was born in February of 1858. Dolly also had two girls, Liz and Florence. According to William Johnson, Dolly had another son who passed away between 1850 to 1857, whose name could have been Harry.

There was a man named Henry Johnson who was bought by Andrew Johnson in the year 1857 when Henry was about 13 years old. He went to work with Florence in the White House in 1865.



Mr. Johnson paid $1,040 for my mother and father.

I was born in the slave quarters on the old Johnson place down in Knoxville, Tennessee. Folks made a heap of 'sturbance about my old master. They tell me they came close to impeaching him right out of the presidency. Well, I don't know the right nor the wrong of that. I just don't understand it. But I've lived a long time, and my old Master Johnson, he was a mighty good man.

He was a kind master. When Mr. President Abaraham Lincoln freed the slaves, Mr. Johnson called for me. He said, "William, now you're free." I said, "Lordy, Marster Johnson, where I go?" And I stayed right there.

THE WORDS OF MR. WILLIAM JOHNSON:

son of Dolly Johnson, during an interview
after his trip to Washington, D.C. that occurred in 1937.

Courtesy President Andrew Johnson Library and Archive,

Tusculum University

Lord, save us from the sin of slavery.

ANDY

I ain't forgettin bout ya.

DOLLY

And my Liz, Florence, and Will? You don't forget dem, Massa Johnson.
Not yet. Dey need freedom, like my brotha an I do.

ANDY

I'll make it dat way, Dorry. Cause ya worry all da time.

DOLLY *(earnestly)*

Oh sweet Jesus, thank you, I never dreamed I'd live to see da day.

ANDY

Go tell it on the mountain top that Andy Johnson freed his slaves today.
Abe Lincoln can't hold that over me now.

SAM

How about da whole 'o Tennessee?

ANDY

What you mean Sam?

SAM

Jus us or all us here in da state of Tennessee?
I gots to know,
cause our cousin Elijah need freein too.

ANDY

The slower the step, the surer the blow.

We'll come back to our history after

we get furtha into da play!

Lord, save us from the sin of slavery.

Civil War Envelope, Courtesy of Library of Congress

Addressed to Miss Marslin Blanchard, Keeseville, Essex County, N.Y.; bears 3 cent stamp, 1861-1865.

SAM

Massa Johnson, what we gonna do now we free?

ANDY

What do you mean, Sam?

DOLLY

Don't go bite yo tongue now, Sam.

SAM

Sister, I mean we don't have no place to go.

ANDY

I'm freein ya. And I can do that.
That's my prerogative as your owner.
Abe freed the slaves in the South, and I can free you.
Leave Tennessee to me. That's my prerogative too as da g'vnor.

DOLLY

We mighty grateful.

SAM

So you keep us on den?

ANDY

Now there's a question for you,
can the negro work on his own account?

SAM

Oh I can work, Massa Johnson, I can work.

ANDY

G'on now. I need ya to get on.
I need to write a speech.

(Andy sets a pen to the air, and the candle on his podium is low.
He was holdin it while Sam was fixin da podium.)

ANDY

Dolly, wait come in here. Dis candle low.
Can't ya hep?

DOLLY

We ain't got no mo candles.
Shipment ain't arrived from up north here to Nashville.
Ain't no hep here.

ANDY

Den I hep myself.
I got a way wid words. I can write it in ma sleep. G'on now.

(And Dolly open da door fer some sunlight to come awn through.)

SAM

That'd hep ya. Massa Johnson, that'd hep ya.

(Sam and Dolly leave da home in Nashville
and move Stage Left wid a movement dat dance
wid da wind awl da way to da downstairs kitchen.)

(And Stagehand-Hamlin waits, while Stagehand-Henry exits.)

ANDY

This whole wide world will be werkin something turrible,
somethin turrible around ma neck,
and there upon the stage, they'll push out ole Andy Johnson
with bells on his feet and the Constitution in his arms
if nothing else just to see me dodge the bullets.

(And he doesn't write on a papa standin upright and movin some.
He write in the air to get his mem'ry to work about the subject.)

People of Franklin, delay, delay, delay, and that's the way.
The work of slavery is a lost cause now.
We delayed the subject in the House and in the Senate, and now
it's come to the point where we delayed and now's time.
It's an itinerant institution and uses its legs to walk off.
I'm for a white man's government. I'm not for negro aristocracy!
I'm for a white man's FREE government, where you build up
from the ground like I did for Heaven's sake!
I need to know, no that's no it. I need to know. No.
They'll work better when they're free, won't they?
Don't you think so? That's the what we had to figure out.
They'd work better if they's free.
I think a Jeffersonian approach would be to say it like it is.
I'm for the government of the people, a small non-invasive government,

ANDY

that doesn't infringe upon the rights of the people.

And let me say I'm for the government with or without slavery!

And a government without slavery is what we gonna have,

cause that's what we came to.

I say give me the government, and the negroes go!

I say I'd send them back to Africa before I let them in the government.

And delay and delay and delay.

I'll eventually have to free them. I'll wait another year.

(And Dolly come in and say somethin to see if he finished.)

DOLLY

I hep ya, Massa Johnson. I close dis door for ya.

(And she looks outside, and the candle burns down.

Andy remains at his desk podium.

Eliza sits on her chair bed. She reads a letter that she has written slowly.)

[Andy monologue is inspired with prayer from:

Johnson, Andrew. "Speech at Franklin, August 22, 1863." The Papers of Andrew Johnson, edited by Leroy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins, vol. 6, The University of Tennessee Press, 1983, p. 334 & 377.]

ELIZA

Dear Andrew, it is I, your loving wife
I don't trust the news I hear
The Confederate women whisper gossip
And the Church I can't go to has no more light
I put a cross in the tombstone
I know you wanted a Union flag

O tender, loving, husband end the war
Declare Tennessee its own and end it
Robert will not live to see you crowned
Pardon my simpleness; you have a way with words
I am hurting

I need to tell you about Charles
I named him after the son of John Adams
So he wouldn't need to live up to your
I'll say demands

I need to tell you I've read about presidents
And he wasn't a tall man, and neither are you
But he stopped war

And I'll write him a letter now, and I'll say Dear John Adams,
My son Charles is dead.
My grief runs up and down.

And my ache is tired, because it isn't mine.
Men die for their country, and I can't.

I'm saying you worked, because it was easy then,
but I would be lying.

And I think my husband works, because he wants to climb Jacob's Ladder.
There are no angels in Greeneville.

Please know that I can't live long with consumption.
And you know I can't imagine much either now, because I'm just so tired of war.

Pray for us, President Adams. France was far away.
There's no ocean to bury the dead here in this place that doesn't know what it is.
North or South, so they rip it apart.

Tell my husband, we need grace, because I named Andrew,
but I changed his name to Frankie, because I'm so afraid.
He's so small. And his brother couldn't see his face, but I could.
Because he told me the news.

And I sit here, and I bleed.
And I can't die and fight like my son.
I'm slow to talk

(Eliza moves to the desk and sits down with her head down.
She puts the letter in the desk drawer.
Lights down on the home in Greeneville.

Mr. Frederick Douglass walks out of the Oval Office door
and sees Charles and Thaddeus waiting outside da door.
He looks down again but den waits for a moment.
He presses his bow tie around his neck a little looser
and walks back to Mr. Thaddeus Stevens,
who he recognizes from da papa.)

FREDERICK

I have seen so much suffering, Mr. Stevens.
I have seen so much pain, Mr. Stevens.
And you laid down your words. And I appreciate that. I really do.
I have to go to Greeneville to visit my son.
He's working to defend da town centa ova there.
I hope Tennessee doesn't fall.

THADDEUS

I've got a meeting with the President
to discuss the Amendment on Slavery. I want to know what you need.

(Mr. Charles Sumner speaks with assuredness
of the need to end slavery.)

CHARLES

I don't want to seek peace, Frederick. It's on his mind.
We need to wrap this up, and move on the Amendment on Slavery.

THADDEUS

I didn't say that. Now, I think peace is worth a look at.

FREDERICK

My two sons, Lewis and Clark,
are fighting with the Massachusetts regiments,
and Frederick is recruiting in Mississippi.

I need Lewis off the line,
so I came to ask Mr. President
if he can move to Tennessee. And he did it.
He'll listen to what you say on what you bring to 'em.

THADDEUS

I hope Lewis is doin fine.

FREDERICK

I don't wanna say, but he'll be fine. Jus can't fight now.

CHARLES

We'll need your support, Frederick.
The convention will be coming up, and I'm worried.