

**THE ANIMAL IN THE TREES**

by

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draft 2/7/2019

*Time: 1963 to 1968*

*Place: Hartford, CT*

*Note: The play takes place in numerous locations. All scenery should be indicated only, and easily moveable for seamless transitions.*

ACT 1  
SCENE 1

LECTURN-BAR

Two stools, low lights, a small stage area where  
a young man stands reading from a sheaf of  
poems.

HENRY

“...The ancient scent of lilacs moves  
Modern men to weep  
The perfume of desire calls  
Cold earth from her sleep.”

Ah, that’s a new one. Always makes you feel a little vulnerable, reading a new one. So.  
Thanks.

HENRY moves to the stools where a woman sits  
drinking. She lifts her glass in an ironic toast.

HENRY

Was that you laughing?

JANE

“The perfume of desire?”

HENRY

What’s wrong with that line? It is a perfume!

JANE

I suppose you think I should wear it? Eau de desire?

HENRY

Yes.

JANE

You men are so unbelievably narcissistic.

HENRY

Who said I was talking about male scent?

JANE

Whoops! My turn.

JANE moves up to the microphone. She makes an antic sexual gesture with it: “will you look at this?”

JANE

My name is Jane. Not “plain”-- never plain-- Jane. Jane Thornton. I am a poet and this is a poetry reading, so if all of you would please--

HENRY

Shut up!

JANE

Thank you. “Shut the fuck up,” I would have said.

HENRY

And I’d have said, “No. A relationship is built on conversation.”

JANE

This is not a relationship. It’s a poem. I hope all of you will concentrate on the rhyme scheme. I’m not doing “True Confessions” up here.

HENRY

You’re doing “True Indictments.”

JANE

Only if you treat your women badly. Do you? Would all the women here who have fucked Henry--

HENRY

No!

JANE

Embarrassed? Taking the fifth?

HENRY

No. Not that many.

This exchange of public barbs has been an open flirtation. JANE abruptly drops it-- another form of flirtation.

JANE

This poem is titled “You Lie.”

I wonder sometimes as you lie  
 One leg lazing on my thigh  
 What you think about when we're apart  
 Or, for that, together.

I start to ask but never do  
 Not knowing what I want to know  
 Or, if I do, not wanting you to.  
 And so we lie, sleek and silent seals.  
 You above, I below.

And what lies between our skins  
 Is the gap of good intentions.

...Thank you.

JANE crosses back to the stools.

HENRY

“The gap of good intentions?”

JANE

What do you call it?

HENRY

You already know that. “The perfume of desire.” My turn.

HENRY steps to the microphone.

HENRY

This poem is called “Pear.”

It is like this.  
 There is a pear on the table.  
 Its flank is every woman  
 I have ever known.

There are flowers in a vase by the window.  
 Peonies, lilacs, anemones, tulips.  
 Their petals are every woman  
 I have ever known.

It's like this:  
 There is soup in a silver tureen  
 Waiting for me to eat it.  
 Its taste is the broth of every woman  
 I have ever known.

The flesh of the pear.  
 The scent of the flower.  
 The soup boiled down from parts.  
 Our hearts are like this.  
 The mixture as before  
 But one thing more--  
 You are my water.

HENRY goes back to his stool.

JANE

You're a romantic. I'm trying to forget.

JANE steps to the microphone.

JANE

This poem is called "Body English."

We speak in tongues.  
 My mouth to your ear.  
 Your ear to my mouth.  
 We speak in tongues.  
 Use body English.  
 Mouth to mouth  
 Heart to heart  
 Parts of speech  
 Each  
 Our every slip of the tongue is graceful.  
 Our best syllables are silent.  
 We speak in tongues.  
 Our skins make conversation.  
 Talk to me.

JANE retreats to her place beside HENRY.

HENRY

You're the romantic... All your poems about men?

Maybe. JANE

Ah. You write a lot of poems? HENRY

Yeah. I write a lot of poems. JANE

Only takes one-- HENRY

I always want more-- JANE

Good one. HENRY

But then you want to do it over and over. I do. JANE

It's nice to savor some things. HENRY

I always want more. JANE

So give us more. HENRY

Just always remember you asked for it. JANE

You're a belligerent romantic. HENRY

Want to make something of it? JANE

Yeah. Yeah, I think so. HENRY

He pulls her to him and kisses her thoroughly.

Jesus. JANE

Actually, Henry Mitchell. HENRY

Henry? Jesus. JANE

The perfume of desire? HENRY

Something like that. JANE

Lights down.

KITCHEN SCENE 2

HENRY and JANE come home to HENRY'S house from the poetry reading. They've been drinking.

So, you were brilliant. JANE

No, you were brilliant. HENRY

So we both were brilliant. They loved us. Pour me a drink. JANE

To celebrate? HENRY

To our mutual brilliance. Chin chin. JANE

I'll drink to that. HENRY

Me too. Bottoms up. Down the hatch. JANE

Bottoms up. HENRY



JANE  
Pour me another. Bigger.

HENRY  
Just one more.

JANE  
Who's counting?

HENRY  
I am. A half a dozen drinks and I'm smashed.

JANE  
Tsk-tsk. The more the merrier.

HENRY  
Easy for you to say-- through a glass darkly.

JANE  
I like you a little tipsy. A little out of control.

HENRY  
And I like you.

JANE  
We like each other. Pour me one more.

HENRY  
For the road?

JANE  
Who's going anywhere? I'm staying here with you. You're smashed and I'm smashing.  
We need a designated driver.

HENRY  
You are smashing. Even drunk I can see that.

JANE  
"Drunk" sounds so nasty. Say "tipsy." Say "smashed."

HENRY  
Smashed. Tipsy. Even in the state I'm in, you're smashing.

JANE

We aims to please.

HENRY

You do please.

JANE

No, no, you please. Please, Henry, take me to bed.

HENRY

Yo were brilliant-- and I was brilliant-- and that is a brilliant idea. Come here.

JANE

I thought you'd never ask.

HENRY

Bottoms up. And I don't mean a drink.

### SCENE 3

#### BEDROOM

Lights up on an old brass bed, stage left.  
HENRY and JANE are in bed: he's naked under the sheets; she is pulling on a pair of stockings, already in her same black dress.

HENRY

You always do this?

JANE

Do what? Go home with somebody from a bar? Sleep with somebody the first night? Sleep with a fellow poet?

HENRY

This.

He plucks at her sleeve.

JANE

As a matter of fact, I generally prefer visual artists. They talk less.

HENRY

I asked a question.

JANE  
You ask lots of questions.

HENRY  
So answer one.

JANE  
Which one? My middle name is Bernice. I thought you'd never ask.

HENRY  
Do you always make love with your clothes on?

JANE  
It's a little kinky. Do we really have to talk about it? Cigarette. Please.

HENRY hands her a cigarette.

HENRY  
You're shaking.

JANE  
I am a very shaky person.

HENRY  
Let me light that for you.

JANE  
Don't start.

HENRY  
Why not?

JANE  
Because I can't.

HENRY  
So finish the cigarette.

JANE  
Finish the cigarette. Answer this one question. Follow these simple directions.

HENRY  
Why not?

JANE  
You don't give up, do you?

No. I don't.

HENRY

Then I'll tell you why not.

JANE

With an abrupt motion, she yanks her long-sleeved dress over her head. We see that both wrists are bandaged.

HENRY

Come here.

JANE

No.

HENRY

Come here. Hey. I like you.

JANE

Aren't you going to ask one of your famous questions?

HENRY

No.

JANE

You think some guy. Someone of my heartbreak poems.

HENRY

Whatever.

JANE

I'm what happened. I am always what happened.

HENRY

You probably got some help.

JANE

I don't need any help. I am very good at this. You don't want to like me.

HENRY

That's my business.

JANE

No. Every so often, I just go off.

HENRY

Very clever. What will they think of next? For an explosive device, you are very attractive.

JANE

Oh, very. I am told I am particularly charismatic just before I go off the deep end.

HENRY

Can't say you didn't warn me.

He starts kissing her shoulders. He moves lower to kiss her breast but instead lays his ear against her chest.

JANE

Can't say you listened.

HENRY

Sure I did. I can hear your heart going "tick, tick, tick." You are a real bombshell.

Lights down.

#### SCENE 4

Henry and Jane are decorating a Christmas tree together.

HENRY

Save the star for the top.

JANE

I can't reach the top, Henry.

HENRY

Well, little lady, I can. Give it to me.

JANE

Good for you. The star at the top.

HENRY

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed...

JANE

Which reminds me-- we need a new mattress.

HENRY

I like our mattress.

JANE

We need a firm one. I sink into our mattress, you sink into me. I'm your mattress, Henry.

HENRY

Are you complaining?

JANE

Just registering the truth. I actually like missionary position. You on top, I below.

HENRY

And what lies between our skins is the gap of good intentions. We need to vacuum already.

JANE

I know, but metal trees are tacky.

HENRY

We deserve the real thing. Eight feet of scotch pine. Tinsel, tiny lights.

JANE

We deserve the star at the top and popcorn chains? Yummy.

HENRY

You don't eat them. One shouldn't.

JANE

Sure you do. I do.

HENRY

Just watch it with that needle.

JANE

I could prick myself? That's it. Prick. And if you aim to stick, don't forget your prick.

HENRY

Another sex poem?

JANE

A rhymed couplet, just like us. Eggnog?

HENRY

You've had three cups already.

JANE

Who's counting?

HENRY

I am. Save some for after. Let me settle the star. Let me settle you.

JANE

Merry Christmas, Henry. Happy Holidays.

HENRY

You're the star. On the top or on the bottom.

JANE

Careful-- you'll tip over the tree.

HENRY

I'd like to unwrap you.

JANE

Oh, Henry. Happy New Year.

HENRY

Come here and say that.

JANE

And if you want to stick, don't forget your prick.

HENRY

Are you a little tipsy?

JANE

A little tipsy, just like our tree.

HENRY

Oh, Tannenbaum.

JANE

Come here and say that.

HENRY

Oh, Christmas Tree.

JANE

Put on the goddam star.

SCENE 5

KITCHEN

Lights up. HENRY sits at the desk. JANE enters from out of doors with an opened letter.

JANE

Do you believe this?

HENRY

I'm sure I do.

JANE

“While there is a delicacy and intimacy to Miss Thornton’s work, we of the committee felt it lacked the necessary authority--”

HENRY

“The necessary authority”-- ah, never thought of calling my friend that.

HENRY pats his crotch.

JANE

So you do think it’s sexist!

HENRY

Of course I think it’s sexist. It is sexist. Now, Janie. If I have told you once, I have told you a thousand times, a lady writes about flowers and kitties and, oh yes, unrequited love and suicide, but mainly about flowers and kitties.

JANE

I do write about flowers. I certainly write about pussies.

HENRY

You write them the way O’Keefe painted them.

JANE

You mean... sex?



HENRY

You mean sex.

JANE

I deny it.

HENRY

That's why you're so mad. The committee acted like those poems really were about flowers.

JANE

I don't think they read them. "Delicacy and intimacy"-- sounds like lace-- or maybe vaginal tissues.

HENRY

Oh, they read them. They just couldn't believe them. So they decided they really were about flowers.

JANE

(breaking down)

Dance with me, Henry.

HENRY puts his arms around her-- they begin waltzing as to a Strauss waltz. Then they stop and hold each other tightly.

HENRY

They'll come around.

JANE

Maybe I should write some poems about earth movers and machine guns.

HENRY

Maybe so.

JANE

Maybe I should machine gun the committee and use the earth mover to obliterate the scene of the crime.

HENRY

Maybe I should tell you what my letter said.

JANE

My God. That's right. We both applied.

HENRY

I left yours in the box thinking it might be good news, too.

JANE

Chicken. Wait a minute... “too”?

HENRY

I won. Not the big grant but one of the small ones.

JANE

Did they talk about the “delicacy and intimacy of your art”? You write about flowers.

HENRY

Yes. But I do it with my necessary authority. I balance every line on the tip...

JANE

Well, that’s great, Darling.

HENRY

I hate being the proof that mediocrity conquers.

JANE

Darling. You don’t need to say that.

HENRY

Yes, I do. I don’t lie to myself.

JANE

Those were very good poems.

HENRY

Exactly... very good poems.

JANE

I did not mean it like that.

HENRY

I’m not a bad poet.

JANE

You’re a very good poet.

HENRY

Exactly.

JANE

I did not mean--

HENRY

I did. Self-respect lies in self-knowledge and self-acceptance. You may quote me on that. When I write a great poem we'll both know it.

JANE

Oh, Henry-- darling--

HENRY

What are you comforting me for? I won. Sort of--

JANE

Yes. Good, darling.

HENRY

Come here. I'll fix you a drink.

He holds out his arms and embraces JANE.

HENRY (CONT.)

They'll come around.

Lights down.

SCENE 6

BEDROOM

Lights up. JANE sits on the bed; so does HENRY. Baskets filled with receipts surround them.

HENRY

Do you know how much you spent on writing supplies last year?

JANE

No.

HENRY

Almost as much as I did. According to your receipts, you spend fifty dollars a week on paper. No wonder people get audited. Everybody knows we write on paper.

JANE

Very expensive paper. It's the little books.

HENRY

What little books? Not the chapbooks? Somebody has to buy new poets-- old poets.

JANE

My little blank books. My current one is paisley.

HENRY

Those little books!

JANE

I always think they're going to inspire me. I think Emily Dickinson must have used little books.

HENRY

I use good, plain paper. Nothing wrong with that... I buy expensive pens.

JANE

I can't object to that. I respond very well to symbolism.

HENRY

Among other things. Let me do your feet.

JANE

Do my feet. Thank God you give the world's best-- Oh, Henry-- foot massage. Mmm. Feet are the Africa of the body, too little explored.

HENRY

A small domestic scene.

JANE

I'll give you a scene.

HENRY

Please don't. No scenes.

JANE

I meant, "Henry and Jane next got into 'scenes'-- kinky costumes, three way sex..."

HENRY

You, me and your foot?

JANE

Right there. That's it. Ah, Ethiopia!

HENRY

The tundras, tawny as lions' hides. The lions' hides, tawny as the tundra.

JANE

Exactly. Could we do this forever? "Visiting Ethiopia..."

HENRY

I could.

JANE

You're right. Sooner or later, I'd wreck it. I'd go off.

HENRY

That is not what I was saying.

JANE

But that's what happens, isn't it? Sometimes, Jane and Henry-- Henry and Jane-- Jane and Henry, Henry and Jane and Jane's foot-- get these lovely little vacations. We make it to a place that is peaceful and exotic--

HENRY

Peaceful and therefore exotic--

JANE

We begin to relax. We do relax and then, just when we feel safe and think that we could stay forever... we spot it.

HENRY

The tiger too near the village?

JANE

The animal in the trees. Out of the corner of my eye. Just when everything seems the most idyllic--

HENRY

Come here. Let me try doing your hands.

JANE

Hands aren't the same. They're Europe. We've grown up knowing everything about them.

HENRY

(tugging her thumb)

The thumb, Italy... What's this thing on your wrist? Is that a burn? I used to do that with my cigarettes on my writing tables--

JANE

It was the animal in the trees, Henry. It came for me.

HENRY kisses her wrist.

HENRY

The next time it comes for you, let me know.

JANE

You don't want to see it.

HENRY

I want to see it.

JANE

It's ugly. Claws and teeth--

HENRY

(kissing her wrist again)

Next time, you call me.

JANE

It might take you, too.

HENRY

Nah. Two against one.

JANE

It's so ugly.

HENRY

You call me.

SCENE 7

BEDROOM

Lights up.

JANE

Henry, wake up. I need to go to the Bahamas.

HENRY

I need a Rolls Royce. Come to bed.

JANE

Be that way. I need to go to the Bahamas, I need a Rolls Royce, I need a daily infusion of pate de foie gras distillate-- a sort of mulch. They dry it and put it in capsules. You crack them open like cyanide-- you die of self-satisfaction. I need to go to the Bahamas, Henry.

HENRY

Be that way. I need to go to sleep.

JANE

I've got an idea. Actually, a whole crowd of them, queued-up. Right behind my eyes.

HENRY

Like a headache? Kiss it and make it better?

JANE

Like a weather front. I'm going downstairs.

HENRY

Don't go. I've got an idea.

JANE

That is not an idea. That's a plan. You pretend interest in what I am saying. Then, very casually, your finger will trace my collar bone. You'll feel along my throat as though checking for a pulse. You'll trace my chin, my lip-- and then, if I seem the least bit interested, which I always do--

HENRY is doing just what JANE describes.

HENRY

Always.

JANE

You will reach lower--

HENRY

It's because you talk like that.

JANE  
It's because I've got great tits.

HENRY  
Miracle we get any writing done at all.

JANE  
I am going to go.

HENRY  
Now?

JANE  
To the Bahamas. I'm going.

HENRY  
Coming.

JANE  
Monday.

HENRY  
Monday's the reading.

JANE  
Now! Oh God! I'm not using anything!

The lights dim, the couple rocks back and forth.  
The lights brighten...

JANE  
You won't need me. You'll be the center of attention. You and your adoring fans.

HENRY  
I need you there.

JANE  
No. You don't need me. You want me... Henry?

HENRY  
What?

JANE  
Honey--



HENRY

Let me guess--

JANE

I want you to sign me--

HENRY

Wouldn't have guessed. All right, all right. It's just that you seem particularly-- you choose the damndest times to write poems.

JANE

I don't choose--

Lights down.

JANE

(in darkness)

I want you to sign me  
In your white ink.

Across my face,  
Across my breast and thighs,  
Write, "life."

Lights up.

SCENE 8

KITCHEN/BAHAMAS HOTEL ROOM

HENRY is talking on the phone, long distance to JANE who is stage left in the bed area which is now in a Bahamas hotel room. The hotel room is a wreck of bottles and papers.

JANE

Henry, I can't come home. I'm not finished.

HENRY

You sound finished. You sound exhausted.

JANE

I'm fine.

HENRY

Fine. Well, then, I'm fine, too. The reading was a big success. I am a big success. Despite my background of inherited wealth and my many advantages, social and educational, I seem to be making it as a starving artist. Sorry. The reading was a success. I was swamped.

JANE

I'm glad, Darling.

HENRY

Since you didn't ask.

JANE

I'm sorry.

HENRY

You don't sound very good.

JANE

I'm glad the reading went well. Really.

HENRY

Have you seen a doctor? Maybe you've got some tropical bug.

JANE

I don't like doctors. And I don't think one could do much... for this.

HENRY

What's "this"?

JANE

Too many questions, Henry.

HENRY

So volunteer some information. A few simple facts. The wallpaper. The weather.

JANE

Stormy.

HENRY

What are you doing right now?

JANE

Right now? Bagging the bodies.

She is methodically putting booze bottles into the trash.

HENRY

That's not funny. When you don't answer your phone--

JANE

I was working. Then I was getting over working. My stomach's upset.

HENRY

You make it sound like a hangover.

JANE

So? Sometimes it feels that way. I get drunk on the work. I go on binges.

HENRY

You're sure you're okay?

JANE

Well--

JANE has lit a cigarette as she talks. As we watch, she places it against her wrist.

JANE

-- I burn myself.

HENRY

Ah. Well, a sunburn's normal down there. That could make you a little sick.

JANE

Oh, good. I'd hate to have not done something normal.

She hangs up the phone.

HENRY

If you feel bad, go see a doctor. Better yet? Come home. Jane? Shit!

Lights down.

SCENE 9

## LECTERN

Lights up. We see HENRY dressed rather academically, standing at a lectern. He speaks to the audience as to an academic assembly.

## HENRY

They've asked me to talk to you about writing. I'm sure that all of you already know a lot about writing, so I thought I might talk to you about something else. That's fishing. If you want, you can pretend the talk is about writing.

The first thing about fishing-- the kind I do, which is fly fishing-- is that it takes attention. Attention costs you drama. You don't want a whole lot of hullabaloo. Loud noises scare the fish. So does tromping around too much.

So I like to fish quietly. I like to show up early, well-prepared, well-rested. That means I pass up a few... opportunities. So I get there early-- I look over the river, see its mood, look over my box of flies, see what matches. You might say I listen for the river's voice, not mine--

The lights slowly go down as does the volume of HENRY'S speech.

Lights up in the bedroom area as a phone rings. JANE, dressed in a sexy Chinese wrapper, answers. A bottle of wine stands open at the bedside table.

## JANE

Hello... Who? Well, hello... Joseph. Joseph who? Ah, you saw me give a reading... I was indelible? That's very nice. I wish I could say the same... Well, I'm sorry to say you were just a face in the crowd, Joseph. What? No, no, this is a fine time to talk. Henry is off giving some lecture-- Just let me get comfortable-- I'm glad you like my work...

Lights down as JANE settles onto the bed for a flirty conversation.

Lights and volume up on HENRY.

## HENRY

Now, not everybody feels this way, but I think fishing is about fishing, the process-- not necessarily about catching a lunker. I think, and this is just my opinion, you have to earn the lunkers. You have to show up, day after day, cast after cast...

Lights and volume down on HENRY...

Lights and volume up on JANE...

JANE

No, I don't mind explaining, Joseph. It's just that I'm not sure I can, I mean, poems, my poems anyway, are a lot like orgasms... they just sort of... happen! If you know what I mean..

Lights and volume down on JANE...

Lights and volume up on HENRY...

HENRY

Maybe I'm a little finicky. Maybe I only catch finicky fish. As a dry fly fisherman, I'm like a poet who insists on tricky rhyme schemes or complicated meters. My fish, the ones I catch, seem to require it...

JANE

(over HENRY)

What can I say, Joseph? I'm flattered but it's always just been easy for me... What? That's right. In another month. Just come up and introduce yourself. I've always got time to meet a real poetry fan.

Lights down on JANE.

Lights up on HENRY.

HENRY

...So I've learned to do some intricate things. Like tie a Size Eighteen Irresistible. That's a strict, elegant little thing. A bit like iambic tetrameter. And I know how to tie a Size Two Midge-- though I seldom use it. I tend to favor classics, but I've got quite a repertoire just in case: Peacock Nymphs, Gold Ribbed Hare's Ears, Spruce Matuka Streamers--don't you love the sound of those things? Maybe fish like the sound of them, too. Maybe they bite because they're in the mood for, say, a Simple Black Wooly Worm-- that's the trout equivalent of a burger, fries and malted. A worthy but pedestrian pentameter. Whoa, I'm going to stop here. Somebody just compared pentameter to a hamburger. Thank you.

Lights down on HENRY...

SCENE 10

## BEDROOM

Lights up on the bedroom. We hear clapping, slow and ironic. As HENRY enters the bedroom area, JANE is clapping, holding his speech in one hand.

JANE

Very good. Brilliant. You said a mouthful. All that crap about angling for a poem.

HENRY

Well, how do you do it?

JANE

Who knows? Dive in, catch them with my bare hands, club them to death? Speaking of which, did you slay the little bastards?

HENRY

Something like that.

JANE

They ate it up? ...They ate you up?

HENRY

I did whet their appetite.

JANE

I've got an appetite.

HENRY

What a surprise... but, five A.M. gets here in three hours.

JANE

You're not telling me "no"?

HENRY

I'm taking a rain check, darling.

JANE

Just once...

HENRY

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

JANE

Said the righteous prig.

HENRY

I am not a righteous prig. Are you drunk? You've been drinking.

JANE

Only a little. Fuck me, goddamn it.

HENRY

No.

JANE

No what? No nookie tonight? Already blew your wad instructing some young thing?

HENRY

Look. Do you know how much young is offered to me? I am a professor. A rather distinguished, rather charismatic professor. So I'm told. Not to mention a poet. A wet panty poet. So I'm told.

JANE

How poetic.

HENRY

They throw themselves at my feet. Or maybe at my meter. I cannot have office hours without having to scrape some adoring young thing up off her knees where she is offering worship. The point is, I never indulge.

JANE

You're never tempted.

HENRY

I didn't say that. I said I never indulge.

JANE

That's my Henry, fun, fun, fun.

HENRY

You can't have it both ways, Jane.

JANE

Yes, I can. Why can't I?

HENRY

Maybe you can. I can't. I teach nine to five, so I write five to nine.

JANE

It's not like you have to teach. You've got your family money.

HENRY

It's not about money. It's about devotion to the craft.

JANE

What are you? The vestal virgin?

HENRY

I have to write in three hours or I don't get to.

JANE

Tell your muse to visit at a more convenient time. Mine is forever sneaking little asides.

HENRY

Not mine. I like a schedule.

JANE

Your muse is a domesticated little priss.

HENRY

My mistress. We have an arrangement.

JANE

How civilized. I'm your mistress, Henry. And I'm horny.

HENRY

So is she-- don't make me choose.

Lights down.

## SCENE 11

A LIGHT CENTER APRON

JANE is now in the "reading" area. She speaks as to an audience. She sits on the apron.

JANE

Where was I? ...I know. The Bahamas. At least, the Bahama poems. Sometimes, I get just a little aphasic. I lose my train of thought-- or my shoes. I lose everything except the poems. That's where I was! I was saying that the trick is-- for me, anyway-- to learn to listen. There's this meter inside-- pun intended-- that will tell you when it is time to go away and just write. I guess it's a kind of "ticking" that I listen for. When I hear it, I pay attention.



Except for “White Ink,” all the poems in my new series “The Shell Game” were written in the Bahamas in two weeks flat. I say, “flat,” but I was really full-- and not just with poems. You see, Henry got me pregnant an afternoon before I left. This poem is for Henry--

HENRY  
(O.S., flat but urgent)

Jane.

JANE  
Sometimes I think it makes Henry a little uncomfortable, having a public life. I don't know any other way to do it. The most intensely private is the most intensely universal--

HENRY  
Jane, I don't want to hear your theories.

HENRY steps forward.

JANE  
Maybe he'd like it better if I published posthumously. Hell, I'd like it better. Great way to assure immortality-- death.

HENRY  
You're drunk.

HENRY steps toward center stage. There is a burst of applause. He is startled by this.

HENRY  
Thank you, but I'm not really here in my capacity as a poet. I am here as a lover and-- evidently-- as an expectant father.

(Much applause).

JANE  
(carefully)  
I am not drunk.

HENRY  
Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention, but we are going home now.

He grasps her firmly by the arm. He holds on tight as she struggles.

JANE

Ladies and gentlemen, Henry knows how you like your poets. Very well behaved. Very sober. It's a proud tradition, sober poets. It's a tradition about the length of Henry's cock-- which is very long-- or he couldn't be such a prick.

HENRY

Somebody bring her home-- or don't.

He drops her arm and stalks out.

JANE

Home is where the heart is, Henry! ...Jesus. Somebody buy me a drink and I'll give you some more poems. Somebody? Joseph?

Lights down.

## SCENE 12

BEDROOM

In the darkness, we hear JANE singing.

JANE

“Dance with me, Henry.  
All right, Baby.  
Dance with me, Henry.  
Don't mean maybe.”

As the lights come up, we see it is morning.  
HENRY lies in bed in his shorts. JANE, dressed  
in a Chinese kimono and carrying a breakfast  
tray, moves towards him.

HENRY

Jane.

JANE

Henry. Honey, wake up. Coddled eggs, wash day toast...

HENRY

What are you doing?

JANE

Fresh grapefruit juice, raspberry jam--

HENRY

I asked, "What are you doing?"

JANE

There's something I have to tell you.

He pulls the sheets over his head.

HENRY

You've taken a lover. He's waiting downstairs to meet me.

JANE

Please, Henry. I am trying to do this right. Whoops!

HENRY drops the sheet from his face and makes a grab for the teetering tray.

HENRY

Let me take that.

JANE

I mess everything up! I've been waiting for the right time to tell you something.

HENRY

And this is it? I don't believe you.

JANE

Last night. I'm sorry. I was--

HENRY

You were?

JANE

A little crazy. A little carried away.

HENRY

Seems to me you've been carried away a lot lately.

JANE

You drink.

HENRY

Not like you do.

JANE

Lucky you.

HENRY

Interesting perspective.

JANE

Henry, I'm pregnant.

HENRY

No kidding.

His response stops her cold. She fusses with the tray, spills something--

JANE

I'm sorry. Whatever I did last night--

HENRY

"Whatever you did." You really don't remember.

JANE

Gin. I said I shouldn't drink it. I black out.

HENRY

You didn't drink it. You drank scotch.

JANE

Oh. See? I really do black out... Henry? ...Anything I should know? Henry, what did I do?

HENRY

Got me. I blacked out... all right. You told the whole goddamn world you were pregnant with my child. That's what you did. You just forgot to tell me.

HENRY puts on a shirt, pants and shoes.

JANE

I didn't forget. I was trying to do it right.

HENRY

Oh, you did it right, all right.

JANE

I was waiting for the right time. I wanted to do it with some ceremony. I wanted you to want it, Henry.

HENRY

Could have fooled me. Last night your announcement had real dignity and tenderness-- like a card trick, a rabbit out of the hat.

JANE

A dead rabbit. You shot it, Henry.

HENRY

Very funny! You're writing.

Despite themselves, they are writing. Angry,  
yelling at each other-- still literary.

JANE

I'm a writer.

HENRY

You're writing, "How Henry and I patched it up."

JANE

You're writing, "How I told her where to get off--" ...Card tricks, rabbits. Jesus!

HENRY

I happen to have a gift for language.

JANE

Among other things.

HENRY

Don't flatter me.

JANE

I was telling you the truth.

HENRY

For once.

JANE

Henry, couldn't we just... somehow... forget about last night?

HENRY

You already did. And I don't drink enough to do that.

JANE

I would never hurt you on purpose.

HENRY

But accidents happen. Who brought you home?

JANE

Somebody... Joseph.

HENRY

Was he an accident too?

JANE

Nothing happened.

HENRY

How would you know? Maybe we should hold a lottery, "Name that baby!"

JANE slaps at him.

HENRY

All I'm saying is that I had a right to know.

JANE

That is not all you're saying. But you're right. You're always right... Good thing. It makes us compatible. I am always wrong.

HENRY

Not always.

JANE

I'm sorry. I'm sorry about being gone for your reading. You've been mad at me since then, haven't you?

HENRY

I understood that.

JANE

Maybe you did, but you didn't like it.

HENRY

I need a little acknowledgement from you.

JANE

(patting her stomach)

Well, I think you may be getting some fairly obvious acknowledgement here.

HENRY

Notoriety is not the same as acknowledgement. You may quote me on that.

JANE

You should be married to someone else then.

HENRY

Wait a minute. Did we get married? Did I miss a significant event, too?

JANE

You really should marry someone else.

HENRY

Is this a proposal?

JANE

Is it?

HENRY

Ah.

HENRY takes a long beat. We see anger wash away as he considers his feelings in the overview.

HENRY

I do think the mother of my children should have the benefit of everything our sexist society holds sacred-- hospital insurance...

JANE

You said, "The mother of your children."

HENRY

Yes?

JANE

How do you know?

HENRY

Children. You're telling me this is a one shot deal? I just got lucky?

JANE

I'm telling you we are having twins.

HENRY

Twins.

JANE

You're the first to know-- well, the second. Oh, Jesus-- Why do they call it morning sickness? I've got it all the time. Oh!

HENRY

Twins!

JANE

A rhymed couplet. Oh, no!

HENRY grabs for a waste basket.

HENRY

Here. Marry me.

JANE

...Very romantic.

HENRY

Well, I'm the romantic. Remember?

Lights down.

### SCENE 13

BEDROOM

Lights up. This time, JANE is in bed. She is clearly "very" pregnant. She is writing on a clip board.

JANE

The cells do not forget.  
The serpent still uncoils.  
Biology remembers  
To the victim goes the spoils-- no.  
Oh!

A labor pain has hit. JANE sits in stunned pain.

JANE

Oh, no, Goddamn it!  
Not yet! Not now, please, not now! Oh!



Stage right, a teapot whistles. HENRY gets up from his desk. He pours water into a waiting pot, readies a tray.

Stage left. HENRY, entering, hears her cry.

HENRY

Jane?

JANE

Remembers yet, remembers debt, that--  
Blood, would-- the serpent would--

HENRY

What? What are you doing?

JANE

What do you think I'm doing? I'm writing. I'm finishing a poem--

HENRY

Finish it later. Why didn't you call me?

JANE

Henry. I am not going. I am not ready.

HENRY

How close are they coming?

JANE

I don't know-- close--

HENRY

You're crazy. Stand up.

JANE

Just a minute! I've got it! I've almost got it!

HENRY

(grabbing her pencil, snapping it)

Stand!

JANE

Henry!

HENRY

Stand! It will come back! Walk!

JANE

They never do-- they do for you-- not for me-- Henry, please, my notebook. Please!

HENRY

Oh, all right! But walk!

He grabs the notebook and leads her offstage.

Lights down.

#### SCENE 14

KITCHEN

HENRY enters the kitchen in darkness. JANE lies on the floor, pillow under her head. HENRY trips over her.

HENRY

Oh! What are you doing up?

JANE

Waiting for you to come home and trip over my dead body.

HENRY

May I ask why you were sleeping on the floor?

JANE

Our bed was a vast, empty plain--

HENRY

I'm not that late.

JANE

The twins and I had a very interesting evening. They taught me patience-- while you were out teaching poetry. Maybe you could teach me some? I dimly remember liking poetry more than formulas.

HENRY

Wordsworth. You'd have been bored.

JANE

Nonsense. My secret vice. I always read Wordsworth on my long pastoral evenings *alone* by the fire.

HENRY

You said you thought my teaching was a good idea.

JANE

And it was. For you.

HENRY

You said it would give you writing time.

JANE

Did I? What a liar. My poems always come when we're fucking-- Maybe we don't fuck enough lately and that's why I've got writer's block. Maybe we should prime the pump.

HENRY

A nice, pastoral image--

JANE

Come lie down. For once the twins are both sleeping.

She holds out her arms.

HENRY

Our bed is a vast, empty plain-- it calls to me.

JANE

I call to you.

HENRY

Four times today between four and six when I was preparing my lecture.

JANE

(testy)

All right. Go to bed.

She starts scissor kicks, opening and closing her legs.

HENRY

You're distracting.

JANE

Now or then?

HENRY

Always.

JANE

But especially between four and six? I understand, Henry. You've made yourself perfectly clear.

HENRY

Now what are you doing?

She is filling a pitcher with water, holding it over her head.

JANE

Putting out the fire, Henry. A nice splash of cold water and even the most stubborn embers begin to gutter out.

She starts toward the bed area. She balances the pitcher like a native bearer.

HENRY

Where are you going with that?

JANE

To bed, of course. To put out any lingering embers.

HENRY

Why don't you just take a fire hose?

JANE

Why, Darling? Because you're wearing ours.

HENRY

Flattery is not going to get you everywhere. It is not even going to get you laid.

JANE

I see. Maybe what I had in mind was a conversation-- an adult conversation.

HENRY

A first.

JANE

No, no, not a first-- Tod and I talked about die-dies today and Theo told me all about Kwak.

HENRY

Kwak?

JANE

I thought it was a duck, a pet duck.

HENRY

Imaginary? An imaginary pet duck?

JANE

Entirely. He was trying to say "crap."

HENRY

Crap.

JANE

That's right. It took me awhile to figure it out.

HENRY

Where would he hear about crap-- not even on Sesame Street.

JANE

Tod was talking die-die and Theo kept saying kwak and I kept saying duck and flapping my arms going quack, quack and finally Theo got so frustrated-- he goes to the diaper bin, pulls out a dirty one, and says "kwak!", sticking his fingers in the kwak. Henry, do you call it crap when you change them?

HENRY

Say... maybe I do. Want to fwuck? I can't take much more of this conversation.

JANE

Kwak.

HENRY

Yes?

JANE

That's conversation-- as I've come to understand it.

HENRY

If motherhood's that hard for you...

JANE

It's very hard. I try hard to be patient. I try to be a good mother, but it's just not natural for me. I get crabby. I have to fight to stay calm. I'm not like you. The perfect parent. I love them, but I miss my solitude, and they can tell. I know it.

HENRY

I think you should see someone.

JANE

Someone? You mean a doctor?

HENRY

Yes, if it's so hard. And we could get a nanny. A mother's helper. I had one, and look how well I turned out.

JANE

It's not that I don't love them. It's that I don't love me.

HENRY

A doctor might help.

JANE

A doctor for me? I'm the designated patient?

HENRY

It's just that you're so miserable.

JANE

A doctor would help my misery? It's just that I miss you. I miss me. I miss us. We used to have great conversations.

HENRY

Ah. Well then. Did you know nursery rhymes were originally coded political messages?

JANE

Kwak.

HENRY

I'm serious.

JANE  
Kwak.

HENRY  
Will you stop that kwaking?

JANE  
I'm kwaking up. I'm kwaking under the strain. I'm--

HENRY  
Kwackers?

JANE  
(mocking)  
"Jane, did you know nursery rhymes were originally coded political messages?"

HENRY  
All right. I'm a pedantic academic asshole.

JANE  
Absolutely. Why is it you're allowed to sound like a pretentious academic ass and when I do it you swat me for it and hate it?

HENRY  
Because you sound like me. I like it better when you sound like you.

JANE  
Henry? I've got a hairline kwak.

HENRY  
A very nice one.

JANE  
Kwak kwak kwak.

HENRY  
Shut up. Don't wake the twins.

JANE  
Use Body English? Ok...

Lights down.

SCENE 15

KITCHEN

As the lights come up, we see JANE frosting a cake.

JANE

I am not any good at this.

HENRY

Looks wonderful.

He nibbles at her neck.

HENRY

Tastes good too.

JANE

I am not a born mother. You can't make me one. I try, but it's just so hard.

HENRY

They're going to love this.

JANE

It took me the whole morning. First one fell.

HENRY

Use a mix. "Never goes flat! Easy as that!"

JANE

Oh, dear God! It's slipping! How many candles?

HENRY

One per year.

JANE

Two or four, I mean.

HENRY

Four. There're two of them.

JANE

I know there are two of them, Love. I think four's too many. They might burn themselves.

HENRY

You are always rehearsing catastrophes.



JANE

I dreamed-- I dreamed they got hurt.

HENRY

I know what you dreamed! You woke me--

JANE

When he doesn't smoke he gets CWABBY... What if smoke gets in their eyes? You know what Dr. Rich, the doctor, says? He says I want to kill them. When he says that, I want to kill him.

HENRY

Feeling's mutual.

JANE

What?

HENRY

I want to kill your Dr. Rich.

JANE

It was your idea I talk to him.

HENRY

Talk to someone. Not listen to that crackpot. He's crazy. The things you say he says--

JANE

Sometimes I think he's right. Not about the twins, but in general. In general I think he's right.

HENRY

I don't.

(admiring cake)

There! You see? It's perfect.

JANE

It is not perfect.

HENRY

Well, they'll think it's perfect.

JANE

They are not blind-- yet. I'm using two.

HENRY

You just love worst possible scenarios.

JANE

Dr. Rich says I am too smart for platitudes.

HENRY

If you can't see what he's doing.

JANE

What? What is he doing?

HENRY

He's trying to get you to believe the worst about yourself so you keep going back--

JANE

Now that is a sinister scenario.

HENRY

Why do you think he's called Dr. Rich?

JANE

Oh, Henry!

She puts her arms around his neck, sings.

JANE

"Dance with me, Henry.  
All right, Baby.  
Dance with me, Henry--"

HENRY

You're drinking. You've been drinking.

JANE

Have not.

HENRY

I can smell it on your breath.

JANE

That's vanilla extract.

HENRY

Don't lie to me. Do you think I am an idiot?

JANE

No. Any idiot knows vanilla extract is 80% proof. I've loved it since I was a little girl.

HENRY  
What am I going to do with you?

JANE  
Dance with me?

HENRY  
Not when you're drunk.

JANE  
Oh! Right! Only when you're drunk.

HENRY  
I am not drunk.

JANE  
Obviously. Or we'd be dancing.

HENRY  
Why?

JANE  
Why "why"? Maybe there is no "why." I just tasted the vanilla because I always tasted the vanilla. I took a little drink and the little drink took a great big drink. Something like that.

HENRY  
You know what it does to you.

JANE  
No. You know what it does to me. I forget-- remember?

HENRY  
You went a long time.

JANE  
Who's counting?

HENRY  
I was so proud of you--

JANE  
You have no right to be proud of me. You are not my father. No matter what Dr. Rich says.

HENRY

Oh, no! Is that what he says?

JANE

No...

HENRY

What's so funny?

JANE

He says you're my mother. He says we all marry our mothers.

HENRY

Great. What does Mr. Wizard say about your drinking?

JANE

He says that when we figure out why I drink the way I drink, then I won't have to drink that way anymore.

HENRY

Brilliant. Why not just stop?

JANE

Because then... I couldn't drink!

HENRY

Well, you can't drink now.

JANE

Dr. Rich says once we know why I drink the way I drink, I'll be able to drink the way other people drink.

HENRY

Other people do not drink vanilla extract. Tell him that.

JANE

They lack originality.

HENRY

It's disgusting.

JANE

You're right. I should stick to gin.

HENRY

Gin always made you crazy.

JANE

Maybe I should stick to wine and beer. No hard liquor-- and no vanilla extract.

HENRY

You went two years. You were only nursing for one.

JANE

So I couldn't very well be an alcoholic if that's what you're implying.

HENRY

I'm not implying anything--

JANE

If that's what you're saying, then--

HENRY

What I was saying-- was going to say-- was that it was just so pleasant.

JANE

For you.

HENRY

I think for you, too.

JANE

No, you don't. It's me, Jane, remember? I think for myself. At least I used to before I was drowned in all this domesticity. Jesus!

She suddenly flips up her top to expose her breasts.

JANE

I would rather jump out of a cake than make one.

HENRY

Just because it isn't perfect... like those.

JANE

I knew you were humoring me!

She reaches into a cabinet and pours herself a drink.

HENRY

What are you doing? Suzanna will be home with the boys any minute.

JANE

Good for Suzanna. I'm pouring myself a drink. I know how you hate it when I sneak them... Ah! I knew you thought I might be doing that.

HENRY

You haven't been sleeping.

JANE

I've been writing. I got six new poems.

HENRY

So you said-- when you came to bed for four minutes at five a.m.

JANE

I'm not tired.

HENRY

Well, I am. And you should be.

JANE

Ah! But on the bright side I cleaned the mud closet. I tackled your tackle box after the boys spilled it and nearly impaled themselves. Sometimes I don't sleep. That's all. Sometimes you like my not sleeping--

HENRY

You reach for me like--

JANE

A drink? You should be so lucky.

She downs a big gulp.

HENRY

A pacifier.

JANE

I see. Baby Jane and Henry playing Father Knows Best. Well. As long as I am an unfit mother, I might as well act like one.

HENRY

No one ever said you were an unfit mother.

JANE

Yet? I try to be patient. I try to be calm. I try to be something I'm not-- someone I'm not.

HENRY

You are the one who sets impossible standards.

JANE

Impossible for me. Not impossible. You're patient. Sometimes I think you're up for sainthood.

HENRY

We hired Suzanna.

JANE

Because we both saw my limitations. The twins were wild. You know what Tod said.

HENRY

What?

JANE

He said you're not my mother.

HENRY

He didn't mean that.

JANE

He said it.

HENRY

Suzanna was hired as a help. Not a reproach. Must you take everything so personally?

JANE

Somebody has to. Chin chin. Here they are! Go to them, Henry. I'm too drunk.

We hear a door opening. Lights down.

CHILDREN'S VOICES

(recording)

Mommy? Mommy? Daddy?

Lights down.

SCENE 16

## BEDROOM

JANE lies in bed. HENRY enters and mounts her to straddle her back.

HENRY

Let me give you a backrub.

JANE

I don't want a backrub.

HENRY

There's the rub. What do you want? Feet?

He grabs a foot.

JANE

That tickles. Don't.

HENRY

What's got into you?

JANE

Nothing lately-- haven't you noticed?

HENRY

Fights about sex are never about sex.

JANE

Who told you that? My former therapist?

HENRY

I think you didn't write today.

JANE

What should be so different about today? I never write anymore.

HENRY

That's not true.

JANE

It's not false, either. I never write anything good.

HENRY

I run dry sometimes.



JANE

Do you? “Run dry” is not how I would phrase my situation. Run amuck-- maybe. Babies do upstage brainchildren, Henry.

HENRY

So you don’t want to get knocked up again, eh? No more babies. Just brainchildren. Ok. I could live with that agenda. We’ll recreate, not procreate.

JANE

I don’t want to “get laid,” either.

HENRY

Why not?

JANE

I don’t know-- and I don’t need to know.

HENRY

I need to know.

JANE

It would distract me.

HENRY

Not getting laid distracts me.

JANE

I need to focus on my work. Go away.

HENRY

Why should I? You’re absent even when you’re present.

JANE

How would you know? You’re never home-- teaching, readings, book tours.

HENRY

Book tour. ONE. Not exactly a howling success.

JANE

That’s because you weren’t here to hear them howl. The twins started crying on your exit and cried continuously for five days and ten cities until you returned.

HENRY

So did I. I missed you three.

JANE

Four.

HENRY

You're not?

JANE

I could be. I want to throw up all the time.

HENRY

That's... wonderful.

JANE

Is it?

HENRY

What do you want to do?

JANE

Throw up. I told you.

HENRY

So that's why-- Hey, that's great-- you're never interested when you're pregnant.

JANE

Terrific. You were worried I didn't want you. I'm worried I don't want the baby. I'm not a born mother.

HENRY

It's a stage. Just like nausea. It will pass with the first trimester. Mark my words-- but don't grade them. God, I do sound like an academic.

JANE

I wanted the twins, Henry. Even when I didn't want them, I wanted them. This feels different. Maybe it's just that I know motherhood's not my long suit.

HENRY

Different how?

JANE

The twins were lassitude, torpor, nausea, lack of sexual appetite and apprehension. This is lassitude, torpor, nausea--

HENRY

Lack of sexual appetite--

JANE

And suicidal depression. Also, I seem to shake a lot.

HENRY

But you look beautiful-- hey, you're burning up.

JANE

You always think I'm hot.

HENRY

How's your throat? I'm not kidding. Where's our thermometer?

JANE

It is a little sore. In the drawer.

HENRY opens the night table drawer.

HENRY

Put this in your mouth.

JANE

I told you. I don't want to play Doctor.

HENRY

Shh. You know, flu makes you aphasic. No wonder you can't write.

JANE

Mmmm.

HENRY

Shh. Flu causes torpor, lassitude, ennui, and writer's block. The existentialists had it all the time. Sartre and Camus both had flu for twenty years. Then the Italians caught it. Pasolini had a venereal strain. Caused an increase in sexual appetite but a decrease in sexual satisfaction. Your cheeks are burning. It's kind of attractive, actually.

JANE

Mmmm.

HENRY

Your eyes look funny too. You look like some silent movie star. Didn't they put drops in their eyes? What's her name? With those fevered eyes?

JANE moves to take out the thermometer.

JANE  
Bella Donna. That's me.

HENRY  
Nevermind.

He takes the thermometer.

JANE  
What?

HENRY  
102.5. Is this thing accurate?

JANE  
Who knows? Either it's wrong, I'm frigid and lack sexual desire, or it's right and I lack sexual desire and have the flu.

HENRY  
How are the twins?

JANE  
Sleeping. Thank God. I walked them two hours. I was ready to offer them martinis.

HENRY  
I'm calling a doctor.

JANE  
Good. I'm throwing up-- or falling asleep-- or both-- God. I'm exhausted.

HENRY  
Let me get you under the covers.

JANE  
Dear Henry, you old soft shoe. I've worn you through--

HENRY  
Not quite yet. I'll get you some juice and some aspirin and call the doctor.

JANE  
You like me like this-- docile.

HENRY  
Not docile. Understandable. I really like cause and effect. And I really like you.

JANE

Oh good. Turn out the light.

Lights down.

JANE

(in darkness, top of lungs)

I hate it here!

### SCENE 17

JANE stands at a lectern.

JANE

This poem is called "Survival" --are you ready?

I can imagine a life without you.

A sky with no stars.

A time before language.

A primitive age

With values relating to survival.

I can imagine a world without sound,

In which no bells ring.

In which birds wing silent

Across skies muted by lack of sun.

What I cannot imagine is my survival.

Still living, still breathing

When it is air that I am missing.

I am trying not to miss you.

I am trying not to breathe.

### SCENE 18

KITCHEN

HENRY stands behind the bar/desk. We hear the unmistakable clatter of dishes.

HENRY  
(singing, bitterly)

“Quarter to three.  
Nobody in the place-- except you and me.  
Set ‘em up, Joe.  
I’ve got a little story  
You oughta know...”  
...I’ve got a little story you should know all right, Joe.

HENRY swigs from a huge drink.

Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross...  
Lady Jane Pain. That’s her name.  
Lady.

He throws a glass against the rear wall.

Jane.

He throws another glass.

Pain.

He throws a third. JANE enters from outside.

JANE

Henry?

HENRY

Ah! The very “lady” whose name was on my lips. “Chin chin.”

He toasts her.

JANE

Sorry I’m so late. I know I should have called. You weren’t... worried about me?

HENRY

Worried about you? Nonsense! Why should I have worried about you, my wife, out all night? Have a drink with me? I gave the baby a screwdriver. She’s sound asleep.

JANE

You didn’t.

HENRY

No. I didn’t.

JANE

I know I should have called. Next time I’ll call. I promise.

HENRY

Oh, I found plenty to do. I received your flowers. "From an ardent fan"-- and I smashed their vase. That was so much fun I started on the glasses. Really fun. Want to try it? Cheers you right up.

He hurls a fourth glass.

JANE

No. Thank you. You're scaring me.

HENRY

Don't ever say I didn't try to please you.

He tosses another, very violently, then another.

JANE

What are you doing? You're acting like me.

HENRY

The dishes.

JANE

Henry. I got twelve poems. Want to hear one?

HENRY

It's three o'clock in the morning.

JANE

You know how these things are-- people want to talk with you afterward.

HENRY

People. You mean that guy.

JANE

"That guy" happens to love my work. If you're going to be jealous of all my literary friendships-- twelve poems, Henry!

HENRY

I'll bet they're great. What's his name? Joe?

JANE

Joseph.

HENRY

Joseph. I'll bet Joseph loves your work. So do I.

He grabs for her. Pulling up her dress, he drops to his knees, pulls her to him.

JANE

No!

HENRY

Sudden fit of modesty? Mmm.

JANE

You're drunk! You're scaring me.

HENRY

Disgusting how people act when they're drunk, isn't it?

HENRY has gripped her by the panties: red bikini silks.

JANE

Henry! Stop it! You don't want to-- I rushed right home as soon as I could get away--

HENRY yanks the underpants straight off her.

HENRY

No time for a shower?

JANE

You have no right!

HENRY

I have every right. I'm your husband. Remember me?

JANE

You're rather indelible. I'm going to bed. Not that I'll sleep. I'm going to bed, Henry.

HENRY

Why?

He sniffs the panties.

You've already been there.

HENRY throws the panties aside.

JANE

You should have been a detective.



HENRY

Why? Are you a crime? Got to admit, I've got a good nose for it.

HENRY pours himself a huge drink.

JANE

Henry, please--

HENRY

What's the matter? Don't like it when I'm vulgar? Like it better when I'm your nice, domesticated little husband?

JANE

No.

HENRY

No what?

JANE

No. I don't like it-- you-- when you're like that.

HENRY

Then stop whoring around with your adoring little fans. If you're going to cheat on me, at least do it with a man.

JANE

Oh. I get it. This has nothing to do with me. The young buck threatens the stag.

HENRY grabs her by her hair, bending her back.

HENRY

You tell me. Do those young bucks know what really turns you on?

JANE

Henry, Darling--

HENRY

Because I'll tell them--

JANE

Darling--

HENRY

Pain is what turns you on-- yours or someone else's. That's what you get off on, isn't it.

JANE

No.

HENRY

Liar. I'm going to talk and you're going to listen. This isn't going to work, Jane.

JANE

Honestly, Henry--

HENRY

Is that like "Dear John"?

JANE

Honesty, Henry. What can I do?

HENRY

I told you, Jane. This is not going to work. You don't have to do anything. Not anymore, unless you'd prefer to file.

JANE

On what grounds?

HENRY

Lady's choice.

JANE

Why, Henry? You can't believe I'm serious about Joseph--

HENRY

I'm serious. Our marriage is taking up all my time and energy. Trying to write is like trying to share an air hose. I never get enough time or calm or ease. It's always a struggle. I'm always trying to "understand." What I finally understand is that there's no doing it right. There's no walking lightly enough on the eggshells. There's no staggering away from the bombshells anything but shattered. Am I really a cold, withholding man? Or am I just retreating from the artillery, refusing to hand over any more ammunition? What's North? What's South? What's the difference, Jane?

JANE

I'll stop.

HENRY

You are clever.

JANE

I won't drink anymore-- at readings, I mean.

HENRY

A bold and simple plan?

JANE

I won't do it again.

HENRY

We're not fighting about the drinking, Jane. In fact, we're not fighting. What I started to say-- before you so shrewdly interrupted me-- is that I want a divorce.

JANE

How can you just stand there and say that--

HENRY

I want a divorce.

JANE

I--

HENRY

No! I can't live this way. I have tried-- longer than I should have tried-- and I just can't do it. Every so often you just go off. You don't sleep, you binge on writing, you binge, period.

JANE

I'll see a doctor. I'll go back to Dr. Rich. It's not that you don't love me, Henry. It's that you hate the things I do to you.

HENRY

Well put. Couldn't have said it better. You must have been saving that little speech for a time like this.

JANE

Please, Henry. I'll change. I'll find out why I do what I do-- Dr. Rich thought we were getting somewhere. I know I can change. I won't get so crazy. I'll sleep. I won't drink.

HENRY

That would be wonderful. It's great when you're sober.

JANE

But sober is just so... sober... I can do it.

HENRY

I thought you were afraid of DUM DA DUM DUM... "Breaking Your Artist."

JANE

I was. I am. But-- I'm more afraid of losing you.

HENRY

I doubt that.

JANE

I'll see the doctor, Henry.

HENRY

And I'll see.

He releases her. He heads for the door.

HENRY

Thank you for sorting my tackle box. You untied my flies.

Lights down.

#### SCENE 19

JANE and HENRY are in the writing area.

JANE

I pressed your shirts. Which one will you wear?

HENRY

I could do it. The red, for luck.

JANE

You were writing. I wanted to surprise you.

HENRY

I appreciate the help.

JANE

Self defense. I couldn't let you go looking like a rumpled bachelor.

HENRY

You like me as a rumpled bachelor.

JANE

My point exactly. They might like you, too. Your fans, I mean.

HENRY

Don't be jealous.

JANE

Not jealous. Territorial. You're mine.

HENRY

I'm flattered. Maybe I'll wear the blue.

JANE

Why not the plaid? The blue's so domesticated.

HENRY

It shouts "Husband?"

JANE

I like the plaid. You look a little bohemian.

HENRY

The plaid, then. I am a little bohemian. I've overcome my proper past.

JANE

Call if you're going to be late.

HENRY

I always call.

JANE

Setting a good example.

HENRY

You don't need to wait up.

JANE

Next time I'll get a sitter.

HENRY

I like that. I mean, it would be nice to have you there.

JANE

Genius must be served.

HENRY

Don't.

JANE

But I mean it. I like your new poems.

HENRY

And I like you. Just don't stay up all night drinking.

JANE

I'm lonely without you. The boys-- Johnny and Hiram-- keep me company.

HENRY

You've been doing so well.

JANE

You're not my warden.

HENRY

I'm your husband and I'm trying to stay that way.

JANE

And I'm your wife, trying to stay that way too. Break a leg, Henry. I'll tell the boys I've got other plans.

## SCENE 20

KITCHEN

JANE is now in the kitchen, cubing vegetables for soup.

JANE

One potato, two potato, three potato, four-- Four red hens, three black crows, two-timing man, away he goes--

HENRY enters from the living area.

HENRY

Nursery rhymes?

JANE

A tisket, a tasket, my Henry's got a basket--

HENRY

What's gotten into you?

JANE

All this domesticity? The Ghost of Christmas past... Satan.

HENRY

What?

JANE

I hear these little voices, they say, "Be a housewife. Give up writing. Be a housewife..." Must be devils.

HENRY

Nah. Critics.

JANE

Oh. So glad you cleared that up.

HENRY steals a carrot, feints "on guard!"

JANE

Want to go fishing?

HENRY

Is that a metaphor or an invitation?

JANE

An invitation. Let's tromp over to Miller's trout pond. The thing they dug behind the lilac hedge. We could skinny dip.

HENRY

That thing. Those fish are sitting ducks.

JANE

I catch them with my bare hands.

HENRY

You catch a lot of things that way.

He puts her hand to his cock.

JANE

Husbands, poems.

She snatches back her hand, snaps her fingers.

JANE

Codpiece! That's what I was thinking of! It was driving me crazy. I kept thinking "doublet." What am I thinking? "Giblet?"

HENRY

That's a chicken part. Is this going to have chicken in it? Ah. I guess so. This is a chicken.

JANE

What are you thinking?

HENRY

I'm not. I'm practicing mulling. It's an art form.

JANE

Like grazing?

HENRY

Exactly like grazing! I take what comes. I try not to think.

JANE

Oops! No trying. That's active. So's grazing.

HENRY

You want a fight?

JANE

A fight... well, let's see. We haven't done that in a long time. Nostalgic?

HENRY

No.

JANE

How about we pretend we fought and just make up?

HENRY

I'll think about it.

JANE

I thought you gave that up?

HENRY

I gave up caffeine and nicotine. I can't think anymore.



JANE

Don't nag.

HENRY

I am not nagging. I'm not even hinting... don't get ashes in the soup, all right?

JANE

You're perfect.

HENRY

It's my job.

JANE

The boys need a little league coach.

HENRY

That is not my job.

JANE

Don't look at me. I throw like a girl.

HENRY

I'll think about it. At least I'll try to think about it.

JANE

Try to catch a fish.

HENRY

That won't work if you try to do it either.

JANE

Like some things I won't mention.

HENRY

All you think about!

JANE

I know. Must be why you married me.

Lights down.

SCENE 21

## BEDROOM

Lights up. JANE and HENRY are in bed. He's sleeping. She has a writing pad propped on her knees.

JANE  
(working out a poem)

Ricky, ticky, tavy.  
Why are you so savvy?  
Hickory, dickory, dock.  
Is that what you thought?

HENRY  
(waking)

What are you doing?

JANE  
Jack Horner.  
Got you cornered.

HENRY  
You sure do. I'm trying to sleep.

JANE  
One potato, two potato--

HENRY  
That poem is driving me crazy. Theo says, "Mommy's talking baby talk."

JANE  
Tell him he used to. Some lucky children grow out of it.

HENRY  
Come to sleep. I need sleep. I've got my reading.

JANE  
What are you going to wear?

HENRY  
I don't know. Clothes.

JANE  
I'll iron them.

HENRY

Now?

JANE

Good time as any. I'll go downstairs and work. What shirt?

HENRY

The red one. Are you ok?

JANE

I'm great. The bastard poem is finally cracking.

HENRY

Good thing. So am I.

JANE

"The Bastard Poem" -- maybe that's what I should call it.

HENRY

I'm tired!

JANE

I'm going. I'm going. Maybe I should go away and write.

HENRY

We will talk about it after my reading. We will talk about it after a full night's sleep.

JANE

You're sure it's the red shirt? Maybe I should do the plaid? Or the blue?

HENRY

(shouting)

Jane!

Lights down.

SCENE 22

READING AREA

Lights up. HENRY is at the reading area. He is at the microphone, wearing his red shirt and his best "poet-in-residence" manner.

HENRY

People have asked me-- you know how people want to ask these things-- if it isn't a little hard, "two artistic temperaments under one roof, two poets." What they mean is, "Aren't you two competitive? Aren't you jealous?" Of course I'm jealous. I am jealous anytime, anywhere that someone writes a great poem and my wife has written some great poems, not just "very good ones." But I wouldn't call that competition. I'd call it inspiration. You see, I not only love Jane, I love her poetry. I love poetry. That's why doing these readings for you are such a pleasure. This next poem is an old one, one of my sentimental favorites. I don't think I knew what it meant when I wrote it-- just before I met my wife-- I begin to think I know what it means now. The poem is called, "The Cost of Lilacs."

JANE enters, a little unsteady, from the side.  
She whispers.

JANE

Henry!

He gives her a little wave.

HENRY

Hi, Dear. Here she is, the Lilac Lady herself.

JANE

Excuse me.

HENRY

(playing the crowd)

Excuse us.

(whispering)

What is it?

JANE

It came for me.

HENRY

What? What came?

JANE

You know.

HENRY

No. I don't know. I'm trying to give a reading.

JANE

I wrote a poem about it.

HENRY

(to the audience)

Excuse us some more.

(to JANE)

Not now.

JANE

Yes, now. I am trying to tell you something, Henry. You said to tell you.

(to crowd)

I wrote a new poem.

HENRY

My wife would like to read a poem. Sometimes it's best to let her do what she likes.

HENRY is trying to maintain a country and  
western duet.

JANE

I've written a new poem.

HENRY

Poets do that.

JANE

I'd like to read it.

HENRY

Poets do that too.

JANE

They know that, Henry,

She teeters.

HENRY

(to her alone)

Are you drunk?

JANE

It is impossible  
I did not call you here.  
I did not know your name.  
Where to find you.

I did not know I was looking.  
You say I sent an invitation.  
You say, when I open the door,  
That we have done this before.

It is true that when you called  
I recognized your voice.  
It was impossible not to.  
It hurts, so I had no choice.

...Henry!

JANE doubles over, sobbing.

HENRY  
(to audience)

Excuse me.

JANE

Help. I had an accident.

HENRY leads her from the stage.

HENRY

What did you do?

JANE

Pills.

Lights down.

SCENE 23

HOSPITAL ROOM

Lights up. JANE sits propped in a hospital bed.

HENRY

How are you feeling?

JANE

Thanks for the flowers.

HENRY

How are you feeling?

JANE

What do you mean, "How are you feeling?" Bad.

HENRY

Surely all those pills should have made you feel better.

JANE

Oh, a little better. Nothing like a good suicide attempt to cheer you up. Kind of takes the pressure off-- like tipping the lid on a boiling pot. The rattling stops.

HENRY

Stop writing.

JANE

I had. Anything except "Very Good Poems."

HENRY

Don't patronize me, Jane. Don't expect me to believe suicide is the answer to writer's block.

JANE

Writer's block is murder...

HENRY

What's murder is the fact that I'm alarmed you're almost dead and you're alarmed to be living. That's what kills me.

JANE

Want to trade places?

HENRY

And you joke about it! If you could see their faces! "Daddy, where's Mommy? Where's Mommy?" We love you, Jane.

JANE

Not Jane. "Mommy." All of you love the clever imitation I made up. I've used my skin and my hair and my voice box and you're all fooled and think she's Jane, but I am Jane. Remember me?

HENRY

I'd say you are rather unforgettable.

JANE

Not to me, I wasn't. I'd almost forgotten I'm not "Mommy" and "Darling."

HENRY

Darling-- Jane.

JANE

There is nothing "darling" about Jane. Here. Read this.

She tries to hand him a poem.

HENRY

I want to talk to you.

JANE

This is me.

HENRY

You. Not your literary accomplishments.

JANE

Easy for you to say.

HENRY

Jane.

JANE

That's her name.

HENRY

Stop pretending you're the nobody wife. Stop acting like I asked you to put your light under a basket or--

JANE

Or my head in the oven.

HENRY

Or even a goddamn roast in the oven. We have Suzanna, for God's sake.

JANE

Marry Suzanna then.

HENRY

I don't fuck the help.



JANE

She's their mother.

HENRY

We will discuss this when you are stronger.

JANE

I see. Now I am the crazy lady.

HENRY

No.

JANE

Ah! You agree with me then. Suicide was appropriate.

HENRY

If you feel that bad. If it is that horrible living with us... Yes.

JANE

Oh, no! Oh, Darling, Henry. No-- Oh, no. Oh, Henry. Not you. Not them. Oh, Darling. I'm so sorry. It's me. I am what's horrible--

They hold each other in their arms, rocking slowly back and forth. HENRY, stroking her hair, recites to her softly, like a lullaby.

HENRY

I wish I could take language  
 And fold it like cool, moist rags.  
 I would lay words on your forehead.  
 I would wrap words on your wrists.  
 "There, there," my words would say.  
 Or something better.  
 I would ask them to murmur,  
 "Hush" and "Shh, shh, it's all right."  
 I would ask them to hold you all night.  
 I wish I could take language  
 And daub and soothe and cool  
 Where fever blisters and burns  
 Where fever turns yourself against you.  
 I wish I could take language  
 And heal the words that were the wounds  
 You have no names for.

JANE  
Henry--

HENRY  
That make you feel better?

JANE  
No.

HENRY  
What? What is it?

JANE  
You're happy. I'm here, and you're happy.

HENRY  
No. Don't say that.

JANE  
Don't lie to me. You are... without me.

HENRY  
Productive. Things have calmed down. Suzanna's got the twins on a schedule.

JANE  
That Suzanna. She's young, she's beautiful...

HENRY  
I thought it was a very good poem.

JANE  
It's not a good poem. It's a great poem, Henry... I'm jealous.

HENRY  
Uh-huh. I see. Well, Miss Thornton, I am afraid that I do detect the first, faint signs of recovery. You just may live to write another day.

JANE  
Monster. Get in bed.

HENRY  
What? Are you crazy?

JANE

Obviously.

HENRY

What if somebody comes in? There's a reason they call them privates.

JANE

We'll let them watch.

HENRY

I'm not a pacifier.

JANE

Who told you that? Best pacifier there is. Henry, hold me.

HENRY

Sure. It's going to be all right.

Lights down.

#### SCENE 24

KITCHEN

Lights up. As JANE and HENRY enter their house, we see a beautiful frosted cake on the table.

JANE

Suzanna baked this for the twins' birthday? The perfect mother strikes again.

HENRY

You've had other things on your mind.

JANE

Like suicide. A fine reason to miss a party. It's chocolate?

HENRY

She said it was no trouble.

JANE

She gets them so perfect.

HENRY

That's her job.

JANE

Mine were always tipsy-- like me.

HENRY

Don't start in on yourself. I thought we could use this afternoon to settle in and decorate.

JANE

Decorate?

HENRY

For the party. I got streamers, balloons, and the works.

JANE

Where are the boys?

HENRY

First the children's zoo, then McDonald's, then the movies.

JANE

All with Suzanna.

HENRY

It's her job, Jane.

JANE

No, Henry. It's my job... When have you arranged the viewing?

HENRY

Let's just get you settled.

JANE

Don't talk to me like that! Don't talk to me like you're my goddamn nurse or like I have brain damage... Do I have brain damage? ...What did he say, Henry? Sooner or later, you are going to have to tell me.

HENRY

I told him you were coming home. I told him we could handle it.

JANE

It.

HENRY

Right. Want to blow up a balloon?

JANE

No! "It," Henry?

HENRY

Let's get you set-- I'm sorry.

JANE

You've got a decision to make.

HENRY

(looking at the balloons)

They're all orange. Most of them.

JANE

Henry, either you will treat me like an equal or like an invalid. If I am to live like an invalid--

HENRY is blowing up an orange balloon.

JANE

If I am to live like an invalid, I would rather do it on a locked ward than in my own home--

JANE pops the balloon.

JANE

Is that clear?

HENRY

Very.

JANE

Did I scare you?

HENRY

Were you trying?

JANE

I was mad.

HENRY

Just what the doctor said.

JANE

Ah.

HENRY

I'm sorry. I'm the one who's mad. You know how I hate loud noises-- except applause, as you'd say.

JANE  
What did he say?

HENRY  
Jane--

JANE  
What did he say? Now you're scaring me.

HENRY  
Alcoholism.

JANE  
Congratulations. I think you made that diagnosis years ago.

HENRY  
That's the good news.

JANE  
Oh.

HENRY  
He said you have a "chemical imbalance." He said these depressions of yours are systemic--

JANE  
Systemic?

HENRY  
Internal. Nothing causes them.

JANE  
(fondly)  
Lets you off the hook. How does he propose to cure them?

HENRY  
They can't cure them.

JANE  
Ah. How does he propose to control them?

HENRY  
They don't know how to control them-- yet. They've found something, this salt, but it's experimental--

JANE

I'm experimental. We will assault my dis-ease.

HENRY

It's a new drug. Lithium.

JANE

And it gets rid of it? Them? My famous moods?

HENRY

It-- maybe-- 'miniaturizes' is the word. They don't know how to control them.

JANE

Like the weather. I always loved that song, "Stormy Weather." Of course, I would.

HENRY

I said, "Fine. We'll just batten down the hatches and let her blow."

JANE

You didn't.

HENRY

No. What was I supposed to say? He didn't have any reasonable alternative.

JANE

Sure there is. Lock me up. Throw away the key. He said I would have these... episodes?

HENRY

He said to "anticipate" them.

JANE

Sure. The same way you anticipate muggings, earthquakes, auto accidents -- Oh, Henry, lock me up. Just get it over with. ...Sometimes I think I would like that.

HENRY

I know. And I won't let you do it. Loving us may drive you crazy, but it may also keep you sane.

JANE

You didn't hear what he said. "Systemic." Nothing can keep me sane. "Nothing" means "nobody."

HENRY

No. He didn't say that.

JANE

You're the crazy one, Henry-- loving me.

HENRY

It's systemic. Internal. I can't help it...

JANE

...Mmm...You know how you can smell a storm? You step outside and you just know?

HENRY

*You* just know. I'm a city boy, remember? Trout are my idea of wild animals.

JANE

It's in the air... Or the blood. You can feel it coming.

HENRY

Are we talking storms or "episodes" or both?

JANE

Both.

HENRY

You used to try to sneak off and have them.

JANE

Well.

HENRY

Truth.

JANE

They're just like hurricanes... better off-shore.

HENRY

I hate the thought of you sneaking off, all alone--

JANE

Like a werewolf!

HENRY

Very funny.

JANE

Truth?



HENRY

No.

JANE

Truth?

HENRY

Your call.

JANE

When I knew one was hitting, I'd get excited. It was like a tidal wave--

HENRY

That was his image-- waves--

JANE

Poems would be the first sign. A poem and then another and another. That part was fun-- more like taking dictation than writing. I used to pretend that part would just last forever. Henry, I felt like God. Did you ever think how God must have felt? A rose and then an azalea and then a daffodil, a delphinium, a hibiscus, a hollyhock-- Don't you see?

HENRY

No.

JANE

Then you don't want to! Think about it. God could make anything. There was no end to it. Tulips, a crocus, your old lilacs, a pine tree, honeysuckle, zinnias, asters--

HENRY

I get the picture. You enjoy your episodes.

JANE

Yes. At least the first part. The foreplay. I get some of my best poems-- God, Henry, what if I can't write on it?

HENRY

Then you don't have to take it. I would never ask you to--

JANE

What did you tell the doctor?

HENRY

I told him we'd talk about it. I told him you weren't some laboratory rat--

JANE

That was sweet of you. Glad you cleared that up--

HENRY

For him to experiment on--

JANE

It's my brain, Henry. If it were just an arm or a leg-- I like the poems I get. And I get--

HENRY

Horny. I guess I enjoyed your episodes too.

JANE

I'll bet you didn't tell the doctor that.

HENRY

What? Are you crazy?

JANE

Takes two to tango. Dance with me, Henry?

HENRY

Welcome home. We'll just batten down the hatches.

Lights down.

## SCENE 25

### BEDROOM/KITCHEN

JANE is in the bedroom. She is straightening the room-- and then, quite matter of fact, she takes a belt out of her suitcase and sets about stringing it-- and her-- up.

HENRY is in the kitchen. He sings to himself. "Happy birthday to you, da da dum..." He is paralleling Jane's actions, straightening the room and stringing crepe paper party streamers.

HENRY

Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear boys...  
(calling up)

Jane! I could use a little help.

JANE

(to herself)

So could I. No ups, no downs, genius must be served...

HENRY

They are going to be home in fifteen minutes. You better hurry. What do you think?  
Should we sing, "Dear boys?" Maybe "Dear twins?" I can't get the meter right.

(singing)

"Ted and Toddy." "Tod and Teddy."

One makes it sound like a drink! The other is like a stuffed bear. I am so glad you made it home for the party--

JANE is on a chair, staring into space, the belt  
around her neck.

HENRY

(his "alarm" going off)

Jane?

HENRY rushes to the bedroom.

HENRY

Jane? Oh my God, be careful!

HENRY grabs JANE, lifting her off the chair.

HENRY

Be careful, Jane.

They stagger to the floor.

HENRY

You need medicine.

SCENE 26

KITCHEN

Lights up. JANE sits quietly with a quilt on her lap. We see that she herself is quilting. HENRY enters.

JANE

Shhh.

She points to the side of the room where a baby sleeps in a playpen.

HENRY

She's finally sleeping? I thought the twins were supposed to be hard.

JANE

The twins were hard.

HENRY

The twins were a snap compared to Lorna.

JANE

Takes after her mother.

HENRY

She's sleeping.

JANE

Or a very good imitation.

HENRY

I walked her for two hours, gave up for five minutes and now she's sleeping? She needed to be near her mother.

JANE

I'm such a soothing presence... these days. Dr. Rich said I'd lose my "highs" and my "lows" on this stuff. Sometimes I think I lose everything.

HENRY

No. Not really.

JANE

Mmm. Look.

(she holds up the quilt)

Almost finished.

HENRY

That went pretty fast.

JANE

A year and seven months is not fast, Henry.

HENRY

Seemed shorter.

JANE

Not to me.

HENRY

I'm proud of you.

JANE

We're all proud of me, Henry. Listen to this.

HENRY

I'll read it.

He does; inscrutably.

HENRY

Nice.

JANE

Nice. That's what I thought.

HENRY

Actually-- a very good poem. Subtle rhyme scheme: filled, build, dread, ebbed, common, woman.

JANE

I wrote it. I know the rhyme scheme. Claustrophobic, well-crafted. It sounds like one of your poems, Henry... Sorry.

HENRY crosses to the playpen.

HENRY

She gets needy when she has a fever.

JANE

We all do. I used to get very needy when I had a fever. Remember?

HENRY

Sometimes it seems so passive-- parenting. They ignore you and you think a tree could do it better. You're just a place for them-- and then they get like this and-- you feel needed again.

JANE

Ah. I still need you, Henry. I may actually need you more than ever. This makes ten "very good poems." I'm aiming at an even dozen before I call it quits.

HENRY

What does that mean?

JANE

I can't stand writing "very good poems," Henry. I think they stink.

HENRY

It's just a dry spell.

JANE

There is a difference between a dry spell and a drought. In a drought, things die.

HENRY

Drama.

JANE

Was that drama? I barely remember.

HENRY

I think you need to trust your process.

JANE

Is that what you tell your students?

HENRY

Sometimes.

JANE

Do they tell you to shove your process up your ass?

HENRY

...Sometimes.

JANE

I used to have a process! Now I have--

HENRY

A life?

JANE

I have a life and you have a wife and we have no strife and where is that knife... There's a rhyme scheme for you.

HENRY

You miss it, don't you?

JANE

The knife? The razor's edge? Yes. You don't.

HENRY

No.

JANE

Liar.

HENRY

I am glad to have you safe.

JANE

Safe? I am not safe. I am very, very sorry!

CHILD'S VOICE

(recorded)

Mommy?

HENRY

Shhh.

JANE

It's all right, Sweetheart. Mommy's right here.

HENRY

She used to say, "Daddy."

JANE

They all used to say, "Suzanna." Who called, by the way.

HENRY

Yes, well... You know she was devoted to the kids.

JANE

Among other things.

HENRY

I suppose she wanted to know how we were doing...

JANE

Circling this marriage like a vulture. Call her back. Tell her the missus is still taking her idiot drug.

HENRY

It's a salt. We "assault" your disease.

JANE

Bad pun.

HENRY

She asked about the children?

JANE

You know how "dangerous" I am without my medication. Oh, sorry... I know Suzanna is a household god-- saint, anyway.

HENRY

She was very helpful to us. You're just jealous.

JANE

Of course I'm jealous! They loved her.

HENRY

And they love you, too.

JANE

"Too."

HENRY

I am not going to play "Poor Jane."

JANE

We're so well-behaved these days... Poor Henry. I think you miss the old Jane, too. Tell the truth. Which do you really prefer? The Lady or The Tiger?

JANE has dropped her quilt and embraced  
HENRY around the waist.



She starts to undo his belt. When he tries to pull away, she topples both of them to the floor.

HENRY

Lorna!

JANE

Let's go upstairs.

HENRY

If she wakes up, she'll be frightened.

JANE

Then we won't wake her... come on.

She starts to undress him. He pulls back.

HENRY

It's not that simple.

JANE

Used to be.

HENRY

Goddamn it! That's over! And I for one am glad it is--

CHILD'S VOICE

Mommy?

HENRY

Mommy's right here.

JANE

Speak for yourself.

JANE exits. Lights down.

SCENE 27

## APRON SPOT

When the lights come up, JANE is in a black academic gown and mortar board. She speaks out to the audience from a pin spot center stage.

## JANE

Ladies. As you might imagine, knowing my work, this honor came as a bit of a shock to me. Not that I am not pleased. I am quite pleased. Thank you. I wish I could accept with great good grace and leave you with a few gentle words about the glories of motherhood, the glories of art, the glories of spousedom, and the way these three glories gloriously intertwine. I know that you want me to say that you can have it all. I think that what you are after, what all of us are after, is a happy life in the arts. But if I am to tell you the truth, I am not certain that for me, “happy” and “life in the arts” go together. I would kill for a cigarette right now. I can? Oh. Now that’s glorious. Just glorious.

(JANE lights a cigarette.)

Ladies? Where am I? Oh yes, happiness. I’m afraid that I think of happiness a lot like balancing on one of those outsized circus balls. When I am up on that ball, with my feet underneath me, balancing, happy, it takes much too much concentration to stay up there, happy. God forbid I try writing in such a condition. No, to tell you the truth, I write best when I am not balanced, when I am unhappy, when I am writing to try to make myself be happy. This isn’t what you want to hear, is it? Well, as I understood it, I wasn’t invited here to tell you what you want to hear. I was invited here to tell you the truth. The truth is, happiness is fragile. So am I. So is writing. Is it any wonder you invited me here to testify? I am that rare thing, a successful woman writer. I’m here to tell you it’s a trick done with mirrors. I may look like a successful woman writer, but I do not feel like one, or not often. I’m sure you can do better than I. Just try it. And when you do, be certain to have a safety net. If that safety net is the unconditional love of your spouse, you are very lucky. For myself, I have found marital love to be conditional. And the condition is that my artist not be high maintenance. That I write in between the household chores. But writing doesn’t always want to be in between. Ladies, you cannot have it all. Ladies, I have had it all, and it has nearly killed me.

JANE sucks a final drag from her cigarette, stubs it out. Lights down.

## SCENE 28

## BEDROOM

Lights up. JANE paces, reading to herself from a sheaf of papers.

We hear a lullaby. Offstage, HENRY is singing.

HENRY (O.S.)

Rockabye and goodnight  
Go to sleep, little baby  
Hushabye and sleep tight  
May your dreams be soft and bright...

As HENRY sings, JANE grows more and more agitated.

JANE

Rubbish.

She crumples a page and throws it into a trash basket. She lights a cigarette, crosses to the bed and starts reading out loud.

JANE

The vase that summer filled  
With flowers stands empty  
On the table by my bed.  
I have a daily dread--  
...I have a daily dread I'll write more of this domestic crap.

She crumples the poem, throws it in the trash.  
HENRY is still singing.

HENRY

Rockabye Baby in the treetop  
When the wind blows--

Lights up in the kitchen. HENRY is walking a baby to sleep, singing. He has succeeded. He moves to lay the child back down in the playpen, still singing.

HENRY

When the bough breaks  
The cradle--  
...Never mind. The cradle will not fall. That's a terrible song. Daddy won't let the cradle fall.

In the bedroom, upstairs, JANE picks up the crumpled poem from the trash and lights a corner of it with her cigarette. Very slowly, it begins to curl and flame.

Downstairs, HENRY smells danger.

JANE tosses the burning page into the trash with her other pages. HENRY enters at a rush.

HENRY

What are you doing?

JANE

My world view or yours? Burning my poems.

HENRY

You're crazy!

He reaches for the trash, tries to stop the fire, snatches a poem out--

JANE

Very touching.

HENRY

I hope to God you've got copies.

JANE

Spoken like my literary executor.

HENRY

They were good.

JANE

Not great.

HENRY

Even if they weren't your best work--

JANE

Ah-hah!

HENRY

I said, "Even if." I am not judging-- for once. I liked this one!

JANE

What?

She grabs for the poem. It is burning.

JANE

Ouch! Oh my God! Me too!

She drops it. He grabs for it. Drops it. Tries to save it by stomping on it.

JANE

Henry! I don't have a copy! Jesus Christ!

Lights down, to their mixed laughter and groans.

SCENE 29

KITCHEN

Lights up. HENRY sits typing. JANE enters.

JANE

Henry?

HENRY

Mmm.

JANE

Are you bored?

HENRY

Frustrated.

JANE

Me too.

HENRY

Frustrated. Not bored.

Oh.

JANE

She has come up behind him and laid her head on his shoulder. Now she moves slightly aside.

HENRY

This fucking-- why I pick the meters I do--

JANE

Because they are hard... and therefore interesting.

HENRY

Thank you, Dr. Freud.

JANE

Dr. Adler. He's the one who believes it's all power.

HENRY

No, he's not. Maslow?

JANE

Wasn't he hierarchy of needs?

HENRY

Whoever. It is all power. The power of language. Ah!... that might work.

JANE

Henry--

HENRY

Mmm.

JANE

I've been thinking.

HENRY

Me too. Get me a cup of coffee, would you?

JANE

How would you like it?

HENRY

What? However I usually take it.

JANE

Henry--

HENRY

Yes, Jane!?

JANE

Ah. I'm bothering you, aren't I? I used to be able to interrupt you without bothering you.

HENRY

I used to write more poorly. These days, I keep the drama on the page.

JANE

I see. I took you for better or for worse and now I'm getting the "for worse."

HENRY

Something like that. Not artistically. Honey?

JANE

It's worse. Here's your coffee.

She pours the cup of coffee she is holding onto him.

HENRY

Goddamn it! Look! What? What is it?

JANE

I need to talk to you about something important.

HENRY

So say so. Use words!

JANE

Like you do so beautifully? Like I used to? It is very difficult for me to say anything without--

HENRY

Drinking? That's what this is all leading up to, isn't it? Poor Jane, poor Jane, pour Jane a drink?

JANE

Now that you mention it, why not?

HENRY

I'll tell you why not--

JANE

(bitterly)

Oh, goody! At least one of us can still use language.

HENRY

Forgive me. I can be really blind.

JANE

No kidding.

HENRY

I wasn't thinking.

JANE

No. You were writing.

HENRY

You've been writing some very good poems.

JANE

And you've been writing some great ones.

HENRY

This is not a competition!

JANE

Sure it is. With myself. And I am getting worse, Henry. Not better.

HENRY

This is how it looks to you today.

JANE

And yesterday.

HENRY

We all have dry spells.

JANE

Hold me, goddamn it! Don't talk to me! Don't use your goddamn words all the time.

HENRY

I wish I could take language--

JANE

And shove it up your ass--



HENRY

Yes!

JANE

Yes? ...I used to write some good dirty poems, didn't I?

HENRY

Yes. Yes, you did.

JANE

"I want you to sign me in your white ink--"

HENRY

All right. Always knew the sword was mightier than the pen.

JANE

Henry?

HENRY

Now what?

JANE

I don't want to fuck. I want to write.

HENRY

Great. Me too. I rescind the invitation.

He turns back to his work.

HENRY

Look. I am sorry you're not writing.

JANE

Not as sorry as I am.

HENRY

But I am writing. And I need calm.

JANE

Sorry.

HENRY

(under his breath)

I'll bet you are.

JANE spins his chair around and slugs him.

JANE

(slapping him)

Don't you ever pretend that I don't love your work. I may love it more than you do. I certainly love it more than I love you.

She is flailing on him. He grabs her by the forearm; she can't get free.

HENRY

That, I believe. And I believe you love your own work more than that.

This does it; the truth is out.

JANE

(finally sobbing)

Oh, Henry! It's gone! It's gone! I don't know who I am!

HENRY

There, there. It's all right.

JANE

It's not all right!

HENRY

I know... I know. Come here.

He holds her in his arms and starts gently to dance with her. Lights down.

### SCENE 30

KITCHEN

Lights up. When the lights come up, JANE is seated at the desk, working furiously.

HENRY enters from outside.

HENRY

Jane--

She holds a hand up, cop-style: wait.

JANE

“The cells do not forget.  
The serpent will uncoils--”

HENRY

That one! You found it?

JANE taps her head.

JANE

...It came back.  
“The cells do not forget.  
The serpent will uncoils.”

HENRY

What an image.

JANE

You think?

HENRY

I think you forgot to refill your prescription.

JANE

No, I didn't.

HENRY

Dr. Rich says you didn't refill it.

JANE

He's right. I didn't.

HENRY

But you just said-- ah.

JANE

I said I did not “forget.”

HENRY

You know this is suicide.

JANE

No. It's malpractice. He called you?

HENRY

Actually? I called him. I had a feeling.

JANE

And I had a lot of feelings. It's very refreshing-- a little startling-- but really very refreshing-- to feel again.

HENRY

You know this is suicide.

JANE

I know the other was murder.

HENRY

Don't joke.

JANE

You know it was killing me. Dr. Rich told me you agreed with me on that.

HENRY

You set me up.

JANE

I had to know what you really thought-- not what you thought for my sake. For God's sake, Henry! I'm our emotional Hapsburg. I take that stuff and go numb and you go numb to match me. That stuff was as bad for you as it was for me.

HENRY

I'm not sure about that.

JANE

I am. I missed us, Henry. I missed us.

HENRY

How are you feeling?

JANE

Like me.

HENRY

That's good?

JANE

You used to think so.

HENRY

How long? Since right before you burned--

JANE

Since right after. That was crazy-- crazy in a way I didn't recognize. If you had done that, I'd have killed you.

HENRY

Thanks. I'll remember that's one of my options.

JANE

"The hissing blood regrets"--  
Henry, I've got it!

HENRY

I thought you burned that one.

JANE

This afternoon. It just came back. I did burn it and it was good and that's when I knew-- Oh, Henry! "The hissing blood." That's what was missing. The villainous hiss.

HENRY moves to behind her chair. He strokes her neck. She leans back against him and he strokes her throat.

HENRY

Sinister image-- the hissing blood.

JANE

Yes. Well, it feels that way. It lies quiet, sleeping. I forget it's there and then one day, softly, I hear the hiss--

HENRY straightens, alarmed. He grips her shoulders.

JANE

Not now. Now I feel very good. I feel like myself... and you feel like Henry--

She lolls her head against his groin; draws his hands onto her breasts.

JANE

Very much like Henry-- Oh--

She wheels around, wraps her legs around his waist.

JANE

I missed us!

HENRY carries her offstage, pulling her shirt from her shoulders.

Lights down.

SCENE 31

KITCHEN

Lights up. HENRY stands, reading a poem to himself.

HENRY

(reading)

“You have decided we are an accident.  
I can see that. Accidents happen--  
And so did we--”

Unseen by HENRY, JANE enters. She walks mutely toward him, her arms held stiffly in front of her.

HENRY

Jane? This is nice-- I’m not sure nice is the word. This is great...

“The survivors of bad accidents tell good stories.  
They talk about tunnels, figures of light.  
A sudden shift in the time space continuum...”

I like this! Jane!

JANE

Henry. It came for me--

He wheels to see her at the sound of her voice and holds out his arms. Lights down.

## SCENE 32

In the pitch black we hear:

HENRY

Suzanna? This is Henry Mitchell. We need you.

HENRY

Tell Dr. Rich this is Henry Mitchell and he had better goddamn well become available. Jane Thornton, tell him.

Lights up.

## SCENE 33

KITCHEN

Dark stage. Lights up. HENRY is at the counter. He has a very large, unwieldy bouquet of lilacs that he is wrapping in tin foil. He does this silently for awhile and then begins reciting to himself very slowly. As he does so, the lights come up on JANE in her hospital room. HENRY continues wrapping the flowers as he recites.

HENRY

Who knows what the lilacs cost  
The green and verdant earth?  
Who knows if that flowering  
Is ever really worth  
The loss of self-containment  
The softening at core  
The quickening at center  
The wrenching to a thaw.

JANE, in her hospital room, is making a decision. She moves toward the window. Stands.

HENRY

Who knows if the earth  
Accustomed to her chill  
Burns as she awakens?  
Warms against her will--

(He pauses, as if imitating JANE'S  
thoughts)

The ancient smell of lilacs  
Moves modern men to weep  
The perfume of desire  
Calls cold earth from her sleep.

Decided, JANE moves toward the bed, makes it.  
Neatens the covers. HENRY gets brusque,  
clearing the mess up, pulling on his coat.

HENRY

The perfume of desire... That we've had.  
(loud)  
Suzanna? Boys? I'm going now. See you for dinner.

Lights out.

### SCENE 34

HOSPITAL ROOM

Lights up. HENRY enters the hospital room.

HENRY

How are you feeling?

JANE

I've been writing. I can't usually do that, you know, afterward.

HENRY

The lilacs are budding. The twins sent these. I think they went at the bushes with their little axes.

JANE

And Lorna? She's mad, isn't she?

HENRY

I don't know-- she won't talk to me about you.



JANE

Who can blame her? I missed her birthday. A Freudian would have a field day with the timing of these things.

HENRY

May I?

(reading)

“You are expensive, Dear.  
Not like caviar, but like mistakes in surgery,  
An error by the anesthesiologist,  
A slip of the knife...”

Ouch.

JANE

It’s not about you.

HENRY

Double ouch.

JANE

It’s not to you or any other man. It’s to me. To Lady Jane Pain, my poet. You’re not hurting me, Henry. She is.

HENRY

Well, I’m glad we finally got that straight.

JANE

I don’t know how to get rid of her. She’s me.

HENRY

Not all there is of you. I’ve always told you that.

JANE

And I’ve always told you that without her I don’t know my name. She is me, Henry. At least most of me.

HENRY

But not all of you.

JANE

The part I love and the part you love, too, Henry. That Jane you fell in love with. Not plain Jane, Lady Jane Pain. The Jane that makes us poems, not babies.

HENRY

I don't like this conversation. There is something sinister going on in here.

JANE

Right. You are not going to get your way.

HENRY

My way?

JANE

You are not going to lure me home--

HENRY

Not yet.

JANE

No.

HENRY

How do you know that you and I don't want the same thing?

JANE

That's the problem. I'm sure we do. How was it Dr. Rich put it? "The perfect pathological pairing"?

HENRY

Easy for him to say.

JANE

We always want the same thing, Henry. We want it all.

HENRY

Of course.

JANE

No, Henry.

HENRY

No what? You are the woman I love.

JANE

What difference does that make?

HENRY

I choose you.

JANE

Oh, Henry! That is very funny.

HENRY

What's funny?

JANE is laughing.

JANE

Henry, you have got about as much choice about loving me as I have about this disease of mine. It's systemic.

HENRY

I choose you.

JANE

That's just the way you get around feeling abused.

HENRY

Lets you off the hook. You didn't make me love you... maybe Satan did...

JANE

Thank God. I'd hate to think you were just addicted to being St. Henry. It's the non-saint I'm in love with.

HENRY

Are you?

JANE

Oh. Oh, yes.

HENRY

After all this time.

JANE

It's you I love, Henry.

HENRY

I know.

JANE

Don't just say that.

HENRY

I do know. I have my doubts, but faith isn't faith without doubts-- is it?

JANE

I think we should give up.

HENRY

We will talk about it once you're home.

JANE

I think we should give "home" up, Henry. I think that's just a pretty idea we had.

HENRY

Don't do that. Don't pretend it never worked.

JANE

Don't pretend it ever did. Your fantasy is that the bad times weren't real. My fantasy is that the good times weren't real. We're just trying to protect ourselves.

HENRY

You don't need to protect yourself from me. I love you, Jane.

JANE

That's it. That is what I need protection from. Can't you see that loving me hurts you? Can't you see that hurting you kills me? Not to mention what it does to the children?

HENRY

I wouldn't ask you to, but you could go back on medication.

JANE

You wouldn't ask me to! Goddamn it! You just did!... I was thinking I could try it again--

HENRY

I'm not sure I could let you.

JANE

You see? Evidently we do love each other and it is just one of God's dirty tricks.

HENRY

Don't say that. There has to be some way.

JANE

No, Henry. There doesn't. Take the flowers with you.

HENRY

Lilacs.

JANE

Take the goddamn lilacs with you. I hate lilacs, Henry. I hate them. They make me weep. Oh, God, Henry, go. Go now.

He moves to hold her.

HENRY

Jane--

JANE

No. Don't touch me. Please.

HENRY

You don't have to take the medication. You could come home for awhile and then-- you've always said you could feel it coming--

JANE

Go!

HENRY

The lilacs--

JANE

Will you go!?

Lights down. In blackness:

HENRY

Yes.

SCENE 35

Lights up. HENRY stands at the reading area. He holds his sheaf of poems.

HENRY

I've been asked to read an old poem of mine, "Lilacs." I'm sorry. I don't read that poem anymore.

Lights down.

END OF PLAY