

Poe: The Play

A full-length play

Greg Jenkins
405 Pratt St.
Luke, MD 21540
301.359.9780
drgjenkins@yahoo.com

Characters

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| EDGAR ALLAN POE | American literary icon; about thirty* |
| DR. JOHN MORAN | Poe's physician; about thirty; also the play's narrator |
| JOHN ALLAN | Poe's stepfather; mid-fifties |
| VIRGINIA CLEMM | Poe's wife; late teens* |
| MARIA "MUDDY" CLEMM | Poe's mother-in-law; mid-forties* |
| MORRIS MATTSON | A writer; mid-forties* |
| THOMAS WHITE | A magazine editor; mid-forties |
| TOMMY | A barkeep; mid-twenties* |
| HENRY FETTERS | A customs house official; about sixty |
| ELIZABETH ELLET | A candidate for Poe's affections; mid-thirties |
| HELEN WHITMAN | Another candidate for Poe's affections; mid-thirties |
| ELMIRA SHELTON | Poe's late-life fiancée; mid-thirties |
| VOICE | Heard at the beginning and end of the play |

*During the course of the play, the characters marked with an asterisk age by a decade or more. No special effort need be made, however, to show this progression, and the age as indicated here should be workable.

ACT ONE

This play covers a span of roughly fifteen years, ending in 1849. Though it occasionally deviates from the historic facts as we know them, it is nevertheless meant to evoke the times, spirit and life of Edgar Allan Poe.

The scenes that comprise the narrative should be presented in a stark and minimalist way. Any props necessary to suggest a given setting--a parlor, an office, a tavern--may and should be quite primitive. For instance, a tavern may be indicated by a pub table and a couple of stools.

Not every scene should be positioned centrally on the stage. Some scenes could--and should--be situated more toward stage right or stage left. This shift in locus will signal the audience that the place and time have changed, and also give the stagehands an opportunity to make whatever physical adjustments may be needed elsewhere. The scenes should advance with little or no pause between them.

Whatever portion of the stage is not being used should be kept as dark as possible, and indeed the atmosphere of the entire play should tend to be dark and brooding despite the sprinkle of humor.

All is dark as the action begins. A crisp eloquent VOICE whose owner is invisible to us reads a snippet from Poe's short story "Eleanora."

VOICE

I am come of a race noted for vigor of fancy and ardor of passion. Men have called me mad; but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence . . . They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night. In their gray visions they obtain glimpses of eternity, and thrill, in awaking, to find that they have been upon the verge of the great secret.

The lights rise, and we are presented with an unsettling scene. A stricken man lies face-up on a gurney; he is half-conscious, writhing and moaning in distress. Dressed all in black, the man is EDGAR ALLAN POE.

Attending to POE, or trying to, is DR. JOHN MORAN. About thirty years old, the doctor is wearing a low-collar shirt with a cravat, a light-colored vest, light-colored trousers and a dark, knee-length frock coat. MORAN, an earnest fellow who is both alarmed and puzzled by the condition of his newest patient, is doing what he can to understand the case and deal with it.

MORAN

What is it? What's the matter?

Unable to speak, POE tosses his head and groans.

MORAN (CONT'D)

Are you drunk?

(Sniffs)

I smell alcohol. Are you in pain?

POE

(With an effort)

Yes.

MORAN

Where does it hurt?

POE

Everywhere.

MORAN

What happened?

POE

I don't know.

MORAN

You don't . . . Did you have an accident? Are you ill?

POE

I don't know.

MORAN

I'm a doctor. You need to communicate with me. Do you know where you are?

POE shakes his head.

MORAN (CONT'D)

You're at Washington College Hospital. I'm Dr. John Moran. I want to help you, but you'll need to--

POE

Throw physic to the dogs. I'll none of it.

MORAN

You'll need to help *me* so I can help *you*. Where were you when this happened?

POE

(Cries out)

Virginia!

MORAN

That makes no sense. You're in Baltimore. Who brought you here? If I could--

POE

Virginia!

MORAN

Is there someone here I can talk to?

POE

I'm alone.

MORAN

Who are you? What's your name?

POE

Poe.

MORAN

Poe . . .

POE

Edgar Allan Poe.

MORAN

(Blinks in surprise)

I've heard that name. You're the . . . the poet, the writer.

POE

Sick--sick unto death.

MORAN

You wrote that poem about a bird . . . What was it? A crow.

POE

(Suddenly focused)

It was a *raven*.

MORAN

A raven, that's it. Good Lord, man, what happened to you?

POE

I don't know.

(Thrashes)

Everything. Nothing.

MORAN

Talk to me.

POE

Oh, my God, my God.

MORAN

(Frantic)

Mr. Poe. Edgar! Tell me . . . listen. Listen to me. I want you to concentrate, and tell me just what the devil--

POE

(Wails)

VIRGINIA!

MORAN peers down at POE fretfully. Soon the lights go to black, though the doctor, drifting away from the gurney, is captured by a spotlight. Now his mood has become abstracted, reflective. After a moment he addresses the audience.

MORAN

Naturally, we did what we could for him. I did. Others did. We worked on him for *days*, but it was a difficult case--as difficult and strange as the gentleman himself.

When it was over, I made up my mind to find out more about this unique man, this Edgar Allan Poe. Not that I had much interest in literature. Far from it. I was a man of science! But there was something about Poe that intrigued me. The shape of his broad forehead, the timbre of his voice, that uncanny gleam in his eye--so like the gleam in a cat's eye. And of course his reputation. If he wasn't the most famous writer in America, he was certainly the most notorious.

So I set about to do some detective work, like a certain Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin. I read up on Poe, and I talked to everyone I thought might know something about him. Friends, enemies, relatives, associates . . . whomever I could track down. It took me quite a while to put the pieces of the puzzle together--or to decode the cipher, as he might say. But here's what I eventually discovered.

I discovered that Virginia, and specifically Richmond, was an important place to Poe. He spent much of his life there. I also discovered that another Virginia was an important *person* to him, maybe the most significant person in his life. And even more than that, I discovered that Edgar Allan Poe was so oddly written that he could've been a character in one of his own stories.

MORAN strolls away as the lights rise on two men, one seated with his legs crossed, the other standing before him. The seated man is POE's stepfather, JOHN ALLAN. In his mid-fifties, coldly handsome, elegantly attired, ALLAN radiates dignity and authority; his piercing gaze would sit well on a hawk. He holds a notebook in his lap.

In front of him is POE, who, deck of cards in hand, is preparing to perform a card trick. Hair black, skin pale, he is wearing a neat but rather shabby black suit. His build is slight, but his bearing is erect and formal and implies a hint of athleticism that one might not have expected. In his mid-twenties at this point, POE may look a bit older than his years.

The setting is a room in ALLAN's palatial home.

POE

Now--I want you to *observe*. Observe carefully, Pa. I'm going to shuffle the deck . . .

(Does so)

And I'll ask you to select a card.

(Holds the deck down and fans it)

Any card at all.

(Dourly, Allan complies)

Have a look at it. That's right. Place it back in the deck. Thank you. Now I'll shuffle the cards once again . . .

(Does so)

All right. What's your favorite number?

ALLAN

Edgar--

POE

Come on, you must have a favorite.

ALLAN

Seven.

POE

(Counting the cards)

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

(Holds up the seventh card)

Is this your card?

ALLAN

No.

POE

Hmm.

ALLAN

Edgar--

POE

(Undeterred)

Just a moment. What is your *least* favorite number?

ALLAN

(Sighs)

Thirteen.

POE

Touch of triskaidekaphobia, eh?

(Counts off thirteen cards and holds up the last one)

Is *this* your card?

ALLAN

No.

POE

(Frowns)

Really!

ALLAN

Edgar--

POE

Let me ask you this. Which card *did* you select?

ALLAN

Ace of spades.

POE

Have a look in your breast pocket.

ALLAN reaches into his pocket and, to his amazement (and exasperation), pulls out the ace of spades. As POE beams with amusement, ALLAN crumples the card and tosses it aside. Wielding his notebook, he stands up and looms over his stepson.

ALLAN

(Gruff)

You call that magic? What you just did? I call it roguery and wastefulness.

POE

Oh, Pa. You always take things so--

ALLAN

I'll show you some *real* magic, the kind an adult can appreciate and respect.

(Flips open the notebook)

My company, Allan and Ellis. Look at this.

(Jabs the notebook with his finger)

Tobacco. Hardware. Ready-made clothing. Fine teas and coffees. Wines and liquors. These are last year's figures--a treat for the eyes, wouldn't you say?

POE

Well, I--

ALLAN

And these are the figures for this year as of two months ago.

(Whips through some pages)

Here's the magic. Up ten percent or more in *each and every category!*

(Pause)

Now that's what I call magic.

POE

(Blase)

Abacadabra.

ALLAN

And you could've been a part of it--could *still* be a part of it if you wanted to be.

POE

I'm not cut out for that sort of work.

ALLAN

How the hell do you know? You've never tried it.

POE

I tried it.

ALLAN

No, you *dabbled* at it. You worked in the counting house for what? Two months?

POE

Three.

ALLAN

Three months. And you call that honestly trying?

POE

Actually, I found it extremely trying. Pa, we've had this discussion before.

ALLAN

Don't I know it! And every time we have this discussion, I become twice as frustrated as I already was. Edgar, I know I'm just your stepfather, not your biological father, but surely to God--

POE

You're the only father I've ever known.

ALLAN

Well then, surely to God some of my core values and principles must've worked their way into your . . . manner of thinking. Surely I've made some impression on you.

POE

(Ambiguously)

Oh, you've made an impression on me.

ALLAN

(Begins pacing around)

Frances and I--God rest her soul--we did our best to raise you responsibly.

POE

And I'm grateful.

ALLAN

Sent you off to the University of Virginia. Top-notch school. How did *that* go?

POE

Well enough, for as long as it lasted.

ALLAN

And how long was that?

POE

One semester.

ALLAN

About as long as your stint at the counting house. Did you learn anything at school besides how to play cards?

POE

I honed my skills in Latin and Greek.

ALLAN

(Sarcastic)

Yes, Edgar, there's a huge demand in today's workforce for those who can speak Latin.

POE

Damnans quod non intelligunt.

ALLAN

Excuse me?

POE

Nothing.

ALLAN

And then you went off and joined the army! I *still* struggle to understand that one. Did you think you were going to be a soldier?

POE

Stranger things have happened.

ALLAN

Maybe--but I can't recall a one. In the time it takes me to smoke a cigar, you dropped the army, or they dropped you, and you came crawling back to Richmond with the notion that you were fit material for West Point.

POE

Education is important.

ALLAN

Yes, and I pulled some strings to get you in there--another top-notch school. So how long--

POE

I'm grateful, Pa, for your help.

ALLAN

But how long, son, did you last at West Point?

(Sheepish, POE looks away, says
nothing)

Here's what I want you to grasp. The Bible teaches us that to become a man, you need to put away childish things--

POE

Mm. First Corinthians.

ALLAN

But *you*, with all your bizarre schemes and your wild ideas . . .

(Shakes his head)

For the life of me . . .

POE

I believe I *have* put aside childish things.

ALLAN

(Skeptical)

Have you?

(Pause)

What're you doing for a living these days?

POE

I edit a small magazine. Soon to become a large magazine.

ALLAN

Mm hmm. Pays good money, does it?

POE

Some.

ALLAN

Ten dollars a week maybe?

(POE shrugs, says nothing)

Edgar, let me ask you point-blank. Why did you come here?

POE

To Richmond?

ALLAN

Here. To this house.

POE

We're family, Pa. I wanted to visit you. Isn't that reason enough?

ALLAN

You're not short of cash or anything like that, correct? You simply wanted to--

POE

Of course not.

ALLAN

You simply wanted to share your congeniality and your card tricks with your beloved Pa.

POE

Nothing wrong with that, is there?

ALLAN

Not a thing.

POE

I thought perhaps we could patch up our differences, since, you know, we haven't always seen . . .

ALLAN

Eye to eye, right.

POE

And that, I assure you, is my sole motivation.

ALLAN

Good.

A moment passes as each stares at the other in contemplation.

POE

(Cautiously)

Now, if you . . . if you felt moved in your benevolent and Christian spirit to spare me a few dollars . . .

ALLAN

(Irked)

Oh, Edgar.

POE

Not much! . . . purely as a token of our familial bond, I certainly wouldn't be so rude as to turn it down.

ALLAN

Thought you said you didn't need any money.

POE

I don't *need* it, exactly. But I *could* make use of it.

ALLAN

I'm sure you could.

POE

Just fifty dollars, and not a penny more. What do you say?

ALLAN

I say just zero dollars, and not a penny more than *that*. You seem to have the impression I'm running a charity.

POE

(A deep breath)

Pa, my, uh . . . my financial circumstances are a tad more exigent than I wanted you to know.

ALLAN

Do tell.

POE

I didn't want you to worry about me, but I do have obligations. And bills. And some of the most cold-hearted creditors a man can imagine. They're like--

ALLAN

You've also got a hole in your wallet. And another hole in your head.

POE

Like demons. Like fiends.

ALLAN

(Flippant)

You like to write gothic horror stories; maybe you could write one about your creditors.

POE

There's something else, Pa. Another factor I hope you'll consider.

ALLAN

Yes?

POE

Sometime in the near future, I intend to take on a wife. If you don't see fit to help *me* out--

ALLAN

(Shakes his head)

Another mouth to feed, when you can't afford to feed your own!

POE

Maybe you could offer something for her sake. She's a charming and beautiful young lady.

ALLAN

I'll warrant she is.

POE

And I'd like you to meet her.

ALLAN

I've no doubt that one of these days I shall.

POE

I'd like you to meet her now.

ALLAN

Now . . . What do you mean, now?

POE

I brought her with me.

ALLAN

(Looks around)

Where is she?

POE

(Gestures)

Out there.

ALLAN

(Incredulous)

You left her standing in the hall by herself?

POE

I wanted to introduce her at the ideal moment.

ALLAN

(Riled even further)

Edgar, for a supposedly intelligent young man--

POE

(Calls out)

Virginia? Virginia!

ALLAN

For an allegedly intelligent young man . . .

POE

(Cups his hand around his mouth)

VIRGINIA!

Smiling cheerfully, in comes VIRGINIA
CLEMM wearing a plain, ankle-length dress

with long puffy sleeves. Her brown hair in a bun, she is plump, shapely and vivacious. She is also, we notice, many years younger than POE.

ALLAN
(Dumbstruck)

Oh, my.

VIRGINIA
You must be Mr. Allan. Eddie's step-pa. He's told me so much about you! I'm Virginia, and I'm delighted to meet you.

(Extends her hand, which ALLAN takes doubtfully)

ALLAN
Yes . . .

POE
You see? Isn't she a peach?

ALLAN
She looks a mite young.
(To VIRGINIA)
You look a mite young.

VIRGINIA
I *am* a mite young.

POE
Virginia has been blessed, Pa, with an *inner* maturity.

ALLAN
The outer part of her can't be more than sixteen.
(To VIRGINIA)
Are you a day older than sixteen?

VIRGINIA
(Proudly)
I'm thirteen years old.

POE
(Quickly)
Soon to be fourteen.

ALLAN

(Straining to comprehend)

So you're . . . Edgar, you're going to marry . . . a thirteen-year-old *child*?

POE

She's practically *fourteen*.

ALLAN

Fourteen . . .

POE

She comes from a wonderful family.

VIRGINIA

I'm a member of the Clemm family.

ALLAN

(Trying to recall)

Clemm, Clemm. The Clemm family . . .

POE

I've been sharing a house with Virginia and her mother, Maria Clemm.

ALLAN

(Slowly)

Maria . . . She's your aunt.

POE

Well--yes.

ALLAN

Virginia's your cousin.

POE

Yes.

ALLAN

So what you're telling me is, you plan to marry your *thirteen-year-old cousin*!?

POE

Soon to be fourteen.

ALLAN
(Unequivocally)

Get out of my house.

POE

I beg your pardon?

ALLAN
(Grabs up a cane)

Get out of my house now before I break this cane over your sick, sorry, sacrilegious head.

POE

Are you serious?

Infuriated, ALLAN takes a murderous swipe at
POE.

POE (CONT'D)

Does this mean you won't be donating a few dollars?

ALLAN

GET OUT!

POE seizes VIRGINIA by the wrist and scurries
away as ALLAN continues to brandish the cane.

VIRGINIA

It was nice meeting you!

Blackout.

Presently a spotlight catches DR. MORAN
somewhere along the periphery of the stage. As
before, he speaks to the audience.

MORAN

John Allan was not only one of the crustiest men in all of Virginia, he was also one of the wealthiest. Yet when he died--as he did soon thereafter--he cut his stepson out of his will entirely. I assume that this omission did little to reduce whatever sense of loss young Poe may've felt.

True to his word, Poe did marry his cousin Virginia when she was almost, but not quite, fourteen. And he continued to live with her and her mother Maria, whom he fondly called "Muddy." This relationship--between Poe and the two Clemms--was one of the few bright

spots in his life, a life that otherwise admitted about as much sunlight as the melancholy house of Usher.

As MORAN and his spotlight disappear, the other lights rise, and we see POE and MARIA at home in conversation. He's wandering about; she's using a cloth to wipe off a small wooden table, beside which is a skinny wooden chair. Since the table is littered with papers, cleaning it is no simple task.

In her forties, MARIA is a stout, homely woman in a long black sack of a dress. Her maternal solicitude for POE is evident, and despite his natural edginess (and any pique caused by their obvious lack of means), the affection he feels for her is genuine.

POE

(Rubbing his hands together)

Damnably cold in here, Muddy.

MARIA

Well, it's October.

POE

I know what time of the year it is. Why don't we--

MARIA

Sometimes gets *cold* in October.

POE

Why don't we put some wood in the stove?

MARIA

First off, we got no wood.

POE

No wood? What happened to it?

MARIA

We used up all the old wood; we never got no new wood.

POE

I think maybe we'd better acquire some.

MARIA

Costs money, Eddie. Which we don't have mountains of.

POE

(Correcting her)

"Of which we don't have mountains."

(Deliberates)

Can you speak to some of your friends about this? Ask around, see if you can't secure us some wood.

MARIA

I'll do what I can.

POE

Gratis, if possible.

MARIA

I'll do what I can. Course you know we got a problem with the stove.

POE

What's wrong with the stove?

MARIA

Ain't too sure. The baffle, the flue . . .

POE

(Scratching his head)

Baffles always baffle me.

MARIA

Maybe a pipe . . .

POE

When you find the wood, as I'm sure you will, you might also find a workman to effect some repairs. I'd do it myself, but, uh . . .

MARIA

Yes, yes. You're better with words than you are with your hands.

POE

(A trifle annoyed)

You should've told me sooner there was something amiss with the stove. If I'd known sooner--

MARIA

Eddie, I told you yesterday, I told you a week ago--

POE

No, you didn't.

MARIA

And I told you a month ago.

POE

No, now Muddy, you, you certainly--

MARIA

But your mind is always a thousand miles away, and my words go in one ear and out the other like a swarm of blowflies.

POE

That's a hideous trope.

(After a pause, shrugs)

I don't know, maybe you did tell me.

MARIA

Dad-blamed right I did.

POE

What'll we do if it gets to be winter, and the snow is piling up, and the wind is howling, and we still don't have wood to burn or a stove that'll burn it?

MARIA

Reckon we'll freeze our heinies off.

After an initial look of shock, POE smiles and then laughs. The two laugh together.

MARIA (CONT'D)

I'll take care of it.

POE

Muddy, why on earth do you put up with me?

MARIA

I'm tickled pink to have you, dear. You're like my own son.

POE

I'm crabby, eccentric, self-centered.

MARIA

I'm used to it.

POE

I drink more than I should.

MARIA

That I could do without.

POE

I don't bring in much money, and my prospects are somewhere between exiguous and nil.

MARIA

You're a genius, Eddie. Remember: a genius always has prospects.

POE goes to the table and picks up a sheet of paper.

POE

I'm working on a new poem. A sonnet. This one's going to be about you.

MARIA

About me!

POE

I'm going to call it "To My Mother."

MARIA

(Embarrassed)

I'm not your mother.

POE

Ah, but indeed you are. Isn't finished yet, but what I have so far reads as follows:

Because I feel that, in the Heavens above,
The angels, whispering to one another,
Can find, among their burning terms of love,
None so devotional as that of "Mother,"
Therefore by that dear name I long have called you--
You who are more than mother unto me,
And fill my heart of hearts . . .

MARIA

Don't know as I deserve it, but it's lovely. You must read it to me again when it's done.

POE

I will.

MARIA

In the meantime, take off your trousers.

POE

I'm sorry?

MARIA

They're coming apart at the seams. Down there . . .

(Points)

And over there. So take 'em off and I'll fix 'em.

POE

Right this instant?

MARIA

No time like the present. Can't have my favorite genius marching around with holes in his trousers.

POE

Muddy, these are . . .

MARIA

Hmm?

POE

These are the only trousers I own.

MARIA

I'll work fast. If you can put up with a little more cold, I can put up with the sight of you in your drawers.

Reluctantly POE goes about removing his shoes and pants, using the chair as necessary. His underwear--his "drawers"--amount to drab white shorts that extend to his knees; aside from the color, they resemble modern-day board shorts.

POE

(Undressing)

Where's Virginia?

MARIA

Out back, last I checked.

POE

You might call her in. It's time I gave her another school lesson.

MARIA

(Turns and bellows)

VIRGINIA!

POE

What's she doing out back?

MARIA

Watching the Swagger boys play mumbley-peg.

POE

Mumbley-peg! That's a hazardous game, Muddy. Those boys are playing with a sharp knife.

MARIA

(Shrugs)

She's a married woman.

POE

Besides, I'm familiar with the Swaggers; they're a pair of guttersnipes. Please call her in here.

(Hands her the pants)

MARIA

(Staring down at POE's underwear)

Eddie, I don't mean to sound over-particular, but your drawers . . .

POE

What about them?

MARIA

They're gonna need washed.

POE

(Firmly)

Not now.

MARIA

Fairly soon.

(Shakes her head in disapproval, turns and

VIRGINIA

(Groans)

Do we *have* to?

POE

You'd like to be a bright and educated young lady, wouldn't you?

VIRGINIA

I figure I'm already as bright and educated as I need to be.

POE

No, not by a long shot. Come on, sit down.

VIRGINIA

(Takes a seat)

What'll it be today? History, I hope?

POE

No ma'am.

VIRGINIA

Or art? I like art.

POE

Today we're going to explore your very special *favorite* subject.

VIRGINIA

(Another groan)

Not algebra!

POE

Algebra it is. Let's ascertain if you, Mrs. Poe, can solve for x .

VIRGINIA

I thought I already did that. Didn't I do that last week?

POE

You did. But today I'm going to challenge you with a different problem.

VIRGINIA

Eddie, if you solve for x once, how many more times you gotta solve for it?

POE

My dear, x is a variable.

VIRGINIA

I thought x was a letter.

POE

It's a letter that can represent different *values* depending on the situation.

VIRGINIA

Seems to me if x can stand for anything, it really don't stand for much of nothing.

POE

Well, it's a symbol, you see--

VIRGINIA

(Flabbergasted)

It's a variable, a letter, *and* a symbol? . . .

POE

Yes, and it--

VIRGINIA

Criminy!

POE

It, it does stand for something--but we don't know what till we *solve* for it.

VIRGINIA

Do we *have* to solve for it?

POE

What do you mean?

VIRGINIA

I mean is there some law says every time your eye lands on an x, you *must* solve for it?

POE

(Exhales)

No, I don't believe it's a categorical imperative.

VIRGINIA

So why bother? We leave all the x's in the world alone, world might be a better place.

POE

Might be.

(Pause; to himself)

I always feel more mentally acute when I'm wearing trousers.

(Pause)

Let me ask you this. What would you rather do today in lieu of algebra?

VIRGINIA

I'd *rather* hang by my thumbs.

POE

Virginia--

VIRGINIA

All right, all right. How about we do some music? That's a proper subject, ain't it?

POE

"Isn't it."

VIRGINIA

Well, is it or ain't it?

POE

Yes, it is. And it's not a bad proposal, either. Perhaps you could sing me a song.

VIRGINIA

Anything in particular?

POE

Whatever your heart desires.

VIRGINIA

(Stands and introduces herself)

Ladies and gentlemen, in lieu of algebra, and for your listening pleasure, here's Mrs. Virginia Poe singing a real toe-tapper that most everyone loves. It's called "Turkey in the Straw."

She claps her hands to set the beat, and POE, grinning, claps along with her. As she sings (and in a capable voice), he becomes increasingly caught up in her performance, swaying his arms and shoulders, stamping his foot and, by the end, capering around in a goofy, improvised jig.

VIRGINIA (CONT'D)

As I went to milk and I didn't know how,
 I milked a goat instead of a cow.
 There's a monkey sittin' on a pile of straw,
 And he's givin' a wink to his mother-in-law!

Turkey in the straw, haw haw haw!
 Turkey in the straw, haw haw haw!
 Roll 'em up and twist 'em up a high tuck a-shaw,
 And hit 'em up a tune called "Turkey in the Straw"!

Well, I come to the river and I couldn't get across,
 So I paid five dollars to an old blind hoss.
 Well, he couldn't go ahead and he wouldn't stand still,
 So he went up and down like an old saw mill!

Turkey in the straw, haw haw haw!
 Turkey in the straw, haw haw haw!
 Roll 'em up and twist 'em up a high tuck a-shaw,
 And hit 'em up a tune called "Turkey in the Straw"!

Midway through the song, MARIA reappears carrying POE's pants. Open-mouthed, she walks toward the others in stunned amazement. When they notice her, the singing and dancing stop, and both POE and VIRGINIA seem slightly abashed at their sportive behavior.

POE

Muddy! You're not done already?

MARIA

I might ask the same of you, Mr. Twinkletoes. For a minute there, I thought you were aiming to dance the afternoon away.

POE

Just taking a brief respite from a lesson in algebra.

MARIA

Algebra.

(Studies him for a moment)

Put your trousers on.

She hands POE his pants as we go to blackout.

Elsewhere onstage, a spotlight once again illuminates the musing DR. MORAN.

MORAN

(To the audience)

Of course, Poe's home life was one thing; his professional life was something else.

As you might expect, his sonorous poems and his wicked stories drew some attention, much of it favorable, from the outset. But, unfortunately, they didn't yield much income. So he had to make a living by other methods, mainly doing editorial work for a series of literary magazines. In the process, he'd also contribute some creative pieces and some rather pointed reviews of others' writing.

I say a *series* of magazines, because he didn't last for very long at any one engagement. God knows he had the talent, but there was something in his . . . well, in his *personal style* that always led to trouble. I'm reminded of watching a lost wagon go wandering down a rocky dirt road. A lot of bumps along the way, and sometimes a wheel would come clean off.

MORAN steps away, and the lights rise on a new scene.

Two men, both in their forties, are standing close together in an office. One of the men, author MORRIS MATTSON, is railing angrily at the second man, THOMAS WHITE, who is a magazine publisher and coincidentally POE's employer. MATTSON is large, loud and given to frequent gesticulations. A slight man in his shirtsleeves, WHITE is calmly leafing through a magazine as if searching for something.

MATTSON

(Seething)

Where is he? Is he here?

WHITE

I don't know where he is.

MATTSON

Is he here?

WHITE

No, Morris, he isn't here. Why don't you just--

MATTSON

Better be *damn glad* he isn't here, or I'd take that arrogant, condescending villain by his scrawny little neck--

WHITE

Just settle down, Morris. I suspect you may be overreacting.

MATTSON

Over . . . Did you read, sir, what he wrote about me? About my book?

WHITE

I'm sure I glanced at it. Trying to find it here . . .

MATTSON

You *glanced* at it?! The man *libeled* me--in your magazine--and you no more than--

WHITE

Oh, I don't think he libeled you.

MATTSON

He stated for the record--and I'm quoting verbatim--that I've written the "silliest book in the world"!

WHITE

Well, I don't think that's too--

MATTSON

He says it's full of "utter folly, bombast and inanity"!

WHITE

(Mildly)

Where's that? Oh yes, further down . . .

MATTSON

He refers to my work as a, as a "tissue of absurdity"!

WHITE

Morris, you've got this review memorized.

MATTSON

Sir, he accuses me of plagiarism, calls my book a "conglomeration of horrors" and then, to top it off--

WHITE
(Skimming ahead)

Let's see . . . Oh yes.

MATTSON
To top it off, he labels it "despicable in every respect"! Now! Now! What do you say to that?

WHITE
Well, it's not exactly high praise, I must admit.

MATTSON
(Barely able to contain himself)
Not exactly . . .

WHITE
But, as we all know, Mr. Poe's critical assessments tend to be direct and--

MATTSON
Libelous!

WHITE
Straightforward.

MATTSON
The man has libeled me--in your magazine--and *you*, you just . . .

WHITE
Morris, I'll speak to Mr. Poe about maybe toning down his, ah--

MATTSON
You'd better do more than just *speak* to him, Mr. White. By God, if I ever catch up to him, *I'll* do more than just speak to him, you can be sure of that.

WHITE
Morris--

MATTSON
And as for you, sir, you'd best be hiring an attorney, because you'll need one when I haul your laissez-faire ass into court!

MATTSON pivots away from WHITE and stalks out.

WHITE
Have a nice day.

Returning his attention to POE's article, WHITE sits down and stares at it as if hypnotized. He produces a handkerchief and dabs carefully at his brow and upper lip.

WHITE (CONT'D)

My, my, my.

Seconds later, POE enters, his stride brisk and purposeful.

POE

Mr. White, I need to speak with you.

WHITE

(Looks up)

Mr. Poe! Someone was just in here speaking about *you*.

POE

Let me guess. It was Morris Mattson, and he was registering his objection to late news that he writes like a baboon.

WHITE

Something like that, yes. You were a little harsh on him, weren't you?

POE

Not at all. In fact, I daresay you and I could sail to Africa at our leisure and without much ado round up four or five baboons that would put his efforts to shame.

WHITE

You don't mean that.

POE

(Shrugs)

At least two or three.

WHITE

He was greatly agitated when he read your piece.

POE

He must be a better reader than he is a writer.

WHITE

(Smiles)

Mr. Poe, never let it be said that I don't respect the sheer honesty that you bring to the sometimes shady world of criticism.

POE

Thank you.

WHITE

But!--we should also bear in mind that there's much to be said for expressing one's opinions in language that's restrained and professional.

POE

Sir, let's continue with this theme of honesty. Since I've started contributing my candid reviews to your magazine, what's become of your sales and profits?

WHITE

Well, they've . . . they've gone up.

POE

They've more than doubled, have they not?

WHITE

(Only half joking)

Yes, and death threats have more than tripled.

POE

Pah!

(Waves his hand dismissively)

The empty bluster of a handful of dimwitted philistines whose misbegotten projects have been rightly exposed as out-and-out shams!

WHITE

(Wags his finger)

That's not what I meant by "restrained and professional."

POE

The readers--and that's what our enterprise is all about--the readers approve of me.

WHITE

Most of them do.

POE

Yes.

WHITE
(Strokes his chin pensively)

Some of them don't.

POE
A few. De gustibus non est disputandum.

WHITE
To be frank with you, Mr. Poe, you're something of a controversial figure.

POE
No harm in a smidgen of controversy.

WHITE
No?

POE
I've come to believe that *all* publicity is good publicity.

WHITE
Mm. I'll have to ponder that one. Strikes me as a rather *futuristic* idea.
(Pause)

When you came in, you said you wanted to speak with me about something.

POE
Indeed I do. I'd like to ask you to consider raising my salary. In the short time I've been here, business has multiplied. I won't be so supercilious as to take *all* the credit--

WHITE
But you will take *some*.

POE
As Prince Hal puts it in *I Henry IV*, "I do, I will."

WHITE
(Folds his hands)
Our cash flow is up; that's true. But our costs are up as well. Everything costs more these days. Paper, ink . . .

POE
Even so . . .

WHITE
Don't know where it'll all end.

POE

Even so, sir--

WHITE

I'll think about it, Mr. Poe. For now, that's all I--

POE

I trust you'll think with due celerity. My pay is just ten dollars a week.

WHITE

I know.

POE

I've got my wife and her mother in the household . . .

WHITE

I'll *think* about it. For now, that's all I can promise you.

(Pause)

As a businessman, I'll need to study all the relevant details.

POE

(Frowns)

Which details did you have in mind?

WHITE

Well, since you ask, one of them would be all the times you've arrived late for work. Another would be all the times you haven't arrived for work, period.

POE

(Averts his eyes)

Now and then I'm troubled by health issues.

WHITE

Can't run a magazine if you're not here to run it.

POE

My health--

WHITE

Forgive me, Mr. Poe, but I've heard--from reliable sources--that you've been sighted on several occasions roving our streets thoroughly intoxicated.

POE

(Indignant)

Scoundrels and scalawags, spreading their detestable lies!

WHITE

One of the sources happens to be my own wife.

POE

(More subdued)

I'm sure, sir, that she mistook someone else for me.

WHITE

And we've already touched on the mixed reception your own writing tends to receive.
Some readers adore it; some are appalled by it.

(Rolls his eyes)

Then there's Mr. Mattson . . .

POE

Sir, is it your expectation that every single reader should approve of every single word I put to paper?

WHITE

Why not?

POE

Land sakes, that's hardly a rational proposition!

WHITE

Some of those dark and tortured fictions that you create--

POE

Some of them have won *awards*.

WHITE

Some of them are well nigh *impossible* to comprehend. Oh, I print them, but even *I* don't, I can't . . .

POE

I beg your pardon!

WHITE

Can't quite puzzle them out myself.

POE

Really!

WHITE

Well, that one about the black cat, for instance. Poor cat gets abused something awful.

POE

Two cats, actually.

WHITE

Then in the end, the thing gets buried alive in a wall with a dead human body! How *dreadful!*

POE

Sir, I'll point out that the second cat does survive.

WHITE

(Absently)

The woman it's buried with doesn't.

(Pause)

Can't tell you how many letters of protest I received from cat fanciers on that one. Do you not like cats?

POE

I love them.

WHITE

You've got a peculiar way of showing it.

POE

(Nostalgic)

Once owned a black cat named Catterina. Delightful animal. Used to drape herself around the back of my neck like a fur collar when I wrote.

WHITE

Catterina.

POE

(Stands closer and recites slowly, in a soft
spooky voice)

I had a special cat whose name was Catterina.
She was a splendid creature; you should've seen her.
Her eyes gleamed gold, her fur was black as coal,
And if you weren't careful . . . she'd steal your soul.

WHITE

(Flustered)

Yes. Well. As I say, I'll give your request some thought, Mr. Poe, and I'll let you know what's possible.

POE

I look forward to it.

WHITE

Now, if you'll excuse me, I think we both have plenty of work to do.

Suddenly MORRIS MATTSON reenters, more wrought up than ever.

MATTSON

I'll tell you one thing more, Mr. White, and I mean this with every fiber of my being--

(Sees POE)

Well, well. Look who's here.

POE

To judge by your waistline, sir, I'd say you've got more fibers in your being than most.

MATTSON

(As if he'd just been stung by a bee)

I'll pretend I didn't hear that.

WHITE

Gentlemen . . .

POE

And I'll pretend I didn't say it. But I did.

WHITE

Gentlemen, that'll do.

MATTSON

(To POE)

Do you think I came here to accept your insults?

POE

We can go somewhere else if you like.

MATTSON

(Steps toward POE)

It's bad enough when you insult my work, but when you insult me personally . . .

WHITE

(Fearing the worst)

Morris? . . . Edgar? . . .

POE

Hate to say it, Mr. Mattson, but neither you nor your work inspires an outpouring of compliments.

MATTSON

(Balling up his fists)

All right, then. That does it.

WHITE

Gentlemen?

MATTSON

That tears it.

MATTSON storms over to POE and throws a tremendous roundhouse right that his opponent ducks beneath. Bouncing up, POE punishes MATTSON with a rocketlike uppercut to his midsection, doubling him over. A moment passes without sound or movement from anyone. Then MATTSON, still doubled over, turns and waddles away in the same direction from which he entered.

WHITE

(Badly rattled)

Oh, dear. Mr. Mattson?

(To POE)

Stay where you are. Don't move.

POE

He'll shake it off.

WHITE

(To POE)

Stay here.

(Following MATTSON)

Mr. Mattson? . . . Morris? . . .

POE

(To himself)

The wicked flee when no man pursueth, but the righteous are bold as a lion.

(Calls out as WHITE exits)

I hope this won't weigh against me when it comes to my salary!

Blackout.

With little delay, the spotlight locates DR.

MORAN, who, ambling about, continues his meditations on POE.

MORAN

Now, as you'll recall, Mr. White had something reproachful to say about Poe's drinking habits, which he rarely held in check. The record suggests that while Poe didn't altogether *enjoy* drinking, he did it anyhow, and he did it recklessly, as a way of shielding himself against whatever pain or frustration he may've been feeling. He drank during the day; he drank at night. He drank with others, and he drank alone. Sometimes he drank till he passed out.

Did he drink himself to death? I couldn't say with any measure of confidence--but all that alcohol couldn't have been a boon to him.

Come to think of it, I could use a tankard of ginger beer myself. Let's see if there's a tavern around here.

The lights rise on what we take to be a saloon. MORAN goes to the bar, where a tankard awaits him, and seats himself on a stool. Hunched next to him is a moderately inebriated POE, his hand caressing a tumbler of whiskey.

Also nearby is the barkeep, a young man named TOMMY. TOMMY is wearing a white shirt with a gray cravat and matching gray waistcoat. His cheek bulges with a massive wad of tobacco that obliges him, at intervals, to turn and spit behind the bar. In front of him is a newspaper.

TOMMY

(With scathing distaste)

And then we get *John Tyler* as President. Can you imagine? President John Tyler!

POE
(Low-key)

Country'll survive.

TOMMY

Yeah, if we don't wind up in a civil war. They've given Tyler the perfect nickname--"His Accidency." I love it.

POE

Who's calling him that?

TOMMY

New York *Herald*. Right here.
(Holds up the paper and smacks it)

POE
(Amused)

"His Accidency"--I appreciate the *jeu de mots*.

TOMMY

Far as I'm concerned, John Tyler is illegitimate! No way in hell is he President of these United States.

POE

Why not?

TOMMY

'Cause we didn't *elect* him, that's why not!

POE

Sure we did. We elected him Vice President, the President died, and so Tyler became President.

TOMMY

But we didn't elect him *President*, see what I'm saying? We elected him *Vice* President.

POE
(Patient)

That's why we *have* a Vice President.

TOMMY
(Shakes his head)

Illegitimate. He's not *my* President. No sir.

POE

Tommy, you're too young to be having a conniption fit over politics.

TOMMY

Half his cabinet's already resigned on him. Right here in the *Herald*.
(Slaps the paper)

POE

(Sardonic)

Maybe there'll be a job opening for *me*.

TOMMY

Like a well-dressed parade, filing out the door.
(Flings down the paper)

No sir, not my President.

POE

The man was born and reared in Virginia; give him a chance.

(Pause)

Hey. Tommy. I just had an epiphany. You know what that newspaper lacks?

TOMMY

What.

POE

Same thing *all* newspapers lack.

TOMMY

What's that.

POE

A sports page.

TOMMY

(Long pause)

What's a sports page?

POE

It would be a section of the paper dedicated to coverage of sporting events.

TOMMY

(Another long pause)

We don't *have* any sporting events.

POE

Well, of course we do. We've got boxing and fishing and horse racing and billiards . . .
(Gazing off)

Imagine how pleasant it would be to cast open a newspaper and read about all your favorite recreational activities . . .

TOMMY

(Doubtful)

You said you're a writer?

POE

. . . instead of that political balderdash.

TOMMY

You're a writer?

POE

That's correct.

TOMMY

I believe it.

(Chuckles)

Sports page! Pretty crazy idea.

POE

(After a sip of whiskey)

Last night I had a dream. Dreamed I was playing a brand-new sport called basketball.

TOMMY

Never heard of it.

POE

I don't think it exists.

TOMMY

(To MORAN)

You ever heard of basketball?

MORAN

Come again?

TOMMY

A sport called basketball. You ever heard of it?

MORAN

No, I haven't.

POE

Doesn't matter. It was a *dream*, an oneiric fantasy. Anyway, I was running down a parquet floor in my drawers. Others were running with me.

TOMMY

(Deadpan)

Were they in their drawers too?

POE

They were. And as I ran, I was bouncing this big round ball on the floor.

TOMMY

Why were you doing that?

POE

It was part of the game. An enormous throng of partisan onlookers had gathered around, and many of them were vehemently opposed to me.

TOMMY

They wanted you to fail?

POE

Oh, in the worst way. And they began to chant at me, mockingly.

TOMMY

What were they chanting?

POE

They were chanting: "No mo' *Poe!* No mo' *Poe!* No mo' *Poe!*" Their words infuriated me, but they also *thrilled* me; they made me all the more determined.

TOMMY

To do what?

POE

I . . . I'm not sure. That's when I woke up.

(Pause)

But the phrase "slam dunk" keeps coming to mind.

TOMMY glances in wonder at MORAN, who cautiously returns his glance.

TOMMY

So, uh . . . so how's the writing coming along?

POE

(With a moody shrug)

Comme si, comme ca. If a tree falls in a forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?

TOMMY

Huh?

POE

If I write a story and no one understands it, does it count?

TOMMY

Well, I don't--

POE

Tommy, I *invented* a genre of literature to be known henceforth as the detective story. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" . . .

TOMMY

Murders in the . . .

POE

"The Purloined Letter" . . . *Unprecedented* innovation!

TOMMY

That's--

POE

I single-handedly took the gothic horror story and lifted it to hitherto unseen heights of literary excellence.

TOMMY

Very good, sir.

POE

"Ligeia" is a marvel, if I say so myself. And I've written some of the most exquisite lyric poetry since the halcyon days of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

TOMMY

You should feel proud.

POE

Ah!--but what's it worth?

TOMMY

What's it worth?

POE

That's right.

TOMMY

I don't know. What *is* it worth?

POE

Not very much, apparently. No, not very much.

(Knocks back a hefty slug of whiskey)

You know, I published my first book when I was eighteen years old.

TOMMY

Amazing.

POE

You ever read *Tamerlane and Other Poems*?

TOMMY

No.

POE

(To MORAN)

How about you? Ever read *Tamerlane and Other Poems*?

MORAN

Not yet--but I'd like to.

POE

(To TOMMY)

Published my second book when I was twenty. Ever read *Al Aaraaf*?

TOMMY

Al Aaraaf? Sounds like a dog barking.

(Chortles--but stops chortling as POE impales him with a long dark stare)

Just funning, sir.

POE

Tommy, what in blazes *do* you read?

TOMMY

(Snatches up the paper and shakes it)

New York *Herald*.

POE

(Nods wearily)

Maybe I should become a journalist. I could be the world's first sports reporter.

TOMMY

Cheer up, sir. Life'll improve.

POE

Hope you're right.

(Stares down into his drink)

I am, as they say, between jobs; it's a place where I seem to spend much of my time.

TOMMY

Economy's down.

POE

And my sweet, beloved little wife has taken ill.

TOMMY

Sorry to hear it. What's wrong with her?

POE

(Makes a moue)

She coughs all the time.

TOMMY

Probably just a cold. There's a nasty cold going around.

POE

Coughs from morning till night. Then she coughs at night.

TOMMY

Influenza, sounds like.

POE

Yes, that's probably it. A cold or . . . or . . .

TOMMY

Influenza. She'll whip it.

POE

Hope you're right, Tommy.

TOMMY

She'll whip her weight in wildcats.

POE

In the meantime I sit and calculate and try to keep my mind from unraveling.

TOMMY

Nobody wants an unraveled mind, sir.

POE

In that regard, this potion--this elixir--is precisely what the doctor ordered.

(Holds up his glass as MORAN gives
him a dubious look)

Mr. Barkeep, I'll thank you to bring me one more dram of your finest blackstrap.

TOMMY

(Hesitates)

Begging your pardon, sir, but you didn't pay for the last one.

POE

I didn't?

TOMMY

In fact, so far you haven't paid for *any* of 'em.

POE

I haven't?

TOMMY

No, sir.

POE

You're sure?

TOMMY

I'm sure.

POE

Well then, I'll just have to . . .

(Makes a show of searching for his
wallet)

. . . just have to . . . Hmm! That's odd. I seem to've . . .

TOMMY

Sir?

POE

Seems to've left my wallet elsewhere.

(Straightens up)

I presume my credit is worthy.

TOMMY

Not a question of your credit, sir--

POE

Glad to hear it.

TOMMY

But the owner here, I'm afraid he's a strict man with a very strict set of, of--

MORAN

Excuse me. Tommy? I've got him.

TOMMY

Sir?

MORAN

Whatever this gentleman owes, it's on me.

(Pulls some bills from his wallet and
drops them on the bar)

There. That enough?

TOMMY

(Impressed)

Oh, yes sir.

POE

(To MORAN)

Bless you, sir. Bless you. You're the best of the Good Samaritans.

MORAN

(Shrugs)

I only wish I could've done more.

POE cocks his head and squints quizzically at
MORAN as we go to blackout.

ACT TWO

Darkness--and then we hear footsteps, slow and steady. A spotlight finds DR. JOHN MORAN, who, holding a slim hardback, is approaching the audience. He stops and opens the book.

MORAN

Listen to this. It's a poem called "Eldorado," written by Edgar Allan Poe.

(Reads)

Gaily bedight,
A gallant knight
In sunshine and in shadow,
Had journeyed long,
Singing a song
In search of Eldorado.

But he grew old--
This knight so bold--
And o'er his heart a shadow
Fell as he found
No spot of ground
That looked like Eldorado.

And, as his strength
Failed him at length,
He met a pilgrim shadow--
"Shadow," said he,
"Where can it be--
This land of Eldorado?"

"Over the Mountains
Of the Moon,
Down the Valley of the Shadow,
Ride, boldly ride,"
The shade replied,--
"If you seek for Eldorado."

The poem is about the search for material success--for gold--for money. Which, as the gallant knight in the poem learns, is seldom easy to come by.

We all have themes in our lives, and one of the dominant themes in Poe's life was money, or the lack thereof. Virtually his entire adulthood was spent in poverty. I have no doubt that the fact weighed on him heavily.

Somewhere in his thirties, he decided he might try to land a nice soft government job. Other writers, including Nathaniel Hawthorne--whom Poe actually respected--found a sinecure, so why shouldn't *he*? The pay was decent, the work was manageable, and he figured to have plenty of time left over for writing.

All Poe had to do was . . . get himself hired.

MORAN goes off, and the lights rise on an office setting--a desk with a chair in front of it and another behind it.

POE is shaking hands with HENRY FETTERS, an older man wearing spectacles and a brown business suit.

Mr. Pugh, is it?

FETTERS

Poe.

POE

Edgar Pugh?

FETTERS

Poe, as in "poet."

POE

FETTERS

Henry Fetters. Won't you have a seat?
(Directs POE to a chair and perches himself on the edge of the desk)

I understand you're interested in the Inspector position.

POE

Sir, I'm open to any and all possibilities.

FETTERS

We have an opening for Inspector.

POE

Then that's where my interest lies.

FETTERS

You'd be working here in the customs house. Ever work in a customs house before?

POE

No sir. I once worked in a *counting* house.

FETTERS

Altogether different. Do you have any idea what we do here?

POE

I was hoping perhaps you'd enlighten me.

FETTERS

Concept is simple. In today's multinational economy, various goods are always being exported and imported. Lotta *raw* goods going out--fish, furs, grains, whale oil; lotta *manufactured* goods coming in, mainly from England.

POE

I see.

FETTERS

We need people to watch what's going where.

POE

Aha.

FETTERS

Course, the transactions involve *fees*. Duties.

POE

(Wry)

One must do his duty.

FETTERS

So we need clever people, vigilant people. Ever inspect anything before?

POE

No sir.

(Pause)

Well, stories, poems, books; I've inspected those.

FETTERS

(Plucks up a sheet of paper from the desk)

I see in your letter of application where you've done some magazine work.

POE

(Nods)

I aspire to an appointment that's a touch more *stable* than what I've known in the past.

FETTERS

(Reading the letter)

Education . . . University of Virginia . . . West Point . . . Most of our staff wouldn't know a university from a unicorn.

(Pause)

Did you graduate?

POE

I, uh . . . I have long since graduated to the real world of living, loving, sometimes losing and yet always lusting to achieve.

FETTERS

Well phrased.

POE

Thank you.

FETTERS

You have a way with words. Let's see . . .

(Back to the letter)

Extensive knowledge of foreign languages . . .

POE

(Modest)

Un petit peu.

FETTERS

That's a skill that might come in handy.

POE

Communication, sir, is my metier.

FETTERS

Good, good. Now, at some point you served in the military, is that correct?

POE

U.S. Army, yes sir. You may number me among the patriots.

FETTERS

How did you like being in the army?

POE

Loved it. Loved every minute. Up and down the east coast--beautiful country.

FETTERS

Got promoted to regimental sergeant major.

POE

Yes sir.

FETTERS

You *look* like a regimental sergeant major.

POE

Thank you, sir.

FETTERS

Based on your background, then, I presume you know how to handle a firearm.

POE

I do.

FETTERS

Not that we're often involved in shootouts--but you never know.

POE

(Dreamily)

Actually, my personal bias in weaponry tilts more toward cutting instruments--knives, razor-sharp blades of any type.

FETTERS

Guns, knives. Whatever works, right?

POE

Yes sir.

FETTERS

(Again reading)

In your letter, you've listed some of your interests--

POE

I like to think I'm well rounded.

FETTERS

And many of these items are rather . . .

POE

Captivating?

FETTERS

Unusual. You mention that you have a keen interest in balloon flights, mesmerism, shipwrecks, epidemics, murder, apocalyptic prophecies, phrenology . . .

POE

Yes, yes.

FETTERS

Just out of curiosity, what in the Sam Hill *is* phrenology?

POE

It's . . . a *science*. A science proposing that the size and shape of the cranium is an indicator of one's character and mental abilities.

FETTERS

Is that so?

POE

Oh, yes. For instance, you'll notice that my skull is quite large; my forehead is broad and pronounced. This is invariably a sign of a superior intellect.

FETTERS

Huh!

POE

Your head, on the other hand, sir, is . . . is different.

Despite himself, FETTERS carefully gropes his own head for a moment. He seems vaguely displeased.

FETTERS

(Referring to the letter)

You've cited a fascination with premature burial--being buried alive.

(Gazes directly at POE)

Strikes me as a fairly outlandish topic.

POE

No sir, not at all. You'd be surprised at how often it happens.

FETTERS

How often *does* it happen?

POE

Why--all the time. You see, sometimes a person may *appear* dead but still be living. Someone, say, in a coma. In which case the result could well be an early and nightmarish entombment.

FETTERS

(Studies POE)

You think about this frequently?

POE

Yes.

(Pause)

Don't you?

FETTERS shakes his head no.

POE (CONT'D)

Imagine what it would feel like to suddenly awaken *inside a casket*. You're alive--but you've been ignorantly discarded as dead. The darkness is total. The air supply is limited. The space for bodily movement is almost nonexistent. So you twist and you claw and you scream. Of course, the screams of anguish that leap from your heaving chest are certain to go unheard. Except, perhaps, by the souls of the truly dead that cluster around you, and by the Fiend himself, who patiently awaits your arrival in hell . . .

His brow knit, FETTERS hops down from the desk and moves about, silently, thoughtfully.

FETTERS

Let's play a little psychological game. Are you open to a psychological game?

POE

Always.

FETTERS

Good. Now. I'm going to name something--a person, a place, a thing. When I do, I want you to tell me the first word that comes to your mind, whatever it might be.

POE

All right.

Ready? Here we go. FETTERS

Niagara Falls. (Pause)

Death. POE

Santa Claus. FETTERS

Death. POE

Apple pie. FETTERS

Death. POE

Does everything remind you of death? FETTERS
(Amazed)

No sir. POE

Let's try again. Red roses. FETTERS
(Long pause during which FETTERS
peers hopefully at POE)

Death. POE

Mr. Pugh-- FETTERS

"Poe." POE

Mr. Poe, I can't help but observe, your outlook seems markedly morbid. FETTERS

My outlook! You're the one spewing out all those dark and depressing prompts. POE

FETTERS starts to retort but doesn't. He goes behind his desk and sits in his chair.

FETTERS

Question. If you could do anything--anything at all in this whole wide world--what would you do?

POE

Anything at all . . .

FETTERS

That's right.

POE

(With intensity)

I'd place my personal imprint, like a black tattoo, right on the *face* of world literature.

FETTERS

(Nods for several seconds)

Anything more you'd like to share with me?

POE

When I was a boy, I was a surprisingly gifted athlete. I could run and jump with the best of them.

(Stands up)

Indeed, I can still leap quite some distance, and I'd be happy to demonstrate if you like.

FETTERS

Won't be necessary.

(Stands up)

Mr. Pee-oh, it's been a pleasure meeting you.

POE

Mr. Fetters, the pleasure is entirely mine.

They shake hands.

FETTERS

I'll be in touch.

POE

Oh! I should leave this with you.

(Withdraws a folded sheet of paper from his coat)

It's a letter of recommendation from my dear friend Frederick Thomas, who happens to be

dear friends with Robert Tyler, who happens to be the son of John Tyler, President of the United States.

FETTERS

President John Tyler . . .

(Takes the letter and glances through it;
smiles)

“His Accident.”

(Pause)

I’ll be in touch.

Blackout.

As before, DR. MORAN reemerges, his
spotlight shafting through the darkness.

MORAN

Mr. Poe was a lucky man. The problem is, almost all his luck was horrid. It goes without saying that he received no offers of employment from the customs house or from any other government agency.

One notable piece of *good* fortune that came his way was the public response to his strange new poem “The Raven.” Readers were dazzled by it. And even those who hadn’t read it, or couldn’t comprehend it, were at least aware of it. And they were also aware of Edgar Allan Poe. Overnight, he became something of a celebrity.

You might think his sudden renown would’ve translated into a handsome chunk of change for him. But it didn’t. I read that Poe’s earnings from “The Raven,” during his lifetime, amounted to a grand total of just nine dollars. His other income, from whatever sources he could scrounge up, wasn’t much better. The nation’s wealthiest man, John Jacob Astor, saw no rival in Poe.

On the home front, things were going from bad to terrible. Poe’s young wife Virginia, who’d been ailing for a while, seemed to be getting worse instead of better. Whether she could recover was an open question that cut into the author like one of those sharp knives he found so seductive.

MORAN exits and the lights rise.

POE and MARIA hover over VIRGINIA, who is sleeping restlessly in bed. (The bed is in fact the same gurney featured at the start and the end of the play.) Both observers are clearly upset by what they see.

POE

(Testy)

Where's the doctor? Why isn't he here?

MARIA

He was here yesterday.

POE

Why isn't he here *today*?

MARIA

He's doing what he can, Eddie. He can't just--

POE

He needs to *be* here.

MARIA

--can't just spend his life here.

POE

Muddy, nobody's saying--

MARIA

Shhhhhhhhh! You'll wake her.

POE

(Restraining himself)

Nobody's saying he should spend his life here. But he should *be* here when we need him.

MARIA

He just bled her yesterday. He can bleed her only so often.

POE

I know it.

MARIA

And before that, he purged her.

POE

How could he purge her? She's got nothing in her to purge.

MARIA

Eddie--

POE

She never eats!

MARIA

Eddie, please lower your voice.

POE

(Again restraining himself)

She's wasting away, Muddy. Before our eyes, she's wasting away.

MARIA

It's an awful case of bronchitis. Worst I ever seen.

POE

(Glares at her)

You need to stop that.

MARIA

Stop what?

POE

(Scathingly)

"Bronchitis." We both know what she's got, and it doesn't do to pretend otherwise.

MARIA

Pretend? What do you . . .

POE

She's lost her appetite, she's pale as a ghost, she's short of breath--

MARIA

Eddie--

POE

And she coughs up *blood!*

MARIA

Eddie, don't.

POE

It's the White Plague, Muddy.

MARIA

Don't say that.

POE

It's *consumption*, and consumption is absolutely consuming her, even as we watch.

MARIA

Now that's enough!

POE

It's *true*.

MARIA

That's *enough*, I said.

Taking hold of him, MARIA pushes and pulls POE away from VIRGINIA, who stirs just slightly. As they retreat, the light over the bed slowly fades.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Come on. Over here. I won't have you talking that way, even if it's true.

POE

Where are we going?

MARIA

Especially if it's true. Come *on*, will you. Our little girl needs to rest.

POE frees himself from MARIA's grasp but makes no effort to rejoin his wife. He and MARIA are near the paper-strewn table.

POE

(Bitterly)

Yes, she needs to rest.

(Pause)

"Rest in peace."

MARIA

We can check on her later. In the meantime we'll do something else.

POE

(Petulant)

Like what.

MARIA
We'll talk.

POE
About what.

MARIA
About . . . Well, did you see the letters that came for you today?

POE
No.

MARIA
Two of 'em.

POE
(Mildly intrigued)
Two?

MARIA
I put 'em on the table.

POE
Who might've sent them?

MARIA
Well, anybody *might've* sent 'em. But as it happens, they came from a couple of magazine editors.

POE
Mmmmmm.
(Peers down at the letters but doesn't touch them)
My notoriety has soared, Muddy, since I uncaged "The Raven." Soared like a bird.

MARIA
So I hear.

POE
(Droll)
My income has been winging along at a lesser altitude.

MARIA
And two men came by to see you, one right after the other.

POE

Really? Who were they?

MARIA

First feller was from the Boston *Post*. Had a mustache like a walrus. Said he wanted to ask you about “The Raven.”

POE

Understandable. Who was the other?

MARIA

Clyde Blubaugh from across the street.

POE

What’d *he* want?

MARIA

Same thing. Wanted to ask you about “The Raven.”

POE

I didn’t think Mr. Blubaugh could read.

MARIA

He can’t. But that don’t stop him from flapping his gums.

POE

Where are they now?

MARIA

No idea. But I suspicion they’ll be back. Both of ’em allowed that you wrote yourself a real catchy poem.

POE

(Miffed)

Is that what they said?

MARIA

Something like that.

POE

Muddy, I’ll have you know--and them, too--“The Raven” is *not* a “real catchy poem.”

MARIA

It ain’t? I thought it was.

POE

Well, it *is*, but I'd describe it this way. "The Raven" is quite simply the greatest poem that's ever been penned.

MARIA

(Blinks at him)

Is that a fact?

POE

Yes ma'am. That's a fact.

MARIA

(Musingly)

I knew it was pretty darn good.

POE

Muddy, do you doubt my word?

MARIA

No, I don't. Not a whit. I just . . .

(Pause)

Eddie, how did you do it?

POE

Do what?

MARIA

Write the greatest poem that's ever been. I mean, it's all I can do to write out a note to my cousin Myrtle.

POE

(Shrugs)

Wasn't easy, I can assure you.

MARIA continues to stare at him, her mouth open, her curiosity palpable. Sensing she'd welcome a fuller reply, POE begins to meander around, mulling her question and then offering his comments with the air of a kindly professor lecturing a class of freshmen.

POE (CONT'D)

The creation of beauty, which is the sole calling of any genuine artist, is never a simple task.

MARIA

I shouldn't think so.

POE

Paradoxically, in order to write a matchless poem, you must begin at the end. Settle on the final effect first, and it gives you a sort of beacon to work toward.

MARIA

You start at the end? I don't think I could do that.

POE

Nonsense, Muddy. Every time you cook supper, don't you picture the outcome before you prepare the meal?

MARIA

Yes, I, I--

POE

That's what *I* did, more or less, when I composed "The Raven." Along the way, I had to address, with the utmost delicacy, a host of other issues. How long should the poem be? What should the tone be? How should I handle the refrain?

MARIA

What's a refrain?

POE

The part that repeats, over and over.

MARIA

Ah. "Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore.' "

POE

That's it. Say "nevermore" again, and this time draw it out somewhat.

MARIA

Nevermoooooore.

POE

Isn't that word just too delicious?

MARIA

It *is* kinda tasty.

POE

People read the poem, and naturally they're enthralled by it, but too often they dwell on its secondary features.

MARIA

Like what.

POE

The intricate rhyme scheme, the scintillating diction, the quintessential weirdness of the bird itself, sitting there atop that bust of Pallas . . .

MARIA

Goodness!--that talking bird . . . So what *should* they pay attention to?

POE

The situation.

MARIA

You mean . . .

POE

I mean this. A young man has lost his lover. Tragically, she's dead and gone. And the raven is telling him bluntly that he'll never, ever see her again.

MARIA

That's sad.

POE

Extremely sad. The excruciating truth *tears* at the young man's heart.

MARIA

"Take thy beak from out my heart"--ain't that what he says?

POE

Precisely! And that very element--the profound melancholy aroused by the death of a lovely and loving young woman--is the key to the poem's impact, its greatness.

MARIA

My heavens.

POE

Of all the topics conceivable, *that* one, it seems to me, is the most moving. The most sublimely poetic.

MARIA

Probably is.

POE

And, skillfully articulated, it makes up the very core of “The Raven.”

A long moment slides by in silence as the two stand motionless, reflecting. The silence ends when VIRGINIA unexpectedly speaks up.

VIRGINIA

(Feebly)

Eddie? Mama?

(Coughs)

Where are you?

Immediately POE and MARIA hurry over to VIRGINIA’s bedside, and the lights rise on her. MARIA positions herself a step or two farther away from the bed than POE, allowing him and his wife a measure of intimacy.

POE

We’re right here, Ginny.

VIRGINIA

I looked around, I didn’t see you.

POE

Right here, darling. What can we do for you?

VIRGINIA

Nothing much, I’m afraid.

(Coughs)

POE

Something to eat?

VIRGINIA

Not hungry.

POE

Something to drink?

VIRGINIA

Not thirsty.

POE

Are you feeling . . . a tiny bit better perhaps?

VIRGINIA

No. I feel like I been rode hard and put away wet.

(Coughs)

I just want you to be here with me.

POE

We're here.

VIRGINIA

I want to see you.

(Coughs)

I want to hear your voice.

POE

Of course, dear.

POE holds her hand and gazes down at her.
After a short while he becomes uncomfortable.

POE (CONT'D)

I, um . . . I'm not sure what to say.

VIRGINIA

It don't matter. I just want to hear your voice.

POE

I . . . I . . .

VIRGINIA

A man of words with no words?

Ruffled, POE smiles, says nothing.

VIRGINIA (CONT'D)

Teach me some algebra.

POE

(Laughs)

Oh, Ginny, you don't want me to do that!

VIRGINIA

You're right.

(Coughs)

So sing me a song.

POE

Oh, no. No. I can't sing.

VIRGINIA

I sang for *you* . . .

POE

No, no.

(Pause)

I'll tell you what. I'll recite a piece of a new poem I'm writing. How would that be?

In response, she coughs.

POE (CONT'D)

It goes like this.

It was many and many a year ago,
 In a kingdom by the sea
 That a maiden there lived whom you may know
 By the name of Annabel Lee;
 And this maiden she lived with no other thought
 Than to love and be loved by me.

I was a child and *she* was a child
 In this kingdom by the sea,
 But we loved with a love that was more than love--
 I and my Annabel Lee--
 With a love that the winged seraphs of Heaven
 Coveted her and me.

VIRGINIA

It's nice, Eddie.

(Coughs)

Is it about you and me?

POE

(Sincerely)

Who else would it be about?

VIRGINIA

It's nice.

(Coughs)

Eddie, there's something I gotta tell you. It's kinda important.

POE

(With a trace of foreboding)

What is it?

VIRGINIA

When I'm gone--

POE

Ginny, stop right there. You're not going anyplace.

VIRGINIA

(Coughs)

When I'm gone, I think maybe you should find yourself another woman.

POE

(Anguished)

Another woman! What do you . . . There *are* no other women.

VIRGINIA

But there will be.

(Coughs)

Only natural. And I'm fine with that, you hear?

POE

Ginny--

VIRGINIA

You're still a young man.

(Coughs)

Not even forty. You'll need somebody to . . . to help out.

POE

(In pain)

Oh, Ginny . . .

VIRGINIA

Only one thing, Eddie.

Yes?
 POE
 I want you to remember.
 VIRGINIA
 Yes? Remember what?
 POE
 Remember . . .
 VIRGINIA
 (Goes limp)
 POE
 What do you . . . Ginny? Ginny!
 (Shakes her)
 MARIA
 (Steps forward)
 Eddie?
 POE
 Oh, my.
 MARIA
 Eddie?
 POE
 She's . . .
 MARIA
 Is she? . . .
 POE nods once.
 MARIA (CONT'D)
 (Panicky)
 I'll go fetch someone. I'll go get help.
 POE
 No need to, Muddy.
 (Pause)
 No need.

Blackout.

After a respectful pause, the spotlight locates JOHN MORAN, who comes strolling out with his head down as if in sympathy for VIRGINIA. He stops, turns to the audience and looks up.

MORAN

Ugly disease, consumption. Took so many, without regard for who they were or what they did. As a doctor, I saw it all the time. The numbers were frightful, and no one was exempt. Frederic Chopin. James Monroe. Andrew Jackson. John Keats. Consumption took them all, just as it took poor Virginia, who was only twenty-four years old when she died.

She was right when she suggested that other women would soon enter Poe's life. It was inevitable. He was charismatic, not bad-looking, accomplished in his field and far better known than most of us will ever be. So when the time came, quite a few young ladies "set their cap for him," as they say.

I gather that their feelings for Poe were actually *mixed*, which made things interesting. Because while it was easy enough to see his attractive side, it wasn't too difficult to see--or at least hear tell of--his dark side. Plenty of stories about his boozing, his erratic behavior, his inability to reach into his pocket and bring out a single copper to hold up in the light . . . So women were drawn to him, but at the same time they were wary.

For his part, Poe didn't really know *what* he was doing when it came to romance; he was no smooth-as-silk Casanova. Typically he'd dally with one charmer or another for a spell, broach the subject of marriage all too quickly, react with dismay when she said no thanks, and then move on to the next one. After Virginia, none of them seemed a perfect fit for him.

I must say, though, at one point he had them lined up to get at him as if they were trying out for a part in a show--for a bit part in a major drama. It was like a . . . like an audition!

The lights rise, and MORAN takes a seat onstage behind a small wooden table. He holds up a sheet of paper, studies it briefly and puts it back down. Using a dip pen, he jots something on the paper--a practice he'll repeat periodically.

In a chair not far from MORAN sits POE, legs crossed, demeanor tranquil. The two men are facing in the same direction.

MORAN
(Shouts)

Next!

Out comes ELIZABETH ELLET, heavysset, solemn-faced, serious in manner. Like the women to follow, she is dressed modestly in the style of the period. She halts at an intermediate distance from the men and waits.

Name? MORAN

Elizabeth Ellet. ELIZABETH

Background? MORAN

ELIZABETH
My mother is Sarah Maxwell, daughter of Captain John Maxwell, who served in the army with General George Washington. My father was William Lummis, prominent physician. I speak French, German and Italian, I published my first book when I was sixteen, and I'm the author of *The Women of the American Revolution*, which is a major, major work.

MORAN
Impressive. May we take it you're single?

ELIZABETH
Separated. My husband's a chemist, but right now the chemistry between us isn't so grand.

MORAN looks to POE, who shrugs his acquiescence.

MORAN
And what exactly has stimulated your interest in Mr. Poe?

ELIZABETH
(Brusque)
I'm sorry, I thought Mr. Poe was interested in *me*.

MORAN

Well, to some degree, yes. Would you agree with that, Mr. Poe?

POE

I would.

MORAN

(To ELIZABETH)

But the fact is, you've sent him several letters indicating your interest in *him*.

ELIZABETH

Basically I was just letting him know I'm semi-available.

MORAN

I see.

ELIZABETH

Do you have a problem with that?

MORAN

No.

ELIZABETH

(To POE)

Do *you* have a problem with that?

POE

Not at all.

ELIZABETH

Good.

MORAN

(Consults his paper)

Now, Mrs. Ellet, what in particular would you bring to this relationship if there were to *be* a relationship?

ELIZABETH

I'm a strong woman. Mr. Poe could benefit from a strong woman to keep him in line.

POE

It's not an altogether invalid point.

MORAN

(To ELIZABETH)

Is that how you'd describe yourself? As a strong woman?

ELIZABETH

I would describe myself as an exceptional writer, on a par with Mr. Poe himself--

POE

(Raises his eyebrows)

Let's not get carried away.

ELIZABETH

--as a strong woman *and* as a protofeminist.

The men exchange a glance with each other.

MORAN

(To ELIZABETH)

Anything else you'd like to tell us?

ELIZABETH

Truth be told, I'm a real peck of trouble. If you reject my love, I'll torment you for the rest of your life. If you *accept* my love, I'll torment you for the rest of your life.

MORAN

Well, that's . . . that's . . .

ELIZABETH

In fact, you're both hip-deep in trouble already.

MORAN

That's good to know. Mr. Poe--comment?

POE

(Smooths his mustache)

Fascinating. Blame it on my imp of the perverse, but I rather like this one.

MORAN

(Alarmed)

You do!

Poe nods.

MORAN (CONT'D)

Well . . . no.

POE

Excuse me?

MORAN

I think not. No, no, no.

POE

Are you certain?

MORAN

Very certain. Besides, we have others to consider. Mrs. Ellet, thank you for your time. Enjoy the rest of your day.

ELIZABETH

(Enraged)

You'll both shed hot tears over the deplorable fact that you were ever *born!*

(Exits)

POE

Sir, are you absolutely--

POE interrupts his protest as MORAN holds up one hand and, with the other, scribbles a note on his paper. In due course he lowers his hand.

POE (CONT'D)

There was something endearing about the way she glowered at us.

MORAN

(Shouts)

Next!

Next to emerge is HELEN WHITMAN, a living portrait of femininity, who flows onstage with "many a flirt and flutter." A beautiful, curly-haired woman, she is adorned in a fashionable bonnet, a long lacy scarf and a dress that seems almost liquid in its shifting movements. She turns one way and another, displaying herself like a modern runway model. In her hand is a decorative fan that she manipulates coquettishly.

MORAN (CONT'D)

Name?

HELEN

(Sexy, breathy voice)

Sarah Helen Whitman. I go by "Helen."

MORAN

Some background please?

HELEN

I'm a poet, an essayist and a transcendentalist. A "bluestocking," some would call me. I was married to the writer John Whitman, but he died some years ago.

MORAN

So you're a widow.

HELEN

That would follow, yes.

MORAN

Children?

HELEN

None.

MORAN

Well-fixed, are you?

HELEN

For now, I think I'll keep that a mystery. You both like mysteries, don't you?

MORAN

(Checks his paper)

Mrs. Whitman, I see where you've been known to conduct seances at your home, is that right?

HELEN

In a very intimate and dimly lit room, yes.

MORAN

I want to make sure I understand this. You and your friends communicate with the dead?

HELEN

We attempt to.

MORAN

Any success?

HELEN

I think I'll keep that another mystery.

POE

I'll take her.

MORAN

(Refers to his paper)

Something else here catches my eye, and I hope I'm getting this accurately--you like to sniff ether?

HELEN

I don't necessarily *like* to sniff ether, but I do it nonetheless.

MORAN

How often?

HELEN

Frequently.

MORAN

Why?

HELEN

I have a weak heart.

MORAN

Does sniffing ether make your heart stronger?

HELEN

(Winks)

Doesn't make it any weaker.

MORAN

Mrs. Whitman, what would you bring to a relationship with Mr. Poe, assuming there's to be such a relationship?

HELEN

(Smiles and lifts both arms out to her sides, posing)

Isn't it obvious?

POE

I'll take her.

MORAN

(To HELEN)

Anything more you'd like to add?

HELEN

I've written a number of poems in tribute to Mr. Poe, and I'd be happy to share one with you now.

MORAN looks to POE, who nods in assent.

HELEN (CONT'D)

I call this one "Rantin' and Raven."

(Pause)

Oh, thou raven with thy pinions,
 Art thou tapping at my chamber door?
 Thou'rt not a writer of the minions,
 But an artist steeped in life and lore.
 I even crave thy tart opinions;
 They make me breathe out: "More, more, more!"

POE

Now that--*that*--is poetry.

MORAN

Anything further, Mr. Poe?

POE

(To HELEN)

Will you marry me?

HELEN

(Astonished)

Why, Mr. Poe!

POE

Yes?

HELEN

Don't you suppose we should get to know each other first?

POE

Didn't we just do that?

HELEN

Mr. *Poe!* . . .

POE

Yes?

HELEN

You make me tremulous with your . . . *your ardor!*

POE

I can't help myself, Mrs. Whitman.

(Stands up)

My heart is pounding, my blood is racing!

HELEN

(Backing away)

Well, you'd better calm yourself before you have a coronary.

POE

Mrs. Whitman! . . .

HELEN

(Still backing away)

Come to a seance. We'll talk to the dead, and we'll talk to each other.

POE

Mrs. Whitman! . . .

HELEN

Good day, gentlemen.

(Exits)

POE

Helen! . . .

POE starts to pursue her, but MORAN stands up and physically intervenes.

MORAN

Mr. Poe? Mr. Poe--please.

POE

(Disconcerted)

I just proposed marriage to her.

MORAN

I know you did.

POE

And she didn't say yes.

MORAN

She didn't say no either. Regardless, *I* propose that you come back over here . . .

(Guides him)

. . . and have a seat.

POE

I feel devastated.

MORAN

You'll shake it off. Here.

(Adjusts POE's chair)

Please. We've got one more to speak with.

Reluctantly POE plops down in his chair, and MORAN resumes his place at the little table. He scratches a note on his paper.

MORAN (CONT'D)

(Shouts)

Next!

Petite, comely and soft-spoken, ELMIRA SHELTON comes gliding out. Without especially trying to, she exudes class and gentility. POE, who is still brooding over HELEN's hasty departure, has his head down and at first doesn't notice the newcomer.

MORAN (CONT'D)

Name?

ELMIRA

My name is Elmira.

POE's head--his entire torso--lifts as if yanked by multiple strings. He stares intently at her.

MORAN

Last name?

Ignoring MORAN's request, she fixes her eyes on POE's, and the glimmer of a smile brightens her face.

POE
(Stunned)

Elmira? My God.

ELMIRA

Eddie?

Deferring to the chemistry between them, MORAN sits back and quietly observes. POE rises, goes to ELMIRA and clasps her hands in his.

POE

Elmira. My God, I can't believe it.

ELMIRA

It's good to see you again.

They hug.

POE

How long's it been? Ten years? Fifteen?

ELMIRA

More like twenty.

POE

Twenty years!--and you haven't changed a particle. Except perhaps to become even more beautiful than you already were.

ELMIRA
(Flattered)

You and your sugary words.

POE

All those years ago, you were the first one I ever . . .

(Pause)

You were my first one.

ELMIRA

Yes.

POE

But you got married to someone else. While I was away. I . . . heard about it later.

ELMIRA

To Alexander.

POE

Alexander Skeleton.

ELMIRA

Shelton.

POE

The news nearly broke my heart--though of course I wished you well. You're still blissfully entwined in matrimony?

ELMIRA

(Shakes her head)

Five years ago he passed away.

POE

I'm sorry. I didn't . . .

ELMIRA

Pneumonia.

(Pause)

I heard you got married as well.

POE

Yes, but I'm a widower. Two years. Consumption.

(Pause)

It's terrible, isn't it?

ELMIRA

Life can be so . . .

(Pause)

I was at the university last evening for your presentation. Everyone loved it.

POE

You should've come over and said something to me.

ELMIRA

Too many people! Hundreds and hundreds--all to see and hear you.

POE

There aren't hundreds of people around now.

They both turn and see MORAN, who appears apologetic.

POE (CONT'D)

Why don't we go grab a bite to eat?

ELMIRA

I'd like that.

POE

Are you hungry?

ELMIRA

I'm starved!

POE

I know a cozy little bistro where they serve the finest calf's head, ox tongue and pig's cheeks you'll ever taste!

ELMIRA

Mmmmmm. My mouth is watering.

POE

This way.

Holding hands, they exit. Blackout.

When the spotlight once again limns DR. MORAN, we see he hasn't moved an inch; he's still sitting there letting his eyes trail off toward the departed couple. Presently he stands up, stretches, moves around.

MORAN

(To the audience)

That one--Elmira--was a keeper. Didn't take the two of them long to rekindle the love affair they had blazing back when they were teenagers. My personal opinion, though--Poe never did get too far beyond his beloved Virginia. I'll wager that sometimes when he was by himself, late at night probably, he could still hear her voice whispering to him like a soft summer breeze. Whispering sweet nothings. Whispering about the places they'd been, the things they'd done, the things they *would've* done if they'd had the chance . . .

In any case, Elmira had a lot going for her, not the least of which was a substantial legacy left to her by her late husband. Within a few months, she and Poe had an understanding that Elmira Shelton would soon become Elmira Poe. The plan was, he would first attend to some personal and professional matters, which would put him out on the road for a while. Then he'd return and they'd tie the knot.

She placed only one condition on Poe, but it was a doozy. He had to solemnly pledge to stop drinking. And so he did. That is, he *did* take the pledge. Unfortunately, he didn't stop drinking. So, after bidding his fiancée a temporary farewell, he didn't waste much time landing in one of his favorite rum-holes.

MORAN saunters away, and the lights rise, revealing the same tavern as earlier in the play. Drink in hand, POE is standing near tobacco-chewing TOMMY, who, in front of the bar, has coiled himself down into a tight, catlike crouch. He swings his arms to and fro rhythmically, preparing to launch a standing broad jump.

POE

(Points to the floor)

Let's get *behind* the line.

TOMMY

I *am* behind the line.

POE

No, you're *on* the line.

TOMMY

I'm *behind* the line.

POE

Come on back another eighth of an inch.

Exasperated, TOMMY shuffles his feet minutely.

POE (CONT'D)

There you go.

(Pause)

You ready?

TOMMY

I'm ready.

You completely ready? POE

Concentrating, TOMMY declines to answer.

Am I disturbing you? POE (CONT'D)

You're doing your level best to. TOMMY

Feel free to ignore me. POE

You hear? (Pause)

With a savage yell, TOMMY finally leaps, covering a mediocre distance.

There. Let's see you beat that. TOMMY

(Marks the distance with a coin)

What was that, Tommy, a warm-up? POE

That was my jump. TOMMY

I thought perhaps you were just loosening up. Did your foot slip? POE

Sir, let's see you beat it. TOMMY

I've seen hop-frogs jump that far. POE

Hey, if you can beat it-- TOMMY

POE

Should I set my beverage down for this?
 (Approaches his spot)
 Or maybe I'll just take a sip in mid-flight . . .

TOMMY

Talk is cheap, Mr. Poe.

POE

More so than these libations you've been serving me.
 (Has a sip and sets down his glass)
 All right, give me a one-two-three.
 (Takes his stance)

TOMMY

One two *three!*

POE leaps and surpasses TOMMY's mark
 easily.

POE

How about that--these ancient legs still have some spring in them.

TOMMY

(Bug-eyed)
 Well, I'll be . . . How'd you do that?

POE

One of the many benefits of clean living, my boy.
 (Holds up his glass as if offering a toast,
 then takes another swallow)

TOMMY

Didn't beat me by much.

POE

I jumped only as far as I had to. If you'd gone farther, so would've I. Care to try again?

TOMMY scowls and tosses his hand in refusal,
 then goes back to his usual station behind the
 bar. Using the moment to his advantage, POE
 scoops up the coin on the floor and slips it into
 his pocket.

POE (CONT'D)

By the way, how much did we bet on that little contest?

TOMMY

We didn't bet anything.

POE

You sure? I thought we bet a drink.

TOMMY

No sir.

POE

No sir, you're not sure? Or no sir, we didn't bet a drink?

TOMMY

No bet.

POE chuckles amiably and goes to his seat at the bar.

POE

You remind me of Charles Dickens.

TOMMY

Charles Dickens the writer?

POE

That's the one. A few years ago he and I compared jumps--naturally I was victorious--but he didn't want to bet either.

TOMMY

(Star-struck)

You actually met him?

POE

In Philadelphia. He was doing his American tour. I think, though, that you may wish to reverse the pronouns. *He met me.*

TOMMY

Yes sir. What'd you talk about?

POE

(Waves his hand)

All sorts of things. He spent half our time together telling me about how rough the passage was sailing aboard the *Brittania* from England.

TOMMY

Really?

POE

Seems they ran into a heavy sea and a headwind. According to Dickens, the ship was “staggering, heaving, leaping, diving, jumping, pitching, throbbing, rolling and rocking”-- sometimes all at once. Everybody sick and suffering, none more so than Boz.

TOMMY

Sakes alive!

POE

Course, I didn't have the heart to tell him that I once endured a similar passage myself, on my way *to* England with my family.

(Pause)

I was six years old at the time.

TOMMY

What else did you talk about?

POE

We discussed the state of literature in America, which we strongly agreed was abysmal-- except, *nota bene*, for my own shimmering output.

TOMMY

What's wrong with everybody else's output?

POE

Too didactic, for one thing. You don't believe in didacticism, do you, Tommy?

TOMMY

Me? Oh, no sir. I wouldn't hear of it.

POE

Good man.

TOMMY

In fact, I think it's illegal around here.

(Pause)

So how'd he like America?

POE

Liked it well, enough, I suppose. Said we could do a better job with our prisoners.

TOMMY

(Nods)

Some of 'em we should chop up and feed to the hogs.

POE

Also said Americans are too much in love with tobacco.

TOMMY

Don't know where he got *that* idea.

(Turns and spits some tobacco juice)

POE

Everywhere he went he saw men--and even some women--chewing and spitting tobacco.

TOMMY

If you're gonna chew it, you gotta spit it. Not much choice.

POE

Said if he ever wrote a book about America, he'd likely call it *Great Expectorations*.

POE laughs, and TOMMY, not quite getting the joke, laughs along with him.

POE (CONT'D)

Witty man, Dickens.

TOMMY

You're in lively spirits today, Mr. Poe. Which, if you don't mind my saying so, isn't always the case.

POE

Why shouldn't I feel on top of the world? I'm getting married soon, you know.

TOMMY

No sir, I *didn't* know.

POE

Well, now you do. Charming lady. Widow with a pocket full of rocks.

TOMMY

Congratulations, sir.

POE

Probably the second best woman I've ever known.

(Thinks about it)

Third best, if you count Muddy . . .

TOMMY

Congratulations.

POE

So it would take something truly extraordinary to throw me off my game today.

(Swills down the rest of his drink)

How about another one, Tom-Tom?

(Pulls the coin out of his pocket and places
it on the bar)

TOMMY

Right away, sir.

(Exits)

POE

(To himself; jovial)

Tom, Tom, the piper's son, stole a pig and away he run.

Abruptly a new customer enters the tavern--
MORRIS MATTSON. Although he seems less
angry than in his prior appearance, he still comes
across as unfriendly and vaguely menacing. He
and POE take note of each other, neither man
reacting much.

POE (CONT'D)

Well, what do you know! Morris Mattson. Haven't seen you in a coon's age.

MATTSON

Did you miss me?

POE

(Lightly)

Not especially.

MATTSON glares at POE, who chuckles easily.

POE (CONT'D)

I'm joking! Come on over here and sit down. I'll buy you a drink.

MATTSON seats himself next to POE.

MATTSON

(Sarcastic)

Can you afford it?

POE

No, but I'll do it anyway.

MATTSON

Right neighborly of you, Mr. Poe. What's your angle?

POE

No angle.

MATTSON

I thought you *always* had an angle.

POE

No, not at all.

(Pause)

So what've you been up to lately?

MATTSON

Nothing.

POE

Any new books in the offing?

MATTSON

No. None.

POE

Well, that's *one* way to avoid barbed criticism, eh?

MATTSON says nothing for a moment--just
locks his eyes on POE.

MATTSON

You're in a jolly mood.

POE

So I've been told. As I explained earlier, I'll soon be getting married to a marvelous lady. A southern belle. The prospect, sir, fills me with conviviality.

MATTSON

My wife just left me.

POE

A shame and a pity.

MATTSON

Left me for a lamplighter.

POE

A lamplighter? I suppose I could say something like: "Maybe she saw the light" or "He's probably a bright fellow," but I'll spare you the indignity.

MATTSON

You're too kind. What feeling would you say my wife's vanishing act has filled *me* with?

POE

Let me think.

(Furrows his brow)

Morris Mattson is full of what? . . .

MATTSON

(Looks off)

I'll tell you how life is, Mr. Poe.

POE

Please do.

MATTSON

It's all cause and effect. Lots of causes and lots of effects. One event leads to another.

POE

Oftentimes, yes.

MATTSON

(Slowly)

So, for example, if someone says or does something to someone else, there's a good chance you'll see consequences . . .

POE

Yes.

MATTSON

Short-term consequences, and maybe long-term as well.

POE

Maybe.

MATTSON

There *could* be a big long chain reaction.

(Pause)

Because of a single event, a man could lose his direction, make a bad decision, and then *another* one, and *another* one . . .

POE

It's possible.

MATTSON

He could eventually wind up in grave trouble. Could even lose everything he has, and find himself standing on the brink.

POE

If he allows it to happen. But a man's got to bear up. *I* know that.

MATTSON

What if he can't bear up?

POE

He *has* to. That's what men do.

MATTSON

Easy for you to say. You're Edgar Allan Poe, literary titan.

(Pause)

I'm Morris Mattson, human doormat.

Carrying POE's refilled glass, TOMMY returns.
He sets it on the bar, and POE raises it in front of
MATTSON.

POE

We don't live in Utopia, Mr. Mattson. Anytime the world feels too heavy on your tired shoulders, do what I do. Have a drink. If that doesn't work, have *another* drink.

(Takes a swallow)

Tommy, we have a gentleman here in desperate need of a picker upper.

TOMMY

I've got plenty of those.

(To MATTSON)

What'll it be, sir?

MATTSON

(Very hesitant, as if his mind is elsewhere)

I, uh . . . I'm not exactly sure.

TOMMY

Do you have a preference?

MATTSON

I, uh . . .

TOMMY

I've got most everything a gentleman could want. I've got brandy--applejack, mainly--corn juice, gin, rum, enough baldface to float a barge, and ginger beer. If you like fancy drinks, I can make you a pig-and-whistle or a phlegm-cutter. What'll it be?

MATTSON

(Still hesitant)

Hard to decide. What's . . .

TOMMY

Hmm?

MATTSON

What's that bottle up there?

TOMMY

(Turns)

Which one?

MATTSON

(Points)

Up there.

TOMMY

That one?

MATTSON

No. *Top* shelf.

Both TOMMY and POE squint up and away from MATTSON, who craftily leaves his stool and takes a foot-long blackjack from his coat. Standing behind POE, he swings the weapon as hard as he can, striking POE on the back of his

neck. Without a sound, POE collapses to the floor where he lies motionless. MATTSON puts the blackjack away and calmly reseats himself.

TOMMY

(Turns back around)

Have to get a ladder for that one.

(Notices POE is missing)

TOMMY (CONT'D)

What happened to Mr. Poe?

MATTSON

Who?

TOMMY

Mr. Poe. The gentleman who was sitting next to you.

MATTSON

He, uh . . .

On instinct, TOMMY peeps over the bar and sees POE sprawled on the floor.

TOMMY

Oh, my God.

MATTSON

He fell. Drunk, I guess.

Instantly TOMMY races around the bar, kneels down beside POE and tries in vain to rouse him.

TOMMY

(Distraught)

Mr. Poe? Mr. Poe? Oh, my God.

MATTSON

Too much of the sauce.

TOMMY

He's gotta go to the hospital.

Or jail.
MATTSON

Help me carry him out of here.
TOMMY

Carry him . . .
MATTSON
(Resistant)

Hurry up!
TOMMY

No, no. I never get involved in that sort of thing.
MATTSON

TOMMY gets up, crosses to MATTSON and
seizes his lapels ferociously.

Help me carry him, sir, or the next person to get carried out of here will be *you*.
TOMMY

Unhand me, or you'll hear from my attorney.
MATTSON
(Icily)

And you'll hear from *my* attorney, right here.
TOMMY
(Doubles up his fist and holds it inches
from MATTSON's face)

Yielding, MATTSON takes a position near
POE's feet; TOMMY circles around to POE's
upper body. As they stoop down and prepare to
lift him, we go to blackout.

When the lights rise, we see the same hospital
scene that we observed at the very start of the
play. By now, however, four days have passed.
POE is lying inert on a gurney, and next to him
stands a worried DR. MORAN, his hand on
POE's shoulder.

MORAN

Mr. Poe?

(Pause)

Mr. Poe?

No response from POE. MORAN lays his hand gently on POE's forehead, holds it there for a few seconds and then pulls it away. The doctor's face betrays his fatigue. He looks up. He looks down. He shakes his head.

Now, off to one side, something--someone--moves in the shadows, attracting MORAN's attention. The figure draws closer, emerging into the light, and we see that it's POE's mother-in-law MARIA.

MORAN (CONT'D)

Yes? Can I help you?

MARIA

I don't know.

MORAN

Ma'am, I'm afraid you don't belong here.

MARIA

If that's my boy, I belong here.

MORAN

This is Edgar Allan Poe.

MARIA

That's my boy.

MARIA approaches the gurney and lets her eyes fall on POE. After a moment, she sighs in pain.

MARIA (CONT'D)

Are you his doctor?

MORAN

(Nods)

For all the good it's done. Dr. John Moran.

He extends his hand, but MARIA, distressed, overlooks it.

MARIA

My name is Maria.

(Pause)

What happened to Eddie?

MORAN

It's a pathetic answer, but I don't know. Someone brought him in a few days ago; no idea who. Mr. Poe was in a critical state then, and he seems to've gotten worse.

MARIA

Mother of mercy.

MORAN

When I first saw him, he smelled of alcohol. Does he drink?

MARIA

More than he should.

MORAN

That could have something to do with it. I found some bruises on him. Maybe he fell? . . . Then again, he might just have a godawful dose of the grippe; it's been going around.

MARIA

(Brushes POE's hair with her hand)

What can you . . . Are you doing anything for him?

MORAN

Oh, he's receiving top-of-the-line care, yes ma'am. We sponged him with warm water, gave him a mustard plaster, applied a cold compress to his head . . .

MARIA

Did it help?

MORAN

And that's medical science at the cutting edge. Once, when he was able to drink, we gave him a small cordial. He *liked* that.

MARIA

Did it help?

MORAN

No. As I say, he's moving in the wrong direction.

MARIA
(Sadly)

Story of Eddie's life.

MORAN
Last night he was wild--out of his head. Screamed and yelled for hours.

MARIA
My poor boy.

MORAN
He was seeing things that weren't there. Devils, demons. I got scared just listening to him.

(Pause)
At one point his mind seemed to clear . . .

MARIA
Yes?

MORAN
He looked straight into my eyes. He called himself *une ame perdue*, whatever that is, and said if I was his friend, I'd get a pistol and *shoot* him.

MARIA
God love him.

MORAN
Then he closed his eyes and floated off to somewhere else. Started calling out names. "Reynolds" was one I remember. Called out "Reynolds" again and again.

MARIA
Did he call my name?

MORAN
"Maria"? I don't think so.

MARIA
He calls me "Muddy."

MORAN
Muddy! *Yes*. Yes, I did hear him say "Muddy"; I didn't know what it meant.

MARIA
And "Virginia"?

MORAN

“Virginia,” yes, all the time.

MARIA

Virginia was his wife. She died two years ago.

MORAN nods.

MARIA (CONT'D)

People talk about Eddie, not always in a nice way. But they don't know him the way I do. Every night before going to bed, he'd kiss me goodnight. Very sweet and warm, the way a son *should* be.

(Pause)

And you should've seen him with Virginia, the way he nursed her through her last days.

POE

(Murmurs)

Virginia . . .

MARIA

He did what he could to help her. When Virginia died, it almost killed *him*.

POE

(Louder)

Virginia? . . .

MORAN

(To POE)

Easy, now.

MARIA

I don't doubt he noticed some other girls, especially after she died, but *she* was the one.

In the distance, a light flickers as the ghostly form of VIRGINIA appears. Stirring, POE sits up partway on the gurney and stares wide-eyed in her direction. She smiles at him. Unaware of her, the others focus on POE.

MORAN

(To POE)

Easy, now. Easy.

POE
(Louder still)

Virginia? . . .

MARIA

Eddie.

(Puts her hand on his shoulder)

Eddie, it's all right.

POE

Sing for me, Ginny. Please?

(Pause)

Will you sing for me?

VIRGINIA

(Sings--only this time her voice is soft,
slow and somewhat mournful)

As I went to milk and I didn't know how,
I milked a goat instead of a cow.
There's a monkey sittin' on a pile of straw,
And he's givin' a wink to his mother-in-law . . .

The flickering light goes dark, and VIRGINIA
exits. POE permits himself a smile before lying
back on the gurney.

MARIA

Eddie?

POE
(Exhausted)

Lord have mercy on my poor soul.

POE's head lolls to one side, and he moves no
more.

MORAN

Mr. Poe?

(Shakes him lightly; to MARIA)

I'll go get someone. I'll go get help.

MARIA
(Serenely)

No need to, doctor.

(Pause)

No need.

MARIA and MORAN bow their heads, and gradually the lights diminish.

The same disembodied VOICE we heard at the play's outset now speaks again; it reads the first stanza of Poe's poem "A Dream within a Dream."

VOICE

Take this kiss upon the brow!
 And, in parting from you now,
 Thus much let me avow--
 You are not wrong, who deem
 That my days have been a dream;
 Yet if hope has flown away
 In a night or in a day,
 In a vision, or in none,
 Is it therefore the less *gone*?
All that we see or seem
 Is but a dream within a dream.

Blackout.