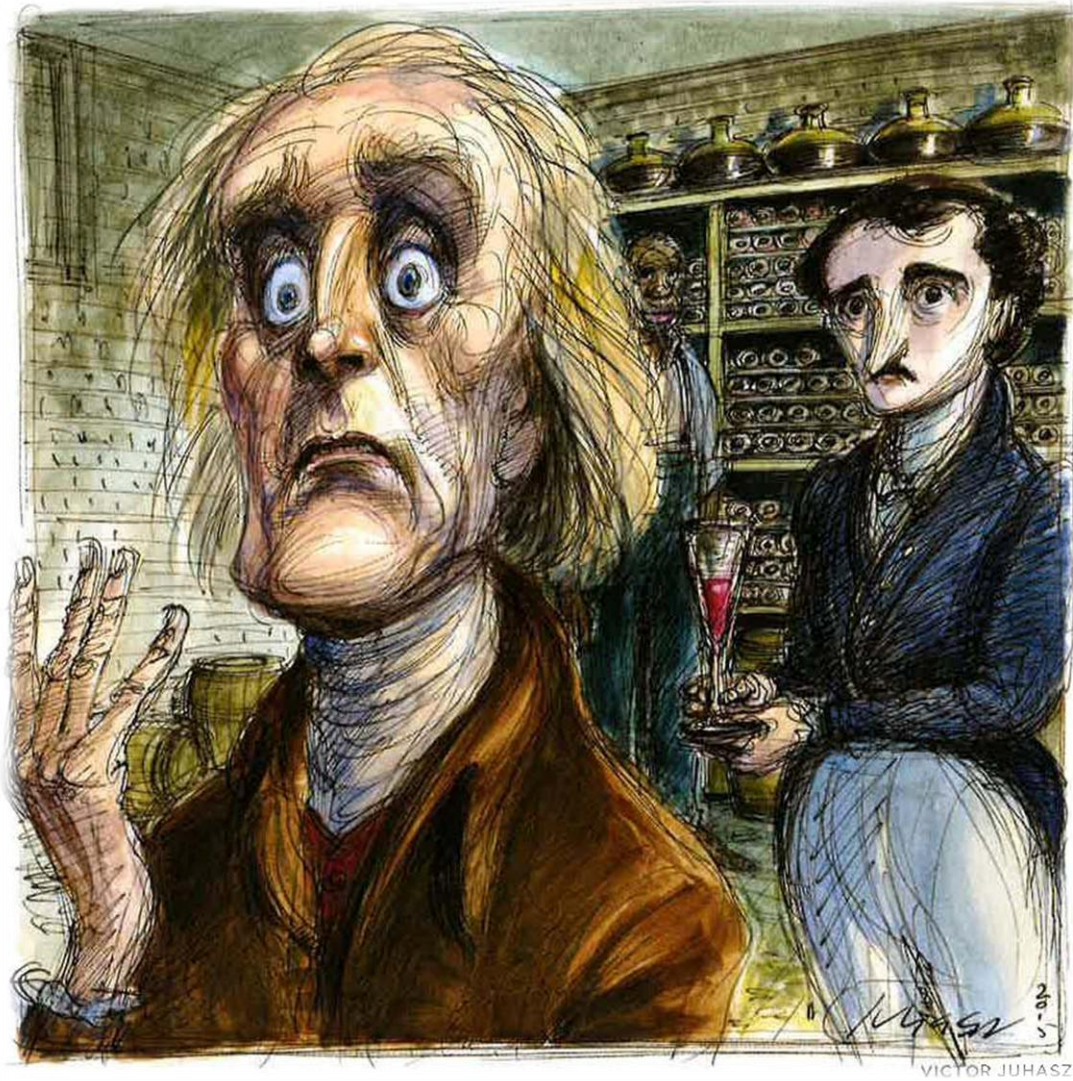


Monticello

A Play in Two Acts
by
Thomas H. Geoghegan



The True Story of Edgar Allan Poe's Night with Thomas Jefferson

MONTICELLO

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Monticello has its premise in a historical fact: Thomas Jefferson *did* invite students from the University of Virginia to dine with him at Monticello. In 1826, the last year of Jefferson's life, Edgar Allan Poe showed up at the school. The official Monticello web site speculates that Jefferson and Poe *may* have dined together.

The play here is a riff on what a Poe and Jefferson meeting might have been like- set just before that legendary July 4, 1826, fifty years after the Declaration of Independence, the date of Jefferson's death. As the play opens it is Poe's "turn" as a student to go up and dine at Monticello. However, Martha Jefferson- the President's daughter, who acts as his chief of staff - wants more than just a dinner guest.

Two facts relevant to the play: the Monticello web site says that the young Poe may in fact have gone up to Monticello just before Jefferson's death. Poe did attend Jefferson's funeral.

Poe did write science fiction, including a tale about a trip to the moon.

Cast of Characters

POE: Edgar Allen Poe, a student

MR. POTTS: President, University of Virginia

MARTHA JEFFERSON: Daughter of Thomas Jefferson

SALLY HEMINGS: A slave - perhaps a concubine

ABBY: A young slave of Haitian descent

THOMAS JEFFERSON: Ex-President of the United States

RANDOLPH: Jefferson's nephew (same actor as Mr. Potts)

FREDERIC: A slave - distantly related to Sally

ACT I

Scene One

AT RISE:

It is the spring of 1826: the young Edgar Allan Poe, student at the University of Virginia, has been summoned to the office of the university president, Mr. Potts. Martha Jefferson, daughter of Thomas Jefferson, is next to Mr. Potts. Poe is scribbling notes for a story.

MR. POTTS

Ah: Miss Jefferson, this is Mr. Edgar Allan Poe, newly enrolled this year but already seen by all of us at the University as a literary genius - and Mr. Poe, if you will put down those page proofs, I have the honor of introducing you to Miss Martha Jefferson, the daughter of Thomas Jefferson. As you know, Mr. Poe, during the term the President tries to invite every student at this University he founded to dine with him at Monticello, and... and.. as it happens to be your turn to go.....

(loudly)

I say, Mr. Poe!

POE

(looking up)

Mr. Potts! Sorry - I'm just scribbling an end to this story...

MR. POTTS

... it seems the President may also at this moment have need of your poetic gift already on display in our student publications.

POE

But my poetic gift is so modest, and my cheerful temperament is out of joint with the morbid sensibility of modern poetry. I prefer the sunlight, like Mr. Jefferson, who is my model, the reason I enrolled here.

MARTHA

Oh Mr. Poe it is your temperament that I like. Rational, cheerful, like my father's...used to be, before his recent illness.

POE

We all know there is no mind more enlightened -

MARTHA

But his mind has darkened lately Mr. Poe, and you - so cheerful and optimistic - are just the kind of company he needs. But..

(starting to sob)

I'm afraid you will find him...

POE

Miss Jefferson, what is wrong?

MARTHA

Mr. Potts, may I speak frankly to this young man?

MR. POTTS

He must be clear as to his task.

MARTHA

Mr. Poe, the President is, oh, impaired: he has suffered a stroke. But his mind is still working. Or at least he is able to speak to us in French. But Mr. Poe, here is the point. You know that the Fourth of July is just a few days away.

POE

Yes, this year - 1826 - is the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the sacred scripture of our country.

MARTHA

Yes, it is our sacred scripture, and in just a few days our country - and the world, Mr. Poe - expect the author of the Declaration to make... well, a declaration about it. And the point is, the President, being impaired temporarily, needs help in finding the right words to say....

MR. POTTS

That's why we're putting you ahead in the line to go up to Monticello. He needs your gifted pen... to write down the right words.

POE

POE

(pacing)

Yes, let me think... I have it: now is the moment to set forth a challenge, some challenge to America...

MARTHA

And what is that challenge, Mr. Poe?

POE

(pause) Space travel!

MARTHA

I beg your pardon.

POE

To have an American go to the moon!

MARTHA

How would one get to the moon?

POE

By balloon of course. (holds up the sheets). Miss Jefferson, I describe it in this story... "The Unparalleled Adventures of One Hans Pfall." I admit there is a bit of fantasy in here... but also a scientific precision that would appeal to the President. Isn't that a challenge to set before the country?

MR. POTTS

(after a pause)

Shouldn't we settle the West first?

MARTHA

(hesitantly)

It does avoid the slavery question.

MR. POTTS

Mr. Poe, that is the question.. We need to find a way for the President, in speaking of the Declaration, to explain what he meant by equality... between... between... the races, if you understand me.

MARTHA

Mr. Poe, I tell you frankly, sir, my cousin Randolph and his friends - they want the President to use this occasion to "clarify" the Declaration -

POE

Clarify?

MARTHA

As you may know, he and his friends in the legislature are very, very strongly in favor of states' rights...and on the subject of the races, their views are -

POE

Pardon me, Miss Jefferson - your cousin, Randolph, with his brother - last year, did he not kill those two slaves by - by...?

MARTHA

By doing what?

MR. POTTS

That was not true, Mr. Poe.

MARTHA

He says it was an accident...

POE

What do your cousin and his friends wish to clarify?

MARTHA

They have actually written a statement for father to give, now that he is ill - which say that certain phrases in the Declaration about equality, how they have to be understood in our age...

(breaks down)

Mr. Poe, my father is not aware of what is happening, and...I am hoping that you might write something that does not have him disown his own...disown his own...

MR. POTTS

Mr. Poe, of course all men are created equal, but that was in 1776, and now, in 1826, well, there have been major changes in our Virginia economy, with respect to cotton, I mean... I don't have to tell you, as a Virginian, that there is concern in some quarters as to how we now understand the Declaration...

MARTHA

(takes out sheaves
of paper)

Here is the statement Randolph and his friends have
drafted.....It's too extreme. Father would never have said
this. But Mr. Poe, surely you can use some of it, can't
you?

POE

(starts to read,
paces)

...This is all... it's all about the inferiority of the
Negro race...

MARTHA

Perhaps you can soften it.

POE

(casts it aside)

It is harsh - perhaps we can start all over.

MARTHA

I can't tell him no... He and his friends - and their
friends in the General Assembly - will wipe out the debts
of Monticello if... if we can give some version of this
statement...

POE

But this - it's so unscientific... it doesn't sound like
the President at all.

MARTHA

Mr. Poe, you have a gift - come up to Monticello, tomorrow
night, Tuesday, for dinner. Dine with the President. He
is able to converse, at least in French.

POE

I will do what I can, but -

MARTHA

Oh Mr. Poe how can we let Monticello - with its order and
balance - go under the auctioneer's hammer? Of course I
believe that all men are created equal, but... oh Mr. Poe,
we have so many debts.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT IScene Two

SETTING: Monticello, the kitchen

AT RISE: SALLY speaks with Abishag
(ABBY) in the kitchen at
Monticello, as they peel
potatoes.

SALLY
(embracing her and
weeping)
Oh my darling Abishag: it is too horrible to be true.

ABBY
Sally, Sally, I...can't peel any more....

SALLY
The President has never sold any of us...and in past years
he's freed some of my children.. though not me...but
now...now Monticello is in too much debt...and to start
selling...and selling you...go ahead, cry... what a night
to have another drunken student come up for a free
meal.....Oh Abby, to sell you...one of "us," not in the
field, but up here in the house...and not to anyone, but to
Randolph! Randolph is a monster!

ABBY
He boiled those two boys...even some whites said there
should have been a grand jury!

SALLY
That was never going to happen. He is a Jefferson, and in
the House of Delegates...so he can kill at pleasure...

ABBY
One of them was just 12.. and now he has come for me!

SALLY
Abby, stop...

ABBY
Oh he'll find something I do wrong, and call me a little
Haitian bitch, and you know what happens next...he'll say
he has no choice but strip me - from the waist up, naked -

oh because he has no choice, and then he takes a whip, and the first lash...blood...the second...more blood...the third...50 lashes, that's enough, don't you think? Big welts, all over my back..... And do you think Mr. Jefferson knows or cares this is happening?

SALLY

You know him: he knows, and he doesn't know.

ABBY

Does he even know that he's selling me? I suppose he knows he is in debt.

SALLY

That too: he knows and he doesn't know.

(stops)

Will you keep peeling? Even a young drunkard expects something to eat.

ABBY

You think he doesn't know?

SALLY

(shakes head)

How else could he be Thomas Jefferson, if he didn't know how not to know things?

(pause)

But you have a power over him.

ABBY

No, no - you have a power over him.

SALLY

No, no - you are the one upon whom he doted - or he did. Teaching you Greek and Latin - not my children... no, you were the one..

ABBY

And you know why - it's because I'm from Haiti, or not really, but my mother was, and he's obsessed with it. Haiti! . Oh, he'd like to think of us in Haiti as credulous, superstitious, but it maddens him to think that, yes, in the New World, we were the true republic. Yes, the first one where we did not just say that all men were created equal, but we threw off our chains? But Mr. Jefferson's America: who would call it a republic? It is an empire of slavery. And when he was President, and the people of Haiti asked for his help against the French, he

did nothing at all. Yes, he has a bad conscience. It's all because of that - because of Haiti.

SALLY

Haiti isn't all of it..

ABBY

And the strange thing about all this - I don't even know if I am from there.. My mother: yes. She was. But my father? Who is he? After all I was born here, at Monticello. I think you know and won't tell me!

SALLY

Just peel the potatoes.

ABBY

I don't know how my mother even got here to Monticello?. "I was part," she used to say, "of the Louisiana Purchase." She came along with all that French territory...

SALLY

Ha! There was much more to it than that.

ABBY

So tell me, will you?

SALLY

(throws down
potato)

Ow...I cut myself...Of course the President...took note of her, your mother, but... He is a lonely man, and he could speak to her in French.

ABBY

His French isn't that good.

SALLY

Then later he showered all that attention on you..... whatever his reason was..... and Randolph got none of it.. and that's why the idea of you just drives him in a rage.

ABBY

And that's why I'm to be raped!

SALLY

I will not let this happen.

ABBY

(hysterical, holds
up knife, swiping
air, backing toward
door)

These last few nights, I wake up... and he's outside! He's coming... and now he's standing over me, and... Sally, he has some kind of razor or knife, and... Shut up, he says, don't scream, and then he -

(FREDERIC enters
from behind her)

FREDERIC

Got you!

(ABBY screams)

SALLY

Frederic, she thought you were Randolph - out of the kitchen, go!

FREDERIC

Randolph is here?

SALLY

No, but he's - Frederic, just go!

(FREDERIC exits)

ABBY

Oh he is coming!

SALLY

So it's you! That scream I just heard is the one I heard last night, the night before, and two nights before...

ABBY

I wake up, I see him over me, I... where can I go?

SALLY

We have to stop this - somehow. After our guest leaves, we will have our talk with him. Don't you realize the President too has heard your screams? I know (pauses).... well, I do know, he's been sleepless like the rest of us...

ABBY

But no one's selling him to Randolph!

SALLY

(embraces her)

But, Abby, I know him - and when we break through the compartments of that magnificent instrument which is his mind... it's going to break his heart. He'll listen - really.

ABBY

(turns away)

He'll listen? Really? He - and Randolph, all of them - they don't even listen to the cries of the white women in this country. So who'll hear the cry of a black slave girl?

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT IScene Three

AT RISE: Up in Monticello, later that evening, Poe and Jefferson sit in silence. French doors open up to a view of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

POE

Monsieur le President... I,un, je parle....with you, I mean... oh je ne sais quoi... Mr. President, I've just about run out of French...

(JEFFERSON is silent.)

It's nice up here... in Monticello.... (pause) and I'm sorry, did you say something sir?

(JEFFERSON is silent.)

Just chime in, if... don't let me interrupt...

(JEFFERSON is silent.)

The staff at dinner was so attentive, I wonder where you get them...

(JEFFERSON is silent.)

SALLY

(enters with ABBY)

Has he spoken?

POE

(aside, to SALLY)

No, I don't know what to do -

JEFFERSON

(to ABBY). A cette heure tardive, est-ce qu'on peut refuser ce jeune homme?

ABBY

(to JEFFERSON) Oui, main ca serait plus facile si vous parliez avec lui mem pour un petit moment.

SALLY

Mr. Poe, let me try a word with him.
(SALLY whispers to JEFFERSON)

POE
Well?

SALLY
I think he'll speak with you - in English. Abby and I will leave you alone.

(SALLY and ABBY go downstage)
ABBY
(out of POE's hearing)
So? What did you say?

SALLY
I said: "The American people will think that all of us up here can only speak French. Do you know what danger that puts the staff in?"

ABBY
But he doesn't care if we're in danger!

(SALLY and ABBY exit)

POE
(alone with JEFFERSON)
Mr. President, did you see the draft I wrote for you? I have another copy here. Do you like the line here about the "mystic chords of memory" reaching back these past fifty years...? No? Mr. President, you have to help me. Isn't there something really important we should be telling them? You're nodding - yes, what is it? What is it you want to say?

JEFFERSON
(rising slowly, grabbing POE)
Don't... bury... me... alive!

POE
Pardon sir?

JEFFERSON
As they buried... the General... poor Washington.

POE

You mean.. George Washington?

JEFFERSON

The very one... it's all been hushed up. You didn't know he was buried alive? They are supposed to put a bell in these coffins so if the so called corpse is still alive, he can ring the bell. "Saved by the bell," you must know the expression. But with the Father of our Country, we didn't bury him with a bell, and...

(lets go of POE)

Pardon me, I'm... I think I'm having an attack...

(starts searching pocket for plant)

Give me that glass of wine...

(bites of plant and swallows)

There... Sorry, I have.... It's a natural herbal remedy, Dr. West and I discovered..... I am not well, and I am sorry, Mr. Usher, if I seem to babble.

POE

I'm not Mr. Usher, I'm Mr. Poe.

JEFFERSON

Not Mr. Usher?

POE

That's another student, a classmate - I think he was up here last week.

JEFFERSON

Yes, yes, Mr. Usher. Had a sister with him I recall?

POE

I believe so.

JEFFERSON

A screechy disagreeable young lady. But what about you? You've come up to help me, Martha says.

POE

I am to spend the night, if necessary.

JEFFERSON

Wait - here, in this house? And do you expect to sleep, Mr. Poe? They have told you nothing, I take it, about these screams.

POE

What?

JEFFERSON

Wait: I just heard one. Do you hear it?

POE

No, I...

JEFFERSON

Just now! From down below - from the Tenth Degree of Hell. I'm supposed to be a Free Thinker, they say; a man of science, apostle of the Enlightenment, but Mr. Poe, every night I am haunted by demons, spirits, strange shapes in the halls and....

POE

No sir, no, you are still the best hope for every American who aspires to be a votary of reason, and your book which I carry with me -

(holds up book)

yes, sir, your *Notes on Virginia*, this book is the glorious model of the books I hope to write!

JEFFERSON

(with distaste)

Notes on Virginia... (rifles pages)... the greatest single...

(pause)

It's all rubbish!

Does that shock you? Yes, once, like you, I was a "votary of reason." I once doted on Voltaire, and Diderot... I wanted to be part of that world, that logical French speaking world, un-muddled by the muddle of English, but then I saw that world collapse into madness... in Paris, in 1789, and then the madness of Napoleon, that monster... oh, when I came back to America, I had to keep up the pretense - even to myself - that I still believed in that world.. but then came Haiti, Haiti, sir... Do you know him, that devil, Toussaint L'Ouverture? And I saw where the Declaration of Independence leads... where the slaves... the blacks... setting up a republic, rose up and murdered us, the whites, murdered us in our beds, and now in my bed here at night I still cannot sleep - still cannot, even now - to think in any way that all those blacks murdering us in our beds might have been inspired by me... Of course I

still believe that all men are... I do.. but we have to save ourselves Mr. Poe... I... have to save myself from these screams.

(JEFFERSON tries
to rise.)

Wait: did you hear it?

POE

I heard nothing.

JEFFERSON

I feel a chill... let's go over and close these windows
(stops, looks out
the window)

Look Mr. Poe: there it is... Virginia... in the only direction I can bear to look upon it... away from the Tidewater and out to the West, blue, beckoning, beautiful, the West to which the ancients say that at the end of life we'll journey. Do you know the official name of this state?

POE

The Old Dominion, sir.

JEFFERSON

Yes, the old, the lame the crippled Dominion, at least in the east - but out there, see, it is all virgin, and new, and it's the future. We - my friends, Adams and I - we set up the National Government, not for these old sclerotic states like Virginia, the original thirteen, but to watch over what's out there, the America to come, out those windows to the West. Do you understand then the purpose of our National Government? It's the Government of the Future, or so I hoped. Do I still believe in that future, in any future that in a few years isn't drenched in blood?

POE

Yes, I do believe in, uh, well...

JEFFERSON

Space travel - you see I read your draft.

POE

Please tell me what do you think of it?

JEFFERSON

You make me sound as if I'm made of marble. The eighteenth century is over. Do you think, Mr. Poe, I have no heart? I'd like to sound for once a bit more like John Adams - though not that weepy of course

(long pause)

Besides, you don't mention slavery - Adams will mock me if I leave it out.

POE

Why talk about slavery, that morbid subject, when like Lewis and Clark we might go to the stars?

JEFFERSON

By canoe? Randolph and his friends - they want me to "clarify" my view of the races - a certain well known phrase of mine...

POE

No, sir, those are words we all believe in.

JEFFERSON

Oh? It's fine to say - all men are created equal - but not all men are equal to what those words mean. Mr. Poe, come closer... I always feel that I have to whisper this... I believe one day in America a black man will be President!

POE

That's... sir, no one would believe you! You might just as well tell us a woman could be President!

JEFFERSON

(shaking head)

A black man will be president before a woman is President.

(softly)

Besides... is it so implausible that a black man could be President? Look around here, sir, and you will see in my own house people who are... some of the Hemings... they are... partly... they are partly...

POE

Sir you can't say that! You would admit that at Monticello....

JEFFERSON

Admit? I could hardly deny - even my father-in-law fathered some of them. You know what they all say - what Callender wrote about me, how I am father of them, or eight

of them, or nine of them... all these scurrilous things in the pamphlets

(pause)

I must say, it would certainly get the attention if I were to take your draft, and admit in that I -

POE

Admit... admit what?

JEFFERSON

An incomplete thought.

At any rate Mr. Poe, you may be surprised... given my poor health.. that I wrote a draft of my own... (starts to hand it to POE, then stops)... no, I forgot, it's in French, I'll have to translate.

POE

Yes, please.

JEFFERSON

"My fellow citizens, I retired to Monticello in 1808 determined to live a life of the most austere republican virtue, away from the European-type decadence of Boston, and New York... and where I intended to and did found a university to ensure the spread of reason and enlightenment and I now realize... I was mistaken. I look at my students" - not you, Mr. Poe, of course - "drunken, prone to duels, which are but the appendages of slavery, and I look upon my own relatives, fathering black children with no sense of responsibility and.... I now confess to you, it is not only they, my fellow Virginians, but I myself who have sunk into a torpor, and it pains me that all across America, I start to see... stupidity, gross stupidity, and I wonder whether this experiment in liberty and democracy has not foundered upon... a generation of idiots... They say General Jackson, a man who is a bully and a narcissist, is about to become the President, the hero of all the yeomen of yore who are now just poor whites, and all I can say is that the country deserves him... I once thought that we were too enlightened to continue slavery, but now I see clearly how the race question will manacle us forever, for this whole republican experiment has gone awry.... my fellow Americans, just two years ago Lafayette came back here, and said to me: "What has happened to Virginia?" I was fearful he was going to say: "What has happened to you?" Fifty years ago, on the Fourth, we in America were

the real Enlightenment, Franklin, Adams, perhaps even Hamilton in a small way, we were the home of republican virtue. We used to dazzle the world. And now what do I see? The people... sunk into stupidity, and superstition... the birth place of freedom now become its crypt... and our former high-minded distaste for slavery? In the South now we bay for more of it, and more, to feed cotton into Mr. Hamilton's machines, and try to spread it even to the West, the one place where I - Thomas Jefferson - as the author of the Northwest Ordinance, tried so hard to keep it out. What am I to think, fellow citizens? It pains me to hear the flatters say: If Jefferson is right, then America is right... but then what, I tell them, if Jefferson is wrong? Then, my fellow citizens, America is -... No, I can't say it, but I now ask you, on this Fourth, in this time of unspeakable vulgarity, was I in fact wrong?

(JEFFERSON falls
silent.)

POE

That is not a message to cheer us.

JEFFERSON

Should I cut out the part about the crypt?

POE

I still find it - frightening.

JEFFERSON

Frightening, is it?... My nephew Randolph is about to join the Congress... Randolph and his friends - *they* are frightening.

(contemptuously)

You would like to think people would be screaming.

(there is a scream
off stage, perhaps
from ABBY)

POE

My God, did you hear that sir?

JEFFERSON

No I heard nothing. But I tell you - Randolph and his party -

SALLY
(bursting in,
hysterical)
Randolph is here! He wants to take the girl.

JEFFERSON
Girl...
(to himself)
... what girl?

SALLY
Abishag!

JEFFERSON
Who?

SALLY
(as RANDOLPH
enters)
Abby! You sold her to Randolph!

JEFFERSON
Our Abby? No, certainly not... certainly not to Randolph.
I would never sell... Abby.

RANDOLPH
Yes, you did, Uncle - you sold her to me.
(turning to SALLY)
Little bitch, she bit me...

JEFFERSON
What are you doing here at this hour?

RANDOLPH
It is almost the Fourth - are you going to sign our draft?

JEFFERSON
I am looking at it, sir.

RANDOLPH
As to the girl, I'm taking her tonight - right now - before
she gets in her head to run away -

JEFFERSON
And where, sir, do you propose to take her?

RANDOLPH

To a place she'll have no need of French...

JEFFERSON

Don't be such a fool - do you think I'd ever sell her?

RANDOLPH

You're so partial to this little wench! An honest Virginian might wonder why -

(turning to POE)

And who is this young gentleman?

POE

A Virginian, sir, with a modest reputation as a poet..

(MARTHA enters)

MARTHA

Randolph, no, get out. You're not taking Abby. We didn't sell her - she's part of the house - Father... he never would...

RANDOLPH

I have the bill of sale, to the Lees, and the assignment to me - so I'm the owner of the property

MARTHA

(reading)

Let me see this - no, it's a bill of sale... to the Lees.

RANDOLPH

And here's the assignment of rights. So - now - where is she? Get her!

(turns to POE)

And who is this boy poet, by the way?

SALLY

(to MARTHA)

I think we can draw up something freeing Abby, and back date it.

RANDOLPH

I heard that! Don't be absurd - it would never stand up in court. And, well, Martha, you let a slave talk like that? Well, do I have to stand here? It's late, and I want my property - now.

POE

You shouldn't speak to the President in that way.

RANDOLPH

Is this a student?

(to JEFFERSON)

No wonder you're in debt, Uncle, with all these young sots you let up here.

MARTHA

This is Mr. Poe, and he is helping my father draft his statement for the Fourth.

RANDOLPH

But there's no need for Mr. Poe - Uncle, you are using the statement my friends and I drafted - aren't you?

MARTHA

He's just helping to edit what you wrote -

RANDOLPH

He's not to edit it - he's to sign it. But wait -I know who this Mr. Poe is....

(pause)

Yes, Mr. Poe, I know who you are. You really do have a reputation, don't you?

(pacing around him)

You're the one who wrote that poem to a little girl, right? One of the Lee family... (to POE) isn't she a child of eleven?

POE

No -she's actually twelve.

MARTHA

Is that true?

POE

Yes, she is twelve.

RANDOLPH

Mr. Poe, the poet - or is it Mr. Poe the pederast?

POE

(to RANDOLPH)

How dare you, sir? I am as chaste as you or any other Virginia gentleman. As to the young lady's age... it is common for poets to pledge troth to a girl of tender years. There is Novalis, and Dante... it is as chaste an engagement as either of theirs.

JEFFERSON

(to POE)

You should take vigorous walks as I do, Mr. Poe... it helps with that kind of thing.

RANDOLPH

(to MARTHA and to

JEFFERSON)

We have no time for edits, Uncle - it is July second. You may detest me and my friends, uncle, but your views on states' rights are the same as ours. You are defending the cause of slavery - with the rest of us, you too are in the Devil's party, whether you think so or not!

POE

Sir, I am as chaste as - Keats, I would say.

RANDOLPH

(to POE)

I will get to you in a minute, Mr. Poe - Uncle, you have our draft. Read it - and the State will take on all of your debts, guarantee your paper

MARTHA

Father - Randolph and his friends ...

JEFFERSON

You can't believe him.

RANDOLPH

Well you should believe me - in the House of Delegates, we are willing to step in and save Monticello - all that we ask is support for... states' rights.

SALLY

(to Martha)

This will save us?

JEFFERSON

You want me to expatiate on the inapplicability of certain phrases...to the... the Negro race... is that correct?

RANDOLPH

(in a politic
manner)

On the occasion of the Fourth... to clarify a sensitive point.... sensitive to those of us like you who are... solid republicans as yourself, and seek only to limit the

power of an oppressive national government.... over our property...

POE

Sir I demand -

RANDOLPH

(brutally to POE)

Shut up.

(to MARTHA)

And I want my little Haitian bitch as well.

JEFFERSON

Martha, may I see the bill of sale? I must say it looks genuine. (slowly tears it) So I am forced to tear it up.

RANDOLPH

How childish! I have the original - do you think I'd give you the original?

MARTHA

Randolph - please, Father can just edit the draft, I'm sure he'll sign it, and then as to the girl -

RANDOLPH

Cousin, I don't want him or Mr. Poe to "edit" it!

MARTHA

(trying to save the
situation and
protect her father)

Mr. Poe is only here to help Father shape it in a way that is appropriately... (hesitates)... appropriately...

RANDOLPH

(finishing her
sentence)

- "Evasive"? No one would expect less from Thomas Jefferson.

JEFFERSON

(to Martha)

... Martha, I feel a weakness in my left side. It's my heart. I need to sit.

RANDOLPH

Will you please bring out that little bitch - ?

(to SALLY)
You, Sally, you go get her.

SALLY
(to MARTHA) Abby? No! Not Abby -

MARTHA
(shocked)
No, Randolph - you have to leave. You're making father ill.

(ABBY enters, by accident)

RANDOLPH
Leave? I'm not leaving without - well, there she is!

ABBY
(screams)
Oh I thought someone called me! He's here -

RANDOLPH
(grabbing her)
Now I've got you -

MARTHA
Randolph, let her go!

SALLY
Abby, find Frederick - run!

ABBY
I can't, he's got my wrist!

MARTHA
Randolph, get off her now...
(tries to loosen
his grip)
Do you hear?

RANDOLPH
That little she-wolf kicked me -

ABBY
(breaking free)
He's off me.

MARTHA

Abby, get behind Mr. Poe!

ABBY

(in despair) "Deliberate morte ferocior!"

JEFFERSON

The Latin, yes: "She was all the more ferocious for having chosen death!" But "morte"? Martha, only over my dead body.

RANDOLPH

Martha, you're being ridiculous - Mr. Poe, get out of the way, or I will - I will...

ABBY

No, don't - just wait, everyone, please!

(takes breath)

He owns me. But before I go, let me ask... (to JEFFERSON)... you, sir.

MARTHA

Abby, no, I won't let this happen -

ABBY

(continuing to JEFFERSON)

Who treated me like a daughter.

JEFFERSON

I feel light headed, I'm ill...

ABBY

Did you really sell me to save this marble at Monticello?

JEFFERSON

No... I mean, I can't recall.. I didn't really... How can you think so when I taught you...

ABBY

....Greek and Latin... and did you have me read Euripides to prepare me to be abandoned like the Trojan Women?

JEFFERSON

My heart...

MARTHA

Abby stop - and Randolph, you are not taking her. Mr. Poe, stop him.

RANDOLPH

Mr. Poe, get out of the way -

POE

I won't, sir.

RANDOLPH

I brought a pistol, Mr. Poe - as the roads are not safe - but I am raising it now so you understand the urgency of getting out of my way.

MARTHA

Randolph, are you mad?

RANDOLPH

(raises pistol at POE)

I'm going to count to ten...

MARTHA

(furious)

You not to count to one- give me...

(reaches for pistol)

and there, I have it. It's mine -

RANDOLPH

What? You... damn you... damn you, Martha, give it back!

MARTHA

(hands pistol to Poe)

Mr. Poe, hold the gun please...

POE

(takes pistol reluctantly)

Yes, but Miss Jefferson, a poet should be unarmed.

RANDOLPH

Drop that pistol, Mr. Poe.... drop it!

(reaches for it)

POE

No, Miss Jefferson said -

(pulls it away but drops it - the pistol goes OFF)

Oh I dropped it - oh no, Mr. President!

(general shouts of "Mr. Jefferson," "Uncle")

(JEFFERSON collapses)

MARTHA

Father, are you all right?

RANDOLPH

My God, Uncle, are you all right?

SALLY

(stage whisper to ABBY)

Abby, run - now - go! Find Frederick - go!

RANDOLPH

Martha, I was just trying to get back my pistol!

MARTHA

Father, father... I think he's unwounded... Father...

SALLY

Yes - the bullet missed! It's his heart -

RANDOLPH

Mr. Poe - are you happy? You've now murdered Thomas Jefferson!

(pause)

Wait - where's that little Haitian bitch? You, Sally, you did this, didn't you? Damn you, damn you!

(RANDOLPH exits)

MARTHA

I've had enough of Randolph for one night... Father... Sally, he's trying to speak... I think he's saying something... help me carry him back to his room.

SALLY

(to MARTHA)

Yes, but look at Mr. Poe - he's like a ghost. I think he's going to -

(POE collapses)

faint.

MARTHA

We'll get the smelling salts - Father! It's his heart. We have to get him back to his room!

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT IScene Four

SETTING: A spare study, at Monticello.

AT RISE: ABBY and FREDERIC have a hurried conversation.

ABBY

Hide me!

FREDERIC

Let me think - not the slave quarters: it's the first place he'll look!

ABBY

Then he'll flog me and then rape me and kill me. .

FREDERIC

Kill you? No. He has to be careful. He's running for Congress - that will be a restraint.

ABBY

What if he loses the election?

FREDERIC

Maybe the woods -

ABBY

The woods? The dogs will be after me.
(There is a loud
cry.)

FREDERIC

That's Randolph - for now, it's upstairs, under my bed.
When it's safe, I'll bring you to the wine cellar.

ABBY

(picks up shawl)

The wine cellar! It's full of bats! Oh, what hope do I have? Wait, just let me think -
(eyes closed)

"As my mother's mother came across

ACT IScene Five

SETTING: Jefferson's Bedroom.

AT RISE: SALLY and MARTHA stand
outside JEFFERSON's bedroom.

SALLY

How is he?

MARTHA

(to SALLY,
hesitant)

Oh Sally, he is in there raving!

SALLY

(slowly)

You say he's in there with... a raven?

MARTHA

A raven? No, I mean - he's not making any sense..
(pause)

JEFFERSON

(entering)

That's ridiculous - I just had another spell. I'm as lucid
as I could be. Where is Mr. Poe? I want him to do a whole
new draft of my statement for the Fourth.

SALLY

Let poor Mr. Poe go home. He's afraid!

(POE enters)

JEFFERSON

I fear that Mr. Poe is afraid of the dark

POE

No, sir - not at all. Not of the dark... exactly.

JEFFERSON

Good, then we're going to my wine cellar: it's quite dark
down there, but it's where I do my best work.

MARTHA

No, Father, you're not well -

SALLY

And there are bats down there.

MARTHA

And where is Randolph?

FREDERIC

Miss Jefferson, he is going room to room in a rage -

JEFFERSON

Well, he can't get into the wine cellar - I have it barricaded.

MARTHA

Father, no: it's too much for you. Just now you may have had a stroke.

JEFFERSON

And I may have another, and another... so I have no time to waste... so, Frederic, help carry me... Mr. Poe and I have work to do tonight.

SALLY

(aside, to MARTHA)

Frederic will watch them.

JEFFERSON

Daughter, it may be the last time I visit the room I love best.

MARTHA

Father, it will be too dark to see.

JEFFERSON

So it will help me adjust my eyes - to that eternal darkness where I'll soon descend.

(to POE)

Mr. Poe, down there we will open a bottle and get to work.

POE

Sir, as you know, I do not drink.

FREDERIC

Mr. Poe, you and I will have to lift him.

POE

Let me take the left.

(struggling)

I think I have him... oh, he's not so light.

FREDERIC

Do you have him?

POE

(carrying JEFFERSON)

Yes, yes - but is this far?

JEFFERSON

(being carried)

I envy the two of you the exercise - lifting me - Mr. Poe, I have written a great deal on health and fitness - I used to run two miles a day, did you know?

POE

(puffing)

I know, sir. I have read your works on health.

JEFFERSON

And it is ruinous to your health to stay up till midnight -

POE

(struggling)

Sir, I never stay up this late.

JEFFERSON

I used to do it... staying up to midnight, reading one of our classic authors, some book of ancient lore... but I now I don't.... no, never more, Mr. Poe.... we all need seven hours of sleep!

POE

Frederic, are we there?

JEFFERSON

Frederic, make sure we avoid Randolph - is he abroad? Mr. Poe, I must apologize for some of my family. Of course Randolph is not the worst.

POE

No?

JEFFERSON

My cousin, John Marshall, the Chief Justice - he's the worst... a mad dog...

FREDERIC

Mr. Poe, be careful with this step -

POE

Sir, I read Randolph's draft - it would have you "un-declare" the Declaration.

JEFFERSON

And I will never "un-declare" it- even if I now doubt certain of its premises.

POE

About equality?

JEFFERSON

No, no - about liberty. Once I thought that liberty - by itself, alone - would be enough to sustain our union, to hold us together, but now when I look at Randolph, and his friends... I just see the liberty of wild dogs.

POE

Sir, you are not responsible for what he and others have done with that liberty.

JEFFERSON

Once I thought that the Declaration - or at least my own draft, before Adams and Franklin began marring it - could only liberate, bring about a better world, even for the blacks... eventually. But now I see how the Declaration itself might be an instrument of oppression, yes, even for the blacks. We oppress them with our liberty.

POE

(to FREDERIC)

Can you hold the lantern higher? I can't see.

FREDERIC

Yes sir, watch your footing- we're going in a back way, which Randolph doesn't know...

(POE and FREDERIC
keep carrying JEFFERSON down stage)

JEFFERSON

Yes, here we are! Set me down.

FREDERIC

I'll light a torch.

POE

Look at all these vintages. Sir, they must be worth a fortune. I think they could pay off all the debts of Monticello.

JEFFERSON

They are the debts of Monticello.

POE

And what of this giant clock?

JEFFERSON

Clock? What clock? Oh... Martha wouldn't allow it upstairs. She hated the ticking of the pendulum. It won't bother you -

POE

No, it won't bother me.

JEFFERSON

(brightening)

Then Mr. Poe, take out your pen and let's get to work.

POE

Oh, sir, I forgot my pen.

FREDERIC

I have a pen.

JEFFERSON

But first let's open a bottle. Let's look at this label: the "Cask of Amontillado." Hm. No, let's save this for some literary event. Ah, here's one you will like, Mr. Poe - that I bought from Lafayette.

POE

As I keep saying, sir, I do not drink.

JEFFERSON

Your not-drinking was much noted at dinner...

POE

I swore to Annabel that I would dedicate my life to clarity...

JEFFERSON

Tell her that tonight, with me, you will dedicate it to claret.

(offering glass, which
FREDERIC has poured out)

Your country is counting upon you, Mr. Poe, to taste of the grape.

POE

All right... I suppose, one glass... sir, to the United States!

(POE takes a baby sip)

JEFFERSON

Are you ready to write?

POE

Yes, go ahead.

JEFFERSON

On this fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration... come on, Mr. Poe, drink the whole glass.

POE

I... sir, please... I took an oath... all right...
(gulps)

I did it, Mr. President.

JEFFERSON

Frederic, re fill the glass. Mr. Poe needs more.

POE

(FREDERIC refills)

Frederic, please... that's enough.

JEFFERSON

Before we begin, Mr. Poe, is there any question you have about the Declaration?

POE

Yes, there is one thing.

JEFFERSON

Ask.

POE

Why did the delegates... even those from Virginia, and even South Carolina... proclaim that all men are created equal, when, when...

JEFFERSON

When they beat their slaves?

POE

Yes.

JEFFERSON

Drink, sir.

POE

Mr. President, I am drinking.

JEFFERSON

No, I mean the delegates - and their drinking. Mr. Poe, the Declaration of Independence was dependent on their inebriation.

POE

Do you mean the delegates were drunk?

JEFFERSON

The entire summer - by the Second of July, I worried not whether we had a majority, but whether we had a majority who could sign their names... Mr. Poe, the American people must never know... but the three of us... Adams, Franklin, myself... we had to sign some of those names...

POE

(staring into glass)

... I am drinking, I fear, like one of those delegates.

JEFFERSON

Two glasses will do you no harm. At any rate, except for some ridiculous edits by Adams, I was able to write anything I pleased.

POE

And so... now... I ask, at last: do you believe, now, that all men are created equal?

JEFFERSON

"Believe"? Did I say I believed, or we believed? I did not put it forward as a belief. I said it was "self evident." I put it forward as a scientific fact.

POE

Hold it... I should write this down... my thoughts... they're getting tangled.

JEFFERSON

That's why we must re fill your glass.

POE

Sir, no...

JEFFERSON

Frederic, pour another glass for Mr. Poe. It will give him a clear head.

(to POE)

Now, Mr. Poe, I have a question for you: do you know what is in the Declaration?

POE

Sir, every American knows what is in the Declaration. What is it to be an American, except to know what is in the Declaration?

JEFFERSON

Yes, I thought so. Then tell me: what does it say?

POE

Briefly?

(sipping)

I'm having trouble focusing.

JEFFERSON

Can I prompt?

POE

Yes, get me started...

JEFFERSON

There is a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?

POE

Yes, yes... life, liberty... and the other one...

JEFFERSON

And from where do these rights come?

POE

I believe from you, sir.

JEFFERSON

No, Mr. Poe, from the Creator - endowed by the Creator.

POE

Yes, of course, but I thought these were self evident facts... so why bring in the Creator?

JEFFERSON

The Creator created self evident facts. The Creator created calculus. But the Creator did not stop at three - what other right did the Creator create?

POE

Life, liberty, the one about pursuit.. is there another?

JEFFERSON

The most important one.

POE

I'm ashamed I can't recall - if I'd not had so much to drink...

JEFFERSON

Oh you wouldn't know anyway. I could ask one American after another - none of them would know.

POE

What is it?

JEFFERSON

It is the right to throw off the government - at any time, as we please - it is our right to cast off this deplorable Constitution, clamped down on the American people by Hamilton and his friends. Do you say Randolph's draft un-declares the Declaration? The Constitution of the United States un-declares the Declaration! It exists to nullify the Declaration. We the People... hereby give it up

forever. Write that down if you dare. They un-declared it in Philadelphia, in 1787, when I was out of the country, and this time, they were not drinking. Hamilton, all the royalists, terrified of the debtor class, the farmers with pitchforks, the ones who supported me, they clamped it down on us a Constitution from which none of us can escape. And now forever we have a permanent pact with the privileged... a pact that they will never let We the People escape. We have given up the right that effectuates every other right. And it is impossible to change. For two terms as President, I tried to do it. I tried to give the country back to the people. That was why I purchased Louisiana... to give more land to everyone... to give the country back to the people... by adding more States, I made it harder to amend. All I did was add more land... I simply made it possible for us to pace sea to sea in a more spacious cell.
(pause, breathing hard)

POE

Mr. President - sir, is this true?

JEFFERSON

(grasping POE's coat)

Overthrow it now - before it is too late! Or in centuries to come, there will only be two races - not black and white, but rich and poor, who will be like different races, with different physiognomies, by virtue of their wealth. But no, there's no way out! Mr. Poe, there's no way out!

POE

Sir, you're grasping my coat!

JEFFERSON

(holds hand to ear)

Wait - I heard a scream.

POE

Mr. President, no one screamed -

(there is a scream, from ABBY, off stage)\

Wait - I just heard it!

FREDERIC

(to himself)

It's Abby!

JEFFERSON

Who?

FREDERIC

Abby! Mr. Jefferson, I have to leave, for... for a few minutes...

JEFFERSON

(weak, faint)

...I feel faint... every night, I hear that scream.

FREDERIC

I am sorry, sir, I have to go! Mr. Poe, stay here - I will send down Sally and Miss Jefferson.

(FREDERIC exits)

POE

(surprised)

Mr. President, you're weeping... is it for the girl?

JEFFERSON

No, no, I am weeping for the children -

POE

Children? What children?

JEFFERSON

The ones who are buried here... right under you, Mr. Poe.

POE

There are children buried here?

JEFFERSON

(grieving)

Yes, the ones... whom I had working in my nail factory.

POE

I have read - that you once tried to set up such a factory...

JEFFERSON

And I employed young boys - who were not ready for work in the fields - I set up a factory? I who hate commerce! I did what a Hamiltonian would have done. Better if a Hamiltonian had done it.. I made a bungle of Monticello sir - and then those children...

(pause)

POE

What happened to them?

JEFFERSON

(starts to rise)

Half of them caught a fever - they were all swept away -

(There is another
muffled scream)

POE

But that's not your fault - sir, sir... where are you
going?

JEFFERSON

(grabs POE's arm)

Let me take you down to the crypt, where they are buried -

POE

(struggling with
JEFFERSON)

Mr. President, no...

(MARTHA and SALLY
enter)

MARTHA

Father! Mr. Poe, where are you taking him? I can see we
came just in time. Sally, help me lift him!

(They support
JEFFERSON, with
POE's help.)

POE

I was about to start writing a new draft -

MARTHA

Mr. Poe, you will have to do it without him. We have to
take Father back to his room.

POE

Miss Jefferson - I don't know if I can write exactly what
the President wants.

(wobbles)

Pardon me, I have trouble standing... up.

MARTHA

You seem unsteady, Mr. Poe - are you all right?

POE

Yes - and I am ready to write. But I may have trouble here explaining what's really in the Declaration.

MARTHA

(surprised) Everyone knows what's in it! But remember, Mr. Poe, in your draft, we have to please Randolph - do you understand?

POE

But now I've lost my pen

SALLY

(hands a pen)

I have a pen.

MARTHA

(starting to lift

JEFFERSON)

Sally we have to lift. Can you take the left? So good luck, Mr. Poe - we're all counting on you to save Monticello!

(Carrying

JEFFERSON, SALLY

and MARTHA go down

stage.)

...Wait, Sally, before we leave - let's make sure to lock this door. You know how many students at the University try to tunnel their way in here.

(MARTHA locks the

door, and MARTHA

and SALLY exit.)

POE

(alone)

Wait - did she lock the door?

(runs to door)

It's LOCKED!! Oh... there's no way out!

(POE, in despair,

paces, sips wine)

I must stop this drinking! Oh this night I have seen and drunk too much! Hours ago I came up here, a happy, cheerful acolyte of Mr. Jefferson... but now have I not looked with horror into his heart? And what of my own heart, beating like a pendulum faster in this pit? I am going mad (takes big gulp). No, but I might. For what if

he dies tonight and his soul like a bat goes flying in the air and comes down to light upon me so that I too live my life possessed, as mad and haunted as he is (sips)... by this horror, this slavery that enslaves him. Yes, this is the real horror, even if we disguise it, and does it not enslave us all? Oh if only I could free him. Ah! Here (sips) is what I ought to write:

"My fellow Americans... hmm, I don't like that... well, On this occasion of this fiftieth anniversary, etc., etc., and because I cannot keep these two ideas, all-men-created, etc. and human slavery simultaneously in my head, I now hereby free every single one of my slaves..."

Ha, I like it! No, it would ruin Miss Jefferson. That's too much. I have to cross that out... x-x-x, all of it... This is better" "I hereby free just the slaves up here in my house." No, I have to cross that out... x-x-x... they need someone to serve these wonderful dinners... What do I write? I know, I know, I have it! "My fellow Americans... On this fiftieth, etc., America.. I say America is a work in progress." Excellent! I have no idea what it means, but who will be offended? And I'm going to scribble in the rest... (writes furiously) yes, there will be "setbacks," and the "mystic chords of memory," and so on, and so on... all right, I AM DONE!

(stands up)

Now to get my draft upstairs before the President, in a coma, ends up signing Randolph's!

(yawns)

But just for a minute... I'm exhausted... look, it's 3:00 a.m., and... I'm just going to lie down here, and...

(lies down)

(there is a POUNDING on the door)

(slurring a bit) Oh... who's knocking?

(POUNDING continues)

Oh go away!

(POUNDING continues)

Knock, knock! Is that you, stupid old Randolph?

(POUNDING continues)

Go away you bad old man... oh, let me sleep... just ten little tiny minutes...

(POUNDING continues)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF ACT I)

ACT IIScene One

SETTING: Wine cellar, Monticello

AT RISE: Crashing open the door, ABBY and FREDERIC burst into the wine cellar, which is still in darkness. FREDERIC is carrying a log, like a battering ram.

FREDERIC
Someone locked the door, but I expected Mr. Poe to be here.
(searching, sing-song)

O Mr. Poe!

ABBY
(same sing-song)
O Mr. Poe...?

ABBY
(little scream)... Oh, it's a body! I think it's Mr. Poe!

FREDERIC
Is he dead?

ABBY
(leans down, sniffs him)
No, I smell alcohol on his breath.

FREDERIC
And he's twitching, too. (leans over POE) But look: here's the draft that he's writing for Mr. Jefferson.

ABBY
Shh.. he's waking up.

POE
(groaning in sleep)
Mr. President, sir, I think I've drunk enough...

FREDERIC
Abby, I'm reading this draft...My God, look what he crossed out...

ABBY

What? Let me see it -

FREDERIC

(handing it to her)
In the crossed out part.. oh... my God...Mr. Jefferson...
frees you and me... and every slave serving him at
Monticello....

ABBY

Oh my God! I'm free, let me see it!

FREDERIC

No, no - he crossed it out.

ABBY

(in dismay)

How could he cross it out?

POE

(loudly groans)

Oh...

FREDERIC

(whispers)

We have to be quiet - Randolph may still be here.

POE

(trying to rise)

I'm possessed... no, it's just my head...

FREDERIC

Easy, sir, easy now...

POE

My head ... oh... I think I... drank... oh, no. .. let me
take that lantern...

(crawling on ground)

I was writing something, and... I have to get it the
President...

(looks up at FREDERIC)

it's a speech... I think it's somewhere on the ground...
oh no... where is my speech... no, no, I was almost
done...

ABBY

Sir, please, it's filthy down there... full of bat goo...

POE

I know, but -

FREDERIC

(sheepish)

Mr. Poe, we... we have the speech...

POE

Oh you found it!

FREDERIC

(abashed)

Yes, yes I found it...

POE

Did you get a chance to read it?

FREDERIC

(startled)

What?

(pause)

Sir, I'm just a... slave...

POE

Well of course I know that... I am a writer, I just like to ask... so, you know, what did you think? I am experimenting these days with a bit more onomatopoeia and ...

FREDERIC

I... I thought... I didn't really read it... exactly...

ABBY

(interrupting)

Why did you cross out the part about freeing us upstairs?

POE

What?

FREDERIC

Abby!

POE

Oh, oh, yes... I did cross that out... but how did you like the rest of it?

FREDERIC

I.... yes... it was quite good, sir...

ABBY
(under breath)

Oh my God...

POE
Look - tell me - how is the President?

FREDERIC
He's very ill...

POE
And it's late... it was frightening to find out... that
there is a crypt right under here..

FREDERIC
A crypt?

POE
Yes, the one with the children in it...

FREDERIC
(puzzled)
Sir, I know this whole building... there is no crypt right
under here.

POE
But what about the children who died in the nail factory?

FREDERIC
(more puzzled, looking at ABBY)
Children who died in the nail factory...?

ABBY
(shrugs)
I'm not following this...

FREDERIC
There were no children who died in the nail factory...

POE
Oh...
(sighs)
I know I didn't dream it... maybe I did. All I really
remember is the President saying, "A writer ought to
drink."

FREDERIC
(politely murmurs)
That sounds like Mr. Jefferson.

POE

A writer... ha! Do you know how embarrassed I am to be known as a writer?

FREDERIC

No.

ABBY

No.

POE

For one thing, you feel ridiculous in front of Randolph, or Mr. Jefferson... as both of them are lawyers...

FREDERIC

They don't practice, really.

POE

But they're lawyers! The law, that's the thing... Who would want to be a writer? It's demeaning. People expect you to make up stories... tales. Is that anything for an adult to be doing? And that's the least of it - there's something even more dishonorable. It's mucking around in the little interior thoughts the characters have. It's a kind of prying, like opening people's mail, or peeping in their bathroom windows... it's disgusting to be a writer. It's certainly not a thing that a gentleman in Virginia should be doing... it's the kind of thing they do in New York...

FREDERIC

(after long pause)

Sir, you're upset.

POE

(holding head)

I'm exhausted... what time is it? My head... sorry, I keep yawning... I think I need just a little bit of rest...

FREDERIC

Just a little bit... you need to get the draft up to the President....

POE

(lying down)

Don't worry... I'm too nervous to sleep....

(goes to sleep)

ABBY
(sing song)

Oh Mr. Poe?
(to Frederic)
He's asleep...

FREDERIC
(distracted)
Mr. Poe? We have to get his draft up to Mr. Jefferson -

ABBY
Frederic!

FREDERIC
What?

ABBY
(holds up draft)
Stop worrying about that stupid speech - me, me, what am I
going to do?

FREDERIC
You're safe right now.

ABBY
Don't you grasp I'm about to be tied up and tossed on a
stack of wood and have my throat cut? What's the answer?
A boat? The Chesapeake? It's as far away as Canada...

FREDERIC
(nodding)
Abby, you're a Haitian... can't you... can't you summon up
someone from the spirit world?

ABBY
(scoffs)
Oh that's demeaning - you don't believe in that.

FREDERIC
(offended)
Well, the whites around here do. Table rapping, seances...
Mr. Jefferson may hate it, but it's all the fashion now in
Virginia, among the best families.

ABBY
Just because whites are doing it, it doesn't mean we should
do it.

FREDERIC

But I bet, being a Haitian and all, you'd know how to do it.

ABBY

I'm only the daughter of a Haitian... only my mother was... that doesn't mean ...

(stops herself)

No, what am I saying? Yes, yes, of course I am a Haitian...

(doubtfully)

I.. I bet my father probably was .. a Haitian..

FREDERIC

Well?

ABBY

This is ridiculous. But ... all right, all right, but if we do this, I want to summon up someone serious... fine, this is Monticello... let's go create a scandal... let's summon up....

(pause)

FREDERIC

Hamilton?

ABBY

No - he's boring. No, someone who's actually of our race. Frederic - why not the true father of my country? My real country... not this one...

FREDERIC

Who? You mean... the General, Mr. Washington?

ABBY

No, he was never much of a gentleman... I'm sick of all of them... Let's bring a real man into this house... I said the father of my country, and your country, Frederic... I mean General... Pierre...Touissant L'Ouverture!

FREDERIC

(panicking)

But him? Toussaint L'.. L'... .. he's the last person Mr. Jefferson would allow into Monticello... no, no, you can't... you can't do that!

ABBY

Are you afraid?

FREDERIC

Aren't you? Isn't he going to take possession of you?

ABBY

Or you.

FREDERIC

(frightened)

Me?

ABBY

(haughtily)

I don't think he would take possession of a woman's body...

FREDERIC

And why not?

ABBY

Because he's too much of a gentleman. Here, here... you have to hold my hand?

FREDERIC

Really - we have to hold hands?

ABBY

Don't you think? I don't know either... I only saw this once... here, repeat after me... and we have to say it... I think three times.

FREDERIC

This isn't going to work.

ABBY

And there's probably a big demand for..... Toussaint L'Ouverture.

FREDERIC

I doubt many whites around her want to call him up....

ABBY

(excited)

Yes, maybe he's available..... Frederic, just repeat this after me..."Come up you power/This is your hour/Fire our brains/Take off our chains/Stir up our hearts/And now practice your arts!"

FREDERIC

It didn't work....

ABBY

I'm not done. "May a dalliance with the demon world/Help
extricate this poor slave girl/And may those who walk on
burning stones/Trample those who'd break our bones."

(There is a wild roar like thunder and FREDERIC and ABBY
fall down.)

ABBY (CNTD.)

What was that?

(silence)

Frederic? Frederic, say something! Are you all right?
Speak to me...

FREDERIC

(now bellowing in voice of TOUSSAINT)

Who summoned me?

ABBY

Oh, no... Frederic, or... no, not Frederic... who.... who
are you?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

The father of your country, if you must know... I said,
YOUR COUNTRY... not Washington's.. And besides, I'm twice
the general....

ABBY

You mean... Haiti, yes?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

Hispaniola. Or St. Domingue. But I am father of a
different country, too: Africa. No, I am the father of
any country, anywhere, where blacks are ready to strike off
their chains, and rise up and be free... to claim their
rights to equality, liberty, and... no, not the pursuit of
happiness, that's not for us, not now...

ABBY

I long to be in that country...

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

You my child are here in hell...

ABBY

And here we fly its flag: the stripes are on our backs..

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

Thomas Jefferson does no such thing.

ABBY

But he is quite aware his nephews do - and now he would sell me to some.....

(spluttering)

mutilating nephew of a rapist.

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

I think you mean: mutilating racist of a nephew.

ABBY

Yes, whatever -

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

But he's good to the Hemings.

ABBY

He should be - they're like his family.

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

But hasn't he been good to you?

ABBY

Oh, I don't think so, really...

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

He had you read the classics.

ABBY

I don't want to read the classics - I want to be free!

(suspiciously)

But how do you know about all that?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

They say I can't read, but know all about the classics. Did Mr. Jefferson ever tell you why Aeneas was in love with Dido, or Caesar with Cleopatra? Do you know why they wanted them but then left them?

ABBY

No.

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

They were African! They wanted them as they never wanted their pallid European wives.

ABBY

Oh if only I could die like a queen and not be hunted down like a slave! (pause) How do you know about me and him?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

Because I'm from the spirit world, of course - I've been dead since 1802 when I went unarmed, like a fool, to bargain with the French. I've had time to pry into things. No, my child, I am no stranger to this place. Lately, every night I've come here.

ABBY

What? Every night you come to Monticello?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

Until recently it was only every other week... but now, as my enemy here is about to die, I feel I should be coming up here every night... I take a certain pleasure in tormenting him... before he goes down to that cavern where all of us have to go... Those screams that wake him and keep him up... do you really think they come from you? They come from spirits only he can hear -

ABBY

What kind?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

The ones who die in childbirth... and who weep for their children because they themselves are no more... and others, he hears others..... he never gets much sleep...

ABBY

That's my consolation, is it?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

Of course we leave him alone occasionally. He still has his good days.

(picking up an empty bottle)

...he can still enjoy a glass of wine....but he will not make it to the Fourth - he doesn't deserve to. And so you see ... whether you summoned me or not... I was going to stop by anyway... this is the last chance I have to torment him. That's the only reason your clumsy little chant was able to summon me... this is your first time isn't it? The whites do it so much better... no, this is Mr. Jefferson's last night upon this earth....

ABBY

What will happen to him after that?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

That's not for you to know.

ABBY

Tell me... since you seem to know everything... who is my father?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

That's not for you to know.

ABBY

What is for me to know?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

It's to know how to get out of here - to make your escape. But...

(feeling his jacket)

I need a pen.

ABBY

(handing him a pen)

I have a pen.

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

Hmm... I ought to give it back to you. Being a field slave, I don't really know how to write - the point is, you can write your way to freedom.

ABBY

How?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

I'll tell you, in a minute.

(staring at pen)

Oh, Thomas Jefferson, I wish with this pen I could write down all your crimes...

ABBY

Tell me -

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, John Adams- your Founders - they're all so besotted with themselves. Oh, we established the first republic... they created no

republic... all they did was to set up the greatest slave power in the world.... and they did it in a time when we did not need slavery, or human beings, to provide our energy... they did it when we have steam engines for that... It's only here, in the 19th century, where they still use human beings.... But these great men of yours... were nothing but a band of dwarves. Washington, a general? I was a far greater general, facing and beating far greater forces than he... Thomas Jefferson? He is a writer, posing as a leader... He never went into a battle... And he was an incompetent as a President ... His only achievement was to acquire Louisiana... and that was entirely because of us... because of me... I was the one who without any help from Thomas Jefferson, first defeated the French, first defeated Napoleon... forced him out of America..... the West, your American West... it's a present from the people of Haiti... I practically handed it to him, as he knows full well, but of course cannot admit to himself... But that's the least of it... It's his hypocrisy and his failure to recognize my country, Haiti, his attempt to isolate us and put the people of my country back into their chains... This Declaration... I read Mr. Poe's draft, and I saw what he crossed out... that line about the Declaration... "A work in progress"... that's the kind of thing they like to say... the only work in progress, in the last 50 years, has been to further manacle blacks, every one of us.. Independence? They rail against the royalists but yes, we would have been safer under them..... And what about our Independence? No, no, Thomas Jefferson, all of them, they wouldn't put up with that... They thought we would rise up and murder them in their beds....

ABBY

Didn't that all happen?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

No, I worked with whites! Murder them? I didn't even take their property. I let them continue to own their plantations. I just made them pay wages to their workers. Murder them? Yes, he's up there, still trembling. The only way my country could survive was to work with white people - with whites in Haiti, with the French, with the Americans. But that's what riled them even more - that we would propose to work with them as equals. Murder them? We didn't murder whites, not the way you murdered the British, and did it out of greed. Yes, you murdered the British. Look at the list of grievances that Thomas

Jefferson put in the Declaration - oh come no, the British were good to you. They supported you financially, at great cost, saved you from the Indians, and in return you murdered them because you thought that one day the British might free your slaves. But as for us - murder whites? Yes, after I was tricked and captured and killed, Desaulniers, my successor, a Congolese man, a bit of an idiot, yes, he did one great act of needless murdering, but that wasn't me. And it would never have been me, or happened, if Thomas Jefferson and the Americans had recognized our independence - and come to our aid as the first free - I say the first free - country of the New World. Even at the height of my power, he, Jefferson, even then he wanted to treat me as a slave.

ABBY

All they think about... oh, they don't say it often, but it's in their dreams... that we here in Virginia, and South Carolina, and Georgia, we might rise up the way they did in Haiti...

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

Yes, that's what they think... they think they have to save themselves from a blood bath... lock it up in their Constitution... the fools... it will lead to an even bigger blood bath than in their dreams...

ABBY

But Mr. Jefferson knows, doesn't he?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT
(pause)

He knows.

ABBY

(after a long pause)

I don't want to die. Get me out!

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

Yes, of course - that's why I'm here, isn't it?

ABBY

What should I do?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

I forgot.

(waving pen)

You have that draft, don't you?

ABBY

Yes, Mr. Poe's draft - yes, it's right next to him...
(picking it up)

Here it is... -

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

Your way out of here is simple. Just put back in out what he crossed out - the part where they free you - run up, get the President to sign it - then you'll be free

ABBY

But that will free everyone.

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

So?

ABBY

But that won't work.

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

No contradict me child - well why not?

ABBY

No, it will be copied out in our hand, not Mr. Poe's.

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

Can't you copy it? It can't be that hard - ask Frederic, when I let go of him... He probably has a steady hand.

ABBY

Yes, maybe we could do it... why didn't I think of that?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

There is so much confusion - no one is going to notice. I promise you, Mr. Poe will rush up, and he won't even notice.

ABBY

Yes, free everyone.

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

Or maybe just free the house staff - you, the Hemings family.

ABBY

Why not everyone?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

I've become somewhat fond of Monticello - I'd hate to see it all go.

ABBY

Why are you so nice to him?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

Oh I would like to destroy him. I would like to rewrite this whole document - rewrite it and have him say he fathered so many children... And I could do it. I could have Mr. Poe under a spell and have him write it all in... but....

ABBY

Why not?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

I don't know that I do want to destroy him...

ABBY

But what good will it do to free me? What about Randolph?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

Randolph - I think he is going to meet with an accident.

ABBY

An accident, like - he wakes up one morning with an axe in his head?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

I've not decided what kind of accident. Any way the hour is late, and it is time to wake Mr. Poe.... Get him up there now with that statement as soon as you can change it.

ABBY

So you are not so angry with Mr. Jefferson?

FREDERIC/TOUSSAINT

We take our time in the afterlife. I am not done yet with his reputation... But I must leave, my time is up...

(starts staggering)

Good luck to you and farewell.

ABBY

Farewell? Is that... you, Frederic?

FREDERIC

(as the spirit loses its grip)

I'm... yes, I'm Frederic... something is wrong... help me,
please...

ABBY

I don't know what to do!

FREDERIC

He's parting the... fibers of my being... the marrow of my
life... its' all being borne away... help me...

ABBY

Oh Frederic what have I done to you.

FREDERIC

I... I'm going to collapse... I'm.....no, I'm all right...
I'm all right....

ABBY

Did you hear what he said?

FREDERIC

I heard everything.

ABBY

What do we do?

FREDERIC

Give me that pen - I know what I'm doing.... Oh Mr. Poe?
We're going to have a document for you...
(starts scribbling on draft)

POE

(groaning in sleep)

Oh, I'm... possessed....

ABBY

Shh... not yet.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT IIScene Two

SETTING: Jefferson's Bedroom

AT RISE: MARTHA and SALLY stand by the
bed in which JEFFERSON lies.

JEFFERSON

I hear her crying.

SALLY

He's talking in his sleep.

JEFFERSON

Please, stop crying. How can I still sleep?

MARTHA

(whispers to him)

Then wake, father... Sally, look, he is waking....

SALLY

Can he speak?

MARTHA

I fear he had another stroke... Father?

JEFFERSON

(eyes open, after a pause, trying to rise)

I'm awake.

(pause)

Martha, what century is it?

MARTHA

It's the 19th, Father..

JEFFERSON

I knew it. Where's Mr. Poe? I have work to do.

MARTHA

Father ... I really think... maybe we should agree to use
... most of Randolph's statement.

JEFFERSON

Randolph!

MARTHA

He's just outside - he needs to talk to you. He wants to apologize, I think.

SALLY

(to MARTHA)

Careful, we are agitating him - I worry about his heart!

(RANDOLPH enters)

JEFFERSON

Can't you see I'm dying? Don't open the door..

RANDOLPH

It's too late, uncle: I am here.

JEFFERSON

Am I not entitled on this last day of life to the pursuit of happiness?

RANDOLPH

I'm entitled to it as well. Besides, you seem to be recovering. Uncle, I really do want to apologize for -

JEFFERSON

Where is Mr. Poe? I think he has a new draft.

RANDOLPH

You want to see that boy? His antics nearly killed you.

JEFFERSON

You, sir, have caused me more distress.

RANDOLPH

I have come to relieve that distress. I implore you in front of your daughter - take this draft which my friends and I - your friends in the assembly - have drafted for you to give, in matter of hours, on the 50th anniversary of the... no, your Declaration.

JEFFERSON

No.

RANDOLPH

I don't see why not: it reflects your contempt for the National Government.

JEFFERSON

So it does - that Hamiltonian monstrosity, which to my own dismay I built up - but I know what else is in your draft. You want a disquisition on the races.... and I will not.... mar my own....

RANDOLPH

We want a reply to the Abolitionists!

JEFFERSON

The Abolitionists are no threat.

RANDOLPH

No, you are the threat, Uncle. Your words are a threat as long as the author of them does not recant them.

JEFFERSON

I will not recant them.

RANDOLPH

I mean qualify them - not recant - just say, on this anniversary, you never meant to suggest the races are equal.

JEFFERSON

They are not.

RANDOLPH

Then sign for God's sakes - say that. Say it. Even in the North they say it.

JEFFERSON

I will not say it - what I have written I have written. It is written. I will not, I will not... un-write it.

MARTHA

Father, I understand, but perhaps you could just say how -

JEFFERSON

(finishing her thought)
...how they cannot live here on a footing of equality? I have said so. It's impossible. If they are free, they have to leave.

RANDOLPH

Then at least say that you recognize slavery is permanently here... it is part of the Constitution....

JEFFERSON

And for that very reason our Constitution is a compact with the devil, and a life dedicated to its destruction would be a life well spent.

RANDOLPH

Ha: you took an oath to defend it!

JEFFERSON

Sir, I would do away with - I would destroy - all government if I could.

RANDOLPH

Destroy all government? Destroy the states?

JEFFERSON

Yes, destroy the government of this Dominion, the government of Massachusetts, the government of... of South Carolina, that would be a special pleasure..

RANDOLPH

Yes, I know your anarchism: but then what or who would protect us from the slaves?

JEFFERSON

No one: let them have a right to life.

RANDOLPH

If they have a right to life, we'll have no right. They will murder us.

JEFFERSON

Perhaps they should.

MARTHA

Father!

RANDOLPH

(to MARTHA)

I have done my best to save you...

MARTHA

Randolph, leave the statement with him. I'm sure he'll... he'll sign some version of it.

JEFFERSON

Will you all get out of here?

SALLY

Martha, I fear for his heart.

MARTHA

Yes, everyone, all of us... Oh, his breathing is so labored...

(to JEFFERSON)

Father, please - rest.

(MARTHA, RANDOLPH, SALLY exit.)

JEFFERSON

(alone, breathing heavily)

I hear a scream...

(picks up Randolph's statement)

Randolph's draft... can't even spell...

(lets it drop)

I must sleep....

(opens eyes)

Is that you?

(slowly standing and addressing an empty room)

Do you have to torment me even today? Oh, I have heard at length all you have to say... Do you want to hear my reply? Don't prate to me how you set up the first true republic - you made yourself a dictator for life. And I had hope of slowly... yes, slowly... getting rid of this satanic institution, which I hate as much as you... but after the example of what happened in your country, what do you think I could do? Even in the Tidewater they are hysterical... Do I blame you? No, but you left me in a situation where I could do... nothing, nothing, nothing, and now... If I could free them, where would they go? Stop tormenting me... let me sleep, let me... Anyway, I don't need a lecture on republican virtue from a dictator for life... at least, unlike you, I know how to give up power... I should like to come and torment you... but... I am tired at last of explaining myself.... perhaps in my life I have explained myself too much...

(POE enters)

POE

Mr. President? Mr. President? At least he's breathing... or is he? Oh look at what's at his bedside...

(he walks over and finds Randolph's draft)

It's Randolph's draft. It really is an abomination. We agree on that, sir, yes?.... Mr. President, here is my

draft... Can you hear me? Sir, this is how it starts:
 "America is a work in progress..." So far, so good?

(stops, to himself)

Oh my God, he's stopped breathing. He's dead! He's dead,
 and I'm here alone, and now everyone will think -

(there is slow KNOCKING)

No, no - what's that I hear? It's a knocking. It's his
 heart! No, he's dead - but it's still beating, like a
 drum... Wait, I'm going mad...

(the KNOCKING stops)

...no wait, the knocking stopped!

(POE turns as SALLY enters)

SALLY

I was out there knocking but you didn't open. Ah! I see
 the patient is awake.

JEFFERSON

(alert, in a new tone of voice)

Yes, sitting up - and fine, for the moment.

SALLY

The doctors are downstairs - should I bring them up?

JEFFERSON

Hold them for a moment: I wish to speak to Mr. Poe...
 leave us alone please....

SALLY

Of course.

JEFFERSON

Just a few minutes.

(SALLY exits)

JEFFERSON

So you thought to snatch away Randolph's draft and just
 leave yours..... without caring whether it ruined
 Monticello or my daughter.

POE

Sir, I am sorry...

JEFFERSON

You, sir, will not make that choice for me... I have my wits about me again, Mr. Poe... at my last hour, I'm grateful for their return. I am capable now of writing my own statement or choosing between yours and his as I think fit.... but it's late... I may sign Randolph's statement, or yours, or neither... but I alone will make this choice. Thank you. You are dismissed.

POE

I am sorry, I am sorry...

JEFFERSON

You are excused... Frederic can take you back down our little mountain.

POE

Mr. President -

JEFFERSON

(annoyed)

You are excused!

(POE exits. JEFFERSON alone in bed reads one draft and then another, in brisk manner.)

JEFFERSON

(tosses down draft)

Yes Randolph's is despicable, but perhaps I can fix it.... Mr. Poe's is.... twaddle, really. America is a work in progress... does he think I'm still in the White House? I don't have to talk like that. Wait: there's something odd about this draft.... It looks like a different hand made an addition here... and here.... there's a devilishly brimstone smell in the air. Well, I have an addition I want to make. Ah, yes - I feel the melancholy of the last few months lift from me. Yes, at last, I have cast off my demon... God forbid it light upon poor Mr. Poe, whom we invited up here... but now, I will just scribble this right here... no, I can't... I can't be unfair to Martha... Let me take up Randolph's... no, I can't do this... to the Declaration... let me think... perhaps I could...no, let's take this one or... no, we have to use the other...no, it's this one... and now take and seal it in this envelope...

(falling back on pillow, drifting off)

Do I hear their cries? Of course I hear them. And don't I
always free them, all of them?

(whispering)

Abby, Sally, Frederic - in my dreams, I free you. I free
you every night.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT IIScene Three

SETTING: Outside Jefferson's Bedroom

AT RISE: SALLY talks to ABBY outside the President's bedroom, where doctors are in attendance.

SALLY

The doctors are here, but he's dying. And really, it seems Frederic needs a doctor too.

ABBY

Frederic... is recovering, I think.

SALLY

(annoyed)

Down there in the wine cellar with him- was there some sort of sorcery, or Haitian magic thing going on? Abby, tell me the truth..

ABBY

Sally! I always tell you the truth. And I always will - no matter what.

SALLY

(softens)

I know. So - was there some sort of sorcery?

ABBY

No.

SALLY

Well, Frederic will recover. But no, not the master of this place...

(pointing off stage)

Mr. Potts is now here...the president of the university... He's going to speak for the family... when... when...

(SALLY starts to sob)

ABBY

Why are you crying for him? We're his slaves...

SALLY

Let me be. Besides, you should be in hiding.

ABBY

I have to know: did he sign anything?

SALLY

Sign what? He's dying.

ABBY

Did he sign whatever Mr. Poe drafted?

SALLY

Why is that any concern of yours? Wait, Mr. Potts, Martha... they're coming in.

(MARTHA and MR. POTTS enter.)

MR. POTTS

Miss Jefferson, it's the press, the whole country - we'll have to get out a statement right away. I'm so sorry - I wish he could have made it to the Fourth.

MARTHA

Sally,, he's gone - he's... My father, the President - father - he's.. oh, he's...

(SALLY and MARTHA embrace.)

MR. POTTS

We have to release the news - -

MARTHA

Do we have to do that yet?

SALLY

(sobs)

He's gone!

MARTHA

(to SALLY)

He's gone, he's gone.... my father...

MR. POTTS

We have to - never mind, I will work on a statement, or something. It can come from the University...

MARTHA

Yes, of course - whatever you think best.

MR. POTTS

We have to give a statement, that's all.

MARTHA

(to MR. POTTS)

He gave me this envelope - he sealed it... I've not read it, but it's the statement he would have given had he lived to the Fourth.

MR. POTTS

Perhaps... just perhaps... Miss Jefferson, maybe we should let him live to the Fourth. The doctors might help conceal the real date of death. Is this what Mr. Poe drafted? May I see it?

MARTHA

Mr. Potts, what's in this envelope will decide my fate, and Monticello's, and maybe... maybe the country's. It might be Mr. Poe's draft, or Randolph's... or maybe he wrote something on his own....

MR. POTTS

Yes, Mr. Poe, - where is he, damn him?

(POE, looking awful, enters.)

POE

I'm here, Mr. Potts, though I wish I weren't...

MR. POTTS

The President is dead...

POE

Miss Jefferson, I... I... it's my fault. I dragged him down to that awful cellar.

MARTHA

No, no - Mr. Poe, you are not to blame. His heart just gave out - Mr. Poe, he was 83. We are about to open an envelope which has the draft of a statement he will give on the Fourth....

POE

(protesting)

He's dead though...

MR. POTTS

We've not decided that yet...

MARTHA

Mr. Poe, I am hoping... I assume even... this is Randolph's draft and not yours... I know my father... that with his final and dying act he would have tried to save Monticello...

POE

(anguished)

Miss Jefferson, I have to confess -

MR. POTTS

Not now sir- not now... Miss Jefferson, please... open the envelope...

MARTHA

Wait: Mr. Poe, what is it?

POE

I tried to take away Randolph's draft to slip in my own... oh it was wrong... but your Father caught me, and ...

SALLY

(looking at ABBY)

I now think there *is* some sorcery here....

POE

I can only say he made the final decision... not me.....

MR. POTTS

Miss Jefferson, please, open it...

MARTHA

I'm frightened... yes, I must...

(she opens the letter and reads to herself)

It's not his handwriting, it isn't his! No, no, he has edits in the margins... those are in his hand...

(reads to herself)

oh, oh...

(MARTHA faints)

MR. POTTS

She's fainted!

SALLY

(to ABBY)

Run: get water, smelling salts, go, go -

MARTHA

No, no, I'm all right. He's freed you, Sally... he's freed all of you... all the slaves... I can't believe this... we're ruined... He's given all of you your liberty.

(on her knees)

All of you - even in the field - oh, my God, I'm not unhappy for you but I'm ruined, I'm ruined...

ABBY

Oh! I'm free!

SALLY

(alarmed, picks up statement)

Something's wrong - he wasn't supposed to do that - maybe one or two of us, but...

MR. POTTS

(brusquely)

Give that statement to me -

POE

No, no, it's just the ones who serve here in the household and a few others - it's not everyone - I wrote it but crossed it out, but now it's back in somehow.... Miss Jefferson, I wasn't trying to free everyone...

MR. POTTS

Yes, I see - it's his handwriting - several line changes. Wait, wait, what's this part? It's a whole sentence or two in his own hand...

MARTHA

May I read it? Please?

(takes it back).

We can't afford to free everyone, even up here.

(reads, with growing horror)

Oh no. Oh God save us - not this, anything but this. No, no, no! Mr. Poe did you write this?

POE

What?

MARTHA

Just read what he added.... here.... start reading here...

POE

"I hereby...." yes, yes...."sound mind, and so on...."
yes, yes... "And I hereby free those who serve..." That

looks like my handwriting, or a copy, or... puts in what I crossed out... but here is what he has written.... "which is right and just as they are part of my family, and indeed, are they not my children too?"

(Silence - a long, long pause from all on stage)

MR. POTTS

(breaking silence)

"My... children..." I think he is speaking figuratively - you would agree, Mr. Poe?

POE

Yes - figuratively in a sense - yes.... yes, that's how I read it.

MARTHA

Read it again.

POE

(reading)

"... are they not my children too?" Miss Jefferson, it's in his hand....

SALLY

I don't think he meant what -

MARTHA

What are we going to do?

MR. POTTS

He was speaking figuratively - I mean they are part of his family... it's well known his father in law was... was... well, so it is said anyway...

MARTHA

I know what he meant, but... He couldn't have meant... but his enemies, they already accuse him... and now, to say that, to write that... I don't what he was thinking....

SALLY

May I see it?

MR. POTTS

I'm taking that statement.

MARTHA

No, Sally, you take it... you tell me...

SALLY
(takes letter from MARTHA)
Here's what we have to do with it....
(she tears it up)
.... He never wrote it. He wrote nothing for the Fourth.

ABBY
(runs to SALLY)
What? What did you do? We were going to be free.

MR. POTTS
How dare you?

MARTHA
(to Mr. Potts)
Stop! Don't touch her.

ABBY
(screaming at SALLY)
What have you done? Now we're going to be slaves.

SALLY
(quietly)
Yes, I suppose.

ABBY
I'm to be sold to a butcher! Why did you do it?

MARTHA
I know why she did -

SALLY
Yes, you know why - you, all of you... you're so concerned about Mr. Jefferson, his reputation. What about my reputation? Oh, yes, I know what you all think? Do you think it's true?

POE
We all think he was speaking figuratively.

(There is a long silence)

SALLY
No, Mr. Poe, I know what you think.... I know what all of you think....

ABBY

(angrily)

And... and... because you didn't want to be mocked, I am going to die!

MR. POTTS

Well I assume now we're all going to say... the President died...

POE

On the Fourth, tomorrow -

MR. POTTS

Without a word....

SALLY

That's what he really wanted, if you knew him... His silence will speak for him.

MARTHA

But it's his silence that will ruin us. There will be no loan now from Randolph and his friends. Sally, I know Father would have freed you... and I suppose I should but.. I don't know. I some need time to think.

SALLY

(annoyed, to herself)

Oh: she needs time to think -

MR. POTTS

Is it not possible to fix Randolph's draft?

(FREDERIC enters)

FREDERIC

Mr. Randolph, you were speaking of him? I have dreadful news... there's been an accident!

MARTHA

An accident?

FREDERIC

He was galloping back here... with his uncle dying. He was whipping his horse, got high on his stirrups... and somehow those locks of his became tangled in a tree, and... oh...

MR. POTTS

This house is indeed cursed!

ABBY

(piously, for the benefit of MR. POTTS)
You mean... my master is... uh, dead?

FREDERIC

(for the benefit of MR. POTTS as well)
Oh, Abby, he broke his neck! And we just don't know - he may not live.

MARTHA

(distressed)

I must go to him! No, I can't go to him... father is dead, I can't..... oh what am I to do?

MR. POTTS

Miss Jefferson, your place is here, right here - your father would - I'm sure he would -

POE

- would be delighted if Randolph broke his neck.

MR. POTTS

Mr. Poe how dare you?

FREDERIC

(in a stage whisper to ABBY)
See? Remember what he said? Remember?

ABBY

Yes, I "remember" - but I'm still going to be a slave!

FREDERIC

Well he didn't promise to fix everything.

MR. POTTS

Miss Jefferson, I don't know what to do - that this woman here would take the President's statement, and yet...

MARTHA

I approve of what she did - she saved us... she saved me....don't you see?

SALLY

Is there anything more we should do?

MARTHA

Yes, I suppose... Oh, I'm weak... Mr. Potts, we can tell the world on the Fourth... but let's talk to the doctors, to be sure they will be silent. Mr. Potts, will you come with me?

MR. POTTS

Mr. Poe, tomorrow you will come to my office.

POE

No sir, I will not.

MR. POTTS

What?

POE

No sir - after tonight, no, I am leaving this University.

MR. POTTS

Mr. Poe, you are our prize student - do you understand, you are living out Mr. Jefferson's dream?

POE

Sir, I am living it out - it's taken possession of me.

MR. POTTS

This sounds like neurasthenia. Tomorrow, you should go to the infirmary.

MARTHA

(anxious)

Mr. Poe, I must ask you - as I know you are a writer -you must swear to keep all that you saw here tonight as a secret -

POE

Miss Jefferson, swear? I can't really swear to anything!

(JEFFERSON'S voice from Below Stage)

SWEAR!

POE

All right, all right - Mr. President, I swear!

MR POTTS

Mr. Poe, the President is dead - get a hold of yourself.

POE

I wish I hadn't sworn to that - well, maybe I can work around it.

MR POTTS

Mr. Poe, I will see you in my office tomorrow.
(Mr. Potts and MARTHA exit.)

POE

(turning to FREDERIC and ABBY)
Did you hear that voice just now?
(imitates)

"Swear!"-

FREDERIC

Mr. Poe, you just need a little rest -

POE

No, after this night, never again will I have any rest. Did you hear that voice? No, you didn't - but it means this curse on this house has descended upon me. Is there any place I can go to be rid of it? By tonight I'll be in Baltimore - maybe I'll go to Boston. Swear? Yes, I swear - never to return to this place of horror again!
(POE exits, stumbling)

SALLY

I think he has a poor impression of Monticello..

FREDERIC

(explodes)

Sally, why did you - ? Oh! I could have gone north, starting now.

SALLY

And they would have picked you up tomorrow!

ABBY

(anguished) I can't believe you tore it up!

SALLY

Listen, both of you. Suppose that statement had gotten out! What do you think would have happened if Mr. Jefferson had been disgraced? For Randolph and his friends, that would have been as good as signing his awful draft.

ABBY

I don't care - I would have been free.

SALLY

No, Abby, the great thing is to free all of us... not just you and me, or even all of us at Monticello, or even in the fields, but everyone of us... if he, Mr. Jefferson, if he is dragged into the muck... which is just what Randolph and the rest of them would love to do... it would let everyone ignore it -

ABBY

Everyone does ignore it.

SALLY

I want those words to be as clean and pure as his design for Monticello: I don't want any muck on them. Isn't that what we want?

ABBY

No - it's not what I want. What do I care about his little fairy tale? No, Sally, I know now - we should just murder them all in their beds.

SALLY

Did he let you read it? No, but he knew, and he did not know, you might read it.

(to AUDIENCE as much as ABBY)

Or maybe he knew that one day no one will be reading it. So I am going to read it:

"We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. - That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, - that whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these end, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness... [And] when a long train of abuses and usurpation, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future Security."

So is it not our duty now when there have been so many abuses in this country? Has there been a greater usurpation in memory? Should we not throw off a Government imposed without the consent of the governed - without a majority vote of the People? No, no, no - he is now calling to us from the grave, and some, frightened, will run away like Mr. Poe - but I say, we have to act to free ourselves now!

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF PLAY)