Animal Acts

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A dog is barking. The set is comprised of a long dinner table with two chairs on either side. The table has a bed sheet spread onto it like a tablecloth. There are two feather pillows placed on opposite sides of the table lengthwise. On each pillow there is one of a pair of black leather gloves and a large butcher’s knife. Stage right there is a ladder with two pairs of shoes on the “feet” of the ladder. One pair of shoes belongs to George; the other pair belongs to Liz. Preset down center stage are two red boot-cleaning brushes.

George and Liz are on stage.

LIZ: What a dump!
She drops her handbag.

GEORGE: What now?

LIZ: I’m Elizabeth Taylor doing Bette Davis. From that film, you know the one?

GEORGE: No, I don’t know.

LIZ (snaps her fingers at George): Down.
George goes down on hands and knees. Liz sits on George’s back and removes her boots.

LIZ: You do know. We’ve watched it together. Come on, think!

GEORGE: What’s that smell? Smells like chicken.

Dog barking fades out.

LIZ: What happened to the black dog?
Liz kneels down and places both hands into the boots.

George stands up and takes the two knives that are on the table. She begins to sharpen the knives. George places the sharpened knives onto the pillows.

“That's Me without You” by Al Bowlly fades in. George picks up the script to read the monologue. Liz, still on her hands and knees with the boots worn up to her elbows, begins to slowly assume the pose of a dog.

George (reading as though reading a police report): At 3:37 a.m. police were called to a residence on Black Dog Lane. A neighbor had reported hearing shouting and hysterical screaming. When officers arrived at the crime scene, the house was in complete disarray. The record player was playing “That's Me without You.” There were wine bottles piled up to the ceiling and dog feces shaped into obscure structures. Feathers were strewn everywhere. Kitchen knives were scattered throughout the house. On the table, there was a drawing in charcoal of a black dog. There appeared to have been a struggle. The window was broken. In the corner of the room the television was playing the Elizabeth Taylor film Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Music: “That's Me without You” fades out.

George: A wolf?

Liz: No, a dog.

George: Whatever happened to the black dog?

George picks up a boot brush and begins to brush her shoe.

Liz: I used to live across the street from the meanest dog in town. His owner called him Charlie, but everyone knew him as Manson. Some people said he was the devil himself, but not me. No, I believed that deep down inside all dogs were good. All they needed was the right master. All they needed was a top dog!

Liz raises her arm with the boot and slams it back down, then scratches the boot with the brush like a scratching dog.

Liz: So, one day I went over there with a packet of baloney. As I walked down the darkened lane, I heard a menacing growl behind me. It was him, it was Manson. I turned around and chucked a slab of baloney at him. He gobbled it up and inched closer to me. I held up another slab (she begins to raise the boot again), but this time, I made him wait. (She motions “stop” with the boot on her hand.) I made him look at me.

Then, I dropped it at my foot (she slams the boot on the floor and grabs the boot brush) and commanded, “Leave!” (She appears to want to scratch the boot with the brush but “leaves.”) “Leave!” (She still wants to scratch the boot with the boot but resists—“leaves.”) The next command I taught him
was to stay. *(She puts the brush down.)* And before you know it, that dog would Leave! and Stay! on my command. I trained him good. He was a good dog. My good dog. Well, it was getting dark and I needed to go home. But when I stood to leave, Manson growled, “Stay.” *(She places the boot onto the chair leg.)* So I sat. *(She sits.)* And I stayed. And I stayed. And I stayed. **George** *(clicks her fingers as if Liz is a dog):* Hey! Now, listen to me. I’ve got all day. **George takes the boot from Liz’s arm and places it on the leg of her own chair and sits.**

And we’re going to stay right here until you tell me what happened to the black dog.

*During this section, film noirstyle music is playing while Liz performs in a “film noir manner,” as though she’s Elizabeth Taylor playing Bette Davis.*

**Liz:** That’s right, I collared her. Like a mutt in a cage. But don’t get me wrong, she knows her part in all this. She was there for the taking. Like the little doggie in the window, the one with the waggly tail. Well, she was wagging, all right. She was asking for it. She wanted me to take her: to take the lead. I could have killed her in the beginning. She fell in love with me in the end. I can hear her listening; she always looks like she’s listening. But she’s not. **George is clipping her fingernails.**

Darling, if you’re listening, make me a drink. And make it dry. You know I’m under the weather. **Liz sits and rests her head on the pillow.**

**George:** She’s under the weather. Underwater. Born under the sign of water. Pisces the fish or Aquarius the water bearer, but she can’t bear water. She has hydrophobia, a morbid fear of water. It’s raining outside and that’s why we can’t leave the house. Drink, darling?

**Liz:** Make it dry, darling?

**George puts on her black glove (the left side) and brings out a martini set. She mixes the martini and pours it over her gloved hand into the glass.**

**Liz:** I’m dry. Dry and yearning... yearning to get wet. Yearning for someone to take me, take the lead. Outside it’s raining, oh, it’s drenched, but inside I’m a desert. I’m goddamn Tucson, Arizona. And no one’s going anywhere. And I mean nowhere, until this rain lets up! **George (places olives in glass):* Olive, darling? One or two?**

**Liz:** Two.

*She makes the number two with her fingers and then pretends it’s a cigarette.*

**Liz:** That’s right, just the two of us. A couple of doggone fools. Locked up in this cage for seventeen years. What is that in dog years? That’s... seventeen
times seven, carry the four. *(She begins to count on her all her fingers.)* What does she do when I’m asleep? Does she leave or does she stay?

**GEORGE** *(dog command):* Stay!

**LIZ:** Good dog. Faithful to the end. I could have killed her in the beginning. She fell in love with me in the end. We met at the dance. I took her home, to this house. Then came the rain. Day after day. Raining cats and dogs. No cats! Just dogs. *(Liz moves to the ladder.)* She followed me up the stairs and into my bed. She made an impression in the mattress that only her body could fill. And then came the black dog.

*Liz howls. The sound of dogs howling fades in. Film noir music fades out.*

**GEORGE:** Come on now, you’re too old to be doing this. Let’s have a drink. You look very dry.

**George gives her a martini. They drink.**

**LIZ:** I want a double. I mean, a body double. All the Hollywood stars had body doubles. I bet Elizabeth Taylor had a body double.

**GEORGE:** Yeah, but I bet she drank all of her own drinks.

*Liz reaches into her handbag and finds a chicken drumstick. She eats and gestures with the drumstick like Elizabeth Taylor in* Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

**LIZ:** Hold on, I think I’ve got it. Wasn’t Elizabeth Taylor in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? and *Lassie Come Home*?

**GEORGE:** Yes, I think Lassie was her first film.

**LIZ:** George, I think I’m on to something . . . Wasn’t Elizabeth Taylor also a dual citizen, just like me?

**GEORGE:** Yes, I believe she was.

**LIZ (eating chicken):** And she was a Pisces, just like me!

**GEORGE:** Where exactly is this going?

**LIZ (still eating):** Was Lassie a Pisces?

**GEORGE:** Oh, dear God . . . take me now.

**LIZ:** Was he American?

**GEORGE:** Actually, he was a she. And she was Scottish.

**LIZ:** No, he wasn’t a Scottie, he was a collie.

**GEORGE:** I said, he was a she. You know, a Scottish lass. Lassie *(pauses to drink).* Hey, did you know that they actually used a boy dog to play her?

**LIZ:** What? That’s disgusting. Lassie had a body double? I want a double!

**GEORGE:** Another double with two olives!

**LIZ:** Nobody in performance art has a body double. Do they? I wonder if Split Britches have body doubles? But that would be a body double divided in half . . .

**GEORGE (interrupts):** I could have killed her in the beginning. I fell in love
with her in the end. I can hear her listening; she always looks like she's listening, but she's not. **Liz holds her chicken bone in her mouth as she pours Cheerios into tin bowls.**

**George:** She's under the weather. I can tell she is under the weather because she keeps telling me that I look under the weather. She'll tell you that I'm the one that's ill, but really it's her. It's always her. It's always about her. She's the sun in the sky and the moon on the water. I keep telling her to go . . . Leave me and have a life, but she won't leave me. The last time I told her to go, she brought down her suitcase and unpacked it. Me—I don't even own a suitcase. The only one I had was the one I bought for that Mexican cruise that ended like the *Titanic.* And let me tell you, we felt lucky to make it out of there alive. And now, a century later, we're still here. Ruled by time. Her time. My lists. Day after day. And now she's telling me that she doesn't know where the black dog is. I don't know where it is. All I know is that she is the sun in the sky. The moon on the water.

**Liz:** Dinner!

*Liz slams down two plates filled with Cheerios onto the table. Liz and George sit at the further ends of the dinner table. They fixate on the food. They stare suspiciously at each other as if they are locked into in a strange game for the food.*

**George:** What did you do today?

**Liz:** I wrote in my diary.

**George:** I wrote in my diary.

**Liz:** I wrote my to-do list.

**George:** I wrote my to-do list.

**Liz:** I looked out the window, sharpened knives, and put on a black glove.

*Liz quickly puts on her black leather glove. She wears the right side. George is already wearing the left.*

**George:** I put on a black glove.

**Liz:** I mopped up water.

**George:** I poured water.

**Liz:** I walked to the window and drew the curtains . . .

**George:** Did you see anything?

**Liz:** No, not a sign.

**George:** I thought I heard something.

**Liz:** I heard something.

**George:** You did?

**Liz (draws her George in):** Definitely.

**George:** I don't believe you.
A pause. George doesn’t fall for Liz’s trick.

LIZ: I watched the dance contest on TV.

GEORGE: I signed us up for the dance contest.

George quickly makes a grab for the knife on the pillow. Liz grabs her knife, threatening George to drop the knife.

LIZ: Leave! Leave!

George places her knife under her pillow. George begins to crawl onto the table, keeping an eye on both Liz and the Cheerios.

LIZ: Stay. Stay.

Liz crawls onto the table, and when they are both just hovering over the plates Liz continues.

LIZ: Okay. Go!

Liz and George are on the table eating their food like two savage dogs. Liz muscles her way onto George’s plate and begins to eat George’s food. She even tries to eat the food from George’s mouth. They keep trying to vie for “top dog” position till Liz tops George, her neck locked over George’s to establish dominance. Liz pushes George backward off the table.

LIZ: Aren’t you going to finish that, dear?

GEORGE: No, I’m not very hungry.

George submits while Liz eats hungrily off both plates. She licks the plates like a dog. George watches her in disgust. George reaches under her pillow. It appears that she’s going for the knife, but instead she takes out her diary.

GEORGE: Dear Diary, We met at the boarding gate for a Mexican cruise. I was organizing the movement of luggage onto the ship. It wasn’t my job, I just couldn’t help myself. She had mislaid a suitcase, and I organized its golden retrieval. I knew that my life would never be the same after that. I knew that she would never have to concern herself with the movement of luggage again.

LIZ: Dear Diary, How I wish we could go back to the days of that Mexican cruise. Now, I don’t remember whether I jumped or she pushed. All I know is that I fell overboard for her. Man overboard!

GEORGE: When the ship ran aground in the middle of the night, in all the chaos and confusion, she jumped into the water and started swimming north; at least I think it was north. I can’t be sure of those details.


Dog on a hot tin roof. Ruff.

GEORGE: In the black ink of ocean and sky I heard my voice ring out . . .

LIZ: “Man overboard!”
GEORGE: It bounced over the waves until it reached her. “Wait!” I said. “There is no cause for alarm.” She turned in the water and swam toward my voice. She swam toward me. All the while knowing that true north was in the opposite direction.

LIZ: Overboard! It’s over. We’re bored.

George is angry with Liz. Liz gets off the table and picks up the ukulele. She attempts to sing the first few lines of “That’s Me without You.” Her gloved hand can only strum. The left hand can’t “fret” the chords. Her voice keeps trying to find the pitch, but the ukulele’s sound never changes. It’s apparent that her gloved hand can only strum. She looks to George, who is still angry and ignores her. She can’t find the tune.

LIZ (singing the first line of “That’s Me without You”: she still can’t find the pitch): “Think of a flower without any rain . . .” George?

GEORGE (still angry): Yes.

LIZ (seems to be suggesting a game): Is it time yet?

GEORGE: No, not yet.

Liz places the ukulele under the table and seems to be titillated by a strange ritual.

LIZ: Is it time for the dance contest?


LIZ: Hot dog!

Honky-tonk-style music plays. Liz and George dance toward the ladder like two dogs with their hands out like paws. George then pulls the ladder backward, which makes the shoes under the “feet” of the ladder judder up and down. George dances up the ladder with a jug of martinis. Liz places a martini glass at the foot of the ladder. Liz freezes in a dance pose. Honky-tonk music cuts out. George begins to pour from the top of the ladder, the entire jug of martinis, slowly into the martini glass on the floor.

GEORGE: The dance contest. I made it up. Please don’t tell her. It’s my way of having her near me, moon on my water, sun in my sky.

Romantic instrumental music begins to play.

GEORGE: I’ll do anything I can to keep her near me, and I mean anything . . . even closing my eyes, even telling her to leave.

When I was eight years old, I almost drowned . . . in a glass of water, in the middle of Christmas dinner. She loves to hear that story. It makes her toes curl. It makes her look at me. And when the story is over, we feel so happy, so happy to be alive.

George assumes a high-dive position as if to dive into the martini glass below. As she’s just about to jump, we go to blackout, and we hear the sound of the bounce off the diving board and the splash into the glass. Blackout. Ominous
music called “Black Dog” begins to play. George crosses left to her chair in the dark. She takes the boot from the chair leg, sits, and breathes into the boot like an oxygen mask. Liz stands at the ladder and drinks the martini that George has poured from on top of the ladder. Liz walks to George and snatches the boot from her face and throws it behind the table. Liz takes the pulse on George’s neck.

LIZ: It’s nursing time.

George assumes a position from Paula Rego’s painting The Family. Her head is tossed back with her eyes in a trance. Liz takes her pulse.

LIZ: She’s under the weather. She’s under my weather. She says I’m like a weather system. A natural disaster. A cyclone, a cyclops, a hurricane. But really I’m Mother Theresa.

Liz pushes George’s legs apart. She stands in between George’s legs, then pushes George’s chair back onto two legs.

LIZ: And here I am in the middle of Calcutta. (Liz raises George’s trouser leg up and pushes her fist into George’s trouser leg.) Calcutta. I could a. With her fist still up George’s trouser legs, Liz begins to hump George’s leg fast like a dog.

LIZ: I could have been somebody if I didn’t like to nurse. I could have been somebody if I didn’t like to mop the floors. I could have been somebody if I didn’t like to rub you down. I could have been somebody if I didn’t like to spoon-feed.

Liz falls to the ground on all fours in the manner of the Paula Rego painting Bad Dog. She twists her body, like a dog lifting its leg to urinate, on George.

GEORGE (after a long pause): She likes to take her pleasure silently, like some kind of insect: like a flea or a mosquito, but she only leaves behind the smallest mark of visitation. She doesn’t like to give what’s asked for, so I always close my eyes, for her, and sometimes when I wake up, I itch around the ankles.

Liz holds this pissing pose for a long time. They wait in silence.

LIZ: George?

GEORGE: Yes?

LIZ: Is it time yet?

GEORGE: No, not yet.

LIZ: Is it time for the dance contest?


Honky-tonk music plays.

LIZ: Hot dog!

Liz and George dance once again toward the ladder like two dogs, with their hands held out like paws.

LIZ (yells to audience): If you think that’s great, wait till you see this!
Liz puts on a swim cap. George gets a jug of martinis and dances up the ladder. Liz lies down at the foot of the ladder. She yells up to George, who is at the top of the ladder with the jug.

LIZ: Make it dry, baby! As dry as you can!

George waves down to Liz. Honky-tonk music cuts out. Liz begins to sing “That’s Me without You” as George pours the martini into her mouth from the top of the ladder. Liz tries to sing and drink at the same time. It sounds like a gargle.

LIZ (singing): “Picture a flower without any rain. And picture a songbird without a refrain. Think of a lifetime of living in vain . . . That’s me without you!”

Liz continues to sing as the entire jug is poured into her mouth. She finishes the song. Liz sits up from the floor and dries herself. George climbs down the ladder and notices that the floor is wet with a huge mess. She points at the mess and reprimands Liz as if she were a dog who made a mess.

GEORGE: Who did this? Who did this? Who did this? Who did this? Who did this? Who did this?

The questioning becomes bullying. Liz is on her hands and knees, embarrassed, tail between her legs. George crosses left to her chair. Liz falls to the ground and pants like the dog in Paula Rego's painting Sleeper throughout George's monologue. George reads from her diary, which is tucked under her pillow.

GEORGE: Dear Diary, I’m still here. It’s storming inside. A flash flood, wiping all of civilization away. And we’re trapped inside, running out of gin and tonic, ale and air. We're coal miners in a collapsed relationship. The canary is dead and no one knows we’re here anymore. Not even us.

LIZ: And, it’s all your fault!

Liz throws her swimming cap off her head. She crosses left to George. Music “Black Dog” begins to play. George assumes a reclining pose, as in Paula Rego's painting Bride. Liz takes out a tray with towels and shaving cream.

LIZ: Now, I told you that I was under the weather . . .

Liz places a black barber’s cape over George.

LIZ: And now look what I’ve done.

Liz sprays a very large amount of shaving cream onto her gloved hand.

LIZ: But it wasn’t my fault. It was the black dog.

“Black Dog” fades out. Liz puts shaving cream all over George’s face.

LIZ: It started off as a silly game. A game of chance with blindfolds and sharpened knives. But now, I’ve gone too far. Far. A long, long way to run. Liz crosses downstage right and sees a dog in the distance. She begins to act like she's Elizabeth Taylor in Lassie Come Home.

LIZ: Lassie, come home! Come home to Mama!
Liz looks over at George and is suddenly terrified at what she’s about to do.

LIZ: Oh my God!

She covers her mouth with her gloved hand. Foreboding film noir Music plays. The gloved hand chokes her neck as though it is threatening her.

LIZ: Do nothing and everything will be done? But the deed was done. Before I even did it!

The gloved hand reaches under the pillow and takes hold of the knife.

LIZ: Well done, like a steak turned to charcoal.

She clenches the sharp blade and runs it through her hand.

LIZ: The table with the black dog drawn in charcoal! I drew it!

She picks up the feather pillow and begins to sharpen the knife on the pillow, as in the Paula Rego painting The Soldier’s Daughter. She then holds the pillow as though it were a hostage.

LIZ: Draw! With my own hand!

She threatens the audience down center.

LIZ: Draw! Finger to the trigger.

She threatens the audience down left.

LIZ: Draw! The curtains to the window!

She threatens the audience down right.

LIZ: Turn away! Lock the door! Pull the trigger!

Liz slits the feather pillow with the knife.

LIZ: Call the cops! (She drops the knife.) No. Shut up. Go over your lines.

Liz crosses right to left stage with the feather pillow. Feathers fall.

LIZ: Hello, Officer, something terrible has happened. You see, I’ve been under the weather lately. I just couldn’t see straight. I’ve been seeing double. That’s right! It was my body double. Yeah, she broke into my house and has done a terrible, terrible thing! Get a grip. Take a pill. Take a pillow.

She takes hold of the pillow and approaches George.

LIZ: Now, take a deep breath.

George sees that she is about to be smothered. Liz smothers George with the gutted pillow. The pillow completely envelops George’s head. George struggles, but Liz overpowers her until she appears dead. Liz takes the pillow off George’s head, and the white feathers stick to the shaving cream. Her entire head is feathered. George looks like a giant fluffy white poodle. The film noir music is coming to a climax as Liz takes out George’s knife. Liz grabs George by the hair and exposes her neck. Her hand is shaking as it appears that she is about to slit George’s throat. Instead she begins to tenderly shave the feathers off George with the knife. Foreboding film noir music slowly fades out. Liz shaves George and is in a constant battle with herself in the monologue.
LIZ (shaves George with the knife): The black dog, I made it up, please don’t tell her. It’s my way of keeping her close to me. I want her close to me, but out of my way. It’s my way or the highway. So hit the road . . . Come back! Back off! Give me space, but don’t be distant. And after a lifetime of the same old housebroken-broken-record rituals, here we are . . . She’s the sun in my sky, moon on my water.

Sad instrumental fade-in. Liz moves to center. She attempts and pushes herself to cry real tears. She tries to perform Elizabeth Taylor’s last scene in Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

LIZ: Lassie, come home, girl. Now whenever you look at me there is no Lassie left in your eyes. Lassie, come back. Long for me. Want me. Wag for me. Beg for me. Speak for me. Jump for me. Fetch for me. Leave. Stay! Heel for me . . . no, don’t heal, stay sick. Go on, play dead. Roll over into the next life. No, I didn’t mean that. Oh my God, I think I’ve gone too far. Oh, I didn’t mean to . . . why, oh why . . .

Why did you have to?

Liz’s cry turns into a tantrum.

LIZ (to the audience): I know what you’re all thinking. You’re thinking, “Oh my, she’s not a very good actor.” Well, I may not be a good actor, but I’m a great performance artist! That’s right, an Artist, baby!

George begins to wipe the feathers off her face. She cleans her glasses and begins to pour herself a martini. Liz continues to have a huge tantrum, crying and kicking her legs.

LIZ: It’s not fair! All I wanted was a goddamn body double, somebody cute who could take the blame.

George walks over to Liz with an empty martini glass and a full jug. George stands over the crying Liz and looks as though she’s about to offer to fill Liz’s glass but instead empties the entire jug onto Liz’s head.

GEORGE (gestures a toast to the audience): To your very good health.

Liz is soaked. She sits on the floor staring out the window.

LIZ: Hey, George . . .

GEORGE: Yes.

LIZ: I think the rain’s stopped.

George takes out the ukulele. Her gloved hand can only fret the chords, she doesn’t strum. She begins to sing “That’s Me without You.” George sings.

GEORGE: “Think of a flower without any rain and picture the songbird without a refrain . . . Picture a lifetime of living in vain . . . That’s me without you.”

George pauses to see if Liz will join her. Liz gets up slowly and walks over to
George. George’s glove frets the chords while Liz’s gloved hand strums. They play the ukulele and sing one more verse, together.

“Think of a flower without any rain and picture the songbird without a refrain... Picture a lifetime of living in vain... That’s me without you.”

Blackout. The end.