

ANIMALS OUT OF PAPER

By RAJIV JOSEPH

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A STUDY GUIDE

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THE PLAYWRIGHT. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1974, Rajiv Joseph attended Miami University of Ohio. Following graduation, he joined the Peace Corps, serving for three years in Africa. On returning to the United States, he entered the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, where he earned a master of fine arts degree in playwriting in 2004.

He is the author of several plays, including *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama in 2010. *Animals out of Paper*, a play about an origami artist, was originally produced in New York in 2008.

“Origami” is a Japanese word meaning “folding paper.” It refers to a form of art that originated in Japan during the 17th century. This art-form—a kind of sculpture—involves folding paper in complicated ways to produce representations of various objects, usually from the natural world. Flowers, birds, and other animals are frequently the objects imitated in origami, though abstract geometrical forms can also be represented.

THE SETTING. The action of the play moves freely from the studio of Ilana Andrews, an origami artist, to a restaurant in the Boston area, and a hotel room in Nagasaki, Japan.

The most notable feature of the physical setting is the change in appearance of Ilana's studio during the course of the action. When we first see this place, which also serves as her makeshift apartment, it is, in the words of the playwright's stage directions, "*extremely messy. . .*" He goes on to inventory the muddle: "*Origami models of animals . . . fill the apartment. . . . Also empty bottles, large stacks of folding paper, newspapers, books, clothes strewn everywhere. . . . Also, an enormous amount of empty and used Chinese food take-out boxes. Also, several diagrams of a human heart.*"

The messiness is important because it provides us with an immediate view into the disordered state of Ilana's life, and cues us to expect that the action to follow will surely address this problem in some dramatic way. Three scenes later, the playwright satisfies these expectations when another character, Suresh, who becomes Ilana's student, "*enters and begins cleaning the space,*" beginning a process that brings significant change into Ilana's life. Thus, the setting underlines and illustrates an important thrust of the play's action.

"*[A]n enormous origami hawk*" provides another striking and dramatically significant scenic element. This paper bird, "*three or four times*" the normal size of a hawk, and folded "*in such a way that it looks like it's about to pounce on its prey,*" looms menacingly right above Ilana as she sleeps on her couch. Clearly, the playwright wants us to see Ilana as somehow shadowed by danger.

The other two settings—restaurant and hotel room—provide convenient locations for events that contribute the main action, which unfolds in the studio.

THE PLOT. As the action begins, we see Ilana sleeping on her couch, the paper hawk hanging ominously over her. Then the door buzzer sounds, and she wakes up, startled and disoriented because, "*No one ever buzzes this door.*" Reluctantly she admits her unexpected visitor, a man named Andy Froling who turns out to be the treasurer of the American Origami society, of which Ilana is a member. Obviously unwelcome, he nevertheless persists in trying to engage Ilana in conversation, telling her how much he admires her work, revealing his concern about her condition since she has become strangely reclusive, describing his own work as a math teacher, and reading to her from the book in which he writes down the blessings in his life—nearly eight thousand thus far.

Ilana mostly tries to fend off Andy's conversational overtures, but she does reveal that her work as an artist began when she lost a precious object: a dragonfly medallion. To compensate for its absence, she decided to make another dragonfly out of paper. And we also learn that she is

divorcing her husband—which is why she is sleeping in her studio rather than in her real apartment—and that her much-loved dog has just disappeared.

Finally, Andy gets around to what seems to have been the real purpose of his visit: asking Ilana if she would tutor one of his students, a young man who exhibits brilliant promise as an origami artist. His mother was killed by a hit and run driver recently, and as a result he seems to have lost his bearings. With her help, perhaps he could get back on track. She refuses, though not definitively, and is deeply impressed by the samples of the student’s work that Andy shows her.

At last, after giving Andy the menacing paper hawk, she manages to dislodge him from her studio, but after he leaves, she discovers that he has forgotten to take with him his book of blessings.

In the next scene, we again find Ilana in her messy studio and disheveled clothing, now intently reading Andy’s book of blessings. Again the door buzzer sounds, and again it is a stranger come to pay a visit, this time the brilliant student we heard about in the previous scene. His name is Suresh, and he is a bundle of teenage energy who affects a style of street language associated with rappers and hip-hop performers. He notices the model of the human heart and asks Ilana about it. We learn from her that she has been commissioned to devise—as if it were a kind of origami—a “mesh heart sleeve,” which could be inserted through a small opening in a patient’s chest and then unfold around his heart, providing an alternative to the invasive procedure of open heart surgery.

Their conversation wanders from this project to increasingly personal matters. Suresh makes fun of a bad origami rabbit by Ilana that he finds in a corner of the studio; they argue about artistic technique; Suresh refuses to practice any folding. Eventually he asks about her missing dog, a creature whose ears had been sheared off by a sadistic previous owner. Suresh surmises that the dog ran away because of Ilana’s divorce; she bristles at the suggestion and asks him why he talks “like that.” He bristles back, and accuses her of racism because she disapproves of the way he talks “black like that.”

Tempers flare; he makes an obscene suggestion and calls her an ugly name; she orders him out of her studio. It looks like their embryonic relationship is over, when the phone rings and Suresh switches to standard English as he gives his sister directions about preparing their father’s dinner. Intrigued, Ilana decides to forget about the ugly moment just passed. They resume their discussion of the heart sleeve, and as the scene ends they make up with a fist bump.

In Scene 3, Andy returns to the studio to reclaim his forgotten book of blessings. Embarrassment overcomes him when he learns that Ilana has read all of it, and that, as a result, she now knows virtually everything about him. But Ilana is charmed by what she has learned about Andy, a far more complicated character than she first assumed. We see that they are drawn to one another, and as the scene ends as they exchange a kiss.

Scene 4 picks up the action a month later, on Valentine’s Day. The studio is now “*immaculately organized and clean*,” whipped into shape by Suresh, who has become Ilana’s regular student and visitor. The only problem is that he has transformed the place in her absence, while she has been attending a business meeting with the medical people who have commissioned the heart sleeve. When she returns and encounters the transformation in her living quarters, she expresses indignation, a sense of having been invaded by an alien force.

The scene then turns into a wrangle between teacher and student over the psychology of creativity. Suresh wants Ilana to be more spontaneous, to improvise in the spirit of a hip-hop performer. He demonstrates this by making up a series of rhymes on the subjects of Ilana and art on the spot, each more complicated and inventive than the one before. Ilana finds his inventiveness impressive, but she insists that art requires order, method, and “rigor”—especially when the project at hand is as important as the heart jacket.

This theoretical dispute turns rancorous when Ilana intentionally overturns a file drawer in which Suresh had meticulously arranged her origami materials. He becomes enraged, telling her that her studio was disgusting, and speculating that her husband left her because “you’re such a mess all the time.” Again, as in their first scene together, their relationship seems at the brink of destruction; but again, through an act of willed calmness, the crisis passes, and they find themselves closer than before the storm. At this point, Suresh produces a surprise: “*an origami three-dimensional life-sized human heart*.” “I made you a heart,” he says. “Happy Valentine’s Day.” With this revelation, Act One comes to a close.

Act Two begins later that night, as Andy and Ilana are celebrating Valentine’s Day over dinner at a restaurant—the first time we have seen any of the characters outside the studio. Andy gives Ilana an origami heart that he made himself—a sorry piece of amateurism compared to the stunning model heart Suresh has just produced. In return, Ilana tells Andy why she finds Valentine’s Day a particularly grim spot on the calendar. It’s a story about a drunken fight with the man she was to marry, followed by a house fire, from which they were rescued by the dog who has since run away. The most salient detail is that the dog had to chew his way through a wooden door to get to them—an effort that “broke off most of his teeth” and planted splinters

in his gums. And, so, “Valentine’s Day kind of always reminds me of being in the vet’s office while Demba has splinters removed from his gums. . . . He was a good dog.”

From this dark note, the conversation lightens considerably when Ilana discloses that she has been invited to an origami convention in Nagasaki, Japan. Moreover, the organizers have offered to “provide room and board” for any guest she chooses to bring. Andy assumes that she will invite him, but Ilana immediately corrects that mistake. She intends to take Suresh to the conference. Crestfallen, Andy fumbles to cover his embarrassment and disappointment, and turns the talk to his admiration for Ilana’s book about origami. She tells him that it was mostly ghostwritten by her estranged husband, and that she hasn’t “folded a piece of paper since Demba ran away.” No longer a practicing artist, she reveals the depth of the crisis she’s been grappling with over the last few months.

Moved by this revelation, and by three glasses of wine, Andy begins making a declaration of love for Ilana, saying, “I think I could be the guy who comes into your life and helps you put it back together. . . . I am a guy who will do anything for you, anything.” The emotional floodgates having been opened, he asks her to marry him. But, she points out, she isn’t even divorced yet, “So I can’t marry you right now.” Ever eager to find and count a blessing, Andy frames this non-rejection is the most optimistic way possible: “[T]hat’s not a no. . . . That’s good. I’ll take not a no. I’ll take it.” Bringing the scene to an end, he records the moment in his special book.

The following scene also takes place outside Ilana’s studio, in a hotel room in Nagasaki on the night following the last day of the origami conference. Suresh is again on the phone with his sister wrangling with her about caring for their father, who seems incompetent to care for himself. Ilana enters, wanting to know why Suresh has absented himself from the last day of the conference, when he was to have received an award. Instead, after a morning visit with Ilana to the Nagasaki memorial to the victims of the atomic bombing, he disappeared. Now he tells Ilana that he spent the day observing koi fish in a pond in a park. His explanation for this behavior hinges on a crisis of faith he is experiencing about the value of origami—or perhaps any form of art—in the face of an enormity like the atomic attack. Ilana attempts to reassure him of the value of his talent and of the meaningfulness of his work. Taking Ilana’s hand into his, he kisses her, twice, without encountering any serious resistance from the older woman. Eventually, “*Suresh falls into her. Ilana holds him, folding him into her. . . . She holds him, stroking his face. She looks at him and then out towards the city.*” With this tableau, the scene ends.

The final scene brings us back to the studio. There Andy, in anticipation of Ilana's return from Japan, is busily preparing a welcome-home meal for the two of them. Unexpectedly, Suresh arrives, looking for Ilana, who left him behind at the airport. Soon Ilana herself arrives, surprised to find both Suresh and Andy in her space. Eventually, Suresh discloses the events of the previous night in the hotel room. He and Ilana kissed, held each other, and slept together in the same bed—without actually having sex. Andy is stunned and outraged by this information, accusing Ilana of “predatory” behavior, and declaring that he feels “totally betrayed right now.” He rips the pages out of his book of blessings, strews them on the floor, and leaves. Suresh attempts to pick them up, but Ilana tells him to stop—it's her mess to clean up. Suresh also leaves, but not before telling Ilana that his experience with her has been a series of blessings, and that he needs to begin imitating Andy by writing these things in a book. When he is gone, Ilana gathers up the torn pages; then she *“takes a piece of folding paper and returns to the couch. She stares at the paper and then slowly makes a single fold.”* For the first time in months, she is returning to her work. With this hopeful step the play ends.

THE CHARACTERS. Notable contradictions mark each of the three characters in this play.

ANDY counts his blessings—in fact, he records them in a book, which contains a list of nearly eight thousand good things that he believes have happened to him since he was twelve years old. Since the playwright describes him as a man of about 40, that's nearly 300 blessings a year for 28 years, or something like six per week. So Andy really works at looking on the bright side, on finding the silver lining in whatever cloud life sends his way.

In fact, as Ilana notes after reading his blessings book, Andy has written “about twenty-five times or more. . . . I've never been hurt. Not really.” And yet, she continues, “this book is just filled with. . . . It's filled with PAIN, all these really awful and tough things that have happened to you. . . . So . . . how can you be thankful for these things? . . . Pain isn't a blessing. Unless you're totally crazy. . . .”

So there's the contradiction: the man who obsessively counts his blessings is constantly beset by pain. It's only by redefining the slings and arrows of his life as toys for a day at the beach that he manages to keep going. Pain, Andy muses, “might be” a blessing. “It's not *pleasant* . . . but it's real. . . . I don't expect you to understand. Nobody understands me.” Amid these memories of pain, Ilana, the woman he desires above all others, gives him a kiss, thereby creating another blessing, and seemingly vindicating Andy's approach to life.

And what is that approach? It seems to boil down to this: Andy spends most of his energy willing himself to be happy, determined to turn anguish into its opposite. This constant struggle

to perform emotional alchemy saves him from acknowledging that his life hangs by a pretty thin thread over a void of deep misery. At various times we learn: that nobody understands him; that he has never been cool; that he has had only a single relationship with a female; that he doesn't amount to much as an origami artist.

We also see him in action turning leaden nuggets of pain into gold. This happens twice during his dinner scene with Ilana: first, when she tells him she's taking Suresh and not him to Nagasaki; and then when she declines his offer of marriage. The former he turns into a moment celebrating Suresh rather than bemoaning his own loss. And the latter, as we have seen, he spins emotionally until it becomes, through the power of the double negative, a latent blessing: not a definite no. He is like a rock-collecting child on the beach, determined to see geological beauty in the ordinary stone that catches his eye.

In the end, however, this strategy fails him when he comes across a lump of coal that he can't turn into present from Santa: Ilana's evening in the hotel with Suresh. The greatest blessing of his life, he tells Ilana after learning about her moment with his student, was when she first kissed him. It was so momentous that he wrote it down in his book three times. Now he has been betrayed and humiliated, and there is no way he can deny what has happened. Ordinarily, he admits, finding the silver lining is "not easy, OK? It doesn't just HAPPEN. It takes time. It takes time for me to do that. . . . I don't just sit around thinking everything is perfect all the time." But now, confronted unexpectedly by the undeniable, he has no choice but to recognize the situation for what it is, no time to deploy the tactics of spin and wishful thinking. And people are watching him suffer openly, which is truly humiliating for a man whose life comprises thousands of acts asserting that such suffering doesn't exist for him. Andy's pride was his optimism, his ability to convince himself and others of his blessedness. And at this moment, that masquerade is no longer possible. All he can do is disappear, which he does by walking off stage.

The most important moment for understanding the character of SURESH occurs in the final scene of the play, when Andy is chastising Ilana for her relationship with the young man:

ANDY. He's SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD!

SURESH. I'm eighteen.

ILANA. He's eighteen.

ANDY. He's a kid! For God's sake, Ilana, he's a kid!

A year's difference in a partner's age would be of little importance in judging a relationship between people in their forties. But the transition from seventeen to eighteen—roughly 6% of Suresh's life—represents a significant step away from being a kid and toward being an adult.

Suresh, as all good dramatic characters should be, is in the process of significant change, of transformation from one way of being to another. For him that transformation takes the form of growing up. As he says in the same scene, “I feel like I was an insect and I molted. . . . I molted and now I don’t recognize myself.”

When insects molt they cast off one external layer which is then replaced by another. Suresh is actually not so much molting as undergoing a metamorphosis—a change in the fundamental form, not of his body, but of his soul. To mark such moments in human life, virtually every culture has developed what is often called “rites of passage”—ceremonies that recognize the moment when a young person crosses the threshold into adulthood. The sacrament of Confirmation is such a ceremony for many Christians; the Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah serve that purpose for Jews. One way of looking at the experience of Suresh in this play is as an extended rite of passage, a sequence of moments that mark his transition to a new stage of life.

Because he is in the process of becoming someone else, he carries around two selves: the Suresh he is leaving behind and the Suresh he is becoming. They seem to cohabit in his maturing soul, and cause contradictory kinds of behavior. Among the most obvious contrasts in his personality is the difference between the way he talks to his sister on the telephone when conferring about family matters and the way he talks to Ilana when he first meets her. In the former mode, he employs the standard English of an educated member of the middle class. In the latter, by contrast, he tries to impress his listener with his youthful hipness, adopting the speech and mannerisms of a rapper or hip-hop performer, someone from the gritty precincts of “the hood,” and not from an upscale high school.

Running parallel to these two styles of behavior are the two different psychological orientations he displays in his relationship with Ilana. In their first encounter, he virtually forces her to share his headphones and listen to hip-hop music, inducting her into a world of free-ranging energy and improvisation. When he derides a failed origami piece of Ilana’s, she responds by noting that artists try out preliminary sketches, not all of which are successful, but that are necessary steps in attaining an artistic goal. Suresh seems skeptical about this kind of methodical patience.

In their next scene, he attempts to tutor her in the aesthetics of hip-hop, underlining the analogy between rhyming in that art form and inspired paper-folding in origami. But this encomium to spontaneity comes on the heels of his thorough tidying-up of the epic mess that was her studio before his arrival. So behind his loudly-proclaimed ethic of free-form invention lies a need for discipline and order. And when Ilana dumps out a crate in which Suresh has meticulously organized her origami supplies, an infuriated Suresh cries out in anger: “I had

everything in there totally organized, a whole system and ... and why'd you go and do this! . . . "Aw S**IT, MAN! . . . All that work and you just ruined it!" So the apostle of hip-hop is also in love with system and organization—he is an adolescent seeking mature control of his own chaotic energy.

But even if he discovers how to discipline and order his energy and talent, the question he must answer is: what to do with them? In the hotel room in Nagasaki, he reveals his loss of faith in the art he has been trying to learn. Earlier that day, he had visited the Nagasaki victims' shrine, and begun refolding the paper doves traditionally placed there by children as a gesture of peace. He transforms the doves into ravens, a bird that symbolizes death, and also recalls the menacing black hawk poised over Ilana's couch at the beginning of the play. He tells Ilana that his mother was killed by a hit and run driver. When we remember that his father has seemingly descended into incompetence, we see his situation as a virtual orphan, facing the world with no adult authority to guide him. And so he reflects on the meaning of these birds at the shrine:

Those kids fold doves as if it means anything. It doesn't mean anything. And I'm at the epicenter today and I fold some stupid birds and everyone acts like I did something profound or meaningful, but it's not, it's not profound, it doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean anything except that I know how to fold paper. F**k all this. I'm serious.

His gifts seem meaningless to him given the emptiness of his own life and the horrors memorialized at the shrine. It is shortly after this moment that he turns to Ilana, takes her hand, and kisses her, initiating the ambiguous, sexually-tinged events that will occupy the rest of their night together. What is he looking for in Ilana? As we have seen, he's full of doubts, questions, and contradictions about his identity and his gifts. Does he want her to answer them as a teacher; a mother; a lover? Or as some impossible combination of all three?

His valedictory speech to Ilana in the play's last scene suggests that this woman who arouses such contradictory responses in him has provided some answers to his questions and some direction for his life. Far from hurting him, as Andy alleges, Ilana has been a godsend: "Coming here. Hanging with you in the afternoons and everything. Blessings. . . . Folding you stuff. . . . Meeting you. Knowing you. You hooked me up this semester. That's a blessing, you know? I gotta remember it. I always will." So she has truly helped him complete his senior project: to find the confidence to take the next step forward.

ILANA reminds us of that fixture of post-romantic cultural lore: the artist both haunted and inspired by suffering and loss. Keats and his tuberculosis; Byron and his club foot; Dostoyevsky and his gambling addiction; VanGogh and his madness; Kafka and his depression; a whole

generation of artists afflicted by AIDS: our narrative of the creative soul is shadowed by a raven croaking out, “Nevermore.”

Likewise, Ilana attributes her creativity as an origami artist to the losses life has inflicted on her. For example, in explaining the genesis of her career to Andy, she harks back to a moment at age thirteen when she lost a cherished medallion of a dragonfly.

It was the first time I realized that things could just vanish from your life. And then, I don't remember why, but one day I just started to fold it. I had a piece of paper and I made this one single fold in it ... I stared at it ... and then I slowly started to ... I don't know, I tried to fold my lost dragonfly. I tried to make the paper look like volcanic glass.

So for her, art is rooted in the need to compensate for absence. It gives—or gives back—to us what otherwise wouldn't be there.

The name of Ilana's book about origami, *Folding What I Lost*, directly reflects this view of art. And Andy, a specialist at turning privation into spiritual profit, is a huge fan of her writing. He loves learning about “folding Ilana's models which are the things she's lost in her life,” and he also delights in “reading her little essays about them. They are like little poems.” Later on, during dinner on St. Valentine's Day, he again brings up her book, this time quoting directly from the text: “So much of what I am is what I've lost' . . . I love that.”

And yet, in the face of her most recent losses—of her husband and of her life-saving dog, Demba—Ilana responds not with creativity and a cascade of origami, but with spiritual paralysis. As she confides to Andy during their dinner, “I haven't folded a piece of paper since Demba ran away.” Instead, as we note at the play's opening, she has lapsed into a state of messy inertia, sleeping in disheveled clothing on a couch in a windowless studio littered with artistic detritus, empty bottles, old newspapers, and Chinese food boxes.

So, like Andy and Suresh, Ilana is compounded of contradictions. The artist who has always thrived on loss is now immobilized by it.

How does she find her way back to the creative life, a journey that the play's final image—Ilana folding a piece of paper—suggests she has successfully made? After all, neither her husband nor her dog returns; Andy storms woundedly out of her studio; and Suresh, we assume, though he has found her a blessing, is now going to move on with his developing life. So in the end, she is as bereft as she was at the beginning. Perhaps that's what gets her moving again: two new relationships ending in two new losses. Two new absences to turn into art.

THEMES.

The unexpected visitor. The curtain rises; there is a knock at the door; a visitor arrives who brings momentous change. Some variation of this situation has been a staple of dramatic literature for centuries. Hamlet's dead father shows up unexpectedly in Act I, and, as the song says, "A ghost and a prince meet / And everyone ends up mincemeat." In Dickens's famous story, another ghostly visitor upsets Scrooge's plans for a joyless Christmas with far-reaching consequences. Out in Ohio, Sheridan Whiteside, the man who came to dinner, drops in for a meal and turns a family's life topsy-turvy. As does Sidney Poitier's John Prentice in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and Ben Stiller's Greg Focker in *Meet the Parents*. In fact, during its last two seasons, The Public Theatre has featured three plays entirely about the consequences of unexpected visitors: *Collected Stories*, *Southern Comforts*, and *Visiting Mr. Green*. And in *Animals out of Paper* we are once again in a world where the action starts with the arrival of strangers who complicate the life of the person who receives them.

Why the ongoing appeal of this theme to the dramatic imagination? Probably because all stories require a burst of energy to get the plot in motion. This energy is sometimes referred to as "the disturbance," the factor that upsets whatever static balance is in place as the story begins. Unless there is some force propelling change, causing characters to pursue goals and make choices, we would simply be confronted with uninflected stasis—a deeply uninteresting prospect. The disturbance provides that force: it impels characters to deal with its consequences, and so causes that sequence of motivated choices that we call action.

An unanticipated visitor, or even a guest we do expect who ends up surprising us, is a particularly effective form of disturbance. With the holiday season recently past, many of us will have had the experience of guests in the house for days at a time, visitors who caused, at a minimum, a disruption of our daily routine. Perhaps we have even had guests who brought problems or conflicts with them: unresolved family disputes; obnoxious habits; irritating opinions. Guests like that will do more than disrupt our routines. They might well cause bitter conflicts, angry confrontations—in other words, domestic drama.

And at some level other people are always a little like unexpected guests, always in some way unknown to us. Even members of our immediate family can surprise us with a word or an action that seems out of character, and therefore shocking or possibly wounding. If that's the case with people we think we know, then it's obvious that strangers can pose far more dramatic possibilities. A greater potential threat, or great potential happiness. Or both. When Romeo drops in uninvited to the Capulets' ball, he meets the love of his life; and he also seals

his doom. Strangers in a play are always question marks; finding the answers is the action. Which is why, no matter how often we hear the unexpected knock on the door, we want to know who's there.

Suffering, insight, and art. The idea that suffering creates wisdom goes very far back in our culture. It permeates The Book of Job from the second millennium B.C.; it underlies the transcendent ending of *Oedipus at Colonus* from the fifth century B.C.; it weaves its way through *King Lear* from the 17th century. And it was an act of suffering that gave Christianity the cross, the symbol for believers of the redemption of mankind,

In the modern world, this idea has persisted, though differently inflected from its past versions. In the examples cited above, suffering led to a deepened understanding of humanity's relationship with the divine, even if the divinities encountered, as in *King Lear*, "kill us for their sport." The art produced by or focused on such suffering has as its purpose the transmission of those moral and spiritual insights. In modern works, the art produced by suffering doesn't lead us to the gods; it is not an instrument for that sort of discovery. Instead, the work is an end in itself, a beautiful object whose existence compensates us for the emptiness of the universe—for the gods' absence.

This is implicitly the relationship between art and suffering in *Animals out of Paper*. Ilana makes art in response to loss, as a consolation for what's no longer there. She announces this approach in the title of her book, and she traces the genesis of her artistic career to the loss of a precious object. When Suresh visits the atomic attack shrine at Nagasaki, he is offended by the presence of all the paper doves and cranes placed there by children as offerings to peace, as attempts to use art to draw moral lessons from suffering—like The Book of Job. Instead, he insists that "it doesn't mean anything." In response, he unfolds the birds of peace and replaces them with origami ravens, beautiful objects that remind us of death, the final loss.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.

1. Why is Ilana so deeply affected by the loss of her dog?
2. What does the injunction, "Count your blessings" mean? What do you think about Andy's practice of taking that advice literally?
3. Why has Ilana hung a black paper hawk above the couch that serves as her bed?
4. What attracts Ilana and Suresh to each other?

5. What attracts Ilana to Andy?
6. Do you think Andy will ever return to Ilana? Why? Why not?
7. Why do you think Ilana allows Suresh to kiss her?
8. Have you ever tried to turn an experience of loss into something positive? Or been motivated by loss to create or make something?
9. Why does the playwright have Ilana working on a therapeutic device for the human heart? Are there implicit meanings behind the literal fact?
10. Will Ilana and Suresh resume their relationship as teacher and student? Or as friends? Or in some other form?