

Entombed in Prose

The quill had been her only company during her husband's absence. All those nights, she'd scribbled with a painful grip, etched the scrawl so deep into the parchment, felt its midnight hue stain her skin. The ink was black—a darkness so stark against the pale white of her wrist. She had lathered her hands with grated soap and herbs, wrung them out like linen cloth, trying to banish the ink from her fingers. Branded and tainted—that is what her husband used to call her. It was almost as if she was language's wife and not his—the latter's mark paled in comparison to the one she bore of the first.

Now standing in the hallway of their home, his image still haunted her. He did vow, after all, that he would not part from her in life nor in death. Anne sighed, gazing at the books on the shelves that stood from floor to ceiling. She could smell the decades on them—all the memories folded within the spines and stamped into the fonts.

All his; all his stories, all his sonnets—now suspended in purgatory, as the love encrusted within them rotted like putrescent overripe fruit, and their creator was reborn in heaven.

A knock to Anne's right startled her, lending a hatchet to her intellectual thicket.

She quickly composed herself, pinched her cheeks and bit her lips to give the appearance of rouge. Unfortunately, her mercury vials had depleted, so her skin was not as luminous as it normally was. At least she can blame it on the circumstances that prompted this very meeting.

The latch was cool to her touch and it sprung open with a click.

“Good morning,” she greeted the Overseer and moved aside to give him space, “please do come in.” The social niceties were lead on her lips.

As the man entered through the hallway, she gestured stiffly for him to take a seat in the drawing room. She followed him in, seated herself across from him, and poured the tea that the maid had left just a moment ago.

“Anne,” he intoned as he removed his top hat, “I offer my condolences for William's passing. He and I were as tightly knit as brothers.” She inclined her head, signalling him to continue. “Though, I must make haste this afternoon. As you know, the legality of the Will is serious business.”

The Overseer reached into his briefcase and pulled out the finely-wrapped vellum document. From

across the room, Anne could not decipher it—her husband’s handwriting was barely legible to her even when she looked at it up close. His eyebrows furrowed, and he began to read.

“In the name of God, Amen. I, William Shakespeare of Stratford upon Avon in the county of Warwickshire,” the Overseer’s voice was steady as it tackled the hurdles of her husband’s words.

Anne knew what it would say. Knew how it would end.

“...my second best bed.”

The tea was steaming even after the Overseer left. Anne did not even hear the click of the latch. Did he say something to her? Something about her melancholy—her hysteria? Anne thought if she sat still enough, she would hear a shriek from the bath upstairs, see Clytemnestra’s cloak of holes.

Throughout her marriage, her silence had consumed her—letting her husband’s verbs dictate the inner workings of her nouns. Her quill was her mouthpiece, and that is why he despised it.

Anne felt a snarl disfigure her face, overwhelmed with the urge to pen all the intolerable vowels sizzling on her tongue. She prowled upstairs to his—*her* bedroom now.

It had been a sanctuary—that bed—a blooming orchard of ripened pomegranates; a forest in which faeries dwelled, fretting their mischief in the Midsummer; treacherous seas that unwound their jaws as her husband dived for sapphires and pearls. The stories he shared, the stories he created—her husband mastered artistry in those linen sheets—and the world was his canvas.

But the canvas was his alone. The coverlet was imprinted with *his* rhymes, *his* verbs, *his* touch—never hers. Was it sacrilegious for her to turn the linen into parchment with her ever-inked hands? To transform the print of fine letterings projected onto her mind’s easel into a play of action and spine-curling romance—the touch, the scent, the taste of her words sealed with wax, forever embossed.

Anne would have rewritten their story. She would have called upon the sisters of Fate and cracked their loom in two—a piece for her, a piece for him—and rearranged the stars to form their names. In *her* version, he never would have shunned her. He never would have punished her. He would have embraced her gift as she did his—two artists’ souls intertwined by the grace of Calliope. They would have conquered the literary kingdom, spinning around the universe with their bed as their axis.

Gasping for air, the boning of her corset snapped over her ribs, dress pooling around her as she sunk

to her knees.

This was William's story, and she danced upon his stage, playing her character to perfection.

Anne exhaled deeply as she stood up from the floor, lifting up the hem of her dress to not tear it. She walked across the room to sit on the corner of the bed, then stroked her hands over the prose woven into the coverlet. It was just like she dreamt it would be—except her hands were not ink-stained but herb-scented.

There was no place by his side for her as a writer. No place on the shelves, either.

It was a beautiful bed, she thought, no one would ever know that each thread was stitched with her tears.

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