

The piece is an examination of the 16 year 'gap' in the play, during which Hermione is absent from the court, and Perdita is believed dead, abandoned on an island by Paulina's husband, Antigonus.

There are some bits in this that are direct quotations from Shakespeare's play, *The Winter's Tale*. I give the act/scene citations at the end of the paper.

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### **1. *This ungentle business***

The night before my husband's death, Hermione  
appeared before him:

*... a vessel of ... sorrow,*

*So fill'd and so becoming: in pure white robes,*

*Like very sanctity.*<sup>[1]</sup>

This vision of the good queen spoke to him, saying:

*... for the babe*

*Is counted lost for ever, Perdita,*

*I prithee, call't. For this ungentle business*

*Put on thee by my lord, thou ne'er shalt see*

*Thy wife Paulina more.*<sup>[2]</sup>

Antigonus, my husband, had been sent by **her** husband

to expose her newborn daughter in the desert,

that it might be suckled, or devoured, by wildness.

So men send other men to deal with our fair spawn.

They dream of magical beings: of ravens and wolves

who will suckle, rage or ravage our innocent babes.

They send fools to distant oracles, to glean the wisdom

that cannot be found in their own untrusting hearts.

He lay the child on the earth while a storm raged

saying she was ... *like to have*

*A lullaby too rough: [3]*

And here, another apparition came: a bear,

great and furious as a storm. She pursued him

along the shore, mocking his indignant roars

with murderous fury of her own.

Some say it was a wild thing that pursued him—

a native of Bohemia—but 'twas Callisto, mother

of Arcas, who stepped from the heavens to the earth

to wreak maternal vengeance.

Her ears and teeth were made of stars, her eyes

and gut and claws. She gutted Antigonus like

a fish, left him wriggling on the storm-wreck'd shore.

## **2. Your first death**

The night of your first death, I placed a pillow 'neath your neck,

spread your bride's pale skirts across the stone, and

powdered your pink cheeks with chalk. You lay still

and cold as death until you heard your husband's boot

strike the stones of the chapel floor. No eye but mine

saw your hand dart out and clasp that of your dead son.

You lay, bridal and innocent. Your belly still half-swole,  
the blood of the childbed staining the tomb on which you lay.

Leontes knelt at your side, summoned false tears  
and wept for all that his foolishness had wrought.

I knelt beside him, bent my head to pray  
that your false death would fool the grieving king.

He took your hand and turned it, held your soft  
fist against his cheek. *Oh, but her hand*

*it is still warm*, he cried.

*It is your hot tears that make it so*, said I.

### **3. Hundred horse chestnut**

That night, when I smuggled you home, there was a storm

And we, like the Aragon queen and her hundred knights,

took shelter beneath the ancient elm that stands

between the palace and my modest home.

Just two we were. And you so weary with all you had lost—

A son, a daughter, a kingdom, and a husband—

that you could barely stand for weeping. I gave you

my shoulder, held you fast against me, and watched

rain drip from the catkins. *Look here*, I said.

*They are as soft and useless as my husband's quill.*

*Though these, no doubt, will bear some fruit.*

#### **4. A quiver? A diletto?**

By the time we reached the house it was dark  
And all the fires were out. I wrapped you in my bearskin  
and settled you in a chair by the fire while I knelt  
and blew the embers into flames. The room was dark,  
and muddled. As the flames caught they threw  
strange shadows on the walls. *So many books,*  
you said, and stood to run your hand across  
their spines. *So many words.* You lifted up a paper  
from the desk. A dozen more spilled to the floor  
and something heavier among them. Something  
unfamiliar. *What is this?* you asked. I turned and  
stood, tried to take it from you hand. *A quiver?* I said.  
*A diletto?* You brought it to the fireside, knelt  
to hold it in the light, and laughed. *A quiver?*  
*For what arrows, sweet Paulina? To slay what*  
*beast?* Your face, turned up towards me,  
was flushed with more warmth than a fire  
can induce. You stood, and held the implement  
against your groin. Twirled it heavily. *Shall*  
*I slay you then, with this your weapon? Or*  
*are you slain already?* I grasped the thing and  
pulled you closer. The leather soft and supple  
in my hand. *Look here,* I said, and showed you  
how the thing was hollow and how, within

its vulgar depths, were hidden quills and ink  
and wax. Scrolled treason and translated  
sedition. You frowned. I laughed. *It is*  
*my cunning quiver, good queen. The one I wear*  
*when travelling as a man. When dealing in*  
*secrets and trading in lies. It is also a fair*  
*hiding place for the letters I carry, the ballads*  
*and pamphlets that cannot be found*  
*in a good man's pocket.*

*Are you, then, fair*

*Paul, a good man? you said.*

*I am your man,*  
*good queen. And your woman, both. I*  
*will be whichever you most urgently require.*

*Come then, you said, and prick*  
*my conscience with your quill.*

##### **5. *With lullaby, be thou content***

There is a walled garden in my home. Inside, a parterre  
with six angled beds and paths that meet, not at a fountain  
but a stone dais. Once, there was a statue in the centre:  
Two doves atop a globe, held aloft by a marble maid.  
But she, like many a maid, fell one night and was removed.

Confined to the house for so many years, this

was where you took your walks. The gravel paths  
your meditation's groove. Here, is where  
you mourned your son. Two paths that cross,  
and cross again. Here, your daughter's loss was marked  
in miles of patient circumnavigation.

Some nights I woke to an empty bed, to the  
soft crunch of gravel 'neath your bare feet.  
To the sound of your voice, singing a lullaby  
to the distant moon. *Sweet daughter*, you sang,

*Eke lullaby, my lovely child,  
My little bird, now take thy rest,  
Since death is long, and never sleeps  
Keep close thy life, for so is best.  
With lullaby be thou content,  
With lullaby thy fears relent,  
Let others fear the wolf that bites  
Thou art too sweet for death's delights.*<sup>[4]</sup>

## **6. A glottal stop**

I was thinking of you as I walked along the Linguaglossa Road  
towards home. Thinking, too, of some fair rhyme to please you  
A linguist's pastime this: to make a bawd's joke of my profession  
A woman with a cunning tongue? A cunning woman's tongue?

A cunning woman on a linguist's path? A glossia, a glottal  
stop.

And stop I did, for there beneath the hundred horse chestnut you stood,  
or leaned, while vile Autolycus – that liar, that thief – placed his lips  
on your fair cheek, and fossicked with his hand inside your pocket.

I heard you cry--too faint, too false—and saw you draw away.

Against his breast you pressed a letter. He turned away, the letter fell.

You took his arm and pulled him back. Put the letter in his hand.

Purple paper, yellow ribbons. A red heart for a seal. Oh, love,  
good queen, fair Hermione, what false beribboned heart is this?

### **7. *The postman's fee***

It was early spring in our fifteenth year. I came  
upon you on your knees in the walled garden.

The bare earth turned, and dark. New beds  
pegged out with stakes and string. A wide hat  
on your head, and your skirts plucked up  
like a shepherdess's daughter. At your hip a  
stringed bag, like a miniature net, filled with  
bulbs. Bent like a crab you moved along, dibbling  
in the soil and burying, one by one, your  
treasures. *How now, what's this?* I called,  
coming in from the road in my gentleman's  
attire.

*There's rosemary and rue; these keep*

*Seeming and savour all the winter long: [5]*

*These two are for grace, and for remembrance.*

Have you need of herbs to remember me?

You smiled up at me, and caught the kiss

I leaned down to plant.

Not you,

fair Paul, it is my daughter this garden

does remember. These are her wishes, her

sweet blossoms, planted in our private place.

You stood, and gestured round the partierre. Here,

there will be ... *daffodils*,

***That come before the swallow dares, and take***

***The winds of March with beauty; violets dim,***

***But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes***

***Or Cytherea's breath; pale primroses***

***That die unmarried, ere they can behold***

***Bight Phoebus in his strength—a malady***

***Most incident to maids; bold oxlips and***

***The crown imperial; lilies of all kinds,***

***The flower-de-luce being one! O, with these blooms,***

*I will make garlands, for my sweet daughter,*

*To strew her o'er and o'er! [6]*



*It has been fifteen years, I said, since that small girl  
was left in some forsaken place. My husband's  
bones returned without his flesh to bind them.  
Your daughter—*

*Perdita. She has a name. Pray call her by't.*

*I knelt beside you. Lifted a moist handful  
of soil and inhaled. Good earth, it was, and  
rich with life. As she, your lost daughter,  
was not. *Hermione*, I said. *Dear heart.**

*It has been fifteen years. We've had no word.*

*No letter. You must let go of this false hope.*

*Your daughter is death's daughter now.*

[Herm] **You** have had no sign,  
you said, and plucked a bulb from your pocket,  
passed it into my hand. *But here, look  
what she has sent to me.*

*Where did these come from? I said. These  
bulbs and seeds, these marigolds and marjoram?*

*From Perdita, you said. From Autolycus.*

*THAT thief! That—I could not speak. All at  
once I saw you 'neath the hundred horse chestnut  
your hand pressing a letter to his heart. His mouth  
on your fair cheek.*

*Oh, Paul, you said. Don't  
be a fool. Do you think I would kiss a man—a man  
like that—when I have you?*

*I saw you.*

*You saw what, exactly? ... Oh. Oh! You put down  
your dibbler and your bulb. Stood and took  
my hands in your own. I nearly wept, to see  
your skin so dark, your nails so broken  
and stained. Oh, Paul. It is not such a wicked secret.*

*All these years, I have met him 'neath the  
chestnut tree to pass him letters, that is  
true. And every year he takes them, for a kiss.*

*His postman's fee, he calls it.*

*Some postman! I cried.*

*You wiped at my hot face with your sleeve,  
and smiled as though I were a child. He is a postman*

*and a peddler, you said, and the deliverer  
of my letters to Perdita.*

*How can he deliver letters to a lost child?  
He might as well deliver clouds to angels!*

You reached into your pocket, then,  
and drew out a tightly-folded note.  
A girls' hand—with a heart to dot the i—  
*To Mother, the letter said, from Perdita.*

*I don't understand, I said. I thought she was—*

You nodded, and we turned towards our home.  
The light was fading, and the earth grew cold.  
Familiar stars glittered in the sky: fair Callisto  
and her child. *Come inside, you said. I'll light  
the fire. There is more I have to tell you.*

### **8. Dear Winter**

Dear Winter, come you further in, fingering the wormholes of Hermione's heart?  
Sixteen times she and I have wintered in this hall, warmed each other's beds.  
She has risen over me, ridden high as a conqueror on the waves of my flesh  
And I, divided, have fallen eagerly beneath each victory cry.

Autolycus, that finest of the mortal thieves, could not take her hand from mine.

But you, Death, (Shall I speak your True Name, now that you have come so near?)

Have sown hard seeds in her breast. She swells and hardens in my hand;

Shadows bloom on her skin and death's cold snow rushes in at every breath.

Bulbs wintering in the soil do not dream of the garden's destruction;

The seeds you planted in her breast will never bloom. Not on my watch.

She has given enough already. My love is sharp and narrow as a sword;

Hot as the bee's barbed sting. I will cut your canker out.

### **9. *breast, bone, belly***

How quick, how cruel, how deep Death came

Burrowing from breast, to bone, to belly.

No knife, no poultice, no physic could detach

her from you. God knows we tried. But at each

incursion our enemy turned, laughed. Sweet

as your sickly breath, Death smiled at our frail

efforts. Too soon we knew that there was nothing

more to do. You were the first to call a stop.

*Stop. These are my last days, you said, do not*

*fill them with false hope.* I want, instead,

to plant a tree. To see Perdita's bulbs

put in. The walled garden, then, became

your final theatre. It was late afternoon

in our sixteenth year. Autolycus came

upon us, working in the walled garden.

The beds were bright with flowers and you  
sat watching while I weeded the daffodils.

*How now, what's this?* he called,

coming in from the road in gentleman's

attire. *Why so quiet, why so still,*

*When I bring good news, old friend?*

*Good news?* you said, and I saw that old,

false hope rise in your cheeks.

Yes, yes!

he said, trotting along the paths, plucking

rue and rosemary. *Think you this would*

*make a pretty posy for my buttonhole?*

[Herm] *What news?*

[Auto] *News? Oh! A wedding, a resurrection, a quiet*

*revolution. Perdita is coming home,*

*a suitor in her pocket and a king at her*

*heels. Her father suspects nothing, but soon*

*his kingdom will be hers. A ghost princess*

*returns from the desert of wolves and bears,*

*and a dead queen, too, must soon*

*be resurrected.*

[Herm] *Perdita is coming home?*

[Auto] *And you are discovered, good queen. The king has ears and eyes in the hundred horse chestnut and in the physic's chambers. In the walls of this your garden, too. He is coming. She returns. And all that was once hidden will too soon be revealed.*

#### **10. Are they near?**

The last time we were alone, you were standing on the dais in our walled garden. Perdita's blooms growing at your feet. It was late afternoon and you were weary. *Are they near?* you said. I looked along the road and saw dust, rising in the distance. *They are coming*, I said, and drew the curtain closed around you. There, as though in a lover's tent, I lay one last kiss on your cheek. Your flesh was cold. I could almost believe you a statue.

*Are they near?* you said. I listened for the beat of horses, for the rattle of the harness.

*They are near*, I said, and bent to arrange the long hem of the chiton at your feet. *Remember, when they come, you must not breathe, must not*

*blush.*

[Herm] *Until you give the word: until  
you say 'perceive she stirs'. You will follow us  
to the palace?*

*Yes, I said. I will follow you wherever you are  
moved to go, so long as you have need of me.*

[Herm] *Are they near?* you said.

I heard the scuff of sandals in the road, smelt  
leather, lilacs and horses. *They are here*, I said.

I could not meet your eyes, but you, in any case,  
were looking towards some other love. Long  
lost, and now returned.

### **11. Your second death**

The night of your second death, I placed a pillow 'neath your neck  
pulled the sheets up over your cancer-wasted body, and  
kissed your pale cheeks. You looked so warm, so lifelike,  
I was sure you would wake when you heard the strike  
of Perdita's boot on the stone-flagged floor. No heart but mine  
broke when you did not move. Did not take a breath.

You lay, peaceful. Ruined. Your chest flat and swaddled,  
your face bald of curls, or lashes or brows.

Perdita knelt at your side, took your unfamiliar hand  
and wept for all her father's foolishness had wrought.

I knelt beside her, bent my head to pray  
that your second death would be as fleeting as the first.

I took your hand and turned it, upwards like a tulip  
or a daffodil. Kissed the tips of each pale petal.

*Oh, but your hand, it is still warm!* I cried.

Perdita put her arm around me, drew me away.

*It is your hot tears that makes it so,* she said.

## **12. To sum up, honestly**

To sum up. Honestly,

I am not very good at sum-  
ming up.

As a linguist I was trained to strive  
for exactitude; to believe that  
rigorous imitation – without residue, without  
loss – is possible.

But here it is, the residue of you, which does  
not, can not, never will  
exist again. It moves like  
a daffodil like



a doxy like

red blood in this:

my winter's tale.

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## REFERENCES

Jankowski, Theodora A. “. . . in the Lesbian Void: Woman-Woman Eroticism in Shakespeare's Plays.” in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*. Ed. Dymphna Callaghan. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. 299-319.

[1] III, iii, 1514-1516

[2] III, iii, 1524-1528

[3] III, iii, 1546-1547

[4] This lullaby is very, very loosely based on the rhythm and rhyme scheme of 'Gascoigne's Lullaby' by George Gascoigne (1534? -1577)

[5] IV, iii, 1943-1944

[6] IV, iii, 1997-2008