

## Death of a Poet

All little boys play havoc with life, surprised the bird they slay with their homemade slingshot won't wake up and fly away. He, though, is one of a kind. At the age of seven he makes his first killing, a deer on the Yorkshire moor. He dreams it back into life. It turns into a woman with oyster pearls for eyes.

Tall, heavy-boned and broody-eyed, large hands with blunt fingers, a Heathcliff figure set amongst the black capes and mortarboards; he eats his first peach at age twenty-five. A taste so fine his spine tingles and leaves of desire fall off trees. Women love to sniff him, smelling the fruit consumed in longing and anticipation. They lap up the lofty tilt of his coarse eyebrows. His words are a great tool to uncover the other in each set of lips they offer. Out of the mix he picks the perfect one to summon their sweetness. Everyone says he has a gift for melting womanly flesh. No one can guess a delicate taste plucked from a stall at Charing Cross Station has triggered this soft epiphany of realisation. His friends don't know. All they can do is step back and let him take the male lead in the lady's drama. He has the sort of appeal that rings bells and opens doors.

He is only a lad, a youth not in the least worldly but whiffy of the earth, volcanic lava bubbling like a holy writ just beneath the surface. Mildly curious and unreserved, he runs his eye over the Fullbright list. She cheeses out at him in her American candour (is this before or after his tongue tingles) and then he forgets yet remembers the picture. The grin falls short of the daddy-damage or whatever it is she clutches so desperately squeezing out the last acidic drop. She relishes the sensation just as he savours the peach. It makes a distinctive combination. She baits the hook and casts the line. He glimpses the lure out of the corner of his eye. The choice is his. This he cannot deny. He opens his mouth wide. She gets a grip

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of his tongue and worries it with her own. There is a poem she writes he dislikes. He chooses some thorny words. These fit with the yet unsaid she holds so dearly. These words spill in a wanton flurry and she scurries about shoving them into her mouth. Gobble, gobble, her lips open like a greedy fish in this hopeful wish for more.

He forgets the grandmothers' wisdom or perhaps has never heard it. *Beware the woman who opens her ears and silently teases out your secrets. She will collect your spilled heart and churn your leaked guts. You'll fall in love with your own words and mistake them for her.*

They play with their mates. Bright sparks all, they spin stories of love and war, talk to the full moon and catch the ocean's wake. It is she, though, only she, who listens truly. All the rest pretend, eyes wide, lips parted, but only she can recite his words back to him. She has learned the age-old techniques, rhyme and rhythm – neither is aware nor even cares that in this she's lacking reason. Once he is hooked for certain she draws aside the curtain hiding her deepest love. That wild thing has already married her soul and is a jealous lover. Is this a competition? Her words tip out in a rush. The more she bothers them the less she is in control and they fold her uncompromisingly into their sting. Still, by tradition she knows only one can shine. He ate the luscious peach. She drank the sour wine. Reclining in the back seat, she slips further into hell. Children, she hopes, will settle the dust and dampen the taste of the tainted grape. It is now too late for him to recall the old women's wisdom.

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The globe succumbs to their tacit demands. His words become the ones they praise. *Such insight... Such imagery... A young poet with a god's soul... The way his words soar and fold you whole...* They plead for more.

Her words remain in the shadows. That is the plan but she's forgotten or has never consciously known, so determined to get it right. It's a fight to the death. She papers her walls with rejection slips. Pouncing on the occasional publication, her fury slobbers over those words already on the page drenching them in her pain... *her pleasure... see, I told you so....* This is a way she can slither in. Only a rogue would deny her after all she's given up. Another poet before, famous, whose Irish ancestry opens the world of the fey, chanting in a monotone he alerts them to more than the eyes can see and they plunge into an ocean of maybe.

A darkened room, electric blue with anticipation, they fringe the rim of her coffee table with letters, 'yes' at one end, 'no' at the other, shining up a brandy glass, setting it down on the epicentre. *Spirits, please, are you there? Tell us how to quell this hovering rumble...* At first the glass is still. Their fingers tremble. And then... And then... The glass prods the letters. Her mood is gloomy and dire. Each response shows her a funeral pyre. At last she hears him as sure as worms, her dead father drips in from the ocean and shakes out a warning. Only one of them can win. This unleashes her seething rage engaging the demon within. Must she follow the cue? Be no more than a wife, a daughter? Typing *his* script, licking envelopes, posting *his* words?

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She does as she ought, as she's been taught for long ago it was written, *those who can't do teach*. So she does. Focused on this she ignores The Queen of Swords whose presence in his tarot readings she vehemently resists. The Queen is dark and sculpted. Until this his acolytes all have had round faces and fair swinging hair. She refuses a closer look at his book for fear of seeing behind each page a doe-eyed memory, the sweet taste of his first peach.

In the distractions of plump juicy babies, burying her nose in their soft stinky necks, she unwisely forgets the tainted wine, the unholy mix. She nests. Her sap gathers and gently streams. She listens to its babbling, letting this suppress her longing for him to hear only her song and forego the rest.

A temporary reprieve. Her children's downy bodies grow and throw off their feathers. The space they leave crowds in and she shudders in a corner. She's hungry again.

*Save me* she begs, but his head is turned away. Remembering the wise women's advice, she offers her ears to him. It is not her ears that interest him.

She blames her body, looking at herself with a critical eye. Her breasts are no longer pert and round but sag and sigh. There's nowhere to hide her ailing pride. She lets it all hang out, lets her hair down. Embarrassed by her forthrightness (she's tried it on a friend), this other slinks away hoping she'll quickly recover and there'll be no dues to pay.

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No lure is left to bait the hook. His sideway glances are in the opposite direction. His words, the very words which once had the force to lilt and make her swoon are like daggers in her marrow. *It is the way they are delivered, she howls, scraps off the table, bones to the dog.* She hurls her bell-jar high. It lands in his open mouth, slides down his throat to come to rest behind his heart.

This is the moment The Queen of Sorrow chooses to flesh out of the tarot pack. The queen's sad beauty captures him. He falls into those soulful eyes, wallowing in the image he finds mirroring the deer he felled as a child – his first love - returned as a woman just as his dream prophesied.

Consumed with jealousy she screams at the house of cards, banging on the door. The queen gladly beckons her in. He hadn't wanted her to know. She's come by her own volition. They pass on the stairs; he is leaving as she arrives. The queen throws the door wide, offering her a sad-eyed smile. She has only herself to blame. Forced to see... she averts her eyes... to see... it's as plain as the scar on her face... the queen's belly is swelling with one of his poems.

Desolate, she sends the children away and sits at home, alone, devising the best way to make him pay. Too late to poison the peach, to sweeten the wine, she must divine the perfect plan.

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The walls breathe darkly. They whisper. They snigger. *You are no longer lovely, my dear. Your words wither in your sighing breasts. You can't deliver the perfect poem. There's nothing left. Nothing. Your verse slithers like hissing snakes while his is lauded and praised. The world calls him L'Enfant Terrible while pointing the finger at you, accusing you of being his succubus. He will not save you. He will not gather your words and cherish them in a gilt-bound book. His blunt fingers clutch at the pen she gave him and form letters which slide over her belly and scribble all over her flesh. You must hurt him for his own sake. Save him from himself. The punishment you offer him will be its own reward. She must be taught his words are hollow. Here is what you must do...*

A robot now, she tidies the house. The walls egg her on. Once everything is in order she is ready to obey the urgent commands of the whispering walls. She opens the oven door. Plumps up a soft cloth and lays down her head, turning the gas full on. As she closes her eyes she learns for herself there is only herself, there is no other.

He finds her death-raw, switches off the gas and lets the words fall. The queen writhes on the bed upstairs expelling the poem he planted in her womb. He weeps. *It is not just anyone who can kill genius.* He preciously guards these words in the bell-jar inside. They bounce and pound, resounding forever against the tall glass walls.

There is sadness in his eyes but no surprise. She'd foretold the role she chose in the only novel she ever wrote. His friends gather around. They crack open their ribs and offer their

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hearts but it's too late. She has won. There is no heart juice strong enough to stop the peach from rotting.

Still, he won't give in without a fight. She has no right to destroy his joy. He picks himself up and dusts himself off.

He removes her and replaces her with the queen disguised as a gypsy woman washed in Jewish hopelessness. The grandmothers weep. They watch helplessly as the queen reels him in as surely as the American cheese of before. Once more he falls in love with himself. His words sing their own tune and he dives head-first into the lagoon they make, refusing to notice the undertow. Below the crystal calm weeds spread their tentacles that tickle his chest. He pretends to glory in their teasing. Down, down, down, he buries the gas-blown corpse of the first well beneath them.

The new poem he pours into the queen's womb fruits into a daughter. The Queen of Sorrow uses her child to reinforce the walls of her house of cards. She blames the first for all the others. The hungry ones clamber around his knees, greedy to taste the peach, their ears large and hot from listening, eyes glistening - they sniff the lava scent of his deep despair and seething fury. They are there fuelling the queen's moaning. They teach her the word *hysteria* means *disease of the womb* and she blames his poem.

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*The little girl arranges the soft toys around her doll's cot, face down, feet away so they can't see mummy doll lying in the cot clasping baby doll very closely, their glass eyes tightly shut.*

The queen's body and that of his daughter lie lifelessly on the daybed the unlit gas jets turned on. And so the house of cards tumbles down. Again his eyes show sadness but no surprise.

Poems fall from his fingers like teardrops. Poet Laureate sits on his head. They ask him why he has attracted these damaged women into his life, a poet with such insight. He answers that this has never once crossed his mind. But his volume of words put the lie to this reply... peach blossoms... grapes on the vine... a deer gambolling through the woods... a little boy cries... Unleashed, they flicker and flutter and erupt, clustering in abnormal cells that grow and swell, a gangrenous stew of words which consume him whole.