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England's Fairest Creatures

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ENGLAND'S FAIREST CREATURES

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Madison Hart

May 2022

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ENGLAND'S FAIREST CREATURES

English

Missouri State University, May 2022

Master of Arts

Madison Hart

ABSTRACT

Set in 1616 Jacobean England, surrounding a tragic chamber pot incident, the place setting of the small fishing town of Lechlade, England, begins our story. From generations of fisherman, Elias Eaton, is the first Eaton not to bear a son. Instead, his fierce daughter in her mid-twenties, Julia, our protagonist, helps her father at the docks daily. Although Julia is a champion for women of her time, she dreams of there being something more out there for her than the town that has shackled Eatons for centuries. Julia's mother, Sybil, is the daughter to the town baker. Her literate father taught her to write, so she taught Julia in secrecy. Sybil runs the business of Elias's fishery along with trying and writing new recipes which she sells weekly at the market with her husband's catch. Since the Eatons are fairly stable middle class English citizens, Sybil can not only maintain the nurturing of her own family, but she also offers nightly meals to the poor for trade. A button can get you a mutton at the Eatons'. Julia resents her parents for, what she believes, are seemingly passionless self-establishings in the world. Their love was like a poem, and they were content with their trades. The same could not be said for Julia. Instead, she desires to write, like Shakespeare. She pours over her own poetry, attempts at prose, and faulty Shakespeare quartos in an attempt to procure copies worth studying. The way Shakespeare explores the depths of his characters' minds—their inner turmoil—resonates with Julia in a way she cannot escape. After dropping a full chamber pot on a famous actor's head, later to be revealed as Shakespeare's closest friend, rendering him fatally wounded, Julia is thrust into the start of a journey that could potentially be the key to helping her understand the Eaton melancholy that binds her. Perhaps what feels like an all-consuming curse is otherwise our protagonist's greatest gift.

KEYWORDS: novel excerpt, England, Shakespeare, melancholy, mental health, historical fiction, tragicomedy

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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This is dedicated to my mother, who knew I was a writer before I ever did. As well to my father, who always championed me and made sure I was able to follow a vocation that I was passionate about. To my partner, who inspires me and lifts me up unconditionally. To those who believed in me when I was unable. Thank you for your endless love and support.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Sonnet 1

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
But as the ripener should by time decease,
His tender heir might bear his memory;
But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel,
Making a famine where abundance lies,
Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel.
Thou that art now the world's fresh ornament
And only herald to the gaudy spring,
Within thine own bud buriest thy content,
And, tender churl, mak'st waste in niggarding.
Pity the world, or else this glutton be,
To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee.
William Shakespeare

England's Fairest Creatures is a historical fiction novel that came out of an undergraduate writing experience of mine in 2017 when I was at Texas Christian University. It was my first attempt at any kind of complete narrative as an author. It is a concept that has stayed with me for almost six years now, growing more complex as I grow older and learn more as a writer. The more I dive into this story and its possibilities, the more it challenges me professionally and mentally. Inspired by my own mental health struggles, I was curious how to write a character who struggled similarly, yet in a different time period that might alter the way their struggles are perceived.

Our story is set focusing mainly on the life and inner thoughts of Julia Eaton in early Jacobean England. This is precisely because the Shakespearean texts Julia would have been exposed to hone in on a highly advanced understanding of mental illness of the time. These texts are what influence Julia to think beyond the limits of her melancholy. I am fascinated by women in history who were before their times, and how their thoughts or ideas were received by those

interacting with them when they were considered only as simple, submissive matrons of the home in Renaissance England. We romanticize the plight of the woman, while ignoring to explore the woman herself—what made her, what molded her, and what influenced her. I often tell family members and friends how glad I am to live in the twenty-first century, and often joke that if I lived in any other time, I would have maybe been burned at the stake, lobotomized, or institutionalized. In her earliest stages, our main character, Julia, was simply a little girl, unnamed, who accidentally dropped a chamber pot on the head of a poor man who just so happened to be Shakespeare’s childhood friend. As I learned more about her, experimenting with writing her as a teen, I learned she is far more complex than that of some naïve child or minor character.

In this novel excerpt, we are introduced to Julia, her parents, their family dynamic, her ex-lover, and the events that led up to the tragic happening to Thomas Polton, our chamber pot victim. In a frantic attempt to finish her bowel business while doing some editing of a *Hamlet* quarto while experiencing self-doubt and mental deprecation, Julia’s hands slip from the full pot she is holding, and it falls directly onto the head of passing Thomas, fatally wounding him. In early drafts of this story, The “poop plop” (as I affectionately refer to it) was merely an inciting incident to gather a shocking interest by the reader, much like the ogling onlookers in Julia’s town—disgusted, yet curious. The rest of the novel was intended to explore William Shakespeare and what he could have been like. Upon development, I realized Shakespeare was not the main character at all. I decided his story could be better told by those who were surrounded and influenced by him, giving us a better picture of Shakespeare than anyone could conjure up. This thesis is only the beginning in grounding myself as a writer and conceptualizing the possibilities of this narrative. Therefore, it is intentionally experimental in nature, in a way

that allows us to not only focus on Julia's story and her thoughts, but the stories and thoughts of those closest to her to allow for a broad understanding of not only Julia's world, but Julia as she is positioned in Shakespeare's England.

I hope to accomplish an otherwise idealistic task by playing around with the experimental form of polyphony. Bakhtin names Dostoevsky as the father of the polyphonic novel, utilizing multiple voices of many characters in the work as opposed to one singularly focused character's narrative world. A polyphonic work is "dealing not with a single author-artist who [writes] novels and stories, but with a number of philosophical statements by several author-thinkers [i.e., characters]" (Bakhtin 5). Polyphony establishes that there is not sole focus on an individual character, but rather a collective consciousness between those also interacting with our main character that brings a clear thematic and philosophical wholeness to the work.

What appeals to me about polyphony is that it allows a sort of comfortable uncertainty for myself, as a writer. Polyphony takes some of the pressure off of always needing to know what every possible element of my story is before I start writing. There is freedom as an author to not always have my characters figured out and acknowledging them as growing beings, learning, changing and evolving every time I learn and grow as a writer. Bakhtin describes this deviation "as if the character were not an object of authorial discourse, but rather a fully valid, autonomous carrier of his own individual world," making sure to note that character consciousnesses interact not just internally, but externally with the culture and society around them (Bakhtin 5).

Characters are not simply reacting verbally with others to give us strategic glimpses tailored by the author into their way of life. Instead, they are considering their realities given the limitations of their places in the world. In a polyphonic novel, setting and place matter, critically,

as a character itself, subconsciously communicating with characters living in its realm. This can reveal more philosophical and existential elements of the fictional world that verbal dialogue simply cannot. In a polyphonic novel, character's cannot hide who they truly are, as the author is exploring what is in their heads—what they may not express directly or in conversation with another. This opens up a whole new world for the understanding of characters as fictional beings, and what they represent to us that we may relate or be drawn to. However, this also means accepting characters in a polyphonic novel might be more contemplative and “real” to us than we may be comfortable with.

Polyphony seems consistent with the life of being a writer of fiction and the reality that our ideas are going to change and grow after they are born, sometimes even in the middle of the process, or, scarier yet—close to the end. I get a lot of anxiety with the writing process and the feeling that I need to have every aspect and element of my work planned out and ready to go in order to allow myself to begin writing it. I seldom feel confident before writing something new. Very rarely do I feel like I have all the pieces I need to finish the puzzle. That feeling feeds an overarching panic during the writing process that by the time I get to the end, a crucial last piece might be missing and I cannot finish.

The pressures and expectations I put on myself out of fear of making any wrong moves in the development of my work threaten my creative process as a whole. Polyphony became a way to combat some of that writing anxiety and those perfectionist tendencies of mine. By positioning my characters in a world that challenges them to consider their existence with not only other characters', but how they internally contemplate the world around them, writing changed for me. I began to see my character's thoughts as crucial elements of my narratives in

order to help empathize and understand them in deeper and more meaningful ways, allowing them to grow in the ways my story wanted, not the ways I may desire to force them.

I was largely inspired and influenced, first, by Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. In the first paragraph, Morrison establishes the use of polyphony to prepare reader to interact with not only her characters, but their thoughts:

124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old – as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more; another kettleful of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the door-sill. Nor did they wait for one of the relief periods: the weeks, months even, when nothing was disturbed. No. Each one fled at once – the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time. Within two months, in the dead of winter, leaving their grandmother, Baby Suggs; Sethe, their mother; and their little sister, Denver, all by themselves in the gray and white house on Bluestone Road. It didn't have a number then, because Cincinnati didn't stretch that far. In fact, Ohio had been calling itself a state only seventy years when first one brother and then the next stuffed quilt packing into his hat, snatched up his shoes, and crept away from the lively spite the house felt for them. (Morrison 1)

The way in which Morrison deliberately grounds readers in the polyphonic form, indirectly dipping into the minds of her characters as a window into their beings, is exactly what I enjoyed about *Beloved*. It added depth and meaning to not only the magical realism of the text, but also a story about not simply one character and his or her thoughts, but many. Yes, it may require the reader to bear with a few uncomfortable pages to acclimate to the form. However, I believe if a reader can be open to learning the particular polyphonic rules of a text, it allows a broader view

of the life in which fictional characters inhabit—encouraging the reader to utilize the empathetic muscles of their brain in order to relate and respond to many internal character threads.

Morrison does not simply use polyphony to experiment with form. Polyphony is most likely being used in *Beloved* to emphasize the chaotic and claustrophobic nature of what it is like for Sethe and her family living in a home haunted by their generational trauma. The use of polyphony is designed to disorient the reader by paradoxically orienting them in the perplexity of the novel's motifs.

Another influential polyphonic novel that inspired *England's Fairest Creatures* is Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf establishes her own polyphonic style in the first page as follows:

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning—fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?"—was that it?—"I prefer men to cauliflowers"—was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace—Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished—how strange it was!—a few sayings like this about cabbages. (Woolf 1)

While Morrison's use of polyphony is more coded and implied, Woolf writes main characters' contemplations directly. Woolf utilizes signal words such as "thought Clarissa," in order to

communicate with readers that not only do these thoughts matter, but Woolf wants them to matter to us too.

Virginia Woolf famously struggled with her mental health, eventually, sadly, taking her own life. I believe her use of the polyphonic novel is intended to challenge our expectations and perspectives of characters like Clarissa and Septimus. Woolf invites us to consider Clarissa and Septimus as antitheses of each other. Clarissa, an aging woman of high class whose biggest problem is who she will invite to her party, is juxtaposed with Septimus, a tremendously troubled war vet who suffers from severe PTSD, bouts of madness, and derealization. With polyphony, Woolf illustrates two seemingly opposite characters who are both stuck in an element of their past existence, challenging us as readers to analyze how we choose to empathize, or not, with each one. Just like Morrison examines generational trauma in *Beloved*, Woolf continues to explore mental health and trauma in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Although inspired by more modern texts, I couldn't help but feel the urge to go back even further in history to find the time and place I would feel most comfortable experimenting with polyphony in. I was always a fan of Shakespeare. Not much classic reading struck me as did the work of the Bard. Maybe it was because the normal thing to do in high school was to write him off as wordy and irrelevant, as he was speaking in some foreign language for no purpose other than to show off, and I never was one to follow the pack. Leaning into that rebellion, I discovered a genuine interest in Elizabethan England and a highly intelligent, contemplative author *way* ahead of his time. All I had to do was challenge my expectations as a reader and be open to learning his style to reveal a complex microcosm of existential and philosophical themes. It was very full-circle for me when Bakhtin acknowledges Shakespeare as a predecessor to the use of polyphony in terms of exploring “not the life of an idea as an isolated consciousness, and

not the interrelationship of ideas, but the interaction of consciousnesses in the sphere of ideas (but not of ideas only)” and realizing why I was always drawn to his work (Bakhtin 33).

A. V. Lunacharsky declares Shakespeare as “polyphonic to the extreme” in the sense of his “ability to create persons independent from himself, and moreover to create an unbelievably great variety of them, while observing an incredible inner logic in the convictions and acts of each personality in this endless procession” (Bakhtin 33). This directly refers to Shakespeare’s expertise of not simply writing works for the sake of mindless entertainment, but responding to the social and cultural ethos of Renaissance England as English anxiety arises surrounding the growth of international enterprise. At the time of Shakespeare, England is experiencing adjusting to global trade and mercantilism and the foreign or exotic interactions and exchanges of religious and ethnic “others.” Shakespeare responds to these anxieties in works such as *Othello*, *Merchant of Venice*, and *Titus Andronicus*, creating worlds where his characters react not only with others, but internally with social norms and constructs that Lunacharsky refers to as “systems of consciousness,” in Renaissance England (Bakhtin 33).

I hope my own experiment with a polyphonic novel that explores multiple character consciousnesses will provide a useful tool to continue to explore the nature of anxiety, mental claustrophobia, and mental health in Renaissance England. To allow the reader a way to visually separate Julia’s thoughts in *England’s Fairest Creatures* when she experiences bouts of melancholy and associated physical and mental symptoms, her inner dialogue, rational and intrusive or otherwise, are strategically presented to the reader right aligned.

Just like so.

This is intended to challenge the reader’s emotional expectations, taking in the story while being interrupted, just as if the reader were Julia herself experiencing the confusion and

chaos of ailments such as anxiety or depression. Julia's thoughts as right aligned are also intended to better distinguish our main character from her supporting character counterparts, whose thoughts will also be given within the text, *as italics, like so*, when others are interacting with Julia.

Although exciting in theory, I have found polyphony a challenge to execute without confusing or puzzling the reader—and myself. However, I believe there is no better way in the form or theory of fiction to accurately illustrate mental health struggles than with the complexity of multiple character perspectives. I believe this due to the fact that mental health is just as complex as polyphony, and those who struggle are often stuck living in a world inside their own heads, yet are still trying to make sense of their existence in conjunction with that of the world around them. That means sometimes things do not always easily make sense to Julia, and sometimes she has to accept that fact in the moment and keep going. She doesn't get the luxury of some omniscient being helping her to make sense of her melancholy or discover it's greater purpose, or to be able to pause her and analyze a paragraph for clarity. I feel it would be unfair to her struggles and the reality of those who struggle like her to shy away from polyphony for fear of being too disorienting. However, I do accept there needs to be a grounding in the narrative in the first paragraph when our story begins to prepare the reader for the use of polyphony in this work.

Along with the utilization of polyphony to illustrate mental health and illness struggles, there are many satirical themes that, if otherwise rendered, might make for a decent comedy. *England's Fairest Creatures* is designed to challenge the reader to experience satire in a different way. The premise of our story and inciting incident is otherwise laughable. But, this work is designed to challenge us as humans and our perspectives. How do we reconcile, as beings and

creatures with our own pasts, the perspectives of her struggles? How does Julia proceed to cope with what feels like a joke being played on her by the universe, but raises incredibly high stakes for her reality? By using polyphony to get into the heads of Julia's mother, father, ex-lover, and Simon (a visiting merchant's son), we can better see the true world Julia is living in and not just how she reacts to it.

Eventually, I hope Julia's story to be one of four character point of view chapters, each focusing on one single character's inner thoughts right aligned, while, Dalloway-style, dipping into supporting characters. I hope to continue to work on this novel and explore a plethora of themes and ideas from not only Julia and Simon's present, but Thomas and Shakespeare's pasts and how they come together. Although the story will expand to include glimpses into Shakespeare's past, we will first begin with Julia in the present of 1616, the year Shakespeare dies. Allow us to explore how a small-town fisherman's daughter could even begin to play a role in the death of the Bard's childhood friend. By following the road to redemption and a specific focus on her inner-thoughts positioned with the inner thoughts of others, Julia is propelled and into a renewed purpose as a woman, a writer, and a dreamer.

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PROLOGUE

Maybe he wasn't watching where he was going, or maybe Thomas just attracted bad luck. *Just a matter of how you look at it, the world*, he often thought. Bustling with patrons buying, bargaining, and arguing, Thomas had just bought a ripe, fresh beet from the market—a strange snack for convenience. *What might Alice relish for dinner? I wonder what my dove has brought back from Stratford upon her travels with the women*, Thomas thought. Really, he liked the way beets made his stomach feel. When he tried to pass them, they exited with a certain ease that brought him an accomplished joy. Thomas always walked with an odd pep in his step, inherently jovial to a degree that not only puzzled others but offended them, for they could not achieve such carefree, joy even if they tried. It was most likely this merry nature that made him such an accomplished actor, that made him so electric to watch as play-goers wondered how he channeled emotions such as anger, spite, and jealousy, as such concepts appeared foreign to the aged man walking through Lechlade, dancing about like a child enjoying a beautiful day. *And beautiful day it is*, Thomas thought. Thomas Polton was, if anything, a memorable acquaintance. His stupendous rendition of Polonius had begun to excite the town with his troupe's performance of *Hamlet* in Market Place. He wiped beet juice from his chin with his quarto of lines. Worry not, for he had them memorized years ago when he helped his closest companion and friend come up with them, drunken and spent after a night at the Tabard Inn in London. When they arrived home as the sun began to rise, they would continue to talk, and William would fervently write.

Sloppily taking bites while watery, magenta-colored juice trickled down his chin, Thomas continued on the route to where the actors were camped right outside town for rehearsal.

He walked past a group of friends and fellow young actors on his way to give coaching and tips in preparation for the next show this midday. *Oh, were my marking for Roger on that quarto now?* Thomas thought.

“Thomas is such a slob,” murmured fellow actor, Roger, as he watched Thomas appearing confused by his makeshift napkin.

“Maybe you just mind him for he finds you a poor Laertes,” Robert teased. “After all he *is* an esteemed actor of The King’s Men, and you have met a few. None of ‘em worth anything were ever really normal, were they?”

“Good day, Thomas!” spoke out Robert despite Roger’s annoyance. Mouth full and dyed red, Thomas called out complete gibberish that was most likely a simple greeting of the pleasant sort.

Or maybe not.

“Gurmuh-her bud sur yersh thur merd!” Thomas waved and continued on. *Good men*, he thought. *Good men*. He smiled to himself.

“Disgusting,” answered the first with a look of disdain as Thomas left his view. Another actor, Edward, nudged him, requesting he at least be respectful while they could hear Thomas singing, well what sounded like the tune of a—was that a *church* hymn?

“Have any of you ever even seen or heard Thomas go to church or talk about anything Holy other than the divinity of what is found underneath a woman’s skirt? What does he know of a hymn,” Roger complained. Thomas had just recently threatened to give Roger’s part of Laertes to Robert. Roger desperately wished something would fall from the sky and knock Thomas into a deep, long sleep. *Plainly, I would not care in the least if he were to drop dead on his way to continuing to ruin my career, right here, right now*, Roger thought with a satisfying dark

pleasure he was not yet quite sure he truly believed. Thomas's hymn rang from his lips as he continued to rehearsal.

"We should be on, too. Thomas has no tolerance for tardiness," stated Edward while glaring at Roger.

Not far from them, *or did it come from above?* Thomas thought, there was a faint shrieking. As he looked up, he almost missed the face of the girl as she bolted out of view from the window.

"By the saints..." mumbled Thomas as he dropped the snack from his mouth and was struck in the head by a hurling chamber pot. Rendered unconscious and covered in waste, he collapsed.

POETIC INTRODUCTON

Noble are those who love the beauty of chaos. Those masochists who almost seem to crave how it stings when it hurts so badly. Virtuous are those who are patient for the relief when it finally passes through. Fearless are those who know the chaos may return. Bold are those who are prepared for when it does.

Come on, is that all your best?

Envious of those are we who seem to know what it's like to breathe without trying, to live without needing the effort of trying to exist, to love without the fear of chaos—rather welcoming it to be able to be challenged and grow from its primordial essence. Wise are those who recognize the fact the very laws of physics require chaos to exist.

I see you for what you are.

Yes. Yes, noble are those who overcome chaos. Very noble, indeed. Yet, brave are those who direct their chaos into the arts that seem to begin to heal its archaic nature. Rare are those servants of chaos, doomed to face its wrath forever.

Over, and over, and over again.

Powerful are those who feel for not only themselves but others. Potent are their instruments which they use to wield their strength, but only whence they have discovered that which they already do retain. Timeless are the themes of these skilled virtuosos. Fearless are the artists, for through them may we begin to be reconciled with one another again.

ENGLAND'S FAIREST CREATURES

In the small fishing town of Lechlade, England, sixty-eight miles west of London, there lived the Eatons. Nestled in a bustling village along the river, Elias Eaton, a generation fisherman, married Sybil Mackenzie, an Irish schoolteacher and baker's daughter. Together they bore a girl of the most dichotomous nature. *If only I knew why my father's melancholy skipped me only to dwell in Julia*, thought Elias. *If only I knew how to pull her out of her sorrow, protecting her and fixing it for her, as mothers are called to do*, thought Sybil. Julia's problem, or rather the easiest one to recognize, was she thought too much.

*Oftentimes too much.
Cursed mind.
Doomed to torture me until the end of days.
Oh, where does one find respite from thine own self?*

Although she minded herself, believing the self-deprecating nature of her melancholy was perhaps why she never seemed to find connection with many others her age, she tried to remind herself of the Dolby twins, Marcus and Martin. Their father, Richard, another Lechlade fisherman by trade, fathered two sons by a courtesan at the Red Lion who died under mysterious circumstances after birthing the twins. Marcus and Martin enjoyed participating in the same activities as their father, much to Richard's hypocritical anger and disappointment. Marcus kept a low profile, but Martin always made sure to make his presence known. It was what Julia always liked about him when they were kids. He was never shy or thought too much about what other people minded of him. *If only Julia were different, more amiable, maybe then she would make a good wife*, thought Martin.

Donald Culpepper rounded up Lechlade's fishermen. Julia tried to forget his daughter, Emma, who would often play with Julia and the Dolbys at the dock. She and Julia developed a

strong friendship that dissolved as they grew older. Julia found Emma mean. Emma found Julia an annoyance. Once Julia, Emma, Marcus, and Martin all passed their twentieth year, their pasts together became merely child's play. Now at the age of twenty-three, Julia had not even spoken to some of her closest friends as they moved on to other enterprises. Marcus and Martin would take over their father's fishery, like good sons do, although Martin had shared with Julia his secret desire to leave his father and brother and start anew in London. Emma was now allegedly being courted by a young merchant, exchanging letters back and forth from London, pretending in the light of day she never associated with Julia nor the Dolby twins.

The cobble streets of Lechlade grooved beneath Julia's boots. When it came to the energetic streets, efficiency was key. Lingering among the filth that lined the streets and the stench of last night's meal having been passed had been enough to make visitors faint.

"This walk always makes my stomach ache," Julia Eaton whined, pressing her scented kerchief to her nose as the bread she ate that morning stewed inside her. Julia was slender and well fed, and with a voracious appetite when she did have one, although she never put on weight. Sybil Eaton often felt lucky she only had the one child, or her kitchen might not be stocked enough. Thankfully, Julia would compensate when she would go a whole day without eating, upstairs writing by the open window of her third-story room. In this intimate space, Julia wrote down her thoughts, little poems, and plays inspired by those of Shakespeare and Marlowe—plays that challenged the very nature of the self. The nature of her own self.

She would stay up late by candlelight examining faulty Shakespearean quartos, desperately trying to correct what someone had gotten just so, so utterly wrong. Ever since her mother taught her to write and she was old enough to go to the plays put on in Market Place, she

began to attempt to emulate the romanticized life of her hero. She hoped one day that kind life could be hers.

*Fie, this sluttish prose...
What was the word...
What time is it?
Come on, come on.
When was the last time you even ate today?*

No untainted copies of the plays existed, at least not in Lechlade. None of them were ever the same, nor was it easy to tell which one accurate, and Julia desperately desired a full collection. One with integrity. What drew Julia to Shakespeare was the fact she believed he examined the inner soul and intention of man in a way that seemed to somewhat heal her. It was almost as if Shakespeare understood more the Eaton melancholy than she. Determined to study his works, she hoped by learning more about his tortured and sorrowful characters, she could prevent the tragedy of her own life from ending in a sad, sorry way, with no meaning more than her existence as a potential wife or mother. Surely, she wanted those things, but at twenty-three, and in Lechlade of all places, it didn't look promising.

Julia had deemed her life a tragedy at an early age, and although she didn't fear death, it was more of an apathy or complacency than dread. Shakespeare's characters didn't seem to fear death. They would do whatever it took to get what they wanted. Julia admired them for that. And although the quartos weren't terrible, they weren't *perfect*. Some even were missing whole entire stanzas she had found. Brutally important lines.

A true abomination.

And whereas she couldn't seem to iron out the kinks in her life, she could restore the integrity of *Hamlet's* struggle. It was partly the reason she woke up so late after spending the whole night obsessing over her revisions, which made for such little time as to allow her to run

even a finger through her hair in the morning, making her even more unfortunate looking, at least to her. How she envied her mother's beautiful, tight, red, springy curls. She knew many men in town still wished Sybil theirs. Grandma and Grandpa Mackenzie loved to tease her about her popularity back then. Julia wondered if they held a bit of resentment for her choosing Elias. Instead of full, bouncy curls, Julia's hair lived somewhere in this impossible realm in between coiled and straight; more often than not, it resembled a nest of rats.

Still, try to get her to simply tie it up without a ten-minute monologue on exactly which specific characteristics inherited by her parents she resented that day.

"When does your stomach not ache?" joked her father, a well-respected and reputable local fisherman. Merchants came as far as London for his sturgeon catch.

Usually when I eat BREAD.

"Usually when I eat *BREAD*," she retorted, attacking Elias for reminding her that her otherwise fail-proof system still had some unpredictable and unexplainable flaws.

Did I say that out loud?

You are so ungrateful.

He is only teasing.

But how is that fair?

You can't control when your stomach aches.

"Not long now," Elias encouraged her. "Be glad nobody shites in the river like they do in London." Although living among their waste became normal, it never became more palatable. There was a little relief as Thames Street went further south from High, but High, Burford, and Sherborne created a tripod of overpopulated and overrun streets, piss and shit forever wedged in between each individual crack and crevice.

Not all minded it, though. Kids seemed joyfully oblivious, and most men wore their tolerance as a badge of honor. Elias never skipped a beat. However, sometimes Julia caught his nose twitch and his upper lip scowl with disgust. She didn't understand why they stayed in this sad fishing town. The world was nothing like it used to be; ordinary people in places like Stratford could be extraordinary people in London. Sometimes Julia would catch her father dreaming of London life to her mother, talking about how proper he would look in a bright red or a rich deep blue. Might give him a bit of color. Might give him a bit of life. No, not many minded Lechlade, or at least they didn't admit it.

And—what, those people over there? No, they've not fainted, that's just where some of the poor would sleep. When Thames Street approached the docks, it created a makeshift dwelling. Most of Lechlade's homeless had built their own little community among the fishermen. They kept their distance from one another. Most of them would end up in the Eaton home for a meal later that evening while the neighbors looked on with repugnance.

“Don't they just shit in our river instead?” Julia mentioned, pointing to the bridge-dwellers.

“I'm sure they do. But good luck finding a time where someone isn't looking. One got caught. Some of Culpepper's boys beat 'im to death after nightfall. Mayor did nothing about it. He looked the other way. Scared the rest of them all a great lot. I think our fish are safe.”

Most other fisheries in town were run by father-son or brother duos. The Eatons were the first and only father-daughter team. It was odd at first for the other fisherman when Julia began accompanying Elias to work at the ripe age of ten. It made Elias an easy target to the other jealous, less successful fisherman to try to hinder his business. Not to mention, Julia was such a

pretty little girl who did not belong at the docks surrounded by rough working men all day. Therefore, the fishermen of Lechlade attempted to appeal to the Mayor to remove her from her service when she was fourteen, which was ironically around the time Elias began to catch more fish in a year than two of them could combined.

Young Julia gave a speech in appeal of her cause, stating, that if they refused to let her work, they be punished instead, for why deny anyone good, honest work with most of the poor in town being ridiculed for their lack of? The opposing fishermen argued the issue was her nature, for a little girl had no place in the dark and dirty depths of a fisherman's work, and although they enjoyed the recipes Sybil shared with their wives, they suggested Julia take a more domestic role. They argued it inappropriate she be exposed to such unpleasantries.

Julia argued with the Mayor at Town Hall that the only unpleasantries she had experienced were the malicious and crude jokes the men would share when they mocked her and their own wives—when they joked about what they would do to a woman to put her back in her place, much like it felt was happening to her in that moment. Perhaps the issue was with their behavior making the docks unsafe for her “nature,” and they would be better served to act a bit better than deny her basic human rights. Could a girl even argue such a thing? Embarrassed and not sure what had just happened, Julia then reminded the Mayor of the visits from the wealthiest merchants in London came to Lechlade specifically for her father's catch of sturgeon. Surely they did not believe removing a worker supporting that enterprise would be beneficial for the economy of Lechlade, no? Julia had also built friendships with the other fishermen's sons. Since they had grown up together at the docks, they began to protect her. Their fathers were furious at their hand in keeping her position at the docks.

It was rare if any of the other fishermen in Lechlade came home with sturgeon. In fact, it was quite hard to procure a line long enough to make it all the way down to where the sturgeon hid, but Elias had tied weights to ropes and had marked the river's depth. He found he couldn't possibly make or find a sixty-foot line. *Maybe in London*, he thought. However, he *could* start with thirty. His dad had left enough leftover horse hair he could work on a longer line, see if the sturgeon would bite in this deeper water, and then, if that worked, eventually buy silk when it came to market for more durable and sustainable line. That would be well worth the expense, Elias reconciled. In London you could get your own silkworm he had remembered. *That would be wonderful, to have your own silkworm*, he contemplated.

Eventually, Elias worked his way to acquire three silk-lined fishing lines. One was twenty-seven feet, another thirty feet exactly, and one thirty-two feet, after it ended up being a little longer than he had realized. He had plenty of old lines and rods from his father and his father's father before him, but these were now built to last. These were now built specifically for sturgeon. The Dolbys may have found the young, poor females that didn't know better than to wander into shallower parts, but Elias knew where to find their mothers with a fortune in their bellies.

"Did Mum pack you bread...?" Julia veered her eyes to try and catch a glimpse at the lunch Sybil had packed for them. She had to stand on her tiptoes and look over and beyond her father to her left. The basket was in his left hand, riding low to the ground.

Riding awfully low to all this piss and shite.

He caught her and yanked it out of her view. "Would you not like to know now, huh?" he teased her, never changing his tone much when he spoke, if ever. But Julia knew he was still

teasing—his odd variety of derision. Before Thames Street turned into a bridge, there was a little step-off for access to the West Wharfs—Free and Parkend. Free Dock was where anyone with a boat could fish. They were usually just fishing to feed their own family and make it through the winter each year. These fishermen seldom caught enough to sell—only enough to eat and save. Elias wished it could be like that for him, too. That it be enough he just fed Sybil, Julia, and himself.

Along with the Dolbys and Eatons followed the Culpeppers, a father-son pair who the town believed might have dealt in some illegal business, but no one knew exactly what of. They just knew Donald to not be the most reliable. It was rumored to have been Culpepper and some of his distant relatives that he paid to beat the homeless man who tried to lay his bodily waste in the River. There was also Old Tom Yancy, an eighty-year-old man who was injured as an adult, rendering him mute and ostracized within his own community, except for the Eatons and a few others. Yancy used to be good friends with Elias’s father, Edmund.

“Who is that talking to Culpepper?” Julia asked her father, nodding toward the richer man and his companion who stuck out like a sore thumb among the common folk. Visiting merchants had become easy to spot, as only a handful at a time would visit Lechlade throughout the year. When they came, most of them had gaudy ruffs and bright-colored garments with obnoxious patterns. Elias hated them. Julia silently admired them. She thought her otherwise plain and bland-colored frocks weren’t the most appealing.

*I wonder if a deep red would bring out my eyes?
I love the color gold.
Is it a color?
Is it a thing?
How do they get the hard metal into the clothes?*

The travelers wore dark cloaks with gold adornments. They were dressed like the others, but with no neck ruffs, and no blinding color or patterns. Julia noted she quite liked its elegance, grace, and style, while still appearing luxurious.

*Why would something as simple as color make a difference?
Maybe it is not what I could wear.
Maybe it is more about who wears it.*

“You know those aren’t our people. They buy my fish at market from Sybil ‘cause she’s prettier. I don’t see them. They don’t see me. I don’t mind,” Elias said.

“They aren’t quite *your* people, you mean?” Julia shot back. “I think it would be fun to meet someone different. Imagine how much they see when they travel from town to town?” Her eyes lit up.

*GREEN DRESS—
GOLD DRESS—
PURPLE DRESS—
PLEASE, ANY OTHER DRESS THAN THIS DRESS!!*

“They are still not quite *our* people. We live in *our* town. We know each other, we take care of each other, and we work hard with each other. They’ve got their own land. They only come here for trade and respect not us working folk. They need only take the fish to the next place, making more money than I did selling it, and working less than I did catching it.” Julia began to feel badly, a wave of guilt rushing over her, feeling it her fault her dad was upset. Usually, her father didn’t get worked up by things, but sometimes he seemed tired of her. Or maybe just tired with her jibber-jabber? He would not dare show a crack in his exterior, which maintained he carried all his existential weight without effort—pretending like he wasn’t fighting just as hard for his place in the world as everyone else.

Maybe I don’t need fanciful colors or dresses to feel pretty.

As they passed the merchant and his apprentice, Julia overheard their conversation, growing louder as they approached. "... now, now, Mr... Culpopper is it? I cannot pay you that much for your boat if there is any possibility it will not hold my supply. Not only is it more than what you are worth, you will not be able to pay *my* employer to replace what either falls off on the way to London or what has to be left here. I just—"

"Cul-pepper, and hold on! Now, she only *looks* small, but I promise you she is mighty! I swear by God she's covered in fishing gear right now—of course you can't see how much she can hold—give me a day to get her cleared off..." Donald Culpepper's shrill voice trailed off like he was telling the most interesting story ever spun. His son, James, one of Julia's best friends, made an exasperated face at her as she walked by. He mimed decapitating himself with his thumb as a blade, causing his eyes to roll back in his head as he pretended to collapse behind his father's back.

Julia giggled and nudged her dad. "You hear them?" she asked, eager for his attention. "They need a boat." He disregarded her, saying nothing. She knew she had worn him out, but the day had only just begun. *Do you ever tire, girl?* Elias thought. "A *big* boat." She played his game, but she hated games. However, she knew if she pushed too far, sometimes he could boil over like a hot soup, scalding all the good stuff at the bottom, the burnt bits ruining the entire meal. He would do that a lot.

"Some might say there's no' a bigger boat in Lechlade than Mr. Culpepper's other than yours?"

Had he started to walk faster?

He was clearly trying to out-pace her. "Some might say the *Rose of Sharon* could be perfect for this merchant," she, said, before she began to imitate Donald Culpepper "Just 'give

me a day to get her cleared off and— 'I know better than to think you would be avoiding my words, Father?'

He paid her no mind. It upset Julia something fiercely when he did this, or when anyone ignored her. Simply pretending like she didn't exist. "Oh, now you, too? Not just Mum, then?" she challenged him, but to no avail. "Father?" she yelled at him accusingly; some of the villagers now looked their way.

Elias abruptly stopped walking, turned to Julia, and snapped back, "He will just as easy find passage on a larger ship tomorrow morning when one arrives. He doesn't want to pay much, so he's trying to haggle Culpepper when I am certain he could afford to give Culpepper more than what he is offering, no problem," Elias grumbled, dismissing his daughter. "Although I rather enjoy seeing Culpepper squirm—that short pig—he has got family. No sense in trying to take what is rightfully his. He has already got the guy. Let it be. Pray they can work it out."

"You know they won't work it out because, you've said it before, Culpepper is a snake. James hates going to work with his father, says he always has some stranger around he is trying to bargain with. I guarantee you the sale falls through before nightfall. I can go back if you want me to—"

"You think you need more than you do. You have wants, and you think you will die if you do not have them. For some reason you cannot be content with what you have, content with what there is. There is always something more, something *else*. Not everyone gets to have something more." He paused for a beat. "Not everyone gets to have something else." He then turned to stone.

*He's right.
Ungrateful.
Selfish.
Ignorant.*

*You think somewhere new will change who you are.
Stupid girl.
You think searching for something else will make you better?
He's right.
No, he's not...
Why is it wrong to want more?
Stupid girl.
Why is it bad to want something else?*

“A lot of people don’t mind it here,” Elias started. “Look at Tom Yancy. He doesn’t mind.”

“That’s because he doesn’t have one,” Julia stated.

“Have ‘one’ what?”

“A mind.” She started to become short in her conversation. He always did this. Julia would become so passionate about something that she could burst with excitement, yet her father never matched her own excitement or encouraged her to dream.

*Just some low-spirited man who has no lust for adventure.
A fisherman content to fish the same shore his whole life.
Never once seeking out a different shore.
All dreams and no action.
How sad.*

“It’s Mom’s fault.”

“Oh, now—don’t give me that, don’t start with that shite—your Mother—”

“No, you don’t give me that. You have no idea what it is like for me!” Julia said. “If I were your son, you’d want me to fish for you when you’re dead. But because I’m your daughter, you act like I suddenly have a choice.”

“Julia, that’s not fair.” *Why does she always do this? Immature girl, you tire me so,* Elias thought. *Why does she constantly have to pine after what she doesn’t have when she has so many great things right in front of her?* He immediately regretted his thoughts. He did not want to stifle her as his father did him, *that angry, melancholy old man.* This was a tricky thing for Elias.

The devoted father, husband, and son took the burden of carrying the legacy of his father, doomed to be stuck in Lechlade his whole life. Which he was content enough with. Or was he just content with it because he had no choice but to be, he wondered? He would be nothing like his father, yet the hammer that struck Elias in place to his destiny taunted him every time he tried to break the cycle. He was almost relieved when Sybil bore a daughter. Edmund Eaton groaned with displeasure, leaving the special lure he tied to welcome the future of the Eaton legacy into the world with Elias—a haunting reminder of his disapproval. He barely saw Julia before he died, only a few times when she was seven and ten. After she started working at the docks, he never came back. *Probably for the better*, Elias thought. *They never got along, and my how she made that known*. He smiled at the thought of his daughter’s sharp wit and fast tongue. How he knew she was his daughter, yet she was awarded and worthy the pride offered a first-born son.

“Not fair? You think it is fair that I wake up every morning and Mum is trying to whore me out to the first suitor desperate enough to give her one less reason to worry about me? She is delusional. All I know is I can’t even hear her anymore after I have spent all night trying to fix England’s shittiest *Hamlet* quarto.”

“You act like there aren’t things I would rather be doing. Choices I would have rather made. Not everyone always gets what they want. Especially people like us, and I thought you liked Martin? Isn’t he your friend? Not many people get a mate that feels like a friend. How is *Hamlet* going, by the way?”

“You act like you forget to mention you have other things you enjoy doing. Do you even know what it is like to feel something other than the air enter and leave your lungs? And Martin *used* to be my friend, but his father’s evil dwells in him, too.” She paused for a bit,

contemplating whether to answer his last question. “It is going like shite by the way, *and* I’m going to miss the play this afternoon. I can barely think with Mother wrenching me all the time.”

“Good parents make difficult choices so their children can have a better life than they did. You are getting older. Don’t you want to think about what is next? Have a good life? Richard Dolby will die, and Martin and Marcus will have the chance at their own fates. Your mother just wants you to have a good life.”

“Is that what we are calling this? A good life? And Dick might die, but it would only make Martin more vicious and resentful. It will take him his whole life to mend from what his father has put him through. It is quite the reason we are no longer friends. A Dick birthing another dick just as equally as disappointing,” Julia joked, a little scowl in her voice that cut like a knife when she turned ice cold like her father, although it melted a bit when she started to remember how Martin and Marcus were her only friends at one point after the “Poo-lia” incident.

When Julia was twelve, she had tried a new hairstyle to tame her mane. Emma Culpepper and Sarah Wright used to tell her that her hair looked like a rabid hedgehog lived in there. So, Julia had finally done up her hair in a way that produced more loose tendrils to frame her face, giving it dimension.

*Maybe even make it somewhat interesting to look at.
Maybe even make someone stop and stare.
Maybe even make someone stop and fall in love.*

Instead of compliments, Emma and Sarah laughed and told her it looked like a poo. “Poo-lia! Poo-lia! Poo-lia! Poo-lia!” they chanted before her.

Julia knew this was mean and wrong of them to say. And, frankly, it also just wasn't true, as Julia made sure to position the hair with pins in a way that had never resembled any poo ever—or at least not one she had taken.

“If this is what yours look like, you might want to see the apothecary. He might have an herb to help with healthy stool,” Julia quickly responded and rushed home before they could see her cry. She vowed never to fashion any hint of turd on her head ever again.

*That rotten bitch.
Someone should tell her that HER blonde hair seems as bleached as her pale skin.
Why do all the boys like her, anyway?
She is the most un-interesting.*

Regardless, Emma and Sarah proceeded to get all the kids in town to call Julia *Poo-lia* for a week. That is, until Martin and Marcus Dolby planted a dead fish in Emma's frock pocket. They convinced the boys in the town that Emma had a crush on Marcus, but he wanted nothing to do with her, so she wanted to smell like the docks so he would take a liking to her. Despite vehemently refusing, this made her the joke of Lechlade that next week instead of Julia. For that, Julia would always be grateful. For the relationship she and Martin had developed afterwards, she would remain wholly in regret and shame.

“Mum also forgets it's hard to be courted by anyone else other than Martin when I'm helping you at the docks all day—which I don't mind and honestly would rather be doing than playing damsel...” she trailed off, making a face at some of the grimy sailors passing through. They were excited seeing a young maiden on the docks. Elias had stopped responding. Sometimes he did this to let her fizzle out, and then it was easier to get her focused on a new task, like sturgeon season.

“You'd rather be writing,” he finally spoke.

Julia smiled to herself. “Grandpa once told me a story about how you tried your hand as a merchant, but he broke the wheel of the wagon you spent years saving up for and fixing. He said he blamed it on the storm that happened the night before so you could never go. I think he thought it was a funny joke, but it didn’t make me laugh.” Elias let a twinkle of emotion escape his eyes.

“I do want to be a writer. I want to do what Shakespeare does. My name on quartos all over England.”

“You want too much.” Sometimes Elias thanked God he had a daughter. Sometimes Elias thought a daughter a wretched curse. Consistently loyal and loving, yet fiercely independent and strong-willed. Stubborn and impulsive, yet always constant, even when in her melancholies. *There has to be a better word for it*, Elias thought. *Melancholy*. Quite a sad word that did nothing to give praise to the lively, adventurous, and curious young woman she was majority of the time. *Melancholy more accurately describes my own father*, Elias thought. Julia was a complex but beautiful being, blossoming well beyond what her future will ever be ready for. Elias knew she was special. He just didn’t know how to help her to be.

“Maybe,” Julia replied. It was a good point, and he wasn’t wrong in making it. Elias was a man who made the best with what he was given. He had quite mastered life, actually. He had taken his Sisyphean fate and turned a boulder into a ball, a mountain into a mere hill. Of that Julia was eternally jealous. She ached to be content with something.

Content with anything...

“I don’t think it’s wrong to want there to be more than this.”

*There has to be more than this...
I need there to be more than this...*

Julia felt a hand brush across her bottom as she jumped and looked for the sleazy looker. He was gone, but she saw his silhouette pass by the direction from whence the caress had come.

Yeah, definitely more than this.

She knew she existed in the world, but it didn't always feel like it. Oftentimes she felt as if she were floating outside of her body, merely observing herself walk and talk and make decisions.

“Maybe you stay home today, then, eh?” Elias stated in monotone.

*Is he kidding?
A sort of sarcastic jape?
Trying to mock you?
I am not in the mood...*

“Trying to get rid of me, then?” Julia retorted, assuming he was so tired of her he needed her gone.

“You sure are fighting it. Wouldn't you rather go to the play today, anyway?” He met her gaze and winked at her. “You are kind of a shite angler.” He handed her their lunch basket.

“Albeit a better writer... I will be home later on.” He kissed her forehead, and Julia remembered how thankful she truly was for her father. As stubborn as he was and given any emotions he may have lacked, he loved Julia.

“Thank you thank you *thank* you!” She twirled around with jubilee and wasted no time heading back to their dwelling. Elias watched her skip away with glee with a slight hint of a smile on his face. *Could she really do it?* he wondered. *Could she be the first Eaton to make it out?* Secretly, he hoped she would, never daring to utter it out loud to Sybil.



The day waned and Sybil attempted to perfect a mince pie with potatoes. It was about time for the play in Market Place where the Polton Acting Company was set to put on *Hamlet*. This worked in Julia's favor, for the quarto's opening monologue had yet to be perfected.

"That patient merit of th' unworthy... stakes?"

That's not right.

"...unworthy fakes? Makes? Breaks? *Fie.*"

*Hahaha, stupid girl.
Stupid, stupid girl.*

Julia scribbled on the pamphlet with little to no room left for legible markings, knowing she would ruin it soon and need to find a new one.

And then have to start all over.

Maybe she could just use it for wiping when she was done on the chamber pot. Her lunch had yet to settle, and she had eaten too much in an attempt to compensate for her sour stomach that morning. Maybe the cheese wasn't as good as Sybil thought? Regardless, her intestines ached as they tried to pass whatever she had eaten as she frantically revised, the urge to work consuming her.

*Maybe it's just you that is bad?
Have you ever thought about that?*

She grunted in pain, clutching her quarto to the sides of the chamber pot, seriously contemplating shitting on the whole thing. By the time she had finished she was running late for the play. She could see villagers make their way to Market Place from her third-story bedroom window. Julia clutched her full chamber pot, in a daze, trying to remember that one word.

*That one fucking word.
If I waste any more time, I am going to miss it.
So slow.
So stupid.*

Slow, stupid girl.

She almost didn't notice the chamber pot slide right out of her hands, and the mangled attempt at a quarto correction that followed.

*Oh shite. Oh no.
Oh no no no no.
No no...*

Time began to move in slow motion as Julia's thoughts raced, realizing what she had done. She hurried out of view from her window. This kind of thing happened all the time, right? Her thoughts began to move faster, each thought coming and going in what seemed like a fraction of a second.

*Not ALL the time.
You're so stupid.
How embarrassing of you.
You're going to have to go clean that up.
Everyone will know it was you.
You're going to be covered in your own shite!
That is hysterical!!
You're going---*

In the same moment as her thoughts, instead of the low-cracking sound of a shattered chamber pot, a weird *thwunk* preceded the anticipated shatter. As soon as it entered her ears, it got stuck in her throat. Her waste had not simply hit pavement. A woman then let out a guttural scream, her voice curdling with horror.

"The chamber pot!! It ... and I swear it just ..." *"He is breathing ... does not look good ..."*

"Somebody HELP! Anybody!!!" *"Do you know him ...?"* *"STEP AWAY—THIS IS OUR FRIEND ... Acting Company ..."* *"HIS HEAD IS PUSHED IN! MOMMY!!"*

"Do YOU know this guy ...?"

"... came out of nowhere and ... pushed it on purpose ...?" *"... Shakespeare ..."*

“and ... the girl or the boy? It was a girl ...” “THOMAS ... MY GOD ... PLEASE”

There was shouting, and Julia’s ears started to ring as the noise outside faded and her thoughts got louder. Her breath began to pick up once the ringing had subsided.

*What is going on?
What happened?
What did you do?*

“He was at the play earlier today ...” “Eaton, this is Eaton’s shop ...”

“GET THE HELL AWAY FROM HIM. ALL OF YOU ...” “... what a shite way to die ...” “Is he breathing?” “Elias is ...” “... how in the world ...?”

“Last time this happened ...” “No way ... she threw it at him?”

“STAY WITH ME, THOMAS” “He’s breathing ... Bless the Lord he’s breathing!!” “... didn’t a pot hit Yancy? Isn’t that what made him ...?” “... not going to make it ...” “Who even is that?”

“Monsters, YOU ARE MONSTERS.” “Thomas, THOMAS ... Come ON.” “Thomas ...?”

“Get away from him!” “... no, no, it was a horse that kicked Yancy ...”

The voices outside registered and shocked Julia into action. She braved to look outside to see the damage. People were pointing up at her, her mother and father shielding the sun to look up at her like they didn’t know who she was. Maybe they were buying her some time? It wasn’t until Julia saw the woman in a fit sobbing, rocking, holding the man’s head as pedestrians surrounded him to help, that she realized the weight of her action. The woman held in her lap the head of a man, unrecognizable. The only features she could make out were concealed by a thick mask of Julia’s own excrement. Her stomach dropped at the first sight of recognizable blood.

Something she knew had not come from her. It was oozing between the cobblestones just beyond where she spotted her mother kneeling to assist the wounded man.

“He’s bleeding!!” “... I’m going to be sick ...” “... No, he’s right—it was a pot ...”
“THOMAS, stay with me ... my love!” “Hit ‘im when he was a wee one ...” “... Away ... AWAY
THE LOT OF YOU!” “... get him to the Parish ...” “Don’t worry, don’t worry. He’s going to
make it.” “Oh, my goodness..” “Somebody help him!” “Oh, God ...”

A hot wave of emotion, or was it humour, consumed her; it began as a hot heat in her feet and shot its way to the top of her skull, petrifying her a moment. As the feeling coursed through her whole body in an instant passed, it incited her to act now, react later. She rushed past her many drafts of *Hamlet* on her bedroom floor, crushing one in her wake beneath her heel. She bolted down the stairs of the Eaton home and—

I can fix this.
I can fix this.
I am so sorry.
I can fix this.

“I can fix this!” Julia screamed. She had burst through the open doors of her family home, blinded for a moment by the sun preparing to set in the next hour or so. She squinted, trying to make out where everyone was, who was who. Who was he?

She was able to spot her mother’s hair in the crowd. She forced her way through, first making it around the gawkers to those trying to help on the ground.

“Mum! Dad! I am coming!” she screamed, trying to get their attention with all the commotion. She was having trouble pushing past what felt like a hundred people. It was as if the whole village had come to see what she had done. Whatever it was she had done. She was

getting nowhere. She dropped down to her knees, face to face with the feces and waste that permanently clung to the cobble. The smell of filth danced in her nostrils as she tried to crawl through the feet of the crowd. She pulled up her sleeve to mask the rancid stench of the city and its residents. *Thwack*—someone had accidentally knocked her right temple with the toe of their shoe in the madness. Julia fell face-first in what was most likely her own shite.

The smell of Lechlade was already one Julia would never forget. Yet, this experience overpowered everything before, filling and penetrating her senses. She had reached her mother's skirt. The woman's voice became the most audible. Sybil was doing her best to try and calm the woman holding Julia's victim.

"Thomas ... THOMAS ..." *"... It is fine, he will be just fine ..."* *"Stop ... Stop it ... Leave my husband alone. Leave him alone!"* *"Just let us take him to the Parish..."* *"... Thomas, please ..."*

"Please, we can help him." *"PLEASE stay with me ... my love ... my love ..."*

When Julia couldn't get any closer, she began to tug on her mother's dress to get her attention. "Mum! Mum!" she screamed, muffled under her sleeve.

"Julia, what on earth?" Sybil saw her daughter, covered in waste, a swell on the side of her head starting to form. *How is it when something happens, it's always to do with my Julia,* Sybil thought. A man was dying, and it was by her daughter's hand. Somehow not the toughest situation the Eatons had been in, like when plague had hit Lechlade, but by far the strangest. *Whatever is about to happen, I am ready,* thought Sybil. *Whatever is about to be, I can fix,* she thought.

“I can fix this!” Upon hearing her daughter’s voice mirror her own sentiments, Sybil realized she had lost her track of time for a bit. She was so lost in thought a second felt like a minute, yet passed just the same. She came to and saw her daughter’s eyes pleading with her to help. Sybil grabbed her daughter’s wrist and hoisted her up and through the rest of the crowd by her side, holding Julia in her arms for another second that lasted a minute as Julia saw the damage—saw the scene she had crafted special for *The Tragedy of This Poor Man*, written by Lechlade’s own Julia Eaton. Or maybe she would go by a pen name; she wasn’t sure yet.

Thomas Polton, later to be identified as an esteemed member of the King’s Men and a patron of lesser-known and struggling acting troupes, was lying among a circle of strangers. The poor man was choking on the fluid that spilled from his head, where Julia’s chamber pot struck him. He lay on his back, a dark magenta staining around his mouth, richened by the thick and deep red blood that gushed from his open head wound. The pot had hit him with such force that his skin had split open almost an inch wide. Julia could tell because the man’s skull had broken slightly, revealing a small, pink, fleshy, pulsing knot of brain caterpillars. The woman, later identified as Alice Polton, a former London prostitute who now owned her own “brothel,” a ruse that was really a women’s shelter where she secretly educated ex-courtesans, did her best to not curse her God to allow such sudden tragedy.

“I’ve been good. We’ve both been so good ... Why, Lord?” “Please let us take him to the Parish.” “Please do not take my Thomas ...” “She’s not listening ...” “I cannot live without my Thomas ...” “You can continue to pray for him and watch over him there ...” “Can you hear me, Thomas?” “Ma’am, we have to get him somewhere safer.” “Ma’am we have to take him ...” “NO ... Don’t you DARE touch him!!”

“Mom, I can fix this.” Julia desperately pleaded with her eyes for help, how to take responsibility and then make it all go away—make it all better, like nothing ever even happened at all. Sybil could sense her daughter’s uncertainty underneath her willingness to help. *Always so willing ... If only you could, my Jewel*, Sybil thought, *if only you could*. Sybil met her daughter’s gaze with sympathetic eyes. Eyes that Julia knew meant this situation went far beyond what her help could do.

*And for what?
All for a silly play?
A play nobody even cares about?
A play they will never understand.
A play to simply be ingested and then discarded?
Tossed out the window.
Just like now.
Destruction following.
No matter what you do.
No matter what you’ve done*

Julia could not contain her guilt. She heard a few people start to snicker at the situation’s absurdity. Kids, perhaps?

*Are they laughing?
How dare they?
Absolutely not.*

Alice heard the laughter and realized it was time to move, but she froze. Rocking back and forth, mouth agape and trembling, Alice looked at her maimed husband and dissolved into herself. Julia felt another wave of the strange, terrible heat shoot and retreat back inside. She sprang into action, stood to her feet, and began to shout. “Who is laughing? All of you?” The crowd began to quiet. “Come on. Who thinks it’s funny to laugh at a dying man? Huh?”

She had their attention now but didn’t know what to do next. She felt a firm hand on her shoulder and heard her father’s voice. “Go on now, you’ve seen what you’ve seen.” He started to

usher the crowd away. “Give the poor woman space. Let’s go on and get going about your days.”

The crowd began to disperse. Alice’s eyes softened as she looked up at Julia, grateful. Julia finally addressed her, minding her husband unconscious on her now-soiled petticoat, Thomas occasionally twitching and convulsing. Thank God he at least looks alive. He didn’t look *too* dead, but he didn’t look *too* good, either. Julia had to apologize. She lowered down to Alice’s side.

“Oh.. My... Thank you... I... I don’t know what I am doing... I am.. I just... He had wandered to the market... Next thing I know... I find him here... Oh heavens... My love... My...” Alice began in a fit of sobs, shuddering as her husband continued to bleed out.

Julia ripped the cleanest part of her own frock to attempt to dress Thomas’ wound. Surprisingly, Alice let her. Julia was whispering to Alice words of comfort and asking if she could handle Thomas’ head like she was. Alice would nod and sniffle in response. Sybil and Elias looked at each other incredulously.

Once Thomas had some semblance of a bandage, Julia looked Alice deep in the eyes. “Ma’am, I am so sorry. Please forgive me. I never meant to do anyone any harm. I was just distracted, and that is my fault, and I shouldn’t have been doing two things at once... but doesn’t everyone do something to keep them busy when they go? I just—I wasn’t paying attention, and I didn’t mean to do it. It was an accident. If we can just take him to the Parish, then they can look him over—”

“What?” Alice stiffened. “It was you?” Julia did not dare a movement.

“Yes, and I am so sorry, I cannot even begin to explain how sorry I am. That’s why I came to help, to see if there was anything I can do to make this better because—”

“*It was you?*” Alice snapped out of her shock and grabbed Julia by the hair, with incredible strength. “*You writhing cunt!*” Sybil ran to grab her daughter to try and wrestle her free from Alice. As Elias and others intervened, some grabbing Thomas, keeping him as still as possible, the back of Thomas’s head hit the pavement. His wife’s hysteria had caused her to abandon him. That was the love of her life, Alice thought, he had saved her. Alice pleaded in her head for God to spare him. She would destroy anything that tried to keep her Thomas from her. Even if that meant she had to destroy this girl.

Julia screamed as she tried to free herself from Alice’s hands. Sybil started shouting calls for peace, trying to diffuse the situation. Elias snagged a flailing and wild Alice by the back of her waist, pulling her off his daughter while Sybil tried to manage Alice’s hands. Finally untangling them, Sybil pulled Julia close, holding her head to her chest. *Feel my heart little one,* she thought, *know I am here with you.* She tried to will her daughter to read her mind.

“*How could you?*” Alice screamed at her as Elias dragged her away with the men who came to transport Thomas to the Parish. “*You killed him. How could you?*”

Alice’s sobs echoed in Julia’s mind as she maintained eye contact on the blood and brain particles where Thomas once lay. Where she committed murder. Someone said he was still breathing, right? Although Alice got further and further away Julia, hair matted and covered in piss, blood, and her own waste, began to tremble from within. The heat was no longer able to be contained, and her diaphragm began to spasm until she couldn’t catch her breath. Sybil was ready and knew this might happen. She held her daughter, as she often did during her bouts of hysteria. *Let it out, sweet one,* she thought, *I will not let go.*

Julia's breathing became more shallow, and she shook, unable to take a complete breath. Her mother held tighter when she started to shudder, whispering to her to "breathe as best you can, and it will be over soon."

"Mom, I'm dying. I'm finally dying," Julia would always say when they happened. In those moments Sybil knew to hold tight and lift, as, eventually, her legs would give out. By this time Julia was in a fit of sorrow. She cried so hard she gagged until she threw up stomach acid. Something to hopefully destroy the evidence of her crime.

When her legs would give out, Elias was usually there to scoop her up into his arms and carry her to her room. Sybil waited until Elias came back, as he was ready to play his part in his daughter's tragedy, carrying her back to where she was safe. Sybil instructed him to place her in her room and brush out her hair so Sybil could draw her a bath. She would then take over to bathe, dress, and tuck her in bed. Once Julia's emotion would pass, she would need rest. *Oh, and a lot of bread*, Sybil thought.

"He's dead..." she mumbled in her father's arms as she wrapped her own around his neck. "I killed him."

"Easy, Jules..." he whispered to her. "It'll be alright."

"I really think I am dying this time, Dad. Please just let me go. Please just let it take me, too ..." Her eyes drenched his shirt at the shoulder.

"You're alright. You're going to be alright." *I really hope you're going to be ok*, he thought. Alice's voice replayed over and over in Julia's head.

*"Writhing cunt."
"You killed him."
"How could you?"
You're a murderer.
You killed him.
You killed him.*

You killed him.



“Aghh, shite,” Julia mumbled at the clanging of what was clearly the sound of the kettle. Sybil tried to react as fast as she could to the kettle before it could wake Julia.

However, if its scream didn’t wake Julia, the sound of her mother hurling it toward the adjacent wall when she realized she had snatched it bare-handed surely did.

*Is it morning?
No, it’s still dark.
How long has it been?
Is he dead yet?
Am I dead yet?*

Julia pushed herself up with her forearm and sat at the edge of her bed. Her hair was dull and matted from her pillow. Had she even moved at all in the night? Wait, it had definitely been longer than a night. She felt weak.

She truly didn’t know how long it had been.

She had woken up a few times here and there—the sound of the busy street in the afternoon, the beggars who came for dinner with nary a pence. She thought she heard Mrs. Filgram try to pay with a stray cat?

*Or a stray cat was chasing a chicken?
Or the chicken was chasing the cat?
Or was that a dream?
Is this all just a dream?*

The growl in Julia’s stomach said otherwise. She wanted nothing more than to just wither away in her sleep. She could not stop thinking about it. All the blood, all the screaming, the way that woman attacked her when Julia was only trying to help, only trying to take accountability for her actions. That was the right thing to do. She did what was right.

Right?

Julia had been in a deep state of melancholy since it was her chamber pot she had let fall from her grip that whacked that poor man's head so hard; she could see his skull. She was definitely never going to live down *Poo-lia*. Not after this.

Along with the deep gurgling in her stomach, her head was pounding. Her tongue felt thick and dense, like there was cotton in it. She attempted to lift herself to her feet.

*Where are you going?
Stay here; there's nothing but all that out there.
Please don't get up.
If you just stay here, everything will be well.
Close your eyes.
Go back to sleep.
Let it all melt away again.*

Julia felt the pain leave her head and rush through her whole body. The scenes in her head of that woman who was cradling her husband's head in a panic swirled in her thoughts in a bubbling cauldron of poison.

The thoughts pulled at her, weighing her down, making every step toward her escape from them harder than the last. She felt panic creep up in her chest as she reached for the door. She finally took hold of its handle.

*No, please no.
You can't go out there yet.
It's too soon.
Please... don't...*

She fought the shadows that clung to her by the floorboards of her room. A hot intensity filled her lungs as she choked back tears in her throat, fighting them at their threshold. She used every ounce of strength she had left to move the door forward. Just a little bit... she only needed to move it just—*thmmmp*. There was a soft thud.

Something was in the way. Julia knelt down to investigate and found some bread and port wine. Julia remembered now hearing Sybil's soft knock on her door. Probably offering words of encouragement, and she must have left something for her had Julia decided she was hungry during her emotional spell. Julia managed a smile and began to smell the stew and fresh bread that was downstairs. Her stomach's desires began to dull those of her thoughts. She gulped back the wine in one drink. The bread was stale from being left out for over a day and a half.

*It's been longer than you think.
You did it again...
Let me go.
Let me out.
It will be good for you.*

Julia took another step out her room and bravely made her way downstairs despite her melancholy attempting to anchor her brain to her bed. As she slowly made her way downstairs, she could hear the end of Sybil's dinner rush growing louder. She could smell the evening's stew, her stomach growing in its vocal pitch, as well.

"Oh, honey..." Sybil was so happy to see her daughter. *This time was a lot shorter than last time, was it not?* Sybil thought. Sybil walked around the lingerers finishing their dinners. Mrs. Filgram had her roll and nodded to greet Julia. "I saved you a portion of stew, my dear," Sybil said, offering Julia a bowl as she sat at the table. Julia felt the steam of the soup hot from the fire dance across her face, breathing new life into her. She was ravenous.

Sybil smiled as her daughter seemed to be returning back to normal when Stan, a beggar who was often unaware of his bluntness, knocked at the Eaton's door. "Hello, hello? Eaton family?" Stan awaited permission to enter, as a proper lad did. "I have come for the gracious meal Sybil offers to us in need."

“Come on in, Stan. Good to have you—get on in.” She gestured him inside. He was beaming from ear to ear.

“Many thanks to you, Sybil.” Such a kind heart, Sybil thought. She was happy to see him nightly. Stan sat down in front of his serving and prayed the sign of the cross over his food—something the ruling Protestants did not take kindly to. Those caught practicing could well be killed as punishment.

The others looked to Sybil, who gently came behind him, moving his hands down before he could finish. “Remember, Stan, that is something you can no longer do, yes? It would break my heart for something to happen to you.” Stan smiled and nodded. Julia liked when Stan came around. He was kind and didn’t know better a lot of the time. He was a bit slower than the rest—nobody knew why—so they pretended he didn’t exist. That is why Julia had been teaching him how to read, as her mother did for her. Stan had a good memory. Sometimes, Julia caught herself envying him.

*If only.
To live a life of ignorance.
Beautiful ignorance.*

She cursed herself for thinking such terrible things. Although she yearned for such comfortable indifference, she felt sorry for him in a way that made her stomach turn like nothing else.

Stan began to slurp his soup. “I was just praying for that man today who got hurt, Mrs. Sybil. He is in bad shape.” *Oh no, don’t you dare*, Sybil thought. She had managed to avoid all talk of the incident this evening, and now was not the time. Julia’s stomach burned with pity but now also confusion, and the dark thoughts she had suppressed from her brain threatened to rise

in her throat. She felt tears well up in her eyes. Her stew no longer tasted like anything. It just sat in the back of her throat with her melancholy.

“Oh, no. No, no. That is all simply rumor and gossip from the town. You know how they can be, Julia. That man is going to make a full recovery and be right back home tomorrow, yes.” Sybil expertly diverted the subject, hoping Stan would let it rest and not upset Julia further.

“Did you see what happened, Julia?” Stan asked her directly.

“Not everybody was there, sheesh. Whole town is acting like it was a play and the whole town present. There are some who still have yet to hear I would bet,” Mrs. Filgram stepped in to aid Sybil.

“But there was no play. Remember?” Stan continued. “That man was one of Shakespeare’s men.”

Julia choked on a root vegetable.

*Cruel and vile malevolence.
Wicked world of mine own.
Why do you jeer at me so?*

“Oh, yes, indeed. The man was Toe-mas. Is that right, Jules? How to say it? I read it out in the village today. Everyone was talking about how Toe-mas was with Shakespeare.”

“No, no. Shakespeare wasn’t here today, Stan.” Julia couldn’t believe it.

The poor, poor, confused man.

“Not Shakespeare, Toe-mas. Toe-mas knows Shakespepare.”

“Stan, I think you are mistaken—” Julia tried to correct him once again.

“Oh, no, I heard it. I heard he was not traveling with him, but he was supposed to be traveling back to him. Or rather, not anymore, for he is to die.” Stan seemed proud of all he could recount from the incident.

*You poor, poor confused girl.
No worse off than that dying man.
Shakespeare's dying man.*

“London? He was from London? And I think you mean Thomas, Stan,” Julia responded.

“Thomas, yes! Thomas Pol- Poloton? Plo- Ploto-“

“Polton,” Mrs. Filgram finished for him. Sybil shot her a look, to which Filgram shrugged some semblance of a “sorry.”

“Thank you kindly, Mrs. Filgram.” Stan had a *really* good memory.

“Mum?” Julia turned to her mother. “Surely that’s not true. Is that what you have heard, also?”

“I haven’t heard much. I mean you know that I am here all day, working, cooking... I am sure I would remember something like that...” She refused to look her daughter in the eyes.

“Do not act like I am a child, Mother. Is he going to be alright, or is he going to die? Julia begged, confronting her. Sybil turned around with a face full of sorrow. *Please, God help me,* Sybil prayed. “I am so sorry, Julia...” Her mother validated Stan’s recounts without needing words.

“He is most certainly going to die. And some are saying he is Shakespeare’s good friend,” Stan added. Sybil put her hands over her face and sighed. *It was only a matter of time until Julia was going to have found out, anyway,* she told herself.

Julia was frozen. She was stuck. She heard them all again, everyone in Lechlade:

“Please, we can help him.” “PLEASE stay with me ... my love ... my love ...” “Ma’am, we have to take him ...” “NO ... Don’t you DARE touch him!”

Julia's head began to pound just as it did when she was staring from her window at what she had done—at the man who was going to die because of her.

*And he knew Shakespeare?
That can simply not be.
Sounds about right, though.
Does it not?
You killing Shakespeare's best friend?
You should get out.
I have to get out.
Let me out.
Let me out of my head.
Let me out of this curse of an existence.*

No longer could Julia take it. The sounds of people screaming and that woman crying and those other people laughing. Laughing. Of all things. She rose to her feet and shot past Stan, her mother, and Mrs. Filgram.

“Jules, please—” Sybil started.

“Bye, Julia!” Stan shouted at her as she flew out the door and headed to the dock to clear her head.

Her breath began to feel stuck in her chest again, but this time it stayed there. It felt like she had just run to the docks and back as she pushed past the men lingering outside the Red Lion.

“Watch where you're going.” “Ah, pretty little thing!”

“What's got you so melancholy?” “Oi, that the Eaton girl?” “Let us get you a strong ale, eh?”

“I remember my first time killing a man.”

Julia kept moving, giving them none of her attention. She began to hyperventilate on her mission to get to the docks.

Breathe.
Breathe.
Fuck.
Breathe.
That's it, break down.
Just like you always do.

When she was happy and good, life was so vibrant. Everything tasted better. A cool breeze wouldn't give her an unwanted chill, but graze her neck, calling her hairs to stand at attention, reminding her she was alive and could feel. It's just when she then felt melancholy that she felt like a puddle. Every form of light and life in her would drain out and melt at her feet. It would taunt her and dance around her fingers as she tried to pick it up, soak it back in, something, anything to help her feel more than just empty or melancholy. Sometimes she felt everything. Some other times she strangely felt nothing at all. She hated how much her episodes reminded her of her horrible Grandfather Edmund.

So hateful.
So sad.
So angry at the world.
Full of spite.
So broken.
His blood is your blood, too.

Finally making it to the dock, quite barren now for it was getting late in the evening, she sat at the edge of the dock and dipped her toes in. On days like this she spent most of the day either crying or sleeping. By the end of those days, her eyes would be swollen, and although she might start to feel again, it would come in the form of a dull ache between her eyes that made her sick to her stomach. It felt as if her head was simply floating, merely attached to her body by a string. The body was active and in motion, but the brain had no relationship with it.

Right now, she just felt stuck. It was all she could do to distract herself from the perpetual playback of what happened. She continued to try and catch her breath. Her stomach was internally trembling. If she could just sit here for a bit, she could get her head right and then—

“I thought I would find you here.” Startled, Julia heard Martin approach her. She once found comfort when he would say things like this.

“Leave me the fuck alone.”

“Whoa, hey... that’s no way to talk to a friend who brings you a gift,” he taunted her.

There’s my girl, Martin Dolby thought.

“So, we are friends, then? Is that why you’ve been ignoring me?”

“I just thought you’d want some company after yesterday.”

*That is very kind.
You are too hard on him.
He’s doing his best.
Just like you are.
Just like we all are*

“Come to call me Poo-lia, did you?” She refused to make eye contact. *That mouth of hers I could do without, but her form I crave*, Dolby thought to himself. *Speak your poetry to me, I implore of you*, he begged in his mind. *Just do not let her see you vulnerable again*, he warned himself.

“I thought about it, but then you might punch me in the face again.” Martin alluded to the time four years ago when he told Julia he loved her and wanted to be with only her, that was until she found him with his hand up Emma Culpepper’s skirt, the two hidden behind Free Wharf.

“I told you I was sorry about that.”

“I told you I deserved it.” It had been a while since they had spoken to each other. Julia remained silent, eyes transfixed on the water. Not really focused on anything, just floating. “I think you’ll like what I brought.” Julia looked up at him to eye the pipe he had presented her as a peace offering to avoid a difficult conversation, if she knew Martin. Regardless, its sweet but sharp smell was the first ounce of comfort she had felt since the happening.

Where you killed a man.

Say what she wanted about Martin, he was always dependable in at least this way. Julia gestured him to sit next to her. He smiled his smile that revealed there could be a truly caring and genuine person under there. Often, he would reveal to her his true self, to then run and hide for fear of being seen, only to restore the wall he put up to prevent himself from ever becoming a better person, preventing him from ever becoming someone better than his father. She took a deep breath and allowed herself to relax a bit. The rest of Lechlade knew Martin as a rebellious, impulsive drunk, but Julia knew him as a close confidant, protector, and friend. Eventually, in a strange way, he became her lover, and the more she learned about him when they were alone, the more she understood the things that made him the way he was, even if those things made him objectively foul. He lit the pipe filled with green and Julia felt a soft wave of nostalgia caress her emotions, taking care of her existential wounds. Martin passed it to her, and she inhaled its sweet smoke.

“Do you think he’s going to die?” Martin asked her.

“Is that what you came for, then? To find out what happened? Can we just talk about something else please,” Julia begged with her eyes for the conversation to end and that she were alone again.

“Fine, fine... it is just... I don’t know.” *Why was she always like this,* Dolby thought, *so*

confrontational and just... difficult.

“Don’t know what? Why you came here?” Julia continued to interrogate Martin. She didn’t fully trust him after he ignored her for months after she assaulted his face.

“No, no. I just thought we could be a comfort to each other after what happened. I mean, the whole town just watched a man get maimed by a chamber pot, Jules.” He spoke as if they had only seen each other the day before and not for over half a year.

“What would comfort me is to be alone. Thank you, but I am fine.” She handed him back his now-corrupted gift.

“Jules, no, you’re not.” He put an arm around her and whispered in her ear, strategically placing his lips gently below her earlobe. “Neither of us are.”

“Surely, thank you for the comfort, but I need not comforting from you further.”

“Come on, Jules. We used to do this all the time. You used to like it.”

Julia was reminded a lot of that time, every day seeing his face at the docks from afar, feeling ashamed a part of her fell for him at one point in her past. Feeling disgusted with herself for the things she had shared with him, willingly, even. “I would venture to bargain you still might like it.”

She wanted it to stop, but she was tired of fighting. She didn’t have it in her anymore to keep fighting—to keep trying to control things. Keep praying Martin Dolby would just cease to exist.

Better yet that I would just cease to exist.

His lips continued down her neck as her body betrayed her, giving into the familiarity of a better time. Martin looked at her like she was the sturgeon he’d been dying to catch all year. He stood up and offered her his hand.

“No. No thank you. I should just go home.” Julia rose to put on her shoes and felt a firm hand now on her arm.

“Come on, now. You want it just as badly as I do, or else you would pull away. I’ve missed you so much, Jules. It has been but too long... Come on.” Assuming she had agreed, he began to lead her away to the same corner she caught him with Emma.

“Martin.. Please... Not tonight?” She verbally resisted, but her body did nothing to object.

*You are just going to abandon him?
Hasn't a part of you missed him, too?
It felt just like before back there, didn't it?
At least just for a minute?*

She fell into him, half trying to shove him off her as politely as she could, so as not to make him upset. He smelled strongly of gin, ale, and piss as he pressed himself to her.

“Martin, stop...” Who was she kidding? Some part of her actually felt guilty if she were to deny him. A part of her she couldn’t explain.

*Martin Dolby.
Julia Dolby.
Ugh... no that is so awful.
So so so awful.
Get out of here, just shove him off.
Just like that chamber pot you dropped?
That killed that man?
You know that man?
That you killed?
Thomas, right?
Wasn't that his name?
And he was Shakespeare's best friend?
No, he IS. He will survive.
Won't he?
No way he is who they say he is...*

She had already re-entered her world of worries to distract her from where Martin Dolby was trying to take her, so much so that she almost didn't notice the stranger who came out of nowhere, whacking Dolby over the head with a loud *thud*—but not as loud as the *thud* a man full of narcissism and poison for blood made when he hit the dock, rendered unconscious. A young man Julia's age she remembered seeing earlier that day accompanying the merchant who needed a boat stood above him holding... was that... a Cumberland sausage..?

Good stars!

“Good stars!” She looked to her hero, and before she could think of anything else, she asked him, “do you think that man was really Shakespeare's best friend?”

“Sorry? Did you just say Shakespeare? Shakespeare's friend? That poor man?”

“Yes, and you are the boy from the market.”

“Man... from the market.” He became a bit defensive. “You are the girl with the chamber pot.” They both looked down at Martin Dolby. “What do you suggest we do with him?”

“Woman... with... the chamber pot.” She sighed, knowing her deed would be her permanent mark, doomed to define her.

*I have to leave this place.
I have to get out.*

”We could just leave him there. Not an uncommon state for him to be in. What is your name, then?” Julia asked the man.

“Simon Gibbs, are you... supposed to be alone here?”

“Stop playing knight. These docks are far more dangerous for you as an outsider. You'd be lucky his brother Marcus didn't follow you to rob.”

“Not the worst place I have traveled.”

Julia admired his optimism. Also, he knew what she had done and was treating her no differently. He wasn't coddling her or trying to protect her. Julia felt safe.

"Then you have yet to stay long enough. Does murder not quite turn your nose?" she tested him.

"I do not believe that to be your fault. Sometimes happenings just... happen. Maybe you were meant to disfigure that poor man." Simon chuckled at himself, catching himself so as not to upset Julia.

Julia chuckled back. "It is quite comical... Almost Shakespearean, in a way. Except everyone usually dies. Are you here to finally kill me, freeing me of this existence?"

"No, I am in dire need of a boat." Simon did nothing to acknowledge her dark joke. Martin Dolby twitched in his unconscious state at their feet. They looked upon him a moment to see what he would do.

"Where are you off to?" Julia questioned.

"Supposed to be London, but if we cannot procure a large enough vessel to rent, our goods will rot before and be worth pocket change in the city."

The city.

Julia ached for the city. Right now, she ached for anywhere else.

"What if I told you I had a boat bigger than Culpepper's?"

"You would be doing me a favor. I would be indebted to you." Yes. This was it. This was Julia's chance. Now was as good a time as any.

She is a very pretty girl, Simon thought. Maybe they could chat more when he returned from London.

"You just have to take me with you?"

“I do not know if my father—”

“No boat then. Pleasure to meet you.” Julia turned and made her way back up Thames Street.

“*Wait...!*” Simon hesitated. “Fine. You can... you can come with.” He had no choice. It was her offer, or they lose money. Barnaby Gibbs would have no choice but to be alright with it.

Julia smiled for the first time in days.

“Most excellent. Meet me back at Parkend at midnight with your coin, and we will take off.”

“Is your father coming? I know it is not *your* boat.”

*Play it indifferent.
Play it unmindful.
Play it disinterested..
You're going to London.
You are going to find Thomas.
You are going to fix this.*

“He... doesn't leave Lechlade. Personal reasons. I normally travel in his stead. All is well.” Julia tried her best to hide her grin. She had gone from despondent to hopeful in a matter of seconds. If she could just find the Poltons in London, she could offer some kind of help or assistance. Maybe even nurse him back to health? She had to at least try.

I have to get out.