

A Silent Thought (Matt Parker)

“Have you seen my sulphates, child?”

This was not a question, but a ritual—her father prompting her for the blood-brown tincture that was always stowed there, sitting in the black oak cabinet beside the copper inkwell.

“Your poison?” she corrected him, “Yes. I know where that is.” This was one of several items in the household that Hope would call a loud object. It’s stationary, but you always know it’s there.

“My medicine,” he smirked, completing the panto in the accepted manner. The sound of the Georgian fish fork hitting the china plate disgusted her in the same way that it always did. So many familiar surroundings had found ways to curl darkly around her, like unwanted suitors, announcing themselves and stomping like butchers into her sailing thoughts. “Did you eat the herring?” she asked, grabbing the oval bottle without looking at him and staring at the fireplace.

“Half of it. There was too much bread. Bitter vegetables, too”

She already knew what his plate would look like. A butterflied, disembodied kipper studiously placed in the middle of the plate to signal, *I’m done with this*. The scrapings of cabbage under the flayed, triangular head, with its two dead eyes often resembled a bleating frog peering up from a lily pad.

Had it not been for her brother, she would never have gotten through this. His counsel, albeit silent, always assured her that they were of the same mind. The same tyranny that shipped James off to the Transvaal now also restricted her own free movement. She was a servant, not a daughter. She and James, shepherded through damask hallways—privy only to conversations about coal futures in their cotton gowns--were merely sired offspring. Never children.

“...were it not for your Mother’s sense of proportion. Hello? Are you listening?”

Twenty-two years had slipped away, as if a swirling mist had put her in a somnambulant trance. The ivy spindling along the window, normally a dark, mullioned spider’s web that made her feel entombed, was today somehow ardent and alive. The fog was dissipating. *I never thought it possible* she murmured to herself as she rolled the oblong glass vessel like a paperweight in her palm. She clutched it like the old man’s heart.

“I’m right here. Your dosage is in the vial. Funny, how we cured your cough over a year ago now....”

“It’s for my melancholy.”

“Ooh. I should be wanting some then.”

Only yesterday, James had given her new reason to live. He showed her Father’s ruby-coloured ledger in the bookcase where, accounting aside, there would be ample rantings and ravings for the police to find. *What do you mean?* she asked him, almost asking herself at the same time, “What will they see?” *The shaky, erratic mind of an addict*. James smiled. He looked smart in his crimson tunic—the same he would have worn at the Battle of Majuba Hill—the pennies in his eyes were no longer a distraction. He was a loving ghost.

Diluting three scruples of the solution in the buttered cabbage was as innocuous as the walnut gryphon carving on Father's nightstand, and as unseen as a fleeting thought. Whatever concoction he chose to give himself after supper would be his own, inviolate design.

As she had hoped, James stood with him through the coughing, and eventually, the gasping. It was not unlike feelings she had felt at any time herself. She turned away, finishing the words—his words—in the ruby book: *I'm so sorry*

She looked through the window, past the ivy, toward the hedgerow atop the field's green end. *Hope. Forgive me.* James smiled. At this moment, nothing was cumbersome or loud. Nothing ornate existed. There were only bright colours, and straight lines.