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Injury against Erasure, Damage against Time

Two Stories about Love and Death

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to recognize truth: as he falls, her perfect skin blooms with a thousand bruises and wounds, and from this carnage flowers begin to grow. Soon she is entirely abloom, transfigured, a garden, a tree that some insist was there already, has always been there.

The path starts at this tree, but where does it end? Some say it ends at his grave. It crosses his gravesite, that much is certain, but others claim to have followed it further—to the cave, the ocean, the stars. There are also those who claim there is no path, no lovers, no marks. There are those who wish to tidy away these stories for which the only evidence is folktales, flowers, and blood. To this I have but one answer, the final secret: This is the only true thing, my love. My love is the only true thing.

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He looks up from his book. He knew she would arrive, the way she does in the story.

Our time is so short and I cannot save you. I can barely hope to escape with my own life, my own life without you, the life I have promised you I will not sacrifice. While you may desire tender embraces before our lovers' tragic end, I have promised you the truth, and the truth is that true love is written in blood (it is through blood—this is the second secret—that we may arrive at the deepest tenderness, the most exquisite tears, the cleansing fire).

As their lips, tongues, teeth touch, he pulls the wet tangles of her hair back, exposing her delicate throat, biting into the center like a plum, penetrating the most delicate, the strongest parts of her, destroying all that separates, even skin. (We are transported to a place where we bound together through the woods, senses heightened, you carrying me away from danger by the scruff of my neck, then rolling wrestling licking on the forest floor until our fur is matted, covered in briars and thorns, we release inside each other, the deepest soundest sleep.)

As I revel in your bites and blows, I ask that you mark me, consume me, so that I might live inside you and you inside me as you mount the scaffold in the ever-nearing sunrise. But though you tear more and more harshly into my flesh, the wounds seem to close, the excited capillaries settle, leaving only drops of blood resting against my unblemished skin.

This is when the tears come—not from the pain, not at the sight of blood, but with the knowledge that I cannot take you with me. Are you real, am I real, my dearest dream? Is this indeed only a story?

At dawn, as the crowd gathers, they notice a woman, her shoes and skirts muddy, her hair wild, but her skin radiant and pure and unmarked. As he walks to the gallows, she stands there like the hawthorn in spring (I am tied, I am rooted, you are gone, one, none, my nightmare, my angel). And this is what the people will tell their grandchildren, and all those who possess the innocence

displaying the contusions, flaunting them against the lethal world, injury against erasure, damage against time.

II.

Shall I write to you of love?

There is a trail of flowers that weaves through the city. You have not followed it from beginning to end, but you may have stopped to admire one of the many tendrils that together comprise the trail. Lilac rushes through a chasm in the brick wall. Honeysuckle climbs in spirals up a splintering pole. Lavender shoots through a sharp crack in the cobblestone. A graffitied violet rose transforms a rusting spiked gate. Year after year, the path is reborn, for there are always new crevices to fill, new (old) grounds for beauty to occupy, as the investors of today revitalize the past with concrete and plastic (and here is the first secret—these façades too will fall in time, but the path will remain).

I have heard many stories of the path's origin, but only this one is true (this is the only true thing).

Once upon a time, the night before his execution, she makes her way to the prison to see him. Her delicate slippers (my steel-toed boots) are muddied by the long walk through the torrential rain, her hair is wild, her skirts are torn. She skillfully picks the locks, evading the guards (or do I stab them, shoot them?) until she reaches the last, looming impenetrable door, buried in the deepest cellar, drugging the guard (with laughter, poison, a kiss), relieving the guard of the single bijou key. He is reading by candlelight.

She unlocks (I unlock) the cage that holds him (the cage that holds you), the last enclosure (I am excited by cages myself, but only when you hold the key, my darling). She goes in to see him.

For Valentine's Day 2019, we offer two retellings of a classic story—the tale of the lovers who secure a single night together before one of them is to be executed. The one who is to go free urges her partner to leave marks on her body by which she might remember him, yet try as they might, she comes away bare.

I.

Lying beside him in the guest bedroom at his mother's house on the night he was released from custody, she remembered the first time they had undressed together, many summers before. She had been trying to teach him how to give her a hickey. Those had been wild years for her, free years, before everyone had terrorism charges.

That first innocent morning, when he lifted her shirt, the clefts where M— had raked his nails still marked the small of her back like the f-holes of a violin. A great crushed plum on the left side of her chest testified to R—'s vigor and carelessness. But she could hardly bring him to so much as nip her.

"You can't just touch your teeth to my skin," she had protested, finally, after a pleasant but fruitless hour. "You have to bite down."

"Like this?"

"Yes, that's... better, but you also have to suck on the skin—and sort of move your teeth around, break up the capillaries."

He complied, tentative as a fawn. "Doesn't that hurt?"

"No—I mean yes, it hurts, but my idea of a good time is somebody scraping a brillo pad all over my body."

"A brillo pad? Is that something you've done?"

“No, silly,” she giggled, rolling her eyes up to reconsider, “—or yes, once, but it was electrified.”

“Electrified?” He shuddered.

She teased him about that for years afterwards. He never did manage to give her a hickey.

So there they lay, on the night he was released, entwined and reminiscing. The tracking device on his leg scuffed her ankle every time one of them moved.

“There’s no way to take this off?”

“My lawyer’s appealing it. But you might have to put up with it until trial. I’m sorry, honey.”

“Oh, *I’m* sorry, my darling!”

“When all this is finished, we’ll go back to the park by your old place, where we first hooked up outdoors.”

“And we’ll do it again on that bench! Even though they have security guards now.”

“Then we’ll go back to the old library...”

“Where I went down on you in the stairwell! Now that it’s shut down, we can break in and do it on the ground floor.”

“And we could go to the beach...”

“And I’ll ride you in the surf! The Coast Guard will crash their helicopters in envy.”

It all felt like a lark, a dramatic backdrop for their love. Why would the court have released him to house arrest if they really considered him dangerous? And yet when they made love again that night, she felt the transience of the moment, as if this meeting of their bodies were simply a sketch in pencil that could be erased, washed away in the torrent of days.

“Mark me, my darling,” she urged him, pulling his mouth to her throat, to her shoulders, to her chest. “Mark me.” He sank his teeth into her, as fearless as he had once been timid, seizing and shaking her flesh around in his teeth like a wolf with its kill. “Harder,” she entreated him, arching her back, offering herself, demanding proof, permanence.

Yet in the morning, when they woke to the sound of the police van pulling into the driveway, her body was bare, as bare as if she had slept alone.

A year later, standing before the gates of the prison in a black veil, she still couldn’t bring herself to believe any of it was real. She felt a world away from the protesters holding up their little candles behind her, from his mother and father and younger brother—a world away from the prison, from her own body, from herself.

Midnight was approaching. Surely a call would come in from the governor, or the lawyers would force a stay, or the power would go out. Then this would be over, and the gate would open and he would step out into her arms and they would walk away from this place together, fingers entwined.

And then she knew that he had been executed—not from the messages arriving on her phone, not by the hush that descended upon the crowd, but because she could feel every place on her body that he had touched her come to life, electrified, from the nibbles of the first morning to the savagery of the final night. A thousand wounds breaking out all over her body, like flowers opening in the darkness.

She dropped her veil from her face and shoulders and stood there before everyone, purple bruises blossoming on her neck, the imprints of his teeth on her cheeks. She turned to the crowd, drawing their eyes, calm and cold and powerful. She raised her arms,