

## Reflection

By creating a fictional story I create a space for the women of Shakespeare to speak their mind—a safe space. Within their own plays they had no agency, they had no voice to be their own and be respected. Lucy wants to be that guiding hand for the women to gain closure and exposure. Writing this story was a sign of respect I have of women in domestic abusive relationships, knowing from experience first and second hand. I hope that I delivered on my promise.

## The Monster Within

*But jealous souls will not be answered so;*

*They are not ever jealous for the cause,*

*But jealous for they're jealous. It is a monster*

*Begot upon itself, born on itself...*

*(Othello, 2.1 157-60)*

Lucy finished Emilia's words, weighing "jealousy" on her tongue. She touched the bruised lip that painted her skin a deep purple. Then she ran her fingers along the trail of bruises leading to her stomach. Nothing like a hand-print beneath her skin or cognitive movement has made its mark, but still. She felt the weight.

She was pregnant with his baby. Their baby. *Her* baby.

Rubbing the stomach a few times, she looked up to the sky, revelling in the sun's warmth and yet not understanding the shivers that ran through her veins. She felt cold. She looked back down to her collection of Shakespeare's Complete Works and read Emilia's words once more. With every line she felt the tears well up in her eyes.

Her phone gave a ding. It was Brigid, reminding her of their dinner plans.

*Can't come until 7. Hang in there, Des. Love you, xo.*

It was 6.

“Des” was the nickname Brigid gave her when she first started dating Bruce. Lucy was always fond of Shakespeare’s stories, finding meaning and understanding of the world around her from them, but she felt putting her situation similar to Desdemona’s situation was a bit unfair. Lucy didn’t feel nearly as privileged. After a couple months of dating, Lucy began showing up to classes with bruises on her arms and legs. It was always little things that got Bruce riled up, like forgetting to text *I love you* or making sure he was okay. Bruce was just a person who needed extra attention, and Lucy never seemed good enough, although she tried. She ended up dropping out because Bruce said he made enough money for them to survive. What else could she do?

That never stopped Brigid though. Stayed Lucy’s one true confidant, through the last two years.

Lucy replied back: *Kk, see you then. Love you too, xo.*

Lucy smelled the air and found the stew she was making for Bruce’s dinner was almost ready. “A couple more minutes, I reckon.”

She began to stand up and walk toward the house when a glint of something shiny caught her eye. Something in the distance. Her house is surrounded by forest, so the thought of a car or something else was puzzling. She hesitated for a moment trying to grasp the glint once more. She caught it.

Making her way to the spot, book still in hand, she realized the object she was walking toward was a large mirror, and in front of the mirror, a battered girl.

Lucy rushed toward her. The girl's skin was scratched and bruised--blood stained the grass and her clothes. Lucy kept looking frantically at the girl and then the mirror.

"Hello? Hello, are you okay?" Lucy began to turn her over. "Oh my god! Brigid! Brigid what's wrong? What happened?"

Brigid slowly opened her eyes, then smiled when she saw Lucy. "Des." She reached out to touch Lucy's face. Lucy grabbed it with both hands, crying and sweating.

"Brig, how did this happen?"

"It was an animal..." she began to go in and out of consciousness.

Lucy shook her, "No! Stay with me! I need you to stay alive! What animal?"

"A...large...one..." Brigid chuckled then spit out blood. She looked toward the mirror. "In there...Take me in there."

"I don't understand. Do you want to see yourself?"

"Touch it. Go inside," at that Brigid closed her eyes.

Lucy became frantic, afraid her friend was dying. She quickly called 911 and waited, with Brigid cradled in her lap.

She looked at the mirror again, saw her friend's bloodied appearance reflected back. Then her own reflection. The bruises were so dark now. She went closer to it and reached out to touch the imposter that was her own face.

"I--" she began until upon contact with the mirror she and Brigid were transported to a doorless room, lined by portraits of women.

Lucy screamed and looked behind her to grab Brigid's hand. She heard laughing.

"What?" She felt the walls for a door. There was an increase in laughter, from more than one voice.

"What are you getting at, child? There is no door," a voice said to her. Lucy screamed.

"I must be going mad."

"Not mad. Enlightened," the voice was coming from one of the portraits. The title card wrote *Desdemona, Othello*. She looked toward another and found a similar, surprising, title card: *Ophelia, Hamlet*. The last: *Hermione, The Winter's Tale*. Her head was spinning.

"Don't faint, darling, we can't help you up," Desdemona's painting chuckles.

"Are you--?"

Desdemona turned to Ophelia, "Oh and I thought she could read." Ophelia covered her mouth and laughed silently. Lucy blushed and rubbed her stomach.

"Oh! Is it a wee babe?" Desdemona exclaimed. Lucy put her hands on her stomach protectively.

"Where am I?" Lucy demanded.

"Why, you are in a room. With us," Desdemona said confidently. Lucy looked down at her book. Desdemona's eyes lit up. "Is that our stories?"

Lucy took a closer look. She mumbled to herself, "I believe so. But why?"

Desdemona tsks at Lucy. "Really darling, how would we know. We've only just met."

Lucy was beside herself. She slumped to the floor and lifted Brigid's head to lay on her lap. She brushed stray strands into place.

"Aster," Ophelia said. "Aster and Lillies."

Desdemona nodded, "You're right. They are quite sweet on each other. Say, darling, what about the man?"

Lucy clenched the hand she was touching Brigid with in a fist. "What about him?"

"Is he no good?"

Lucy sighed. "Once upon a time. But now..." she trailed off and touched her belly. She began to cry silently.

"Hush, hush. Everything is alright. Maybe if you apologize--" Desdemona began.

Lucy snapped her head, "Apologize? Apologize for what?"

"Well, your lip and eye. They seem mighty swollen. Something must have happened."

Ophelia nodded at Desdemona's words, as did Hermione.

"Nothing happened. He happened! Why is it my fault?"

"My Emilia tried to explain jealousy to me once. 'But jealous souls will not be answered so...It is a monster / begot upon itself, born on itself' (*Othello*, 2.1 157-60). The irrationality of jealousy has plagued our lives ever more (Garner)," Desdemona looked at the other girls, "We are forever marked by it."

"Your deaths," Lucy whispered. They all nodded their heads in unison. Lucy looked back at Brigid and sighed. "Your deaths were not your fault," she started, "It was your husbands. Jealous men that determine their male identity by a fear of female sexuality" (Howe).

"I do not follow. Why would they fear us, when we cause them to worry?" Desdemona asked.

"Why is it that they worry? What did you do to deserve their punishment? I've read through all of your stories, and not once did I feel a moment of your behaviors deserving

punishment. Desdemona you were part of a trap by Iago because of his own jealousy. Ophelia, you died tormented in the mind by a man who played with your feelings, many men, because he projected his mommy issues onto you and all women. And Hermione. Did you not die because of your husband's lack of control over your actions (Wolfe)?"

Not a word was said. All women looked away. Lucy turned to Desdemona. "Your play was named after your husband, Othello. But was it his tragedy or yours?"

"We both died."

"That is certain, but why? The basis of the play was maneuvered on the questions of your fidelity toward Othello." Desdemona nods hesitantly. "Then why is it we honor his name over yours? Are you just a plot device? An object to be seen and used? Shakespeare creates this 'culturally mandated belief' that the husbands that have killed their wives over an infidelity charge, real or not, and so 'deserve 'our' and the law's mitigating compassion' (Howe)."

"O heavy ignorance! Thou praisest the worst best. But what praise couldst thou bestow on a deserving woman indeed, one that in the authority of her merit did justly put on the vouch of very malice itself" Desdemona cries out (*Othello*, 2.1 142-146).

"Why do you use the speech that you fought Iago with?"

"My Othello, my love! I tried to keep the monster from his mind (*Othello*, 3.4 151)! Try as I might I was unfit for his love." Desdemona cries.

"Stop it! You idealized him as he romanticized you (Garner). You are both to blame for your innocence and quick love, but don't put yourself down. Do you know what an incredulous, and brave, thing you did? Although I wish we did not call interracial marriage brave. Marrying a black man during that time—isolating you 'from your father and countrymen' (Garner)? It is

you—not Othello—that initiate the courtship and you were the one with the most to lose (Garner). You are neither goddess nor slut, Lady Desdemona (Garner). You’re human and he’s human with faults of your own, but that doesn’t excuse your murder. Shakespeare just used your story to express how his time sought to discipline women as both the cause and cure (Traub). Lady Desdemona, you ventured too far ‘beyond the bounds that the patriarchy dictates’ and that was enough guilt for the men (Traub).”

“What does that mean? You contradict yourself by telling me I am the cause and yet I was helpless to do anything about it.”

“Yes, because you had no control over what you got to decide for yourself. You are a strong character, Lady Desdemona. Did you not fight to stay by his side when he was to leave for Cyprus (*Othello*, 2.1 250-252)? And yet that was not enough because you crumble under your fear of him not being what you thought he was (Garner). He—equating your sexuality with a storm, which is violent and chaotic, makes him fearful because he can not control it (*Othello*, 2.1 184-185) (Garner). By dying he regains his power over you (Traub).”

Desdemona said nothing to this.

Ophelia was weeping. “Why do you cry, Lady Ophelia?” Lucy said tenderly, touching her frame.

“She has no sane words to speak. Her brain has rotted, by the grace of God,” Desdemona explained.

“I want...I need to...” Ophelia continued her sobs. “to explain.” Lucy touched her frame again. “I shall obey, my lord, I shall obey, my lord, I shall obey, my lord, my lord, my lord, my lord (*Hamlet*, 3.1 137)!” Ophelia puts her face in the palm of her hands.

“You’re not insane, Lady Ophelia. You just ‘lost those who created you and have become undone’ (Ronk). Polonius, used you as a pawn for his advancement in court, creating diversions to distract the son and gain information at the same time (*Hamlet*, 3.1 43-46). Laertes, your brother, treated your body like that of the Virgin Mary, and just the thought of your sexuality crippled his psyche—” Lucy picked up her book and recited:

“Fear it, Ophelia. Fear it, my dear sister, and keep you in the rear of your affection, out of the shot and danger of desire. The chariest maid is prodigal enough if she unmask her beauty to the moon. Virtue itself ‘scapes not calumnious strokes. The canker galls the infants of the spring too oft before their buttons be—(*Hamlet*, 3.1 33-40)”

“Stop!” Ophelia yelled.

Lucy continued, “And in morn and liquid dew of youth, Contagious bastments are most imminent. Be wary, then. Best safety lies in fear. Youth to itself rebels, though none else near (*Hamlet*, 3.1 41-44).”

“Dear Brother, stop!” Ophelia screeched. “I was wrong! I was wrong and now your death is on me.”

Lucy touched her frame. “No, Lady Ophelia. His death is not yours. Your death is his. And your father’s. And Hamlet’s.”

“My lord! How I failed him. I must be as mad as everyone says, if I can incite such hatred from him.”

“Your ‘madness’ is nothing but a representation of a ‘convntional mad woman deriving directly from patriarchal law’ (Ronk). Think of it this way, Lady Ophelia. Your voice, that had



been stifled for years by the men you loved, gained expression through your flowers and your songs. You raise questions ‘of the ways by which we know things and of the confusion that may result from using different approaches or different sorts of language’ (Ronk). You questioned and judged everyones character by your own volition, whether or not you went ‘mad’ (Ronk).”

“Let me die again, if all that I am is a pawn.”

“And isn’t that one of the reasons you did die?”

“I cannot say. It all happened so fast. Did not anyone see?”

“Gertrude did (*Hamlet*, 4.7 166-83). She depicted your ‘scene’ with much detail (*Hamlet*, 4.7 174-83). She acted as if you were ‘incapable of your own distress’ (Ronk). And yet she watched, incapable as she was to control her fate as well.”

“Could it not be also that of her own dress?”

Lucy looked away, disgusted. “Maybe.” This is when she spotted Hermione. “You’ve said little.” Hermione only stared back. “How do you feel about your husband, Leontes? Are you happy with him at the end?”

Hermione smiled. “It is but...a winter’s tale.”

“Thou art cold as a statue, Lady Hermione.” Hermione smiles, impersonal and not all together there. “Leontes did a number on you as well.”

“But I live.”

“By whose retribution?”

“There was no punishment. I lived, again.”

“He had barren speculations, Lady Hermione (Taylor). You were but talking about Leontes when Polixenes and yourself engaged in conversation, but Leontes allowed his idea of

your sexuality cripple him with fear (Taylor). But that conversation does lead the way for the question of whether Shakespeare's society thought of women. Polixenes stakes blame on women as the loss of Leontes and his boyhood innocence (Taylor)."

"You speak a language that I understand not. My life stands in the level of your dreams, which I'll lay down (*The Winter's Tale*, 3.2, 79-81)."

"Lady Hermione, I don't plan to use you for any gains. I simply mean to understand you and your kin." Hermione looks at Lucy sweetly, but it does not reach her eyes. "Leontes 'tyrannous grasp on you existentially implicated you' (Wolfe). As his wife, you are not a 'fully autonomous being, but partly dependent for her own identity on his acknowledgement or withdrawal' (Wolfe). When he tells you," Lucy opens to the page, "'tis very credent. Thou mayst co-join with something, and thou dost, and that beyond commision' (*The Winter's Tale*, 1.2, 141-43), he is banishing his doubt about your truths by declaring 'false authority that she has transgressed her commission, or behaved contrary to his intention and his law' (Wolfe). Lady Hermione. You said you lived, but I ask again—by whose punishment? You are reunited with Leontes, 'but the anxieties that incited him to impose stasis upon you are still immanent and inherent in your relationship' (Traub)."

Lucy backs up to face all of them. "Each of your stories retrace the other's sexual anxiety (Traub). Each of your deaths bring your male counterparts 'psychic calm' and that by dying you are giving a sacrifice to that calm (Traub). You all needed to stay the perfect feminine ideal, which is the notion that Shakespeare demonstrates with violence against you and obscures the 'deeper patterns of conflict in which women as lovers and mothers are perceived as radically untrustworthy (Traub). Women are threats to the male identity. Your agency, unrelated to

themselves, make them fear your loss if control is not established.” Lucy looked toward Brigid sleeping on the floor, covered in bruises and blood. She knelt next to her and kissed her temple, then grabbed her hand. “Brigid means the world to me. If she was hurt—“

“Like the way you are?” Desdemona questioned.

Lucy allowed a tear to escape. “Yes.” Her voice was quiet. She looked toward the women. “With each reading of your stories I have had this aching that nags at my insides. I thought it was the baby, but I now see it was the refusal to mirror my own relationship, because if I did would I die? Would I leave my baby in a world of scorn and hurt? I don’t want him to have my baby. I don’t want him to own me or it.”

Brigid awoke and cupped Lucy’s face, forcing her to look at her. “Do you know what hurt me? Do you see the monster?”

Lucy nods, “The monster is him. He is also the victim, for the system tells him it’s okay to possess and own another human being, specifically his woman. I allow him to beat me because I see no alternative.” She kisses Brigid’s hand. “But why did it have to be you?” Her voice was barely a whisper as she choked back the sob in her throat.

“Because you love me, Des. And I love you.” Lucy nodded.

“Well if you knew all this, darling? Why are you still standing here? Wake up!”  
Desdemona exclaimed.

Lucy woke with a shock. She was still under the tree she had read under hours ago. Her book laid across her stomach. She picked it up and the page opened was still on Emilia’s words. Then she remembered Brigid. “Brigid! Brigid where—” A dead bird lay beside her.

Lucy gathered it between her hands and smoothed out its feathers. She began to wept. Then there was a slam of a car door. Lucy's heart dropped.

With bird still in hand she rushes to the back door leading to the kitchen. Bruce was already there, turning off the stove top. The stew had billowed over a tad, creating a small mess at the base of the pot and burner.

She shut the door behind her, quietly. She cleared her throat. "Hello, Bruce."

"What happened?" Quick to the point as per usual and back still turned toward her. She clutched the bird in her hand a little tighter.

"I...I was making you dinner." Silence. "I accidentally fell asleep reading outside."

He finally looked toward her and stalked forward. He smacked her across the face. "Bruce please, don't. It was an accident." Another smack.

"You could have burned the house down."

Lucy rubbed her face. Her already bruised face. She clutched the bird and made her way toward the stew. She tasted it. "It's still good. I just need to clean up the stove and then everything will be fine for your dinner."

He was behind her. "Your dinner? Why didn't you say ours?" He had his hands around her neck, first a soft caress and then a tight tug. "Are you not dining here tonight?" he kisses the back of her neck.

Lucy felt the shivers again, much like when she touched her stomach and thought of her baby in his hands. His hands that bruise.

She put the bird into her pocket.

“I—I told you Bruce. I’m eating dinner with Brigid tonight,” tighter grasp. “Bruce please.” She touched his hands. Even tighter.

“No.”

“What?” Lucy managed to get out, trying to regulate her breathing.

“I don’t like her. She looks at you with the eyes of a man.”

“That’s...” Tighter. The sound of a car horn could be heard outside. *Brigid. Help me!*

He screamed and grabbed her stomach, keeping her body close to his, “You can’t leave me, Lucy. I need you. I saw it—before I left. Your test. I’m so--”

Lucy screamed and jabbed Bruce in the eye with the spoon. “You can’t have it! The baby’s mine!”

Bruce screamed and grabbed for Lucy’s person, like a predator about to pounce. She maneuvered out of his way and grasped the handles of the pot. When he got close she strikes him with the hot pot and the contents pour out on his skin, burning him. His screams were murderous. “You fucking bitch! I’ll kill you!”

Distracted by the burning, Lucy runs toward the front door and into Brigid’s car. “Drive!”

After they were far enough from the town, Lucy looked at the dead bird in her hands. When she opened them the bird sprung to life, zipping through the air above and flying off toward the sky. Lucy smiled and laughed.

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