

. . . *The truth is, she and I—long since contracted—Are now so sure that nothing can dissolve us . . .*

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* by William Shakespeare

I saw myself, a girl-child of eleven, racing along the road astride a bone-white stallion. My quarry was a small boy, nearly eight, running just ahead. I was summoning him with Shakespeare's words. *A fox when one has caught her and such a daughter will sure to the slaughter!*

I reached down and grabbed a shock of his thick, black hair.

"*So the fool follows after,*" he said, vaulting on the horse's back, holding tight to my waist.

"Where now, Asia?"

"You'll see." The earth-baked odor of horse sweat and the little boy at my back was a perfection of the senses. I gripped the stallion's flanks between my thighs. No sidesaddle frippery for me. I rode astride my steed as though I was a man.

We leapt a tall fence, swerving through a spill of lilac bushes toward the mossy rocks behind the springhouse. In the cool shadows, I took a bottle of India ink and a sharp quill from my overalls. I began my task.

"You're hurting me, Asia!"

"Not for long, Johnny, hush." I gripped his hand and pressed it flat. Tiny tears like dragonfly eggs came to his huge, black eyes. "Almost, almost . . . there." I placed his

small hand against my larger one. I plunged the stylus into the ink, pressing the point into my skin. "The same, you see?" Just at the base of our thin wrists I scratched the name 'Booth' in tiny letters. "Bastard boys are shunned, Johnny, and I am fated to be a woman with no name save my husband's. So I have branded us both."

I took him in my arms. "We shall be Booths forever even if Mama and Father never marry. I'm tired of saying we're the *Timoneys*, daddy's cousins from Galway and I can't remember the shipwreck we survived that supposedly killed our parents anyway."

"Daddy told me that our true mama and papa died from eating bad potatoes," the boy said. "Can you really croak that way?"

"There was a famine, dunderhead. They didn't have any damn potatoes. That's why they died!" I licked away the blood drops raised by the pen from his wrist. "Run, boy. I'll count to ten."

"What comes after ten?" he asked.

"Fourteen."

"Is that what the blind tutor lady said that Father brought because she'd never tell where we lived? She smelled bad."

"You put manure on her chair, Johnny!"

"She said children shouldn't read Shakespeare and sat on our cat. I hated her."

I opened my eyes wide and, staring as one sightless might be, pushed my hand right into my brother's face and grabbed the end of his nose. "Demon's proboscis! Oh, my lord, please send me into next Tuesday. Get me gone surely, Mr. Booth. These are wicked orphans!" I stumbled forward with outstretched arms and banged straight into a tree. "I cannot teach math-em-aticals to this boy and girl!"

“They don’t need numbers, missus.,” Johnny said, intoning low like his father.  
“Verse shall wake ’em and verse shall put ’em to slumber.”

We howled with laughter at the memory of our one-and-only teacher, who prayed for a tornado to blow her to the next county.

“Catch the cat!” My brother raced away.

“I see you, Johnny Booth,” I said, crawling between the legs of my steed into thick Oleander bushes—white devil flowers sodden with dew. “Who is a true Booth to his bones? Now the roof.”

I grabbed him and pulled him to his feet. He followed me up the giant cherry tree to the top of the house—to the tin roof boiling in the sun.

“I’m afraid, Asia,” he yelled, hopping up and down like a baby robin that felt a fire on his feet.

“Jump, Johnny, or else you’ll incinerate!”

“Will you catch me, Asia?”

“Always!”

Clutching strong branches, we swung high in the air as red fruit rained down on the rhyming balcony. From that place, we recited Shakespeare and snippets of Byron and Blake, loud and long so our father might hear us in faraway San Francisco and be proud.

We landed on the ground at the feet of Gillian. She was glowering at us, holding out a letter. “If your heads ain’t broke, you all got something from your papa.”

“Read it to us, Gillie,” I said, feeling my brother’s arms and legs for broken bones, my own hands scratched and filthy.

She was bursting proud of her reading and, as she spoke, Johnny and I grinned through the dust and sweat on our faces. A letter from our father was an occasion of bliss as his absences leeched joy from us and made Mama silent as a cottage wren. Gillian read slowly.

My loves,

Whales sing in summer here. The city and even the saloons are filled with gold. People listen to the whales from houses like nests that rock in the wind. I would like to send a ship to float you straight to my arms, but alas, I cannot. When I return, look in my 'sometimes' pocket.

Inside you will see a wooden bear, the most fearsome of all California denizens and surely a beast to be faced down. Of course, when chancing upon him near a mining camp in Sacramento, I lulled him with a sonnet. Whereupon, a great gold tear came to his one eye, so moved was he by my performance, or perhaps he'd eaten his fill of miner's gold and it oozed from his solitary duct.

Tell your beloved Mama to kiss you many times for me. And remind Gillian that she is noble and proper royalty.

Your pater in all matters of love,  
Junius Brutus Booth.

"That's Mr. Junius, alright," Gillian said "Honey words and a glad, good heart. Go on home now, before I give you both a thrashing."

We followed her, clutching Father's letter, reading it over and over. "Maybe he's back already," I said.

"I hope he is, and I hope he's not," Gillian answered. "Maybe he brought the gold with him—something to keep this place going. And when he does, we best pray that bear isn't on a leash behind him."

He did not come back so soon. This was not uncommon. We waited and stocked the larder with pippin apples, potatoes, turnips and gooseberry jam and, of course, many bottles of his precious honey wine. We had ceremonies to welcome him home but also a *leaving* ceremony, each and every time he went away.

"How long will you be gone this time, Daddy?" I'd ask.

"When you have carved the pumpkins," he said, "and given them each the glower of poor King Richard shrunk and bent with hating, or when you've seared a luscious smile into the face of the merriest wife of Windsor, then, I shall be home."

We'd dive at him, knocking him to the floor. "Don't go at all, Daddy!"

"And deprive my audiences of my magnificent tragedies? Fame is a harlot. She smothers me with her perfumes and woos me to come to her, uh, cave."

We'd watch as father ambled down the road, his travel bag banging against his back, and tried to picture a creature with dusky, fragrant places that no man could resist.

"Like a circus?" asked Johnny Booth, after I first described this errant woman to him, this creature who lured Father far from us.

"A *Circe*, a *Lorelei*, or somebody dangerous. That's who's got him surely."

We always cried when he left, and were afraid.