

Love for Words, Kimberley Lynne

Scene One

William lies on the floor of the stage, surrounded by papers and empty bottles. He is drunk, dressed in sloppy Renaissance attire and writing King Lear. It is 1604, and he is in London. His Muse, the fairy goddess of his imagination, dances around him, inspiring him. Although her dance is very sensual, they do not touch. Muse remains on-stage throughout the show. (All Shakespearean text is in quotes.)

William "Speak.

Muse Nothing, my lord.

William Nothing?

Muse Nothing.

William Nothing will come of nothing, speak again.

Muse Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty According to my bond, no more, no less."¹ Good my Lord - - -

William *(Stops writing.)* Halt, my stalwart shadow. My pen stutters on its page. I am base falseness and every inch the unkind fool. I have denied everything within me that is natural and left my distant children to the haphazard care of their mother stranger. Two days travel may as well be the other side of the world as oft as I visit. My son died in my absence, an eleven-year-old foreigner to me. How will I recognize him within the crowded host of heaven? How can anyone call me father? By my troth, I have not seen my daughters in over eight seasons of winter.

Muse Write, William.

¹ Lear and Cordelia; *King Lear*, Act I, Scene 1

William How can I put heart-heavy words into her pouty, cherry mouth, my first, my sometime daughter? Plump words of affection "too full of the milk of human kindness"² to squeeze by those sour, angry lips. I assume that the "bond of childhood" is a tighter knot than her "filial ingratitude"³, and I am a dunderhead with a cranium full of stone. She would never say she loved me.

Muse "'Twas this flesh begot Those pelican daughters."⁴

William Pelican young suck their parents' blood.

Muse That blood makes them strong. "I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are."⁵

William Do you, you slippery fish of my fancy? And what of my lost son? (*Writes again.*)

Muse "They'll have me whipt for speaking true; thou'lt have me whipt for lying; and sometimes I am whipt for holding my peace.

William I had rather be any kind o' thing than a Fool.

Muse And yet I would not be thee, nuncle; thou hast par'd thy wit o' both sides, and left nothing i' th' middle."⁶ (*Blackout.*)

² Lady Macbeth; *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 5

³ Lear; *King Lear*, Act III, Scene 4

⁴ Same

⁵ Fool; *King Lear*, Act I, Scene 4

⁶ Same

Scene Two

William is asleep in a big four poster bed in his house, New Place, in Stratford-on-Avon in England. The time is April 1616. He is wearing a large nightshirt and tosses and turns in a fevered sleep. He is in his early fifties and dying. (There is speculation that he died from a bad batch of pickled herring.) He is not a good patient. William's wife Anne tends him. She is also dressed in Renaissance attire and holds a basin. She is in her late fifties, sweet, solidly built and missing teeth. William's Muse watches to the side or upstage. She is dressed in a man's dark Renaissance attire. Anne cannot see her. A storm rages outside, and the sound of the wind and shutters rattling underscores the action, although when William is in the "dreams" with his Muse, the wind does not blow.

Anne *(Bending over William and yelling in his ear.)* WILLIAM, can you hear me by and by? Oh, dear Father in Heaven, why can you not come back to me? You were here this morning. We spoke. I should not have lived this long to lose you this many times. I've lost you more times than I have lost teeth. *(Susanna, their eldest daughter, enters. She is 34 and carrying a bowl of broth. She is crafty and not clean or pretty at all. She has more of William's creativity than she cares to admit.)* Is the soup finished, daughter?

Susanna 'Tis more of a broth. I thought he could swallow that, and we haven't many potatoes.

Anne We should bathe him after he eats. He's soaked the sheets and his nightshirt.

Susanna He splashes us when he bathes, "this child-changed father".⁷ And yells. My dress is still wet from yesterday's bath.

Anne It is probably the first time that dress has known water.

Susanna The air is green and smells of dirt and rain. Hear the wind blow.

Muse "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!"⁸ *(Susanna looks over in her general direction, startled, although she cannot see the Muse clearly.)*

⁷ Cordelia; *King Lear*, Act IV, Scene 7

⁸ Lear; *King Lear*, Act III, Scene 2

Anne I did not notice. I have been up here longer than I thought.

Susanna Mother, 'tis pulling at the shutters. 'Tis dark at midday and unseasonably cold. The lawyer Riggins is so chilled that I gave him a warm spiced wine. He waits downstairs with farmer Hastings who says that he has an argument to present to father.

Anne Go bid the lawyer and the farmer return tomorrow. They will not be visiting your father this day. Go, girl.

Susanna I am old enough not to be called girl. I am a mother for eight years now.

Anne If you are old enough not to be called girl, then you should be old enough to keep yourself clean. Look at that filthy apron! When did you last brush that hair?

Susanna Yesterday. You have taught me these habits, mother.

Anne When you were a child, we lived upon the plenty of the vegetable patch, and I am a very poor seamstress. I once traded a hairbrush for a small pig, but your lean past does not excuse a slovenly complexion. Your sister, Judith, was not so dirty, and she was born into leaner times than you - - -

Susanna Do not to talk to me of Judith. She is gone and left us here to tend to father.

Anne I am sorry, Susanna. I am tired. Tending to your father is exhausting.

Susanna Living with father is exhausting. The lawyer will not leave without father's signature on the will. He said as much.

Anne Did he? Your father is revising his will. I thought Riggins was here to talk of closing the Welcombe common fields. Perhaps it is less of the lawyer needing a signature and more of you wanting my silver candlesticks over your hearth.

Susanna I want you to live in this house. If father does not sign, you will not have New Place.

Anne You mean if he does not sign and he dies this night?

Susanna He will not pay Master York your debt of 41 shillings. I worry for you.

Anne You worry because if he dies and I cannot pay, then the debt will fall to our first child. Listen, first child, I live in this house with your father, and I am its mistress. (*Anne continues over the Muse's speech.*)

Muse Within your reality, madam. (*Susanna again turns to the Muse, startled.*)

Anne Go give the lawyer and the farmer another wine. (*William moans.*) I will rouse your father. He must be awake to read. He must be awake to drink your broth. (*Susanna glares and exits. Anne adjusts the pillows under Will.*) How you push the pillows so. Did you hear our Susanna? She wants those candlesticks you brought all the way back from London. Why we are left in our old age with the most sullen of our children, I do not know.

Muse (*Crosses to the bed as soon as Susanna exits. Anne still does not hear her.*) See how the pillow sags beneath the weight of its serious charge. (*William stirs, recognizing her voice.*) See him toss and turn. It's hard to believe he's not play acting.

Anne (*To William.*) You must be dreaming up more of your pretty stories.

Muse Those dream stories are the mystic wind spun into words!

Anne You should wake and speak with farmer Hastings. You make more money trading lands than telling tales, William.

Muse I pull the raging tempest of words out from behind William's eyes. I'll do it when you leave the room, you damp lump of sagging clay.

Anne WILLIAM? Are you in there? You must wake to have your broth. It will fight this croup.

Muse He ate too much pickled herring and chased it down with way too much wine. The combination would toss me too.

Anne O Lord, Father of all mercies, this fever frightens me. Its hold is tight, and it will not let go. I could not bear to lose you again.

Muse Come, cease this play, Sweet William. You want to write one last time; I can smell it on you past the stench of sickness. (*To Anne.*) If anyone can wake him, madam, I can. I chase the dizzy drunk of sleep from William, like the pox chases a whore. (*Whispers an incantation.*) Where are you, Willie? Your lady wants you, And I have a gift for thee, Sweet William, big, fat, bald head bursting with one last drowsy seed. The world shall know five romances, and you have painted only four.

William (*As he awakes, the Muse slips back into the shadows.*) What? Ho? Anne? Is that you?

Anne William, you awake.

William . . . Evidently.

Anne Thank the good Lord from whom all blessings flow. How does my lord?

William Cranky, achy and swollen. Spinning, burning, freezing and drenched in my own waters. Are we alone in this room?

Anne Susanna says that the lawyer Riggins and the farmer Hastings drink downstairs.

William I said are we alone in this room. I did not ask about the rest of the house. I wish you would listen to what I ask you. I thought I heard another.

Anne No, William, we are alone in this room.

William Perchance I was dreaming.

Anne It is the poison of the fever speaking inside you.

William The doctor's diagnosis is only the croup.

Anne He is a doctor, our son-in-law; he must know croup. It will work its slow way out of you, and since you refuse to be bled - - -

William I will not allow that vampire at my neck again! I wrote plays that are less bloody than that barbaric practice!

Anne Are you strong enough to see the lawyer?

William I think you should consider whether or not Riggins is strong enough to see me.

Muse (*Another incantation.*) My shapeless fingers itch to hold the quill. Dismiss the lawyer and forget the will.

William (*He hears the Muse but is careful not to acknowledge her. To Anne.*) He can wait; waiting will build character in him. He needs character, God knows, and he has had quite enough of my wine already.

Anne He wants your revisions to the will.

William I am not yet resolved on several issues in the will. Cease your concern. I will live past this day.

Muse Good man. (*Whispering an incantation for Anne.*) Turn toward the door and remember the time, The bowl is empty and this man is mine.

William (*Wind up.*) Listen to that storm. "Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!"⁹

Anne Calm thyself, William. You rest easy. I'll send away the lawyer and the farmer.

William I have not the strength to behold Riggins' shifting face this day.

Anne And yet you have the strength to yell at the sky. I cannot believe that you turned away Richard Burbage and that William Sly after they traveled the two days journey from London and with gifts.

⁹ Lear; *King Lear*, Act III, Scene 1

William If you had to listen to that old fool Burbage for several decades, you'd - - - What gifts?

Anne The pickled herring and a bottle of wine.

William The pickled herring that I spewed forth repeatedly this morning and still heaves my stomach so? Are you referring to that pickled herring? (*Anne nods.*) Old woman, if any of my aging acquaintances arrive with more sordid, stinking presents, bolt the door and raise the drawbridge.

Anne I doubt it is Master Burbage's fault that you became ill. You like pickled herring. (*She exits.*)

William (*Yelling after her.*) He's made me ill before, surely he could manage it again. (*Muttering.*) She was a fool to feed me Burbage's bad fish. All the aid I lent him, all the money lent, and he rides a rickety coach for four days to bring me soured seafood. (*He pulls out a bottle of wine, a stack of papers and a feather pen hidden beneath the bed.*) He probably bought it a month ago and kept it steeping in his desk drawer. He wants me gone and my plays his. (*Checking for Anne, he drinks and begins to write parts of his last play, The Two Noble Kinsman. His Muse stands behind him, influencing his thought but in a less frenzied manner than in the prologue. William has developed arthritis in his hands since the prologue. He reads what is already on the page.*) Act five, scene two. The wooer comes forward from his hiding place (*The Muse walks forward from hers but still out of his sight.*) dressed as Palamon, pretending the gentleman, a pretty speech fresh upon his lips.

Muse "Pretty soul, How do ye? (*William writes.*) That's a fine maid! There's a curtsy!"

William The Jailer's Daughter's heart dips and falls, believing that her cherished Palamon is finally confessing his adoration. She longs to throw herself at his feet, but she clutches to her morals with both sweating hands. (*In a high, woman's voice.*) "Yours to command," she says.

Muse "I' th' way of honesty."

William "How far is't now to th' end o' th' world, my masters?"

Muse "Why, a day's journey, wench."

William "Will you go with me?" she asks.

Muse "What shall we do there, wench?"¹⁰

William Why, what? She is deluded by love and exhausted by the green-eyed monster. I know not. I am empty, fevered, parched. I crave my puny fairy Ariel; I thought I heard her squeaky voice rasping in the trees. The storm stirs me, but the words are silent soldiers, guarding a royal tomb. God's breath! Why we shall WHAT?

Muse We shall dance our favorite dance, William, for this silly romance is keeping you alive. Think on it. Once you die and lose your aching limbs, you may finally stroke my silken hair and brush my satin lips and know the forbidden valley at the base of my velvet throat. I wish I didn't have to lead you down this twisting path of sickness and decay, but you are human. That is the bargain.

William My fair beloved, my sweet Rumpelstiltskin who spins straw into gold! What a sight for sore eyes you are! "You, the fairies midwife." "You, who teach the torches to burn bright!"¹¹

Muse Hello, Sweet William. Clear on the other side of this wet island I heard you, scratching away. This jailer's daughter is a lusty type; the orange pit will like her.

William What care I for the orange pit? That old fool Fletcher can do with this romantic fluff as he sees fit. I write for that you still dain to visit me, my dark-sleeved sprite, for that I cannot stop, for there lies a thick block of yammering words stuck here in my stiff, wrinkled, sweat-stained arm.

¹⁰ Doctor, Wooer, Daughter; *Two Noble Kinsman*, Act V, Scene 2

¹¹ Romeo; *Romeo and Juliet*, Act I, Scene 5

Muse I hear you refuse to be produced, that you are in hiding, a recluse. I hear that Richard Burbage bemoans your absence at the Blackfriars, that business is slacking off, and he is quietly pirating your work, changing a word there, a phrase here, clip, cut, push Sweet William's words back onto the boards.

William Pure hearsay, minx.

Muse Mayhaps. I hear he has published eighteen of our plays in abbreviated, paraphrased, pocket-sized books called quartos.

William I care not, rumor-monger. Let bear-baiting London hear my long sentences one last time. I will have no brook with that vulture Burbage; he is a shilling-pinching, gold-sucking drain of time and strength. He and that dead money-bags de Vere were in league together. He can go to hell in a hand basket for all I care. I have happily closed that messy chapter of my life: thespian, drunkard, man about town, dog among trash. Known all too well in the taverns, amusing the shallow perfumed courtiers, trading round words for rounder coin, steeped in the sticky thicket of court politics and a twisted web of sordid financing and intrigue. I was an entertainer, and the play is over. I have written, I have loved and let the result of both roam the earth as they may. Susanna wants my candlesticks before I die. She may have them. My bastardized tales are recanted once more to the vulgar, orange pit swine. Do they hear them, I wonder? Do they actually look up from their eating and kissing and gossiping and groping to listen to one word young Hal says? Do they learn dignity? Nobility? A phrase or two in French?

Muse They hear a much-edited version of our work.

William So our work is carved in stone, eh? I am a playwright, and I have set those savage word beasts free to roam across the wilderness that is the stage. They no longer belong to me.

Muse Those word beasts need a protector.

William I am too tired to protect. The plays lived when they could. Let their time be over. I am a merchant now. I trade in tithes and land.

Muse And you write in secret.

William You see my companions here in Stratford. If you lived with Anne, you would write in secret too. How dramatic you are this day, my wild firefly. Look how adorned you are in the disguise of a man, you sly fox. I recognize that coat. If you are truly a witch, Hecat, and not a wispy figment of my run-away imagination, then you should be dressed like one and not masquerading as my pet patron, Henry, the broad-shouldered, slight-hipped Earl of Southampton.

Muse This dark velvet is the frock your fevered mind gives me to wear.

William Rubbish. You are a thief and a liar. You wear the doublet he wore for the portrait painted in the Tower. 1601. The black year of the Essex rebellion. The year I wrote *Hamlet*.

Muse I thought you might appreciate me in a man's dress; it being a conceit you employ repeatedly.

William There shall be no sword play with those sharp conceits again, caitiff. If a device works, it should be put to work.

Muse Do you not like the cut? Does it not become me? Lord knows it became him when he wore it last. (*Pouting.*) It was he you truly loved, not me. It is he with whom I share the sonnets.

William "My nature is subdu'd To what it works in, like the dyer's hand."¹² I loved him, dark lady, as a human. Need I remind you that you are not a human and that I am no more a young man? 'Twas long ago and far away when a heart beat within this rattling chest. You may uncork my arm and deliver words, my saucy midwife, but you will never know how it feels to breathe through another mouth. (*He returns to the papers.*) Puckish minx, my head aches, and you digress.

¹² Sonnet 111

Muse You digress. You dug up Henry.

William You wear his coat. Where were we?

Muse Act two, scene four.

William We most certainly were not. We were in act five, scene two. I am not that sick nor feeble, imp.

Muse You will be all too soon if you empty any more bottles of wine. "Why should I love this gentleman? 'Tis odds He never will affect me."¹³

William (*Writing.*) Damn you, you capricious slut. Why can we not write in order?

Muse There is no order to writing.

William (*He shuffles through the stack of papers.*) What the devil happens in act two, scene four?

Muse The jailer's daughter's monologue. "I am base, My father the mean keeper of his prison, And he a prince."¹⁴

William Am I your prince, my Titania? You can tell me. I am past passion.

Muse "To marry him is hopeless; To be his whore is witless."¹⁵ Write, William.

William If only you could lose your pixie wits for half an hour and be my hopeless wife, my witless whore. If only our lips could meet and pray just once as holy palmers kiss. Oh, to kiss a fairy, even if you are a girl.

Muse Holy palmers pray palm to palm. Concentrate, man!

William We would begin the long journey with our palms and travel slowly to your lips, that sacred shrine, those first shaking steps on the crooked staircase to paradise.

¹³ Daughter, *Two Noble Kinsman*, Act II, Scene 4

¹⁴ Daughter, *Two Noble Kinsman*, Act II, Scene iv

¹⁵ Same

Muse You know the bargain. We do not touch. Before we touch, you must lose your flesh or I will lose my fire.

William Our souls touch. I know you now. Oh, how I know you, the smell of you, the sound. I can shut my eyes and open up my aged heart - - -

Muse "But in my heart was Palamon, and there, Lord, what a coil he keeps! To hear him Sing in an evening, what a heaven it is! And yet his songs are sad ones. Fairer spoken Was never a gentleman."¹⁶

William (*William writes and stops.*) How this dance has slowed, my love.

Muse Time has slowed you.

William The gift has checked me more. It is an angry Cyclops with a thin rapier, one-eyed and double-edged. I thought it would never leave me, this blood-gulping, pelican child. At such a steep price, I was ridiculous enough to believe it could not vanish.

Muse I will never leave you, William.

William Someday I am afraid you must.

Muse Come, human. Stumble beside me, mule. (*She holds out her arms and he walks to her.*) Lay down thy pen and stand apart from me, aligned with me. (*Standing slightly apart, they dance.*) Sway and hum and forget thy limbs, thy fever, thy dull wife, thy greedy child, the lawyer Riggins in the kitchen, the lawyer Henry who lies shipwrecked on the New World shore. Play music, play! Weave the none-too-solid Floor beneath your stumbling feet of cool clay. And disappear the house, the day, the man! (*Music plays underneath and they dance.*) "Once he kissed me --- I lov'd my lips the better ten days after. Would he do so ev'ry day!"¹⁷

(*Lights fade slowly as they dance.*)

¹⁶ Same

¹⁷ Daughter, *Two Noble Kinsman*, Act II, Scene 4

Scene Three

*William is asleep on the floor downstage, where the Muse left him, surrounded by papers. Two empty bottles lie beside him. Susanna enters again with a bowl of broth and a candle. She crosses to the bed and looks at the papers scattered on it. She holds the candle to a page to see how fresh the ink is. Checking to be sure that her father is asleep, she **very** slowly reads and finds the rhythm in it.*

Susanna "O sacred, shadowy, cold and constant queen, Abandoner of revels, mute, contemplative, Sweet, solitary, white as chaste, and pure As wind-fanned snow, who to thy female knights Allows't no more blood then will make a blush, Which is their order's robe, I, here, thy priest - - - "

William "Am humbled 'fore thine altar."¹⁸ (*Sitting up.*) Then you do remember, my sometime daughter.¹⁹

Susanna (*Startled, she tucks the page into her apron.*) Remember what?

William How to read. I recall the summer I taught you. You were much shorter then but just as stubborn.

Susanna You should be resting, not writing. Writing empties you of your strength, and you know how it upsets mother.

William Your mother is not my master, changeling child. She is my wife and, therefore, in my service. Help me from the floor.

Susanna (*She does.*) Why do you write during storms?

William Do not ask questions I cannot answer. (*They waver on the way to the bed.*) Steady there! Take care!

Susanna You should not be drinking wine; it does not help you fight the croup.

¹⁸ Emilia, *Two Noble Kinsman*, Act V, Scene 1

¹⁹ Lear; *King Lear*, Act I, Scene i

- William** I cannot bear being here and sick and sober, and to write I must drink and vice versa. That old moose John Fletcher has commissioned me to pen a dark romance. They need a little money-maker to rebuild the Globe. It is a task without thought and a form to fill and only for a few extra coin, and, although I do not miss the writing life, I do miss writing in my life. (*Susanna turns away.*) You give me your back. Why?
- Susanna** They are coin that mother and I will never see.
- William** I placed a roof over your mother's head. I keep her in provisions. I endure with minimal sufferance that blood-letting doctor who is your husband. What else do you demand of a father?
- Susanna** You should pay the 41 shillings beholden to Master York.
- William** Your mother borrowed those funds in my absence to finance a set of furniture. That was her decision, not mine.
- Susanna** She is your wife - - -
- William** Cease this whining waste of good fair air, recreant! I traveled just from a lovely dream and I wish I had remained there in the fairies' fine company instead of landing here in this noisy nest of nasty, clucking hens!
- Susanna** She should not have taken you back in.
- William** She had no choice, the fang-free, flatulent old buffoon! "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is To have a thankless child!"²⁰ This is my house, Susanna. The deed is in my name, you ungrateful churl, and where else would I go? To your home? "I look'd not for you yet, [eh?] nor am provided For your fit welcome."²¹ Like Regan to her father Lear.
- Susanna** (*Begins to exit.*) There is your broth. I will return for the bowl.

²⁰ Lear; *King Lear*, Act I, Scene 4

²¹ Regan; *King Lear*, Act II, Scene 4

William Wait, my headstrong one. Return the page you have tucked inside your soiled apron. Good God, behold you, serpent. Haven't you the time or inclination to clean yourself?

Susanna I don't like getting wet.

William Marry, I'm sure the water dislikes being close to you as well. Don't purse those thin lips at me, you greasy wench! Come, come, my little thief, my little squirrel, hand over the page. I have seen you lift before, quick minnow; it is your gift. It could well be your trade. *(She slowly takes out the page.)* I saw you that night, the night I returned to Stratford for the rest of my corkscrew of a life, the night I burned my plays. Your mother believed I was burning a bonfire of lice-infested clothes, but not you. You are smarter than she.

Susanna I should have let you sleep. You're still drunk. You were drunk that night.

William Mayhap you are my child.

Susanna . . . Please don't speak those words. I hate them.

William What do you hate more, Susanna? The thought that you might be my offspring or the thought that you might be sprung from the fat, short loins of shilling-happy Master York of Shottery?

Susanna I hate your indifference. *(She hands him the page and begins to exit.)*

William Wait again, charge. Remember that we have a compact, you and I. I don't tell your mother that you steal my work and you don't tell her that I write.

Susanna And neither of us speaks to fat, short Master York. *(She exits.)*

William *(To himself after she has left.)* Definitely an imp, that Susanna. "But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter --- Or rather a disease that's in my flesh, Which I must needs call mine."²² I was a fool to teach her to read and write.

²² Lear; *King Lear*, Act II, Scene 4

Muse *(Appearing beside him. She is no longer wearing Southampton's frock.)* Riggins' father was a fool to teach you.

William If he had not taught me, “fen-suck'd fog,”²³ where would you be now?

Muse In Francis Bacon's bedroom.

William Go then, curst shrew! Get thee gone! Go visit Bacon; God knows he is in desperate need of you. Go tear him to shreds. I am finished with you and your nagging mysticism. My hands are deformed from far too many hours of you! Leave me be. It is done. It is written. I am through with it. Let it lie. We are through!

Muse I will return.

William I doubt it, madam.

Muse Doubt, William, is the beginning of faith.

(Blackout.)

²³ Same