

THE QUEEN, MY LORD, IS DEAD

Libretto by Alejandra Villarreal Martinez

Gruoch enters her dark chamber slowly, gliding smoothly across the room as if in a dream. She seats herself at her table and lights a candle.

Do I sleep?
Or have the nightly travels
Of this restless pilgrim
Ceased at last?

Hateful portent of dawn,
You ignite and burn away
The starry mantle
Which sheltered me from destiny.

Malcolm courses forward
Hot and eager to uncouple
Macduff and Siward,
That they might
Tear apart my body
In mine own den.

Malcolm comes to take
What I have won —
To win it from me
By the same bloody means —
Doubtless, he hesitates not.

By that measure are we
Doubly-kin
And so too unlike Macbeth.
Yet Fate mocks my husband,
Makes ready his coronation
And summons forth Malcolm
To anoint his head in blood.

Yes, Fate abides,
And I too,
For I helped hang that morning star,

Which will judge my husband,
Who could, but for his beggar-fear,
Have reigned Alban King!
I deny it not, nor do I avoid
The measure of judgement
That shall fall on mine own head.
I neglected how desperately
Macbeth would overgorge himself on blood
Needlessly, stupidly spilled.

That morn, very like this one,
I gazed upon Duncan,
Whose ruddy vigor had all but left him,
Too starkly red set off
Against the pallor of his skin...

Was it ever as beautiful
As it was wreathed 'round his head?
A bloody crown,
I thought to claim it then,
Bathing my hands
In its intoxicating liquor
Dried up and fragrant on my fingers.

It was the first I had seen of blood
Since Macbeth had stolen me
From the shores of Moray.
He loved me, in his way,
He, who was both bridge and chasm.
Who was the greater fool?

Yes, he loved me,
And by my withered womb,
achieves his own extinction.
Gladly I make the exchange,
Though it beggars me.

I will hold court with Death
Whom I welcome
Alone, unburdened,
Unchained to the unworthy legacy
Of an unwanted child.

Addressing the dagger.

Come, Death,
And find in me a kinswoman
Who will suffer no life
Within her poisoned body.

She raises the dagger to her throat, and stops.

What, truant!
Will you desert your office
And deny your mistress
A good death?
Do you feign wisdom
To make minutes of seconds
And days of hours?

By Malcolm's sword
Or mine own dagger,
The outcomes are equal in grace.
Grace, my mother wanted,
When, arrested at time's end...

My inexpert hands,
Would chase the shuttle
As my mother taught me,
With quiet voice over my shoulder
And brittle fingers making
Tight plaits of my hair.

Beauty and discipline
Woven into me by a woman
Too familiar
To be altogether strange.
Was it from love
That she taught me
To bear such pain
With a silence so pregnant
That any moment, it might yield
A fury so full of life?

And yet we longed for her touch,
My rage and I.
And yet we long for it still,

In this hour when I am undone,
Unwoven, unlaced.

Grace, my mother wanted,
When, arrested at time's end...

Consigned to the captivity
Of her bedchamber
I, warden and chambermaid,
Kept vigil,
Watching the taper-light
Flicker and burn low,
Reflected in her half-lidded eyes.

I entangled our fingers,
Boldened in grief,
And introduced my gaze to hers,
Jaundiced and grey
In advancing death.

"Mother," my voice intruded
On our silent meditation.
Your too-lucid shock
And your croaking reply:
"Cò thusa?"

Gruoch rises.

Who are you?
Who am I?

Lady, so nimbly you slipped
Your earthly bands,
I could scarce mark
The moment of your escape.
Could you not have endured my answer?
Did I fright your fledgling soul
To fly away into eternity?

She returns to her table, and the dagger.

Grace, my mother wanted,
When, arrested at time's end...

By Grace she was forsworn,
Her demise met
With staring eyes,
Gaping, drooling mouth —
An animal's death,
A rough, vulgar death,
Too clumsy,
Like a stumble in the darkness.

How unlike her was her death.
Will you forsake me too, Grace,
And shake off my hand
Just as I step into that threshold?

What is a daughter
But a beloved tapestry?
What is a mother
But an absolute weaver?

Yet, I hesitate.

From whence this pause,
Petitioned by a brain
That knows too well
How to discern between deaths,
Bad and good?
Too soon, too hasty,
A retreat not befitting
The Queen of Alba.

Mo chridhe, Lulach, my heart,
Mo chridhe trom s'dulaich.
Heavy-burdened,
I write these words for thee, my son,
M'eudail, my darling lamb, sweet boy,
Not that they should trouble you,
For, truly, your heart's ache
Would reach my shade,
And pain me just as sharply
As it pains my life.

Mo chridhe, Lulach,
The dearest gift your father gave me...

My beloved Gille,
The hour of your death
Our son searched for you,
Amid the ashes of our home.

I could not bear
To look too long
Upon that tiny face,

Unhappy child
Of a father too-soon and
Too-outrageously dispatched
In fiendish flame.

Unhappy child
Of a mother re-forged
And firestained,
Misshapen and strange,
More iron than flesh,
Unable to embrace and console him.

My son, prince of nothing,
Prince of the air.

Dawn,
Wait still but a little while,
That I might find the resolve
To depart at last.

Lulach, my son,
Rest-ever in sleep,
And meet not with Death,
Into whose dominion
Sure-footed, I am bound to enter...
Where thy kingly father resides.

She raises the dagger slowly.

Oh Gille, mo ghràdh,
The truest love I ever knew,
With eyes grey as rain-shadow,
And a voice like a welcome knock
At my oaken door.

Tender Gille,
Unchanged in death
You remain ever
In my memory.

How must I seem to you?

She begins to sing.

In our hearts a seed we planted
Of a love like climbing ivy
That together did entwine us
So together we might stay.

In my mouth I held a secret
Sweeter than the golden honey
That was yielded from the heather
Growing wild in fair Moray.

In your hand a gift you carried
Of a crown for your beloved
That was made of sweet primroses
You had found along the way.

In our hearts a seed we planted
Of a love like climbing ivy
That together might yet bind us,
Even when you've gone...

Who was she, Gille?
Does she yet live?

How well you concealed
The truth of our condition:
The violent ends,
Which are too often
The bloody inheritance of our station.

Would that I could but
Disinherit our son!

Gruoch returns to her dagger.

Attending the hour
Of our reunion,
Gille, my husband, mo ghràdh,
Rescue me!
Forsake me not
And help me die

Once more, she raises the dagger high in the air.

That I might once more
Return to your embrace.

Are you so cruel?
Or am I so weak
That my hand yet lingers,
Cutting arabesques in the air?

Gruoch shudders.

What spirit
Trespasses hence?

With cold certainty.

Duncan!
Will you not embrace your kin?
Peace, I will not twice-violate
Our sacred rules of hospitality.
One hundred thousand welcomes, shadow-king.

Had you shown forbearance,
You might yet have
Encountered your son.
He comes to occupy my bedchamber,
With trembling jack-knife in hand.

Come, Ghost,
Look long on my happy face!
Can'st you here to witness
Some atom of remorse?

Gruoch laughs derisively.

Perhaps you mistook my nightly paces
As evidence of my shame?
Truth, you'll have, cousin.
My steps are blame-driven,
But not for thee.

Blood is our birthright, Duncan,
Yours and mine,
And we would sooner dye the oceans red
Than wash away the sins of our clan.
Your death and Gille's,
Macbeth's and my own,
These are but a consequence of Nature,
Of the ebbing tides of prosperity.

For a moment, Gruoch doesn't talk to the ghost directly.

My compassion extends
Only as far as those lackeys,
Whom I made to bear
The consequence of your death,
Their paschal blood
Yet perfumes my hands
And rouses in me
Heavy and sleepless regret.

What palpable, incontinent envy!
Would'st thou recoup from me
Some measure of life
And repay murder with murder?

Gruoch takes the dagger and holds it by the blade, hilt out, offering it directly to Duncan's ghost. Blood begins to drip from her hand.

Come, then!
With my blood, quench your fiery hate,
And may this ichor suffice
To extinguish hell but for a moment —
A respite brief and sweet enough
To amplify your everlasting torment.

Come, then!
Or else begone
And feast instead
On that carrion Macbeth,
Whose already rotted soul
Might sustain you better.

Are you a man?
Do you yet deny yourself?
Mark me,
I will show you
How a woman dies
By her own will.

She draws the dagger close, her eyes locked on the ghost. After a moment, she turns away.

Nothing more will I say to you.

Mo chridhe, Lulach,
Mo chridhe trom s'dulaich.
Forgive me,
Forgive your imperfect mother,
Who loved you in all her best.
Who loved you enough
To lose you,
To permit your banishment,
Given in charge
By Macbeth,
Your father's bane.

Mo chridhe, Lulach,
Mo chridhe trom s'dulaich.
The words I so desperately seek
Outrun me,
And I have run out the clock.
Now I must move
To quell the rebellion
That is my life.

She takes the dagger. In one swift, decisive movement, she cuts her neatly braided hair.

What was once
My womanly silken crown,
Polished by oil and ivory —

How readily it turns
To wiry rope in my hand.

How readily so many years
Come unraveled, and how deservingly
These threads await the loom.
Were I to weave them together,
What tapestry would result?

“Cò thusa?”
Once, I was a noble daughter.

“Cò thusa?”
The widow of Gille Coemgáin.

“Cò thusa?”
A wretched orphan’s mother.

You ask again, “Cò thusa?
Art thou the Lady Macbeth,
Consort Queen of Alba?”

Let them say,
The queen, my lord, is dead.

Is mise Gruoch.
I alone remain.

BLACKOUT