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Death, dildoes and daffodils: a winter's tale

Biographical note:

Dr Nike Sulway is a writer and academic. She is the author of several novels, including *Rupetta*, which – in 2014 – was the first work by an Australian writer to win the James Tiptree, Jr Award. The award, founded in 1991 by Pat Murphy and Karen Joy Fowler, is an annual award for a work of ‘science fiction or fantasy that expands or explores our understanding of gender’. Her previous publications include the novels *The Bone Flute*, *The True Green of Hope*, and *What The Sky Knows*. Her works have won or been shortlisted for a range of national and international awards, including the QLD Premier’s Literary Award, the Commonwealth Writers Award, the Children’s Book Council of Australia’s Book of the Year Awards, the IAFA Crawford Award, the Aurealis Awards and the Norma K Hemming Award, and more. She is also the author of a number of essays and articles on contemporary women writers, including essays on James Tiptree, Jr (Alice Sheldon), Lyn Palmer, and Sarah Waters. Her most recent novel, *Dying in the First Person*, was published by Transit Lounge in 2016. She teaches creative writing at the University of Southern Queensland.

Keywords:

Creative writing – William Shakespeare – *The Winter’s Tale* – Queer

1. *This ungentle business*

The night before my husband's death, Hermione appeared before him:

... a vessel of ... sorrow,
So fill'd and so becoming: in pure white robes,
Like very sanctity.¹

This vision of the good queen spoke to him, saying:

... for the babe
Is counted lost for ever, Perdita,
I prithe, call't. For this ungentle business
Put on thee by my lord, thou ne'er shalt see
Thy wife Paulina more.²

Antigonus, my husband, had been sent by *her* husband to expose her newborn daughter in the desert, that it might be suckled, or devoured, by wildness. So men send other men to deal with our fair spawn. They dream of magical beings: of ravens and wolves who will suckle, rage or ravage our innocent babes. They send fools to distant oracles, to glean the wisdom that cannot be found in their own untrusting hearts.

He lay the child on the earth while a storm raged saying she was ... *like to have*
*A lullaby too rough.*³

And here, another apparition came: a bear, great and furious as a storm. She pursued him along the shore, mocking his indignant roars with murderous fury of her own. Some say it was a wild thing that pursued him—a native of Bohemia—but 'twas Callisto, mother of Arcas, who stepped from the heavens to the earth to wreak maternal vengeance. Her ears and teeth were made of stars, her eyes and gut and claws. She gutted Antigonus like a fish, left him wriggling on the storm-wreck'd shore.

2. *Your first death*

The night of your first death, I placed a pillow 'neath your neck,
spread your bride's pale skirts across the stone, and
powdered your pink cheeks with chalk. You lay still
and cold as death until you heard your husband's boot
strike the stones of the chapel floor. No eye but mine
saw your hand dart out and clasp that of your dead son.

You lay, bridal and innocent. Your belly still half-swole,
the blood of the childbed staining the tomb on which you lay.
Leontes knelt at your side, summoned false tears
and wept for all that his foolishness had wrought.

I knelt beside him, bent my head to pray
that your false death would fool the grieving king.
He took your hand and turned it, held your soft
fist against his cheek. *Oh, but her hand
it is still warm*, he cried.
It is your hot tears that make it so, said I.

3. *Hundred horse chestnut*

That night, when I smuggled you home, there was a storm
And we, like the Aragon queen and her hundred knights,
took shelter beneath the ancient elm that stands
between the palace and my modest home.

Just two we were. And you so weary with all you had lost –
A son, a daughter, a kingdom, and a husband –
that you could barely stand for weeping. I gave you
my shoulder, held you fast against me, and watched
rain drip from the catkins. *Look here*, I said.

They are as soft and useless as my husband's quill.

Though these, no doubt, will bear some fruit.

4. *A quiver? A diletto?*

By the time we reached the house it was dark
 And all the fires were out. I wrapped you in my bearskin
 and settled you in a chair by the fire while I knelt
 and blew the embers into flames. The room was dark,
 and muddled. As the flames caught they threw
 strange shadows on the walls. *So many books,*
 you said, and stood to run your hand across
 their spines. *So many words.* You lifted up a paper
 from the desk. A dozen more spilled to the floor
 and something heavier among them. Something
 unfamiliar. *What is this?* you asked. I turned and
 stood, tried to take it from you hand. *A quiver?* I said.
A dildo? A diletto? You brought it to the fireside, knelt
 to hold it in the light, and laughed. *A quiver?*
For what arrows, sweet Paulina? To slay what
beast? Your face, turned up towards me,
 was flushed with more warmth than a fire
 can induce. You stood, and held the implement
 against your groin. Twirled it heavily. *Shall*
I slay you then, with this your weapon? Or
are you slain already? I grasped the thing and
 pulled you closer. The leather soft and supple
 in my hand. *Look here,* I said, and showed you
 how the thing was hollow and how, within
 its vulgar depths, were hidden quills and ink
 and wax. Scrolled treason and translated
 sedition. You frowned. I laughed. *It is*
my cunning quiver, good queen. The one I wear
when travelling as a man. When dealing in
secrets and trading in lies. It is also a fair
hiding place for the letters I carry, the ballads
and pamphlets that cannot be found
in a good man's pocket.

Are you then, fair

Paul, a good man? you said.

I am your man,

good queen. And your woman, both. I
will be whichever you most urgently require.

Come then, you said, and prick
my conscience with your quill.

5. *With lullaby, be thou content*

There is a walled garden in my home. Inside, a parterre
with six angled beds and paths that meet, not at a fountain
but a stone dais. Once, there was a statue in the centre:
Two doves atop a globe, held aloft by a marble maid.
But she, like many a maid, fell one night and was removed.

Confined to the house for so many years, this
was where you took your walks. The gravel paths
your meditation's groove. Here, is where
you mourned your son. Two paths that cross,
and cross again. Here, your daughter's loss was marked
in miles of patient circumnavigation.

Some nights I woke to an empty bed, to the
soft crunch of gravel 'neath your bare feet.
To the sound of your voice, singing a lullaby
to the distant moon. *Sweet daughter*, you sang,

*Eke lullaby, my lovely child,
My little bird, now take thy rest,
Since death is long, and never sleeps
Keep close thy life, for so is best.
With lullaby be thou content,
With lullaby thy fears relent,
Let others fear the wolf that bites
Thou art too sweet for death's delights.*⁴

6. *A glottal stop*

I was thinking of you as I walked along the Linguaglossa Road
towards home. Thinking, too, of some fair rhyme to please you
A linguist's pastime this: to make a bawd's joke of my profession
A woman with a cunning tongue? A cunning woman's tongue?
A cunning woman on a linguist's path? A glossia, a glottal
stop.

And stop I did, for there beneath the hundred horse chestnut you stood,
or leaned, while vile Autolycus – that liar, that thief – placed his lips
on your fair cheek, and fossicked with his hand inside your pocket.
I heard you cry – too faint, too false – and saw you draw away.
Against his breast you pressed a letter. He turned away, the letter fell.
You took his arm and pulled him back. Put the letter in his hand.
Purple paper, yellow ribbons. A red heart for a seal. Oh, love,
good queen, fair Hermione, what false beribboned heart is this?

7. *The postman's fee*

It was early spring in our fifteenth year. I came upon you on your knees in the walled garden. The bare earth turned, and dark. New beds pegged out with stakes and string. A wide hat on your head, and your skirts plucked up like a shepherdess's daughter. At your hip a stringed bag, like a miniature net, filled with bulbs. Bent like a crab you moved along, dibbling in the soil and burying, one by one, your treasures. *How now, what's this?* I called, coming in from the road in my gentleman's attire.

***There's rosemary and rue; these keep
Seeming and savour all the winter long:⁵***
These two are for grace, and for remembrance.

Have you need of herbs to remember me?

You smiled up at me, and caught the kiss
I leaned down to plant.

*Not you,
fair Paul, it is my daughter this garden
does remember. These are her wishes, her
sweet blossoms, planted in our private place.*

You stood, and gestured round the partierre. Here, there will be ... *daffodils,*
***That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty; violets dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes
Or Cytherea's breath; pale primroses
That die unmarried, ere they can behold
Bight Phoebus in his strength—a malady
Most incident to maids; bold oxlips and
The crown imperial; lilies of all kinds,
The flower-de-luce being one!⁶*** *O, with these blooms,
I will make garlands, for my sweet daughter,
To strew her o'er and o'er!*

*It has been fifteen years, I said, since that small girl
was left in some forsaken place. My husband's
bones returned without his flesh to bind them.
Your daughter –*

Perdita. She has a name. Pray call her by't.
I knelt beside you. Lifted a moist handful
of soil and inhaled. Good earth, it was, and
rich with life. As she, your lost daughter,
was not. *Hermione*, I said. *Dear heart.*
It has been fifteen years. We've had no word.
No letter. You must let go of this false hope.
Your daughter is death's daughter now.

[Herm] *You have had no sign,*
you said, and plucked a bulb from your pocket,
passed it into my hand. *But here, look*
what she has sent to me.

Where did these come from? I said. *These*
bulbs and seeds, these marigolds and marjoram?
From Perdita, you said. *From Autolycus.*

THAT thief! That—I could not speak. All at
once I saw you 'neath the hundred horse chestnut
your hand pressing a letter to his heart. His mouth
on your fair cheek.

Oh, Paul, you said. *Don't*
be a fool. Do you think I would kiss a man—a man
like that—when I have you?

I saw you.

You saw what, exactly? ... Oh. Oh! You put down
your dibbler and your bulb. Stood and took
my hands in your own. I nearly wept, to see
your skin so dark, your nails so broken
and stained. *Oh, Paul. It is not such a wicked secret.*
All these years, I have met him 'neath the
chestnut tree to pass him letters, that is
true. And every year he takes them, for a kiss.
His postman's fee, he calls it.

Some postman! I cried.

You wiped at my hot face with your sleeve,
and smiled as though I were a child. *He is a postman*
and a peddler, you said, *and the deliverer*
of my letters to Perdita.

How can he deliver letters to a lost child?
He might as well deliver clouds to angels!

You reached into your pocket, then,
and drew out a tightly-folded note.
A girls' hand—with a heart to dot the i—

To Mother, the letter said, from Perdita.

I don't understand, I said. I thought she was—

You nodded, and we turned towards our home.

The light was fading, and the earth grew cold.

Familiar stars glittered in the sky: fair Callisto
and her child. *Come inside, you said. I'll light
the fire. There is more I have to tell you.*

8. *Dear Winter*

Dear Winter, come you further in, fingering the wormholes of Hermione's heart?
Sixteen times she and I have wintered in this hall, warmed each other's beds.
She has risen over me, ridden high as a conqueror on the waves of my flesh
And I, divided, have fallen eagerly beneath each victory cry.

Autolycus, that finest of the mortal thieves, could not take her hand from mine.
But you, Death, (Shall I speak your True Name, now that you have come so near?)
Have sown hard seeds in her breast. She swells and hardens in my hand;
Shadows bloom on her skin and death's cold snow rushes in at every breath.

Bulbs wintering in the soil do not dream of the garden's destruction;
The seeds you planted in her breast will never bloom. Not on my watch.
She has given enough already. My love is sharp and narrow as a sword;
Hot as the bee's barbed sting. I will cut your canker out.

9. *breast, bone, belly*

How quick, how cruel, how deep Death came
 Burrowing from breast, to bone, to belly.
 No knife, no poultice, no physic could detach
 her from you. God knows we tried. But at each
 incursion our enemy turned, laughed. Sweet
 as your sickly breath, Death smiled at our frail
 efforts. Too soon we knew that there was nothing
 more to do. You were the first to call a stop.
*Stop. These are my last days, you said, do not
 fill them with false hope.* I want, instead,
 to plant a tree. To see Perdita's bulbs
 put in. The walled garden, then, became
 your final theatre. It was late afternoon
 in our sixteenth year. Autolycus came
 upon us, working in the walled garden.
 The beds were bright with flowers and you
 sat watching while I weeded the daffodils.
How now, what's this? he called,
 coming in from the road in gentleman's
 attire. *Why so quiet, why so still,
 When I bring good news, old friend?*
Good news? you said, and I saw that old,
 false hope rise in your cheeks.

Yes, yes!

he said, trotting along the paths, plucking
 rue and rosemary. *Think you this would
 make a pretty posy for my buttonhole?*

[Herm] *What news?*

[Auto] *News? Oh! A wedding, a resurrection, a quiet
 revolution. Perdita is coming home,
 a suitor in her pocket and a king at her
 heels. Her father suspects nothing, but soon
 his kingdom will be hers. A ghost princess
 returns from the desert of wolves and bears,
 and a dead queen, too, must soon
 be resurrected.*

[Herm] *Perdita is coming home?*

[Auto] *And you are discovered, good queen. The king
 has ears and eyes in the hundred horse chestnut
 and in the physic's chambers. In the walls of this
 your garden, too. He is coming. She returns. And
 all that was once hidden will too soon be revealed.*

10. *Are they near?*

The last time we were alone, you were standing on the dais in our walled garden. Perdita's blooms growing at your feet. It was late afternoon and you were weary. *Are they near?* you said. I looked along the road and saw dust, rising in the distance. *They are coming*, I said, and drew the curtain closed around you. There, as though in a lover's tent, I lay one last kiss on your cheek. Your flesh was cold. I could almost believe you a statue.

Are they near? you said. I listened for the beat of horses, for the rattle of the harness.

They are near, I said, and bent to arrange the long hem of the chiton at your feet. *Remember, when they come, you must not breathe, must not blush.*

[Herm] *Until you give the word: until you say 'perceive she stirs'. You will follow us to the palace?*

Yes, I said. *I will follow you wherever you are moved to go, so long as you have need of me.*

[Herm] *Are they near?* you said.

I heard the scuff of sandals in the road, smelt leather, lilacs and horses. *They are here*, I said. I could not meet your eyes, but you, in any case, were looking towards some other love. Long lost, and now returned.

11. *Your second death*

The night of your second death, I placed a pillow 'neath your neck
pulled the sheets up over your cancer-wasted body, and
kissed your pale cheeks. You looked so warm, so lifelike,
I was sure you would wake when you heard the strike
of Perdita's boot on the stone-flagged floor. No heart but mine
broke when you did not move. Did not take a breath.

You lay, peaceful. Ruined. Your chest flat and swaddled,
your face bald of curls, or lashes or brows.
Perdita knelt at your side, took your unfamiliar hand
and wept for all her father's foolishness had wrought.

I knelt beside her, bent my head to pray
that your second death would be as fleeting as the first.
I took your hand and turned it, upwards like a tulip
or a daffodil. Kissed the tips of each pale petal.
Oh, but your hand, it is still warm! I cried.
Perdita put her arm around me, drew me away.
It is your hot tears that makes it so, she said.

12. *To sum up, honestly*

To sum up. Honestly,
I am not very good at sum-
ming up.

As a linguist I was trained to strive
for exactitude; to believe that
rigorous imitation – without residue, without
loss – is possible.

But here it is, the residue of you, which does
not, can not, never will
exist again. It moves like
a daffodil like
a doxy like
red blood in this:
my winter's tale.

Endnotes

1. Some sections of this text are directly lifted from Shakespeare's play, *The Winter's Tale*. Wherever this occurs in the text, an endnote gives the act, scene, and line numbers of the source. III, iii, 1514-1516
2. III, iii, 1524-1528
3. III, iii, 1546-1547
4. This lullaby is very loosely based on the rhythm and rhyme scheme of 'Gascoigne's Lullaby' by George Gascoigne (1534?-1577)
5. IV, iii, 1943-1944
6. IV, iii, 1997-2008

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Research statement

Research background

So invisible are the intimate relationships between women that it took until 2001 for anyone to ask: “Where was Hermione kept so secretly for sixteen years ... [was she] living at Paulina’s?” (Jankowski 2001). The invisibility of these relationships between women are, for Jankowski and myself, an invitation to consider the generative possibilities of asking what these two women might have been doing together during this temporal and narrative gap: this ‘lesbian void’ (Jankowski 2001).

Research contribution

This work imagines and enacts Jankowski’s lesbian void in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, while at the same time interrogating the relationships between silence, death and the (queer/female) body. This original work appropriates images, characters, settings and phrases from the Shakespearean text into new stories and situations, making them perform queered identities and experiences. This method of reworking and queering images and identities/characters involves the use of alogical processes of association: supporting Freud’s ‘reciprocal relations’ between dissimilars (1900: 404) and Froeschel’s assertion that ‘the subconscious considers similarity identical with identity’ (in Mavromatis 1987: 178).

Research significance

This piece was accepted for presentation at, and performed during, the international Australian and New Zealand Shakespeare Association annual conference (Shakespearean Perceptions) in 2014 and for peer reviewed publication in *TEXT* journal.

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