

If This Be Error

by richardgloucester

Somewhere between life and death, a man clings to truth against all odds. This is my submission to the SSHG Exchange 2011, written to a prompt by Lady_Rhian which was, simply, Shakespeare's sonnet 116. Thanks as ever to my wonderful alpha and beta team: Annie Talbot, Machshefa, Subversa, Bluestocking, Pyjamapants.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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If this be Error

I am I was a man.

You lift the quill from the page and look at the words you have written. The ink is dull, but the mute soulsong glows beneath your eyes.

Six words.

"Lying already, Severus?"

Your six paltry syllables seem feeble to these juggernaut words that beat the desiccated air. Three words that make the sky vibrate. That raise the hairs on your arms. Words that act and move and do what living things do.

The voice that utters them, no voice, a hollowness of dust and bone.

"Lying already, Severus?"

You heard these words a second ago, or a day, or a lifetime, yet they are gone. Memory has no substance.

Your words, the words you dragged out of a nib by force of will, blood from flesh ink from quill, these words remain.

And I was loved.

*

What is a word?

It is thought.

And what is writing?

Thought made flesh.

You wonder briefly what cruel mind wrote you. Who made this story of aching flesh?

You tighten the idea of fingers around the notion of a pen.

And I loved her.

The nib is a barb. It gouges the dream of skin to bleed truth onto parchment.

"Writing things down doesn't make them true, Severus." The voice is kindly.

Once upon a time ...

Once upon a time, that place where archetypes dwell, where truth becomes Truth.

Once upon a time, the written word was Truth. Ink was immutable. Every age had its Book, and the Book was Truth. The ink of the Book flowed freely through other pens

"And was diluted, Severus. It is naïf to think that a thing is true just because it has been scrawled across a page. You corrected enough essays to know that."

But at least they tried. You made them fear error, fear to write a lie.

"And what about fiction? You surely don't believe all those millions of stories are real?"

But they hold, each and every one of them, a germ, a seed, a breath, of Truth.

You have a story, and you believe in it.

You etch its pristine acid into your page.

I am I was a man. And I was loved. And I loved her.

"Such a pretty lie, Severus."

*

You consider this.

You lived a lie.

But you never told a lie.

"Well, that's not entirely what we think of as the truth, is it, now?"

You raise your eyes to the red-ochre sky. You cannot see who speaks.

You know you never told a lie.

"What about all the truths you never voiced? All those things you kept hidden from one person or another? Surely a truth untold is much the same as a lie?"

There is a cage. Between the bars are all the places where the truth should have been. The bars no longer hold. The iron is rust; the lock an exhalation. Between them ... that is what confines you. Who was it kept those truths untold? Who caged you?

Your own words mock you. If you lived a lie, how can your story be the truth?

"A paradox is not a man, Severus. Accept it. All those sins of omission, all those lies."

Someone taught you how to lie like this.

And yet.

And yet.

A paradox can be cracked open, and in it will be meat.

You raise your eyes again. Red-ochre; black winds. But there, a point of light.

*

He paced the classroom between the benches, alert as ever. He didn't really expect any major catastrophes though Longbottom could probably explode a cauldron of cold water no, this time his attention was directed at something he knew he would not find. Nobody ever passed this test. They didn't even know it was a test, more fool their innocent little hearts. And that was the lesson not the routine of chopping and stirring and mixing as they followed the recipe on the board.

As he neared the back of the room, he became aware that one pair of busy hands had fallen still.

"What is it, Miss Granger? You have something better to do than take part in today's lesson?"

She was frowning at the blackboard.

"Miss Granger. You will pay attention to me when I address you."

The rest of the class was certainly paying attention.

She let the knife fall from her fingers.

"There's something missing."

"I beg your pardon?"

"There's something missing from the recipe, sir."

"Oh, really? And what, pray, might that be?"

He crushed the excitement that reared in his chest.

She frowned back at the board.

"I think ... No I *know* it's lapis lazuli. Ground to a fine powder would be best, given the purpose of the potion."

"Then I suggest you go and fetch some from the store cupboard."

To a gasp from her classmates, she Vanished the contents of her cauldron and began packing up.

Resisting an urge to punch the air, he hardened his voice.

"And what might you be doing, Miss Granger? I told you to fetch your missing ingredient."

"There's no point, sir." She was nervous at her daring. "What I mean is that it's too late in the process to add the lapis to the potion. There would be little or even negative effect were I to do so now and there isn't enough time to start again."

"Congratulations, Miss Granger. It seems that at last you have moved beyond rote-learning. Your reward is to prepare me a summary of the properties and uses of lapis lazuli. The rest of you " He rounded on the class. " will clear up your mess. Your homework will be eighteen inches on the merit of actually thinking while, or preferably before, you follow instructions."

Amid a storm of muttering about wasted time and House points not given, he awarded her a nod. A simple nod. And was repaid in kind.

*

You are there again, watching as it plays out. You see her, and she ... She sees you.

"So she found you out in your lie. There's no cause for triumph in that."

It is not a lie, that missing information on the board. It is a truth to be found and a truth in the finding. She hears the silence, there with her head cocked. She parses the subtext. She looks at you, eyes wide, and reads what is not written between the lies of your life.

"Subtext is a myth, Severus. A collection of imaginings and phantasms backing up a charade."

Your hands clench on the pitted surface of the table. So now the truths unsaid are unreal.

"Nothing is real, Severus."

I am I was a man. And I was loved. And I loved her.

You write it again, to feel the pen snagging your flesh, the flow of your blood into words on a page. This is real. Your pain, and your story, are real. There is no subtext. All that needs saying is said. The rest is detail.

The point of light far off is anomalous. While the sky roils, it holds steady. Though the wind's black pinions beat at you, and you flinch under their fury, the light remains. Untouched.

And I was loved.

Not as a man, not at first.

But surely faith is a form of love.

Your life was never graced with faith. Of course, you have had faith. You had faith. There, somewhere in the red dust, you can glimpse their likeness if you look hard enough. One spurned your faith in her forgiveness. Others returned your faith by binding you. There they are, those rusty iron bars, twisted where their promises punished your trust. You cannot stand in this cramped cage. You cannot rise above the whisper of "traitor" on the circling wind.

Your words are a flesh-memory of standing tall.

And I was loved.

*

"He sounds like he's in love with the Dark Arts!"

The accusation was loud with disgust.

"He sounds like you, Harry."

To know a thing, you had to be the thing at least in imagination. To know how to counter a curse, you had to see yourself casting it, to know the impulse to maim and to destroy. If all you had to protect you was fear, then you would fail.

The boy would not admit this to himself or anyone else; it was only to be hoped that Granger, with her shadowed eyes, would be able to persuade him that to know his enemy was to know himself. If you can see a thing, you can destroy it, however cunningly it hides.

Granger listened, and she learned.

She found her own darkness and she learned to hunt.

She saw him as a fellow-hunter, a wielder of dark weapons in service to the light.

To his masters, he was an instrument of their agency: shackled, gagged, directed.

"There must be a reason why he did it."

He heard her say that when they all thought he had fled.

"Dumbledore trusted him, after all."

"Dumbledore was wrong!" the boy screamed.

They left her alone with her dying glimmer of faith.

"He was not wrong though he bound me when he had no need."

He met her fear and hope with his own naked grief and shame. He showed his cracked mask to her.

"There will be little cause for me to wear this again, Miss Granger. Everyone will see what they expect to see, whatever I may say or do. I will be an acknowledged, not suspected, villain."

Though there were no tears left for Dumbledore, nor for the boy, nor for the world she knew, she wept for him.

"Take what you have learned from me and use it," he said.

When next their paths crossed, he was a man of importance, feared and obeyed. She was a fugitive.

He called her by her name. She took his hand, trusting.

There was no need to bid the other be careful. It was too late for care.

*

"This is what you think of as love?" The voice is incredulous. "Poor, poor Severus. So stunted, little man. One touch, one moment of misguided belief this is not love. Love is an overwhelming passion. It fills your life with incandescence. It opens you like a flower to the sun. It erases ego. Are you even capable of imagining such a thing in that black, selfish heart of yours, Severus?"

You know nothing of such a rush of illumination, sufficient to extinguish the self. That has never been your lot.

Even now, within and without your prison, the red air chokes on burgeoning darkness.

And yet ...

And yet.

Though it is difficult now for you, yoked and chained, to raise your head, you can still see that point of light far off. It calls to you and holds you steady, reminding you that you are. Its glimmer catches in the still-wet ink of your words.

And I loved her.

"You thought about her a lot, Severus. You can have that. But it wasn't love. It was obsession. At best, sappy idealism; at worst, prurient fantasising."

And I loved her.

*

He came away from that chance meeting in London a changed man. He placed the memory of her touch in a phial to be revisited again and again.

Each time, he would see that she was wearing thin with worry, that her isolation even in the company of her friends fattened her fear. Yet she was clean, her clothes in good repair. Her eyes still held hope, and determination, and ... something more.

Her hand was small and dry. She kept her nails short.

"I saw the papers, Professor," she said. "It must be hard for you at Hogwarts."

He snorted.

"They all want to kill me. Sometimes, I wish they'd just get on with it."

Her fingers squeezed his.

"Don't say that. I'm sure you're doing your best."

"Such faith, Miss Granger. My 'best' has little or no effect."

"Then we are in the same boat."

She tried to smile.

"Call me Hermione."

He tightened his grip on her hand.

"Wish me well, then, Hermione."

"I do."

"As I do you. If you need "

"You mustn't endanger yourself. Just spare me us a thought now and again, Professor."

She twisted into nothingness, and he was alone with just a precious memory and a glimmer of something that made him feel less hollow.

He revisited the memory in his darkest moments, drawing strength to be a man when he must present nothing but the monster.

He revisited it until each memory of the memory seemed a stone added to the cairn of his life, a marker of his substance.

*

"But weren't you just saying that memory has no substance?"

You cringe. The black wings are battering you. You are on your knees, though you hold fast to your quill and parchment.

"You are a husk, Severus. You are empty. You build nothing from a heap of nothings until you are less than the sum of nothing at all."

You squint against the red dust hurtling into your face, making whips of your hair. It is near impossible to keep the glimmer in sight, but you know you must. Oblivion is close, and it is easy, but you know it is not the truth.

*

She led him to the boy.

He read between the lies of his life and knew her for the truth he was seeking. Her touch had made him real. She was his lodestone. She drew him, true and honest.

Her absence was presence. She did not hide when he approached their camp.

She left the boy to brood alone and found him in the spaces between the visible. He threw off the magic that kept him hidden. Neither smiled.

"You haven't been eating," he said.

"And you look terrible."

"We will both look worse by the time this ends."

"It doesn't really matter, though, does it?" She came closer and looked up at him. "You've found a way to help us?" He saw himself reflected in her eyes, a part of her. "I wish I could help *you*, sir."

"Make free of my name, Hermione. It would please me to hear it spoken by someone who does not make it sound a curse."

"Severus."

"You will have the sword by morning. Have faith."

"Always."

*

You crouch shaking under the storm. Jagged rocks cushion you as you curl round the grim hold you keep on your story. The quill lacerates your flesh wherever it touches, but it is all the truth you have.

I am I was a man. And I was loved. And I loved her.

Your parchment is worn through with iteration.

Red sand grinds in your joints, flays your skin. You can no longer see anything through the furious tempest. It beats you. It cracks your bones. It wants your truth. Its wings are clawed.

You are blinded, but you know your star is there. In the part of you that has never been written, that is between and above and outside the words you guard with the last shreds of your being, you know.

You cannot tell how long it has been. Years or seconds beyond your huddled terror, now you are on your feet. Your skin is whole and clothed. The red dust has settled. Black pinions fold and rustle against his robe. You cannot see his face under the shadowed cowl as it leans towards you, but you recognise the dark gleam of the blade.

Your star is closer now, brighter.

"She is but a child, Severus. She cannot feel for you as you wish. And what you feel for her is it right that such an innocent be burdened with your bleak heart?"

*

He banged into the classroom already riled. First, against all his wishes and arguments, the headmaster persisted in placing the Slytherins and Gryffindors together, thus making his job ten times more difficult. And second, the Potter brat. He had a headache.

He surveyed the class, giving nothing away. His guilt and bitterness made flesh, Potter's child, was watching him warily. It irked him.

He gave his speech. They listened with varying degrees of comprehension. One child, a girl with absurd hair, sat transfixed, her eyes shining. Such brightness in those eyes. Such eagerness to please, as she waved and pleaded for approval. Such innocence to leave scarred by the first cruel remark he made to her.

Such an innocent.

So easy to wound.

It made him feel powerful and ashamed.

*

"Why would such a creature want *you*, Severus? What has innocence to do with your filth?"

You are seated, a blank parchment on the table before you, a quill in your hand.

Your hands are clean, your clothes immaculate.

He moves to stand in front of you. He is between you and your star. You cannot see his face, but something glints. An eye. Red. No blue. It hardly matters. He is between you and your star.

He pushes the blank page closer to you.

"What is your story, Severus? What is the truth?"

You cannot remember the words.

"Would you shackle her to your corruption? Would you drag her with you into the mire? Would you betray her trust? Would you abuse her so?"

Once, you were all innocents, besmirched, betrayed, abused.

"Are you truly so vain?"

You stand up abruptly, knocking the chair aside. You are taller than he. You strip; you are a bare thing shivering in a wind that scarcely blows. You are ...

You grip the quill, but the parchment does not interest you. There is another page that will serve you better.

The pen is brutal. It does not cut; it rends. You collapse under the assault as you inscribe the words deep into your own flesh.

I am I was a man. And I was loved. And I loved her.

With each wound, you sink lower, but it is he who screams. He who explodes into dust that cannot settle, that flies from the bright ink of your blood.

Your star is very close now. Her light fills your eyes. You reach out to her in farewell. With trembling, filthy fingers, you sketch her features, ever clearer now, bright eyes filled with tears that fall and lay the dust.

*

"Stay, Severus. Stay with me."

You are weak. The pitted floor of the shack is clogged with dust and blood. You are cold. You can barely move.

Her face is thin and bruised and tear-stained.

You are a man. You love, and you are loved.

* * * * *

SONNET 116 by William Shakespeare

Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments. Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove:

O no! it is an ever-fixed mark

That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

It is the star to every wandering bark,

Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickle's compass come:

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

If this be error and upon me proved,

I never writ, nor no man ever loved.