

**ENTER  
THE BODY**

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DUTTON BOOKS

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*For anyone who's ever wanted to retell their story*





## **CONTENT WARNING:**

While none of the following events happen on the page in this telling, these things are referenced as having happened in other versions of these stories: sexual assault, mutilation, and death by many forms, including suicide, murder, hanging, burning, drowning, and intimate partner violence.



**ENTER  
THE BODY**



# DRAMATIS PERSONAE

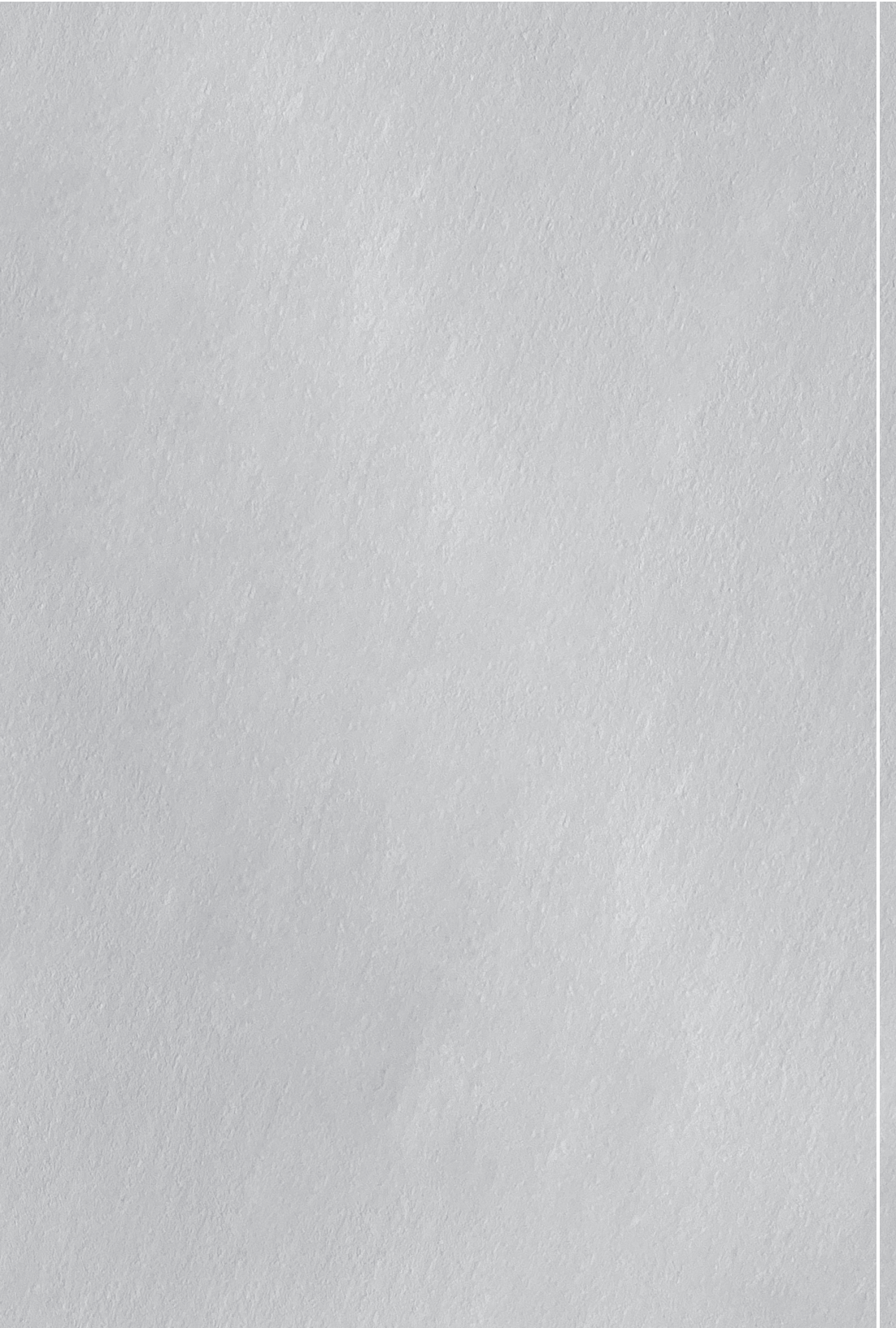
(IN ORDER OF THEIR APPEARANCE IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS)

## PRINCIPAL PLAYERS

LAVINIA	Daughter of King Titus Andronicus; nineteen; enigmatic (and bloody)
JULIET	Daughter of Lord Capulet of Verona; thirteen; eager (despite the knife in her chest)
OPHELIA	Daughter of Polonius, advisor to the king of Denmark; fifteen; ethereal (and drenched)
CORDELIA	Daughter of King Lear; seventeen; driven (with bruising around her neck)

## SUPPORTING PLAYERS

JOAN OF ARC	(burned at the stake)
GERTRUDE	(poisoned)
DESDEMONA	(strangled)
EMILIA	(stabbed)
GONERIL	(died by suicide)
REGAN	(poisoned)
LADY MACBETH	(died by suicide)
CLEOPATRA	(bitten by an asp, suicide)



# PART ONE

*Women may fall,  
when there's no strength in men.*

—William Shakespeare  
*Romeo and Juliet*, 1597





# [TRAP ROOM]

*(The trap room beneath all the stages, anywhere. The ghost light is perpetually on, but it illuminates very little. Which makes it easier to keep to oneself.*

*That woman with blood on her hands, for example, always wanders into the same corner, every time she crashes through that great stage of fools to this space beneath. Muttering to herself, but never to anyone else.*

*The one in the nightgown with strangle marks around her neck—clutching a handkerchief like it'll save her from these men, these men—she usually heads to a corner too, after the fall. But only because she doesn't know what else to do.*

*It's a room, but there are infinite corners.*

*Enough for everyone to avoid the zealot in singed armor who reeks of the fire that burned her. Or the wild-eyed queen who looks as though she died a dozen deaths before she drank the poison that brought her here. The sisters who killed one another definitely need their own corners.*

*They crash through, again and again, these women, while the boards above their heads creak with the trodding of the ones who live, or die in glory.*

*It gets to be monotonous.*

*But now comes a girl the others aren't accustomed to. It's not that she hasn't been down here before. In fact, she arrived before the rest of them, a violent splotch of ink from the quill of the Bard so young he hadn't yet mastered his instrument. She is the first draft to his later masterpieces; without her they don't exist. And yet they can be forgiven for not remembering her; the moment they see her, they do their level bests to shove her from their minds.*

*You would too. Only I won't let you.*

*The jolt this first-draft girl receives when her body crumples to the ground is the least of her concerns. Those concerns are pretty evenly tied between the*

*blood that gushes from her mouth, and also from the end of each arm, where hands should be. But hands are not.*

*She doesn't even bother uncrumpling. What would be the point?*

*But there's one woman under this stage compelled to help her, one who has known violence herself and is young enough to remember, while old enough to imagine herself maternal, even if she never survives to bear a child. This maternal one—in a flimsy nightgown that is by design transparent when stage lights hit it exactly right—approaches the bloody heap.*

*She strokes the girl's hair, soothes the frightened creature until she looks up. The woman startles; for a moment she's not certain whether this girl is prey or predator. Perhaps she is covered in someone else's blood?*

*She is—but not at her choosing. And her lack of hands offers irrefutable evidence that the girl herself has been on the receiving end of some significant evil.*

*The woman brings forth her handkerchief, the one that causes her such endless trouble on the stage above; she might as well put it to productive use while she has the chance.*

*It's a ridiculous thing, flimsy as her nightdress and no match for the ghastly amounts of blood streaming down the girl's face. But wielded by one who wishes to be of use, it somehow does what it is meant to do.*

*The girl is still wrecked; that cannot be undone. But she is no longer a horror show. And after everything she's been through, the miracle is not that she lives, but that she does not want to be alone. She still craves company. She resists the corners.*

*This girl, her name is Lavinia. Names are important, even if no one says them. Let's say she's nineteen. She considers her options. The woman with the handkerchief has already retreated. The women in the corners are there for a reason.*

*There are other girls who want nothing to do with corners, though. Cordelia,*

*seventeen, sits in the center of it all. Bedraggled, she's clearly been through some shit, but it's more important than anything that she keep it together, that you not see the struggle.*

*And nearby, another girl. Ophelia, fifteen, is soaking wet. Absolutely drenched. There may be a few leaves in her hair.*

*Lavinia watches these girls—calligraphy to her splotch of ink—who resist the corners. They see her, but their gazes glance off her. They are shoving her from their minds, like I said they would. In fairness, they both have a lot going on, even if they aren't missing appendages.*

*Ophelia is not okay, but she's not trying to conceal it. She is soaking wet, after all. It's pretty hard to hide that something has gone awry. She doesn't just walk around like this, normally, with pond scum clinging to her dress. This is not usual, except for every time the water drags her down and she crashes into this purgatory.*

*Cordelia is used to ignoring Ophelia. But now this third girl is here. Watching. Disturbing the norms of the trap room. Cordelia thought she was alone. She's used to being alone. Her own sisters are there, each in their own corners, and even they don't glance toward her. It's not that Cordelia likes it this way; it's just the only way it's ever been, even up above, and how on earth is she supposed to adjust to something new at this point?*

*Anyway.*

*Here they are. For a while. Time doesn't mean much in this place. They've just arrived, or maybe they've languished for an eternity, when Juliet crashes through.*

*Juliet, age thirteen, is also not okay. This is evidenced by the dagger in her heart. She's making a big production of it too. Even Cordelia can't look away as the girl wrenches the dagger from her chest and makes a show of figuring out where to put it. Like it matters.*

*Ophelia considers approaching her, helping her. She's not sure how, or if she's*

*allowed, as though there are rules here. But when your world has been composed entirely of rules—rules that landed you here, in fact—it's a difficult adjustment.*

*Lavinia flinches at the sight of the dagger. She's safe now—at least until she's called back up and it starts all over again—but logic is nothing against her memories of what a blade can do. Anyway, it's not like she could help; she doesn't have hands.*

*Cordelia works hard to act as though the others aren't there. She has had enough of dramatic, bleeding girls to last a lifetime. Or an eternity, as it were.*

*Once Juliet figures out the dagger situation—all she has to do is release it and it's gone, which is a lesson that might have been valuable to learn sooner, but what this eternity has no time for is regret—her gaze lands on Lavinia.*

*And then darts away—I told you it would—and searches desperately for something else, someone else to latch on to. It's harder for Juliet to shove Lavinia from her mind. Perhaps it's their shared experience with daggers. Perhaps it's her youth. She would have nightmares, if sleep were permitted here.*

*Ophelia allows her eye to be caught. She understands Juliet's panic and glances apologetically toward Cordelia, as though it's her fault this other girl won't acknowledge their presence.*

*Juliet isn't bothered. It won't be the first time she's been required to wrest attention from the unwilling.)*

## A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

**You think me weak**  
that I would plunge  
a blade into my heart  
because the boy I loved  
lay lifeless at my side.

But love is weakness.  
Love is ripping out  
your beating heart, laid bare  
to the slings and arrows  
of outrageous fortune.

Or maybe that vulnerability  
is a kind of strength.  
Hard to say  
while the blood  
drains from my body.

**Here's what I knew of love**  
growing up in that house:

My nursemaid's devotion  
above all else.

Father's love of his name,  
his wealth, himself.

Servants rutting  
behind the stables,  
perhaps not love  
but want at least.

And Mother?  
Mother found  
less love than I  
in the House of Capulet.

**Mother was a child**

when betrothed to my father.  
You think that's the way of things,  
but that's a lie, a symmetrical heart.

(A lie unearthed  
when Father wished  
to ally himself  
with the House of Paris.)

The other girls Mother's age  
waded in the creek  
and braided the hair  
of dolls they loved more  
than Father would ever love

as Mother was led  
to the marriage bed,  
a seed planted  
that could never bear fruit.

So many seeds sown  
but if planted  
in unprepared soil  
they won't have  
what they need  
to grow.

Any decent farmer  
knows that.

**Finally my seed took root**

when Mother was no longer a child,  
a miracle considering  
the wreckage of her body  
after so many unborn children.

Some gone  
before she knew they grew.  
Some just as her belly began to round,  
would tear off pieces of her heart  
as they fled her body.

And some survived  
until she summoned  
all her strength  
to push them through  
a passage not meant to be breached  
an ocean through a pinprick  
and out they'd come  
skin blue and cold.

By the time I arrived  
pink and needy  
she could barely look upon me.



**She looked upon the altar instead**

the church offering not love  
but certainty and structure.

It started before I was born.  
When she could not control  
her womb, she could memorize her scripture,  
make her confessions, complete her penance.

And then I arrived, but  
I too was unpredictable.  
She dragged me to Mass  
where I watched the weight  
roll off her shoulders  
as I squirmed on the hard pews  
through endless liturgies  
that could never surprise  
or disappoint her.

**Poor little rich girl**

the servants might say  
if they heard my woes.  
I never wanted for anything  
but love.

A fortune's worth  
of dolls and ribbons,  
feasts and balls,  
gowns and trinkets.

Who was I to complain  
if Mother was cold  
and Father was  
Father?

**Even Nurse**

who truly showered me  
with adoration,  
listened to my every woe  
and wove her love  
into every mended seam,  
careful curl, bawdy joke.

Even she loved me  
like a daughter.

Like  
    a daughter.

A substitute  
for Susan,  
the one she lost.  
Most of the time  
that was enough.

**I always knew**

my course was set.  
The perfect daughter  
until I became  
the perfect wife.

Still, I used to daydream  
of a life like Susan's.

(If my beloved nurse's  
child had lived.)

Simple cot  
in servants' quarters,  
garments the same,  
day unto day.  
Fingers raw from  
scrubbing dishes or  
soiled laundry or  
hauling water for  
the mistress's bath

but also  
a kind of freedom  
in clear roles  
in honest work

and the chance  
to marry for love.

# [TRAP ROOM]

*(In the trap room, one woman shifts from her corner, agitated. She's tempted to interrupt, tell this girl who wanted for nothing how ungrateful she was, how foolish to throw it all away. To stab a sword through her own heart.*

*As far as this woman is concerned, clear roles and honest work can just as easily get you run through by the sword of the one you married for love.*

*But no one notices this woman's agitation. Just like they didn't notice her up above.*

*Ophelia listens, rapt, to Juliet's story. Verona is far from Denmark, but Ophelia feels at home in the tale of complicated families.*

*Cordelia relates more than she'd like, to feeling like a pawn in someone else's game.*

*And Lavinia? No hands, no tongue, but her ears work perfectly, and Lavinia is listening still.)*

**Before Romeo**

I met Count Paris at the ball  
and knew why he was there.

Handsome, wealthy,  
smooth as his kidskin gloves  
but subtle as Nurse  
at the bottom of a bottle.

Subtle or not  
he would wait.  
Father wouldn't marry  
me off so soon.

But Father introduced us,  
          cheeks already ruddy  
          from dance and drink  
but not so far gone  
he couldn't envision our family  
allied to a count.  
Father pushed me into  
the arms of that titled man,  
who chuckled at me  
as though I'd thrown myself.

**As we danced**

Count Paris  
gripped my waist  
too tight

breathed hot  
on my face

and trod  
on my toes.

But he spoke  
kindly, painted  
lovely pictures  
of his estate  
his horses  
his gardens.

Asked  
my favorite  
flower.

He did not repel me  
and I thought

it could be worse.

**The moment I locked eyes**

across a crowded  
sea of dancers  
with a boy  
whose gaze  
burned through me  
his name irrelevant

an unfamiliar spark ignited  
a flame of white-hot anger:

Why should I settle  
for *could be worse*?

Why should I be denied  
desires of my own?

Why should I perform perfection  
for people who fall so short?



**Hunger**

like I've never known,  
the all-consuming need  
to absorb the entirety of this soul  
whose every breath syncs up with mine.

Once I'd felt that grip on my gut  
that racing pulse  
desperate want

how could I ever  
be satisfied  
with less?

**We don't jump, intentional.**

Shuffle, unsure.

We don't confidently strut  
or crawl in despair.

We're not dropped  
by some unseen hand,  
we don't squeeze in  
or glide with grace.

We don't sprint (even when  
some might claim we're rushing).  
And we don't soar heavenward.

We fall.

Tumbling head over heels  
we don't know which way  
is up, can't control our limbs,  
smash into innocents along the way,  
are bruised and battered and

so alive.

**The first time I fell**

I was dropped  
into a life  
I didn't choose.

This time  
as I hurtled toward Romeo

I fell away  
from that role  
I was supposed to play,  
a sudden escape

through an unseen trapdoor,  
sleight-of-hand stage magic

and I was gone.

**Montague**

a name meant  
to augment an ego  
an age ago

a mean moat  
man get gone  
ante unmet

a mate not man  
gent to mount  
mute a moan  
untame a tongue

one man a gem

**Capulet**

a petal teacup  
cute lace pleat

leap

a plea acute

let a pale pact cut a tale

**Shedding garments**

in my room that night  
each brush of fabric  
across skin on fire,  
my nurse believed  
I'd reached the bottom  
of my own bottle.

Twirling in my chemise,  
clutching gown to chest,  
drinking in the scent of the boy  
who had pressed up against it,  
perhaps I would never stop dancing.

*I'm dizzy just  
looking at you.*

I laughed at my nurse,  
pressed the gown into her arms,  
danced my way out

to the balcony.

**My favorite place**  
in the entire world  
was the balcony  
off my chambers.

Father owned all,  
Mother ruled the staff,  
but this one space  
was my dominion.

Even Nurse never  
stepped past the door.  
Perhaps heights frightened her  
but more likely she realized  
I needed one space  
to be messy and true.

One space  
to weep and rage  
and sing and dance  
and dream and grieve  
before I pulled myself back

into the girl I had to be.

**I called his name**

into the night  
because I could

because no one  
would hear my cry

and I loved  
how it felt  
in my mouth

and maybe  
a part of me  
believed  
he would hear,

we were so connected  
that no matter  
where he was  
he'd know I called for him  
and he'd call back.



**When he did**

my heart careened  
in mad circles  
through my chest  
and up my throat  
and out into the night.

He was there  
when I called.  
Of course he was.

But also, saints and angels, how  
was he there beneath my window,  
this boy, a Montague, who risked his life  
to stand on Capulet grounds?

And why was he down on the ground  
and not up in my arms, why  
didn't the intensity of his love  
propel him up through the air  
defy the force that kept  
him pinned to earth  
for we were stronger  
than mere laws of nature.

**Feuds handed down**

through generations,  
an heirloom to a toddler  
who cannot understand its value  
but quickly learns  
what happens when  
it isn't prized above all else.

Hate learned before letters,  
a name more vile  
than the coarsest insult

filthy whoreson  
heir of a mongrel bitch  
plague-sore  
puke-stocking  
lump of foul deformity

but nothing's worse than Montague.

**One love couldn't change**

the course of things,  
a seagull's breath  
against the ocean's tides.

Could we even call it love,  
this spark ignited when palm met palm  
and turned to raging inferno that threatened  
to incinerate the world around us?

Whatever it was, it drove Romeo  
to my garden, my heart,  
drove me to dream beyond  
the hate I'd learned.

Perhaps a seagull's breath  
could turn the tides.

**When I returned**

to my room a new girl,  
Nurse must have known  
my scarlet cheeks didn't burn for Paris.

Of course she knew,  
for at the ball I sent her  
to learn Romeo's name.  
Oh, dear, dear Nurse.

*How nice for you  
to get some air.*

She let down my hair  
with a twinkle in her eye.

*It's done you well,  
that glow upon your cheeks.*

A giggle bubbled up.  
I waited for her scolding,  
her warning against  
such foolish dreams.

*I think you ought to make a habit  
of taking the air in the evenings.  
For your health, of course.*

I threw my arms around her  
for I could not hold Romeo  
and I had so much love to give.

**My tongue bled**  
 through breakfast  
 as I bit back  
 every new word  
 and touch and feeling  
 I'd come to know  
 from one day to the next.

Instead Father regaled us with tales  
 of the ball we all attended  
 as though we hadn't been there,  
 applauded himself for his hosting prowess.  
 Mother gripped her fork so tight  
 I thought she might bend metal.

I barely listened until

*Montague.*

Why would he speak  
 the name of my love?  
 He didn't speak it like I would,  
 a wish, a kiss, a song.  
 Did he see when we danced?  
 When our hearts became one?

But now he spoke  
 of Tybalt, my cousin,  
 who, though I'm fond,  
 had nothing to do with  
 matters of my heart.

*What of Tybalt and the Montagues?*

Mother and Father both froze,  
forks halfway to their mouths.  
Had I ever expressed  
the slightest interest  
in their pointless feud?

*Young Tybalt  
nearly turned the ball into a brawl  
when he spotted a Montague in disguise.*

My heart caught.  
Father knew Romeo was there?  
And did nothing?  
That was very nearly  
cause for hope.

*I don't know why  
you stopped him.*

Mother's voice was petulant,  
nonsensical. Would she prefer  
the ball have turned to bloodshed?

*He caused no harm.  
None but Tybalt  
even realized  
he was there.*

**None but Tybalt**

save myself  
my nurse  
the other girls  
whose heads he turned.

*No one realized*

which means of course  
that Father didn't realize,  
and there is no one else  
who matters.

## [TRAP ROOM]

*(In the trap room, there is a moment, a thrum of recognition.*

*These girls, these women, they're queens and ladies' maids, spanning centuries, slain by their own hands or by another's, but they've all felt this shifting ground, this realization that their own experiences are of no consequence to a man they've trusted.*

*Not only of no consequence, but their experiences can be leverage used against them by a man they've trusted. By a father. Lavinia's wounds bleed more freely as her heartbeat accelerates.)*



**When Nurse delivered**

a note from my love  
 I thrilled to the strokes  
 from his pen, the way he knew  
 I ached to see him. He sent word  
 of a meeting place where no one  
 cared about our names.

*You must take me to Friar Laurence!*

Nurse laughed as she made up my bed.

*Look who's the little despot today!  
 Love does make one tyrannical.  
 Why, my Susan—*

*Nurse!*

I usually allowed her  
 to prattle on about  
 her long-lost Susan  
 but now was not the time  
 to linger on a mother's love.  
 I had other things to linger on now.

*My sky-blue dress.  
 Hair up, I think. Or down?*

*Taking great pains  
 to impress the Holy Father?*

I shoved the note into her hands  
    ( she claimed not to read  
    but had puzzled out  
    private notes before)  
and went to retrieve the dress myself.

**The friar's door opened**

with a heady rush of scents,  
his ceiling an upside-down forest  
of herbs bound together.

His eyes twinkled.

*Signorina Capulet. Would you  
to the chapel for confession?*

I suppose  
I had much  
to confess,  
though in truth  
I felt  
more sinned against  
than sinning.

Behind me, Nurse chuckled,  
then the friar did too.

*Do not keep me from her  
a moment longer!*

At Romeo's voice  
my heart split open.  
I rushed past the teasing friar  
and there he was,  
most beautiful of creatures.  
High cheekbones, perfect lips,  
eyes I could live in forever.

We'd only just met the night before.  
Could my feelings be real?  
That was like asking if the wind blows.  
The wind is not visible, a grounded thing,  
but it's real as a hurricane.

He stepped forward, hand outstretched.

*My rose.*