

ANNE

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We last saw Walt Whitman Blakeley in the early 90s. He was boarding a plane for New York City, after backpacking on the Appalachian Trail with his father, Tom. Walt was making his way as an actor after intermittent attendance at the University of Arizona. When acting didn't pan out, Walt somehow got into the graduate program at SUNY Stonybrook, married a fellow student, emerged with a doctorate in English and hooked on as an instructor at Bolton College, a liberal arts school a few miles east of Manchester, Vermont.

Walt loved it there, although his wife Naomi did not. She was ill-suited to life anywhere but Brooklyn or Queens, and they were soon divorced. Walt went on with his teaching. One assignment he liked was Bolton's introductory sequence in Shakespeare. Bolton offered introductory courses in the Comedies, Tragedies, and even the Histories, and they were very popular with the artsy crowd who populated Bolton, two-thirds of them women.

For reasons he only partially understood, Walt very much liked to teach the Comedies. The more he taught the course and he taught it every semester, the more he appreciated that, like almost everything in Shakespeare, nothing was simple. Walt was a great believer that Shakespeare is perfectly homogenous, a compound of many things, none of them just one thing or another. That is, you can see just about all of Shakespeare's vision in any one particular play. For instance, Walt was struck by how much decay and death play a prominent role in the comedies. He liked this especially because it added depth to his lectures and discussions.

Like many of the comedies, the narrative of *Love's Labour's Lost* is riddled with awareness of the end of life. This is especially true with the courtly ladies, who are much more mature and aware of life's boundaries than the silly King and his boyish followers. Called away from her embassy to the King's Court by the death of her own father, the realistic Princess admonishes the boys that their avowals of love are too sudden "to make a world without end bargain in." This occurs in the play's last lines, but the theme of time passing to its inevitable end appears throughout.

Walt found that the essence of these plays was contained in the songs dotting their texts. It was there that the notion of inevitable evanescence following the exuberance of youth appeared most starkly. At the end of *Love's Labour's Lost*, it is portrayed artfully: in song Spring duels with Winter. Lovers disport in spring “When daisies pied and violets blue. . . do paint the meadows with delight” but in the background we hear the incessant song of the cuckoo, death to love and lovers, and Spring’s song is followed by that of Winter, when birds sit brooding in the snow and “Nightly sings the staring owl” bird of night and death. “A merry note,” the Bard ironically comments, as he ends the play.

This awareness of the passage of time is clearer in the songs of more mature plays, for instance in *As You Like It*. There we have the beautiful song “It was a lover and his lass” whom we find passing over the cornfield in springtime. Unfortunately, Shakespeare tells us that Spring is the only “pretty ring time.” For, as the song tells us “a life [is] but a flower” its length and beauty short and cruelly fading. Similarly, in another song in the same play, the lover and his lass want to lie “under the greenwood tree” where they will find “no enemy” but “winter and rough weather.” This sounds reasonably bucolic until you remember that “winter” is a metaphor in Shakespeare’s sonnets for old age and the approach of death. (“That time of year thou may’st in me behold/ When yellow leaves, or few, or none do hang...” Sonnet 73). Likewise, “rough weather” is a metaphor for the disturbance of right order in the universe. The scene on the heath in *Lear* is only one powerful example.

Walt wondered how much the heads behind the innocent often pretty faces of his largely co-ed classes absorbed of this rather disheartening theme. He found love problematic himself in those days, as he grieved over the failure of his own short marriage.

He found buckets of truth in another of the songs in *As You Like It*:

Blow, blow thou winter wind

Thou art not so unkind

As Man’s ingratitude:

Thy tooth is not so keen

Because thou art not seen

Although thy breath be rude. . . .

Most friendship is feigning, most love is mere folly. . . .

After a couple of years alone, with some surreptitious dating of Bolton girls—he rationalized that as long as they weren't in his classes, when seeing them, it was ok—he met Nora Blackburn, working behind the information desk at Northshire Book Shop in Manchester. This was during his fifth year at Bolton, and it was good he found Nora when he did because he soon got the ugly word that the college would not consider him for tenure. Nora was divorced herself. She had two young daughters and Walt was comforted at this troubled time in having a ready-made family. As his days at Bolton seemed doomed to end, he found himself focusing more and more on Nora and her kids. Only during the nine to five hours spent on campus, teaching, preparing classes and keeping office hours, did he think about Bolton, and Shakespeare, and the girls of Bolton, whom he had loved in one way or another.

So Walt was somewhat startled by an encounter he had on a weekend trip. As he and Nora were lunching just off Harvard Square, Anne McCarthy, a former student, burst into the bar with several Cambridge friends. Anne greeted Walt warmly. She seemed very happy to see Walt, and was equally glad to meet Nora. Anne was a tall, rawboned girl, handsome rather than pretty, sharp featured but somehow striking. Under the circumstances, Walt was most grateful he had never dated her. Indeed, he had paid scant attention to Anne, who seemed a very average student contributing little to class discussion. It was good seeing her though, and Walt appreciated that his attractive former student remembered him so positively.

The winter months passed, and Walt was given one final year at Bolton, out of pity, he thought, when he couldn't land a job anywhere else. Late in the summer before that final year, Walt drove down to JFK to pick up his father and stepmother, Sally, who were returning from Europe. They wanted to stop off at Bolton and give Nora and her girls the once over. Their plane was late, and as Walt idled away the hours in the terminal under the famous Calder mobile, who came through the concourse, bronzed, in hiking shorts and boots, sporting a pack but Anne McCarthy. Walt and Anne spotted each other and chatted for a few minutes. Anne had been backpacking through Europe for most of the summer. It had been a splendid time. Looking healthy and very happy, Anne walked out of Walt's sight forever.

The final year at Bolton dragged. It was February, and Walt was reading the morning paper over eggs at his favorite diner, when he spotted a sobering headline: "Bolton Student Killed in Car Crash." Anne McCarthy, 20, of Wayzata, Minnesota, had died returning to campus

from a night out with friends at local bars. The car had not made a hairpin turn, one that had taken the lives of several other students over the years.

Walt felt bad for Anne, as well as for the driver of the death car, another student of his, who had survived with minor injuries. It only added to the general gloom emanating from his waning career. The accident had momentarily receded from his consciousness as he sat in his office a few days later when a co-ed he did not know knocked and timidly asked if she could come in. There was to be a memorial service for Anne in a day or two. She loved your Shakespeare class, Dr. Blakeley. Can you think of anything we could read at the service?

He could, and he gave the girl the references, and shared a little of what he might have said in the class Anne had attended. He had not planned on going to the memorial service. But now he had to.

The service, held late one afternoon in the seldom used chapel, was sparsely attended. Walt was the only faculty member present. Perhaps a couple dozen students were there also. The President of Bolton, who hated Walt and whom Walt detested, presided, but did give Walt a grudging smile of welcome. There were the usual prayers and reminiscences, and at an appropriate point the student who had come to Walt's office took the rostrum and recited what she said were Anne's favorite poems, including these from *Twelfth Night*:

“What is love? ‘Tis not hereafter;
Present mirth hath present laughter;
What's to come is still unsure:
In delay there lies no plenty;
Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty,
Youth's a stuff will not endure.”

and

“Come away, come away, death
and in sad cypress let me be laid.
Fly away, fly away, breath
I am slain by a fair cruel maid.
My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,

O, prepare it
My part of death, no one so true
Did share it.”

Walt left the memorial service at its end without speaking to anyone. He got in his car quickly and drove too quickly over to Nora’s place in Manchester. He did not want to be alone. He mused about what had happened the last night of Anne’s life. Had she taken the whole *carpe diem* thing too seriously and been drinking and driving heedlessly, ignoring the “hereafter?” No, Walt decided. He knew the boy who had been driving. He was a hopeless screw up. It was only too bad he would be bearing the weight of Anne’s death for the rest of his life.

Nora asked him good humouredly about the service and he told her who had been there and how it went. He felt better. He stayed for dinner. Later, a cold rain started as he drove home, and he remembered how he had felt the day of the first rain after his dad, his sister Ingrid and he had laid his mother Grace to rest at Spring Grove back in Cincinnati. He couldn’t help but think of Anne lying under the rain out in Minnesota.

Rain is often a corrosive, deadly element in Shakespeare, wearing away everything it touches, just as it does in life, and Walt had not had the heart to suggest that this be read at Anne’s memorial, the final words of *Twelfth Night*, the last great words of what we too easily call Shakespearean comedy:

When that I was a little tiny boy,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
A foolish thing was but a toy,
For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came to man’s estate,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
‘Gainst knaves and thieves men shut their gate,
For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came, alas, to wive,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,

By swaggering could I never thrive,
For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came unto my beds,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
With tosspots still had drunken heads,
For the rain it raineth every day.

A great while ago the world begun,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain;
But that's all one, our play is done,
And we'll strive to please you every day.

Anne's play was done. Walt hoped what she had read with him had pleased and comforted her as much as the hearing of those other paradoxical words of love, laughter and always loss had pleased and comforted him only hours before. For the rain it raineth every day.