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## Words Alone

### I

“By heaven methinks it were an easy leap  
To pluck bright honour from the pale-fac'd moon”

*Henry the Fourth, Part I*

On the first afternoon of that summer the sun beat down on all eighteen of us standing in a ragged line on the burnt grass. A stocky, gray-haired man with a raspy voice spit out words at us as he paced back and forth. How we were worthless and weak, that none of us were worthy of being here, that the groups before us had the right stuff: brains, guts, determination. We were no better than spoiled candy-asses who had no idea what was going on. That this was work, hard work, backbreaking work of the body, mind, and spirit.

“Yeah,” he said, sneering. “You think you know what's going on. You know absolutely NOTHING!”

A fire ant crawled up my leg. I flicked it off. Across the dirt road a Holstein cow chewed methodically and stared blankly. The tirade continued. Sweat ran down the old man's shiny, forehead. I glanced down the line at the stunned expressions of my fellow inductees. Their mothers probably told them if they went to college nobody would ever talk to them this way.

None of his words could touch me. I was married, a tough guy. Right now my quiet wife, Jeanette, was back in Austin, sitting in her air-conditioned cubicle at G&S Typesetters and proofreading textbook manuscripts, looking for misspelled and misused words. I wondered if she envied me for getting to run away from home for the summer.

It wasn't football two-a-days.

It wasn't boot camp.

It wasn't the circus.

It was Shakespeare at Winedale.

The Shakespeare at Winedale program is the brainchild of Dr. James Ayres, an English professor at the University of Texas, the screaming old man. Every summer for more than twenty-five years he's taken fifteen to twenty students out to the UT Winedale Historical Center property during July and August to put together productions of three Shakespeare plays. In 1990 my class did *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Henry the Fourth, Part I*. The students are usually liberal arts or hard science majors with little or no acting

experience. There are no tryouts (and no drama or theater majors). Ayres interviews candidates in his office, more interested in filling the open slots each year with specific personality types according to his own inscrutable criteria than with proven acting experience.

All that's required when you show up is that you know your lines. At first that sounds like the hard part. It's the easiest. The students have to sew their own costumes for at least one play. They run lights, sound, and all other theater functions. The simple logistics make it seem impossible: three presentable productions built from the ground up by early August by rank amateurs. But, when the first week of performances rolls around, the plays are always ready, testaments to a lot of bickering, browbeating, whining, crying, fighting, and hard work.

## II

"Mark now, how a plain tale shall put you down"

*Henry the Fourth, Part I*

That first evening the class sat on wobbly, wooden folding chairs in a semicircle facing the rough stage at the far end of the theater. A hay barn, actually, built in the nineteenth century and made from solid oak so old that the low-hanging, wide beams looked hewn from dark marble instead of wood. Doc Ayres stood onstage, hands on his hips, and glared at us.

"Words," he said. "Words are what makes this work. That and work. I run all this, but I don't direct the plays. Nobody does. There's no stage manager. No

blocking. We don't have rehearsals, run throughs, or 'do shows.' What you do here is perform. You perform every time you get up on the stage and every time you're working on scenes outside while somebody else is using the stage. It's up to you to figure out what these plays are about. I'm not here to tell you. Sure, you'd like me to. And so at some point all of you will hate me for not telling you. I don't care. The only thing that matters here is getting the plays ready on time.

"You're wondering how all this works. You do it. You read the texts and figure out what's happening in the plays and then you do it. Sounds simple now. It gets complicated fast. Remember, everything you need to know is in the words. You just have to dig deep enough."

Ayres coughed. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with a calloused hand.

"Let me give you fair warning," he continued. "You have to become a team to make this work. You aren't going to like that. You have to give up your petty little egos. That scares you, I know. And if there's one thing that has changed over the years it is the fact that the newer classes are getting more and more selfish. Back in the seventies the classes didn't worry about it. They just sacrificed themselves for what had to be done. But now the classes fight it more and more every year. You'll fight it, and it doesn't matter. This will be done *my way*. None of you are big enough to ruin this program no matter how hard you try. Remember that."

Ayres gave us a long, slow look, shook his head, and snorted.

"Take the rest of the night off," he said. "There'll be plenty to do tomorrow."

He marched off the stage, out through the front of the barn and got in his Bronco. The engine roared as the truck spun out in the gravel and skidded onto the farm-to-market highway that led away from the Winedale compound.

It was about eight-thirty and the sun was dipping behind the tree line, leaving the barn lit in soft, gray light. We sat there waiting for someone to tell us what to do, for Ayres to come back. A few minutes dragged by. None of us knew each other or what to say. I got bored, so I stood up and walked the hundred yards back to the dorm to make a call.

### III

"I do love nothing in the world so well as you:  
is not that strange?"

#### *Much Ado About Nothing*

I never had any illusions of being an actor. Honestly. I was there because I was a semester away from graduation after eight years on and off in school as an undergraduate, and I'd never done anything interesting. Living in Austin was fun--groovy bars, blues bands, and Shiner beer--but I wanted something more from college than a degree and an unhappy wife. Winedale hadn't been my first choice (studying at Oxford for the summer) or my second (a German language school in Taos) but it was the least expensive, just a hundred dollar lab fee in addition to six hours of tuition. And, after being separated for the summer,

Jeanette and I would decide whether we wanted to stay married. So it was cheap, a deal.

A bulletin board was set up on the porch outside the dorm. A schedule for the next week was thumbtacked to it. Group calisthenics at six-thirty a.m. Breakfast at seven. Group meeting in the barn at seven-thirty. A list of scenes from *As You Like It* to be worked on after that. Forty-five minutes for lunch. More scenes. The list went on and on. By midnight we might be done. It was the same schedule every day of the week. Well, almost. On Sundays we got to sleep until seven before calisthenics.

I entered the dorm foyer. A phone was in an alcove to the right and I had to argue with the backwoods operator before I finally got to make a long-distance collect call.

"Hey, babe," I said to my wife. "I got here in one piece."

Jeanette asked how it was going.

I thought that one over. "So far so good. Going to be a lot of work. How about you?"

"I'm fine," she said. "You just left today. I can take care of myself."

"I know that."

"I'm on the other line with my mother. I've got to go."

"I love you."

There was the faint crackling of static on the line and nothing else.

"Oh, c'mon," I said. "I'm gone. You can be sweet now."

Jeanette said, "Okay. I love you too. Bye."

The line went dead. I stared at the phone, but didn't hang up. She'd said the right words. I replaced the receiver with exaggerated care and, stiff-legged, walked outside to my car. I opened the Maverick's trunk: two cases of Pearl Light in bottles; 1.75 liters of bonded Kentucky bourbon; four packs of unfiltered Camel cigarettes. My stash for the summer. I sighed. It was a little early to open the bar. I took a pack of the Camels, slammed the trunk lid shut, and wandered around back of the dorm to sit on the veranda that looked out over a large, muddy stock tank.

#### IV

"O, how full of briers is this working-day world"

*As You Like It*

The first week was a mess. Some people didn't know their lines yet. Coming to a group consensus on how the scenes worked was almost impossible. Doc Ayres would make vague and often contradictory statements, never willing to repeat anything. Sometimes we wouldn't see him all day. The class fragmented into cliques. Everyone wanted to go home. Or at least understand what we were supposed to be doing. If we asked him he'd grunt, "It's in the words," and disappear, perpetually disgusted.

No grocery, video, or liquor stores. No libraries, swimming pools, or pool halls. No video games or cable because there was no television. No diversions,

no freedom, no time off. Not that it mattered, Ayres' system was to be behind schedule from day one so the pressure increased exponentially as days first stumbled, then whipped past.

At night, in bed and listening to my roommates mutter lines in their sleep, I thought about Jeanette. What was she doing, thinking, feeling? I wondered what words it would take to make things right between us. The same words as always, I guessed, but I wanted another chance to say them to see if for once they could make things work for real, for the long haul. Most nights I settled for remembering being in bed with Jeanette, snuggled up behind her with my left arm under her head and my right hand flat on her stomach or up a little higher so I could feel the warmth of her breasts and have her move closer to me in her sleep. There was a hurt deep inside that made me to hold her. Hold her and not say anything.

Our first Saturday night we performed the first two acts of *As You Like It*, as far we'd gotten during the week. Ayres gave us permission to go through the old costumes in storage that afternoon to jury-rig costumes appropriate to our characters. After we slopped through the play Ayres called us back into the theater. He told Jon, cast as Orlando (the male lead), to stand onstage.

"Look at that boy up there," Ayres said.

We looked at the boy.



“What do you see?” he demanded.

I smelled a trap. My radar was well tuned at that time and at that moment I made a vow to myself to say absolutely nothing until this whole scene had played itself out.

“C’mon,” Ayres said. “What can you tell me about Orlando based on the way Jon’s dressed?”

Jon had on a white headband, white Fruit-of-the-Loom T-shirt, and little white BVDs showing through his little white tights that were tucked into his white Chuck Taylor Converse All-Star high-top basketball shoes. The boy was white, the whitest white boy any of us had ever seen.

There was a wary silence, but then answers began trickling out, starting with the obvious.

“Uh, he's white.”

“A symbol of good.”

“Yeah, purity.”

The class began to pick up steam.

“His heart is good.”

“He’ll triumph over evil.”

This went on for a while until someone said he was *just like* the Lone Ranger and then Ayres cut them off. I'd volunteered nothing.

Jon smiled, proud at the fact his costume had been so evocative and effectively interpreted.

“Well,” drawled Ayres, “I’m impressed y’all got so much out of Jon’s costume because all I see is a boy standing onstage in his underwear.”

Dead silence. Jon's self confidence withered up and blew away right in front of us. He looked like he was about to cry.

“You people don't have a clue,” said Ayres. “You think Shakespeare has characters so one dimensional you can define them by wearing a single color?

“Do you?” he yelled. “You think Shakespeare has little 3x5 cards running around with names and color schemes printed at the top masquerading as characters? Huh? Anyone? Do you, Jon?”

“No sir,” said Jon.

“So what were you thinking?”

“I guess I don't know.”

“I guess you don't either. Everything you need to know about Orlando is in the words. Right now all you're doing is ignoring the text, just slopping some bullshit meaning on it that isn't even there.

“Actually, I do know what you’re thinking: you’re thinking eventually I’ll take pity on you and your pathetic non-effort and then I’ll tell you what it is you’re supposed to be doing. Well, let me tell you, mister, it’s going to be a long wait. And, that's the kind of lazy shit that's going to ruin all the hard work being put in by everyone else. That's what you want?”

“No sir,” said Jon.

“All of you are so weak! Does anybody have something to say about this?”

Ha, I said to myself. Ha.

Jon, to his credit and being braver than I’ll ever be, raised his hand and said, “I do.”

“I’m waiting,” said Ayres.

“Well,” said Jon. “I just want to apologize to everyone here. I really thought that I was doing the right thing. But I think Doc’s right about the fact that we need to get it together and up to speed so we can get some real work done. C’mon, you guys, I know we can do it. We just have to pull together. But we can do it and make this the best summer ever.”

A few of the girls spoke up to agree with Jon. I stared at the red-clay floor and smiled.

“That’s very *nice*,” drawled Ayres and it got quiet. “Let me tell you something. I think pretty speeches are real *nice*. But what counts is work, not some cheerleader up onstage mouthing *nice* sentiments.”

He got up to walk out of the barn and I was thinking, Woo-hoo! I am a man! I am number one! Nobody punked me! Now I looked around at my classmates and smiled openly at them.

Then, right at the door, Ayres turned around to say: “Oh, and by the way, I just wanted to say how *proud* I am of all of you who were too chickenshit to volunteer anything at all.”

Then, he strode out of the barn.

V

“I understand thy kisses, and thou mine,  
And that's a feeling disputation”

*Henry the Fourth, Part I*

One afternoon Clayton, the limber young woman who led calisthenics in the mornings, and I were alone in the costume shop with one of her Grateful Dead CDs playing. I was finishing up two hours of work with a seam ripper to undo thirty seconds of damage I'd done with a sewing machine.

“What's it like to be married?” Clayton asked, her long cornsilk hair framing her friendly, goofy smile. “I can't even imagine it.”

“Me neither,” I admitted.

Clayton giggled deep in her throat like Scooby-Doo, making her breasts sway under her tie-dyed T-shirt. I wished I hadn't noticed.

“No, really,” she said.

Clayton wanted, I knew, a homily that would give her something to look forward to once she decided to settle down, but I didn't have one to give her, no nice, neat answer to explain our marriage or even why Jeanette and I had gotten married. Jeanette was the kind of woman any father would want his son to marry: smart, sweet, liked to look good, loved kids, loved a clean house. My father had told me that you should never marry anyone if you aren't completely satisfied with the way they are before getting married. He'd said, “Don't expect

marriage to change someone into the person you want them to be. And don't ever marry someone as a project to mold them into something better." But Jeanette was the whole package, a real deal. Given the chance, how could I, a guy Jeanette called Mister Funny when I danced around the living room on Saturday mornings singing along to the *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* theme song, not marry her?

After the wedding I discovered, though, that no one had given Jeanette the same advice I'd received. Suddenly, I was expected to go a local franchise of the Church of Christ where, as I, laughing, told Jeanette the women were trapped in polyester pantsuits with husbands who looked like used insurance salesman. Even more unexpectedly, these people became, or at least were supposed to become, the focal point of our married social life. I guess they were okay, about as much as most people, but they weren't my friends and, as I made painfully clear to her, the high point of my week was not going to be sitting in somebody's backyard on Saturday afternoon talking to a harried father about equity and tree diseases and dodging his screaming kids trying to knock over my ice tea — *ice tea* for God's sake! — for the thirty-seventh time while the women were in the kitchen making potato salad and discussing linoleum patterns. Now, I also discovered that Jeanette didn't think I was a funny guy any more at all. She didn't want me to do anything that wouldn't make me a more socially acceptable person, but I was happy being who I was already.

Clayton looked at me expectantly.

I shrugged and settled for saying, "It's kind of like always having a date."

"Oh," she said, disappointed. "I have a lot of boyfriends in Austin. I never have to worry about dates anyway."

"Whatever works," I said, setting my seam ripper down.

"I guess I'm just not ready to be monogamous," Clayton said. She giggled again, doing the Scooby-Doo thing.

This time I looked at the ceiling until she was done and then I left to find something, anything else to do so I wouldn't be alone with her.

## VI

"I had rather be canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace"

### *Much Ado About Nothing*

Like everybody else, I took my flogging from Doc. Repeatedly. My Silvius, the happy and horny shepherd, came off as shrill and painfully hemorrhoidal. I was told to be Amoeba Man and act like a slug until I could get it right. My Leonato, my big part in *Much Ado*, was confused and indistinct. My Glendower, the Welsh warlord in *Henry*, was overblown and horrific. My other characters came off as cartoons. Doc got so frustrated by the fourth week that he quit talking to me, the worst thing that could happen. It meant he had given up. But I was stubborn, I figured since I was trapped there I might as well tough it out and do what I could. I got as much help as possible, but it didn't help a whole lot. I was just bad. B-A-D. As in really bad, but not from a lack of trying. The class knew that and hung in with me.

I decided to kill Doc with kindness. Every morning he'd walk up to the dorm from his cottage for breakfast and I always did the same thing.

"Morning, Doc," I'd say. "How you doing today? Beautiful day isn't it? Great to be alive!"

He'd never even look at me. He'd grunt (maybe) at the ground and go inside.

The high point of my day.

Situated roughly halfway between Austin and Houston, Winedale is thirty miles and several unmarked turns from the nearest major highway. It sits on a few acres of land five miles from the nearest town, Round Top, population eighty-one. You're not allowed to go into town, or anywhere else, unless it's a group trip. Over the course of the summer there are two or three of those. The rest of the time you stay at the Winedale property: the dorm; the barn with the stage; a smaller barn; three historical houses in various states of (dis)repair; one falling-down house; a little office that also served as a tourist shop; an abandoned, ramshackle building that had served as the area's roadhouse until the university bought it.

The geographic isolation combined with Ayres' psychological distance only increased his control over the class that much more. The collective reaction to this the first couple of weeks was, forget Ayres and his program, just get us out of here. But after those first weeks the class's attitude splintered in two. Half

of us just tried to keep our heads up and soldier on to the end so we could get back to the world. But the rest became so overwhelmed by Ayres' strong-arm tactics that they totally acquiesced to his desires, gave themselves over completely to him, and literally spoke of him in the hushed, reverential voices that one speaks of a god. They spent an inordinate amount of time discussing how to interpret his slightest actions and what could be done best to appease him. That may sound funny. It was not.

The way we reacted to Winedale was the same as if being in a bad marriage: you can either slog along to the end, be it death or divorce, or become consumed with endless, meaningless mind games.

Jeanette hardly ever wrote. I quit calling after a while because one night, after a lot of things were said and not said, I wound up alone in the costume shop, drinking--too much too fast--as I paced back and forth, smashing empty beer bottles against the walls.

The next morning, surveying the damage, I wondered what I'd proved. Drink out of aluminum cans? Don't break stuff? Slow minded and dull I finally got it: nobody was going to clean my messes up but me.

## VII

“Sweet are the uses of adversity,  
Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head”

*As You Like It*



Late in the summer I figured out that Doc had done his best, in his own oblique way, to show us how it was supposed to work. The secret was in the improvisation exercises we did for a couple of hours each night the first half of the summer. Sometimes we'd all stand in a line and, going down the line in order, have each person say one word, trying to make a coherent sentence as a group. Or toss anywhere from two to five people up on stage with a premise and make them run with it: convince someone that they've got to kill their goldfish; selling vacuums door-to-door; a boy raised by wolves at his first press conference. The hardest was when two people got onstage and one would look away while the other made a physical gesture at the same time as making a sound that was supposed to represent the gesture. The person looking away could only hear the sound, but had to reproduce the gesture.

One night as our Falstaff was humping a red, high-top tennis shoe during an improv, it dawned on me that it was not only funny and fit the sketch, but it wasn't embarrassing either; we'd gotten to a place where playing within the bounds of an improv situation was almost unlimited.

Then I realized that this was what Ayres was trying to do all along: make us take the words in the texts and have the ability to be that free, have that much trust in our fellow actors; go with our instincts to define our characters in performance.

Even so, it was too late for me. I was already locked into what I was muddling through onstage. I could easily mouth this insight I'd had, but I

couldn't break free of the patterns I was trapped in. I tried, but I always wound up forgetting my lines, looking around in confusion at the audience staring at me, wondering where I was, and struggling to get back to the stale, robotic movements I was so disgusted with.

But I could live with it. I was scared, though, of what might happen when I went back home after the summer to Jeanette. I didn't *want* a divorce. I *wanted* to be able to break free of the empty, repetitious patterns of behavior I, we, had accumulated. I *wanted* us to be able to improvise within the boundaries of our marriage with a mutual trust and desire to have our actions create a worthwhile definition of who we were together. I *wanted* to articulate all this without sounding like a big, goofy sap.

I was sick of words.

## VIII

“See a pageant truly played  
Between the pale complexion of true love  
And the red glow of scorn and proud disdain”

*As You Like It*

One night it finally all worked onstage for me during a public performance of *As You Like It*. One of the background stories in the play is the never-ending pursuit by the eternally tumescent shepherd Silvius of Phoebe, a disinterested local country girl. My Silvius had started out as too loud and angry. I was told to strip the character down to being a featureless drudge and build him up again. But into what? There was no telling. There was another problem as

well. Val, the woman playing Phoebe, and I couldn't stand each other. I found her precious and affected. She was convinced that I was loud and boorish. We worked on the few Phoebe and Silvius scenes over and over again--trying radically different approaches--but our utter contempt and dislike of each other was obvious. At the end of the play Phoebe and Silvius inevitably end up like all couples in Shakespeare's comedies: married. Val and I were the unhappiest newlyweds anyone had ever seen.

My Silvius did start coming around in his other scenes. He became a goofy, funny guy. Energetic and silly, totally consumed with his passion for Phoebe as he tried his best to be his idea of a courtier, settling cheerfully for being an unbeknownst failure. Those parts, anyway, were fun.

In *As You Like It*, Act III, scene v starts with Phoebe and Silvius bantering back and forth. She's telling him to get lost. He begs to at least get to hang around to gaze on the wonder that is Phoebe. She keeps telling him to get lost. He keeps begging. We kept playing the scene like one of the martial exchanges between Beatrice and Benedict in *Much Ado About Nothing*. But these were simple rustics--it didn't make any sense. It wasn't right.

So one night onstage as we started the scene I just gave up. I couldn't figure out how to do it right and I was sick of doing it wrong. I was out of ideas. Phoebe started rhetorically destroying Silvius' love for her. Instead of getting mad or being strident with my protestations of love, I just stayed the same old goofy Silvius who didn't have a clue as to why Phoebe wasn't getting the

message. Val built Phoebe up to a fever pitch and my Silvius was just la-la-la wide-eyed puppy dog happy to be so close to his one true love. But by the time of her concluding speech, as Phoebe screamed, “Come though not near me . . . I shall not pity thee” and waved her finger in his face, trying to get her point across, now Silvius cowered on his knees. When she finished speaking there was a long moment of silence as the horror finally washed over Silvius. I let out an impromptu and terrified, “Eek!”

The whole theater burst out laughing.

Everything had clicked. The system had worked. Now we were playing. It was fun. It had taken giving up my antipathy for Val and just being the Silvius I found in the words of the rest of the text, to make the scene play right. After we left the stage Val and I hugged each other, relieved it had finally come together. Then we stepped back, realizing what we'd just done and we edged away from each other.

After the performance was over that night I got ready for my dash to the costume shop to change clothes. I slipped out the back of the barn. Toward the front I could hear the audience talking and laughing with the cast members. The air was wet with moisture that would be dew in the morning. A few cars began to pull out onto the road, already starting the hour-and-a-half trip to Austin under a milky moon that hung fat in the night sky. A hundred yards away,

across a sticker-infested field, I could see the lights of the costume shop. I felt an unfamiliar energy buoying me up.

I had a game I would play: seeing how far I could get across the field barefooted before I had to slip on a pair of shoes. Usually it was about five feet. I took a tentative step. No stickers. I took a few more. Still none. I walked slowly, shutting my eyes and letting my feet fall wherever. I was floating. I started to jog, then run, faster and faster across the field until I was flying, barefoot. I vaulted the fence at the edge of the field and stood on the porch of the costume shop. I smiled, stretching my arms out and feeling the night.

I didn't want to change clothes or drink beer; I wanted Jeanette, so I could take her by the hand, lead her barefoot across the field, have her let go of her instincts screaming about the grassburrs and let her feet fall so naturally, easily, next to mine, the two of us catching that feeling of being so in synch, in harmony, that no pain could ever touch us again.

## IX

“Play out the play”

*Henry the Fourth, Part I*

Then, one afternoon, the summer was over. We packed our cars, took one last group photo, hugged, lied about keeping in touch, and headed back to the world. With a warm beer cradled between my legs I cruised in the Maverick down a pine tree lined highway at seventy-five miles an hour. I still had half a bottle of whiskey, a twelve pack of Pearl Light and a pack of Camels. The stereo

blasted out Jason and the Scorchers' "Golden Ball and Chain." I sang along, glad to be getting back to my baby.

I felt like a good citizen, or at least as good as I could get.

The next day Jeanette and I went to Pancho's All-U-Can-Eat Buffet for a celebration dinner. I was happy! Ecstatic! I babbled endlessly about how things were going to be good, better, new and improved. Jeanette sat quietly and picked at her chile rellenos. I didn't care. I had enough to say for the both of us. Back at our psychedelic-yellow stucco house, though, I broke down and asked what was going on.

Jeanette said slowly, "It's over. I want a divorce."

I stared at her, silent.

She said, "I spent every night this summer alone at home thinking about this. I know it's what I want."

"I love you, Jeanette," I said.

"I know," she said, "but that's not enough."

"Please," I begged. "Don't do this. Not now."

"It's what I want," she repeated. "It's over."

I thought, tried to think. All I could come up with was a dispirited, "Eek."

That confused her. "What?"

"Nothing," I said. I snorted. "Never mind."

For a second she gave me a savage look and then something collapsed inside her and she stumbled into the bedroom. The door slammed shut. She was crying.

I walked outside to our front porch. A jumbo jet roared overhead, heading for the airport. One of my neighbors across the street was asleep in a chair on his front porch. Our yard needed to be mowed and a police car cruised by. I sat down on the front steps and rested my head on my knees.

I wished Doc Ayres was there, standing in front of me and Jeanette, so that she could hear him explain about words, how they worked, what they meant, but that was impossible. I lifted my head up and looked around. At first I was numb, but then there was a burning feeling deep inside of me, like a covered fire, that I knew would cause me to waste away inwardly, consumed in sighs for our lost life.