

# The Retraction – Libretto

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## *Prelude (Choir)*

Sometimes here, sometimes there; some by hunger,  
some by fear, or by meanness, or power's thirst.  
Petty reasons or grandiose plans: they will take you  
far, far away.

*I. How it will end (Isobel thinks about end of life and has a  
premonition of a violent death that takes place in front of a  
cheering crowd)*

They say Death moves light with no clear sound  
like a footless shoe, like a bodyless suit  
It will come day or night, with a silent knock  
[it will come day or night] shouting a silent scream  
with no mouth, no tongue, no throat  
taking you with a bony hand [to] [to peace] to  
peaceful rest

But I see a different death  
it will arrive on the wing of a dirty crowd  
kicking, and loud and shredding my clothes

My death will be black and red and green  
with the penetrating violence of flame

And after the inhuman screaming is silenced  
the passing will only bring a winter, embittered,  
to their cold and cruel soul [cold winter ... cruel ...  
soul]

*II. How one gets there (Isobel & Choir): how easily people  
can get accused and entangled in the reach of the law!*

*(Isobel)* Foolish love came quietly on me  
that man lit with laughter  
tall and bold and caring not what comes after  
I stayed for a while in his hands  
strong and gentle and wide  
work stained and calloused  
trembling slightly with marvel [marvel] on me  
Curled in their hollow I rested  
I the red-haired fool  
I who cared mostly of trees  
I who knew myself able to go alone

Curled in his left hand I rested  
and did not listen or watch  
or mute that whisper  
The silent gossip that grew in time

*(Choir)* 'We saw them late in the wood  
her and the traveler  
She bewitched him with her eyes bluer than sky  
and took him by his lust for her naked arms  
sunburned skin like a copper blade'

*(Isobel)* In the radiance of the day light  
I rested quiet and content  
and in that solitary moment  
I saw the fiery torch made of my pretty trees  
I saw the red-haired-fool betraying him  
I saw but cared not because

no

no

no

I wanted to be in the hollow of his radiance  
oh so much I wanted to be in the hollow of the  
radiant

*(Choir)* They whispered in the night  
twisted gossips spreading like silent mold

'People have eyes so bright  
only when touched by devil  
skin thin and golden  
only when they're taken'

*(Isobel)* They whispered in the night  
the shady tendrils that closed around me

*III. Yes, I met the devil (Isobel). Isabel's confession, hinting at  
a physical violation that took place during the confession.*

Yes [Yes Yes Yes]  
I met the Devil  
and its torture tools

They wanted to hear  
of dark evil and lust  
and so I told them  
to ease the brutal pain

Yes [Yes] I met Satan  
The devil with cloven feet  
the master with a horned head  
covered with sickly gray hair  
and a goat-like smiling face  
He touched me, touched me  
No! they touched me!  
So frigid, so unnaturally frigid  
(ah, so cold [so cold] is so cold here)

And Sabbath  
with witches and wizards  
sumptuous meals  
with fairy Queen and King  
and toads, toads planted in a field

bewitching straw, straw made into horse  
and fly high with them horses  
shooting elf arrows to passersby

Yes, I met Satan the devil

Ah, so cold, is so cold here  
ah, my love, my love  
where are you love

*IV. Where are you love? (Isobel) A counterpoint to scene III:  
Yes, maybe Isobel met something or somebody, but why cannot  
it be good instead of evil?*

Why not a tale more pretty?  
Of a black angel other-worldly-sweet  
flashing with smile and beauty  
dark-ivory-limbed and rainbowed-eyed  
It looked at me, strange and remote  
and darted in the thicket singing

And I moonstruck with madness  
followed the music over groves and pastures  
until we rested and looked  
into the longing  
and marvel  
and future [future] regret

Idiots, yes brutal idiots  
You and your sick darkness  
darkness and coldness, so cold

*V. 1662 (Isobel & Choir). An interlude, Isobel is  
interviewed about her life.*

*Choir:* Where is this? In Auldearn.  
It takes two days from Edinburg  
Far, but might be worth it  
They say she is a witch  
Two dozen in her covenant, a lot of magic, and very  
spicy detail  
She is newsworthy!  
She is also doomed  
Out there indeed things move fast  
We leave now might be there in time

*Choir:* Isobel, a few questions. Let's start. You are a  
peasant?

*Isobel:* Yes, we live in a carved-out pile of dirt.

*Choir:* We? Not single?

*Isobel:* There is a man.

*Choir:* Friends?

*Isobel:* Women friends, one especially dear.

*Choir:* Children?

*Isobel:* No. Does a cat count?

*Choir:* And how old are you?

*Isobel:* In my twenties?

*Choir:* And what do you do?

*Isobel:* Work, work, and work. And still work and  
starve in winter.

*Choir:* So much? That seems like an exaggeration.

*Isobel:* We work all the time! It is not like where they  
will live. With free housing, and education, and free  
food! Powerful herbs! And they'll get free home  
deliveries!

*Choir:* Isobel? Who are "they"? And why do you  
speak of the future?

*Isobel:* Do I?

*Choir:* Yes, you do. The judge said that you see the  
future.

*Isobel:* Oh that. That is an exaggeration! Maybe  
hints ... of the future *Choir:* No wonder you got in  
trouble. Herbs now. Do you mean potions?

*Isobel:* ... they help people ...

*Choir:* And spells?

*Isobel:* Yes! Spells! They are marvels! You should see  
what you can do with them!

*Choir:* ...

*Isobel:* They will say ... that I did talk way too much.

*Choir:* Well. It is time to wrap this up. Tomorrow is  
the big day. Any thoughts for posterity?

*Isobel:* That I saw it coming and did not trust my gift.

*VI. My spells are not for You (Isobel). In her cell Isobel, is  
consumed by guilt for having spoken lies, and thinks about  
retracting her confession.*

In the silence of my cell  
water drops fall so slowly  
specks of dust floating lazy in space  
spiders hunt in the unchanging light  
trapping prey in a web of deceit  
I see you, love, hanging, pierced and dead  
innocents swinging in the wind  
I am the betrayer ... of friend ... lover ... and my

art  
I in the silence of my broken mind  
I, I retract  
Clean and proper  
men and women  
Of the songs of my power  
You'll know none [You'll know none]

To your tools of persuasion  
I sputtered nonsense spells  
A little few, to verbal abuse  
A few more, to enhanced interrogation  
And so many, so many, so many  
many to the worst tool: fear

Clean and proper  
men and women  
well-groomed children  
and your pets

None Will Work!  
none will work  
none better than asking for help  
from your useless god

You'll never find  
much love or riches  
power or safety  
or freedom or knowledge  
or children or beauty  
or immortality  
You'll never ever be happy

You, you'll ever never be  
a proud and smart raven  
or a hare, timid, pretty, so fast  
neither, neither one

*VII. The last hour (Isobel), Isobel retracts. Unheard in the chaos surrounding the execution, she tries to cast a last spell.*

It is like a fair  
full of drunken men  
and loosened women  
and jugglers and tricksters and actors and priests  
don't forget the priests  
and soldiers all around

It is like a fair  
they hanged twelve today  
they even bring their kids they do

they bring them for fun  
and teach an important lesson:  
“don't stray too far or they might come and get you”

And then they see me  
*(Choir)* The witch!  
and they snap-turn  
like a feral beast, smelling a prey  
*(Choir)* The witch! The witch! The witch!

And I walk through the crowd  
while they spit  
*(Choir)* The witch!  
And I climb the pyre  
while they curse  
*(Choir)* Damn you!  
And I, I in fury and tears  
*(Choir)* Burn her!  
I in painful disbelief  
I retract all!

I retract  
the devil  
and sabbath  
the horses  
and elves

and I, I, I  
I scream my spell of liberation [my spell of  
liberation]  
and take flight high in the sky  
the blue sky, my trees, my love  
while they burn my body

And I watched them, with my raven eyes  
as they climbed down the hill  
lightly shaken but barely touched  
as the rain washed out  
that ash mound from sight  
oh me, me, oh me

*Postlude (Choir)*

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some by fear, or by meanness, or power's thirst.  
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