



Davide Verotta

The Retraction
(2025)

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

¹ Text by Davide Verotta

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.

Invocation (wordless)

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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meanness, or power's thirst. Petty reasons or grandiose plans: they will
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