

MARGARET SWEATMAN

The
PLAYERS



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Edited by Bethany Gibson.

Cover image after a photograph by Ignacio Leonardi, www.ignacioleonardi.com.ar, stock.xchange.com.

Cover and interior page design by Julie Scriver.

Printed in Canada on paper containing 100% post-consumer fibre.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Sweatman, Margaret

The players / Margaret Sweatman.

ISBN 978-0-86492-518-3

I. Title.

PS8587.W36P53 2009 C813'.54 C2009-901429-7

Goose Lane Editions acknowledges the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP), and the New Brunswick Department of Wellness, Culture, and Sport for its publishing activities.

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Fredericton, New Brunswick
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*For Bailey
and Hillery*

I am a Fox.
I am supposed to die,
I already threw my life
away.
Something daring,
Something dangerous,
I wish to do.

Erdoes and Ortiz, *American Indian Myths
and Legends* (of the Brule Sioux)

PART ONE

Birds of the air will tell of murders past . . .

Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*

One

This was the beginning of Lilly's real life, the one she would invent out of thin air.

In the hour before sunrise, Lilly went out, walking past the bonfires on Tower Street all the way to Aunt Meg's place on Pudding Lane, arriving at dawn, when everything is revealed at its most uncanny, without the mercy of colour. Aunt Meg, who never slept, heard Lilly's fists on her door and went down to find Lilly standing there, a tall, barefoot waif wearing all three of her mother's skirts, wrapped up against the cold in both of her mother's shawls. Meg drew in a breath and said, "She's gone, isn't she."

Meg brought Lilly inside, banked the fire in the kitchen, covered Lilly with a blanket, and gave her a boiled egg with tea.

The sun rose and with it came prisms, rivers of amber in glasses left on the tables the previous night. While Lilly ate, one of Meg's girls, Susan, tried to tell her, in swerving, euphemistic terms, what she'd have to do to keep herself here. Susan was fair, with white eyebrows and lashes, and had a rash, a hot roseola running between her heavy breasts and up to her cheeks. She was kind-hearted and liked things to sound pretty, so it was hard for her to make any sense. Aunt Meg laughed, wiping her eyes with her apron. Meg was sad because her sister was dead,

but she laughed anyway. She said that you may as well. Then she put her hand to Lilly's chin and lifted her face.

Lilly's life took shape. By next nightfall, when she left her mother's attic room for the last time, she knew death by touch, a shock her hands would never forget. And she had a bed (to share with Susan and with Claire, Meg's other girl). Susan held her that night and told her the ways to keep from getting in trouble. "In olden days, in Eej-ip, the Queen put crocodile dung up there. Crocodile's shite," she said, dissolving into giggles; then she sobered and added, "Course, now we make a good paste of Nellie." Susan tried to tell Lilly what to do so that her pockets would never again be empty. Lilly whispered to Susan that she needed to sleep. She didn't want Susan to know that she didn't think her own life would be quite like that.

Two weeks after Lilly's mother died, Lilly steeled herself through the hour of dawn, and while she knew that she'd always be vulnerable to dawn's particular shade of blue, she would never again be helpless. She crouched to remove the pessary, the little cap of honey, baking soda, and cow dung that Aunt Meg laughingly called Nellie's plug. Lilly had been with boys before, but of course this was very different. She wrapped herself in her mother's shawls and crawled in beside Susan and Claire. Susan put a hand to Lilly's cheek, saying, "Lilly," her white eyelashes flickering in the first light. The bed had a childish smell of being sick. In Lilly's fist, like a seed, she held a coin.

Lilly didn't find it odd, but Susan and Claire certainly did, that what Susan called "the very first stranger" to put a coin in Lilly's hand had gold ringlets and a title. He was the Second Earl of Buxborough, but he said his common name was

Bartholomew. Bartholomew had a small but lively canker he didn't try to conceal, and, besides, he was too drunk to be effective, so they spent the time in conversation. He paid her despite that. He began to pay her often. After a cure, he proved himself capable of a certain energy, but he liked wine more, and while he admired Lilly's flesh, he soon became obsessed with her other qualities.

Bartholomew was a poet and quite glorious to look at — though it seemed he never really wanted to be seen; his clothes were a dazzling sort of camouflage. He was a real poet, with an ear for music and satire and a haunted mind. His wife was rich, but he had scant money of his own, though like any of his class, he could put his hands on a loan when he needed it.

Bartholomew was his wife's steward. And he was honest, except on those rare occasions when he was blindsided by desire. Bartholomew hoped that his mostly drunk experience of life (the sheer terror of experience itself) would qualify him as being *real*, though he didn't, he wouldn't quite believe he was. He *felt* unreal. He felt separate. It made him sad, but he chose to be sad in a gorgeous, modern sort of way.

He took Lilly up; he fed her oranges, and he bought her a pair of shoes. She served ale at Aunt Meg's, but she didn't need to go upstairs with any of the customers; she had enough to get by, as long as Bartholomew liked her. She didn't miss her mother by day because her mother never gave her much, but in quiet times she missed her mother's voice. It was as if Lilly had gone deaf in this one crucial area. But she would take things from here, from zero. Making Bartholomew like her called for patience and skill, especially since Bart was so eloquently wounded by his easy life, so falsely gay; he was what men called "witty."

Bartholomew knew that Lilly was performing for him. Whenever he saw that she was not entirely sincere, not

completely absorbed by his company, he pretended to enjoy it, to be ironical and admiring of her talent for playing the courtesan. Yet he was obsessed. He made a bet with a friend that he could turn Lilly into a *real* actress, a wager that made his obsession seem more like a joke. He began to give her lessons in stagecraft; he taught her how to move and speak, and then he foisted her on the players at the King's Playhouse by telling them he'd pay her wages.

Lilly proved to be a very good player.

One night at the Playhouse, Mr. Barington was passing a stone, and the cues were in chaos because Barington was playing Vermin the Footman, a key role only because he served the entrances and exits. Barington was a sweaty mass of agony leaking bloody urine in the tiring room, so the action was up for grabs. And Lilly grabbed. Didn't she have to? Bartholomew wouldn't pay her stage wages forever.

Lilly was playing Bizy the Maid. Barington didn't come on to announce the arrival of Lord Pleasant (played by Mr. Shift). Lady Le Blanc (Mrs. Gordon) slipped the billet-doux to Bizy (Lilly), and Bizy was then to give it to Pleasant, but when Barington failed to appear, Pleasant failed to appear (Mr. Shift was too stupid to improvise). Bizy curtsied just a few seconds too long, her skirts just a few inches too high, tucked the billet-doux in her bodice, crossed right, passed close behind Squire Squint (Mr. Chesterton — good, handsome, and astute Chesterton, who even drunk had the best intuition of any player in London), pressed her bosom to his back, and spun an exit line out of the excess of the several plays that Bartholomew had already made her memorize: "I shall go, sir, to fetch a nosegay."

Chesterton spun around and met Lilly's eye with quickly gauged admiration. "And prithee, Bizy, why a nosegay? Have I asked for it?"

"Your nose wants it, sir."

Chesterton sniffed, plucked the perfumed letter from Lilly's bodice, said, "I haven't nose enough for my good wife," and tucked it back in again. Lilly smirked, made a curtsy (Lilly could make even a curtsy funny), Chesterton groped, she dodged and exited, and the audience bawled with laughter, missing Mrs. Gordon's next lines. Even the gentlemen in the boxes noticed Lilly then.

In the wings sat Bartholomew with quill, ink, and brandy. He looked up at Lilly as she passed and said, "You're good. Devil only knows, you're good."

As Lilly exceeded Bart's training, he began to laugh mysteriously to himself in her presence. He wrote plays for her, here in town or at his wife's house at Addenbury where there's nothing but rain and sheep, writing with an air of injury, almost of hatred.

She became a success. The King's Players began to pay her (a little) for her work, though she still had to serve as a barmaid at Aunt Meg's. And while Bartholomew couldn't find enough money to get her a house, he did give her enough to keep her for himself. Claire and Susan nursed themselves with worm fern, Whore's Root. Lilly never forgot Nellie's plug. She would look after herself; she would never bear a child. She would never forget, never forgive, and never stop missing her mother's plaintive, self-pitying litanies as she drank herself to death.

Lilly's ear for suffering gave her a talent for playing comedy. Huntington, the manager of the King's Playhouse, bustled the many gentlemen to Lilly's tiring room, where they'd kiss her cheek, linger over her breast, and coo, "Such a nice leg, Huntington, she must play a man, come on, Huntington." And Lilly would say, "Lord Mallet has the prettiest leg." The men laughed excessively. Because Lilly didn't find life very funny, the gentlemen found her *very* funny. Someone kissed her on the mouth. Then they all did.

In six months, when Lilly's reputation as a player grew fully

beyond Bartholomew's control, he did what he liked to do: he inflicted pain on himself. He introduced Lilly to the one man in London who would have the most power over her.

One afternoon, after a performance of Dryden's *Indian Emperor* (Lilly, in maroon petticoats and gold skirt, playing Cydaria, daughter of Montezuma, emperor of Mexico), Bartholomew took her elbow as she came to the side-wing after her bow. Without a word he pointed up to a box. The candles in the great chandeliers were smoking in a draft from the clamour of gallants and masks leaving the pit, and Lilly could barely make out the profile of a gentleman seated there, a gentleman of obvious means. Bartholomew would later recall the backward glance she gave him as she hurried across the stage toward the stairs; he would remember her excitement, her victory, and he would savour the heartache it caused him.

Lilly stepped into the box. The candles dimmed and flared, and she was met by the spectacle of an enormous raven, a man with a raven's watchful stillness, a hunter's objectivity. He didn't move. She saw the white of his eyes, his black eyebrows, his black wig merging with the dark. He idly lifted his hand to touch his own wide mouth, and she heard lace, a fine, clean music. If she failed to please the King, she'd merely live out what years she could bargain from poverty. She settled into the chair and let him look at her. The fictions she'd tell would be told with perfect candour. She was, after all, a realist. King Charles and Lilly Cole would soon learn that this was one of several attributes they shared.

"Pretty girl," said the King.

She peered at him, then said, "Did you like our play, sire?"

King Charles made a wan face. "Much coming and going. Much *discussion* between tortured and torturer. Much stabbing." He examined her in her petticoats and spangles, gazing on her