The painting above the mantle in “The Game of Chess” bedroom is of “The change of Philomel”—a transformation from woman to nightingale that happens at the very end of Philomela’s story in Book 6 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

Philomela’s tale begins, however, with her sister’s wedding: Pandion, king of Athens, has given permission for his daughter Procne to marry Tereus, a rich and powerful king of Thrace. Procne and Tereus move to Thrace and have a son. After five years, Procne asks her husband to arrange a visit from her sister. Tereus sets out dutifully for Athens and makes his case to King Pandion, promising Philomela’s safe and speedy return. When he gets a look at the younger sister, however, Tereus is seized by lust: “He was the puppet / Of instant obsession” (Ovid “Tereus” 216). Pandion, unaware of Tereus’s sudden sexual interest in Philomela, reluctantly agrees to the trip, reassured by Tereus’s vows to protect the girl. But as soon as they land in Thrace, Tereus takes Philomela to a fort in the woods and rapes her.

Philomela’s response to the assault is not to retreat into the silence with which we often associate rape victims. Instead, she confronts her attacker with terrific energy, forcing him to confront the enormity of the assault: his broken vows to her father and sister, his corruption of their whole family. She says it would have been better for him to have killed her first, so that at least her ghost would have escaped contamination. Finally, she invokes the gods:

But the gods are watching—
If they bother to notice what has happened—
If they are more than the puffs of air
That go with their names—
Then you will answer for this.
I may be lost,
You have taken whatever life
I might have had, and thrown it in the sewer,
But I have my voice.
And shame will not stop me.
I shall tell everything
To your own people, yes, to all Thrace.
Even if you keep me here
Every leaf in this forest
Will become a tongue to tell my story.
The dumb rocks will witness.
All heaven will be my jury.
Every god in heaven will judge you. (Ovid “Tereus” 220)

Tereus, “Speechless, mindless, / In a confusion of fear and fury” (221) stops his sister-in-law’s threats and accusations by cutting out her tongue, then proceeds to rape her again and again. Finally, he returns home to Procne with the story that Philomela is dead.

A year goes by. Philomela, still imprisoned in the fort, manages to weave her story into a tapestry and smuggle it to Procne, who immediately understands what she is seeing and is consumed by a desire for revenge. She rescues her sister, declaring that their retaliation on Tereus must be something appalling. They murder Procne’s five-year-old son Itys and cook him for dinner. Procne serves him to Tereus; Philomela bursts into the dining room with the boy’s head. Tereus, suddenly aware of what he has just consumed,

    tugged at his rib-cage,
    As if he might rive himself open
    To empty out what he had eaten.
    He staggered about, sobbing
    That he was the tomb of his boy. (Ovid “Tereus” 228)

As he chases the sisters with his sword, “they / Who had been running seemed to be flying // And suddenly they were flying.” All three have been changed into birds: Tereus into a hoopoe, Procne into a swallow who “Lamented round and round the palace,” and Philomela into a nightingale who “Mourned in the forest” (Ovid Tales 228, 229).

* * *

“A Game of Chess” takes place indoors, in a bedroom and a bar. There is a little bit of air from the outside—the woman’s perfumes are “stirred by the air / That freshened from the window” (WL 89–90) and a man comments on “The wind under the door” (WL 118)—but the emphasis is mostly on a sense of enclosure: the walls (“staring forms / Leaned out, leaning, hush-ing the room enclosed” [WL 105–06]), the ceiling (coffered like Dido’s). We know the door is shut because the occupants are “waiting for a knock” (WL 138). The only mentioned visual connection to the outside world is an artificial one: “Above the antique mantel was displayed / As though a win-dow gave upon the sylvan scene / The change of Philomel” (WL 97–99). At the one spot in the room where there appears to be a chance for a more spacious prospect, we find instead a painting of the final crisis in a story that