

NEW FICTIONS OF
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY
WOMEN

Making better accounts of historical subjects

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UNQUIET THINGS

A novel

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ABSTRACT: NEW FICTIONS OF SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN

Making better accounts of historical subjects

This essay identifies a popular movement in contemporary fiction towards (re)visioning the lives of women who, although they can be found in the historical record, have been largely marginalised from its telling. Rather than designing fictional characters and situations in order to explore the social and political concerns of a particular era – as more ‘traditional’ historical fictions might do – these novels are focused on illuminating the inner lives and lived experiences of women whose voices have struggled to break the surface of the archive. The essay argues that this movement, as yet under-theorised, is part of a wider development towards creating ‘better accounts’ (Haraway, 1988) of historical subjects, expressing the legacy of new historicism and feminist critiques of the ‘unknowability’ and ‘unsayability’ of pure postmodernism.

The discussion is situated within critical approaches to historical fiction and narrative historiography since the mid-twentieth century, expanding to include contemporary explorations of archival and material absence; mess and uncertainty; erasure, haunting, agency and affect. Recent examples of these novels are examined, their subjects women in seventeenth century Europe: *Margaret the First* by Danielle Dutton (2016), *Everyone Knows Your Mother is a Witch* by Rivka Galchen (2021) and *Unquiet Things*. The essay concludes that fiction’s relationship with the historical record is changing, resulting in forms that reject both the notion of history as human progress and the intense, extensive self-reflexivity of historiographical metafiction. These lenses are smaller, preoccupied with the complexities of individual subjectivity; with how much is materially lost to history and what can be imaginatively communicated from its traces – a position vital in creating a more inclusive ‘historical record’ at a moment of political and environmental crisis that threatens bodies and knowledge anew.

Word count: 29,135

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ABSTRACT: UNQUIET THINGS

A novel about the suicide behind England's first public museum, based on archival records

London in 1638 is at a tipping point between old worlds and new, between magic and science, between peace and war. Hester sees little of this, having chosen a stifling spinster's life rather than marry a cloth merchant chosen by her father. But then an offer comes from John Tradescant, a famous plantsman, explorer and owner of the The Ark – the most significant cabinet of curiosity in England, a huge collection of natural and man-made wonders from across the expanding world. The marriage places Hester in a sphere she has only dreamed of but where she, illiterate and faced with a turbulent domestic life, struggles to find purchase. Isolated among the Ark's objects she starts to sense they have their own voices, strange sounds she must keep to herself or risk ostracism and persecution.

When ambitious lawyer and astrologer Elias Ashmole visits the Ark and offers to catalogue it, Hester believes she might at last have a stake in the collection's future. But across years of insidious manoeuvres Elias positions himself as the collection's rightful guardian, culminating in a night of drunken betrayal that excludes Hester from her inheritance after John's death – save for a few objects she has submerged in her garden pond. When her ownership of the now garrulous collection is finally severed Hester goes to join her hidden objects under the water, where she is found drowned. Meanwhile Elias uses the collection to found a museum in his own name, the Ashmolean at Oxford. But when he visits his completed creation, doubt creeps in – is his enterprise the success he imagined? Has he silenced all the questioning voices?

Word count: 75,152

TOTAL WORD COUNT: 104,278

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New fictions of seventeenth-century women

Making better accounts of historical subjects

Introduction: A roar of retellings

In the video a woman sits behind a table, close to the camera. There is nothing else in the frame: white table, grey wall, dark-haired woman in a black top. Her eyes are open and focused, but not on the viewer – her awareness is elsewhere. Her left hand is placed flat on the empty surface and she holds her right hand a few inches above it, steadily. The utilitarian overhead lighting casts a play of shadows from that hand; dark, light, many-fingered, overlapping. The woman stays like this for some time. She appears to be searching, intently, for something that cannot be seen.

It is 2022 and the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford is exhibiting the results of research conducted the preceding summer by Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović, through an installation called ‘Presence and Absence’. Step back from the video display screen and the towering walls of the museum’s rectangular atrium rise up several floors around you, each overwhelmingly crammed with ‘objects, photographs and manuscripts from all over the world, and from all periods of human existence’ – nearly half a million of them (Pitt Rivers, 2024, para. 1). In an online interview that accompanies the installation Abramović explains how she connects her practice to the objects in the museum. With performance art, she says, ‘all that happens is energy dialogue between the audience and you. And when you finish the performance all that’s left is a memory and the emotions of the audience during this work.’ To her, therefore, the many artefacts in the Pitt Rivers with ritual significance ‘actually have energy. That energy is based on quality performances over long periods of time, hundreds of years sometimes, so these objects have power.’ (Pitt Rivers, 2023) During her research, she selected objects ‘associated with magic, rites of passage, sites of transition and transformative states of consciousness’ (Pitt Rivers, 2022a, para. 5) and engaged with them in a multi-layered performance piece (Pitt Rivers, 2023, my emphasis):

[I] look at them, I don't touch them but I observe them, and I can feel the energy, I can feel certain things that I can't rationally explain... [During the research] I'm holding my hands over the object, never touching, never actually physically interacting with the object, just touching above and seeing if I can feel that energy, if I can transport myself into a certain time period and imagine the ritual or imagine the purpose why it was made. Or even how I can find maybe a new purpose for the same objects... I'm also removing the object, and having a completely empty space on the table and having my hands above that empty space where object was just a few minutes before in front of me. I wanted to see if the empty space can actually keep the presence of the object, if the energy stays. And I really think it's possible... I like to *prove the materiality of immateriality*, that energy never leaves the space, that it's transforming into different dimensions but is always there. It's like performance.

Abramović's work centres a complex negotiation that lies at the heart of institutional object display and historical storytelling. As a general rule, extant objects and written archival material are employed – in multiple, often sophisticated ways – to construct narratives of past eras, peoples, events and cultures about whom our understanding is limited by many and overlapping processes of erasure – from the material abrasions of the passage of time to the structural inequalities organising knowledge production to the extreme violence of colonialism. Increasingly, critical attention has come to bear on those processes, applying the lessons of post-structural critiques of Western discourses of power to heritage sector practices of narrativising, archiving, collecting and display – and significant, often controversial conversations and acts of restitution are occurring across a wide spectrum of institutions.¹ The 2024 documentary *Dahomey*, directed by Matt Diop, enters creatively into this debate, dramatising the return of 26 artefacts from a museum in France to their home in Benin. In the film, as the objects are observed, packed, transported, debated and displayed, a voiceover creeps in, and a statue

¹See, for example, Koshy on Maasai objects in the Pitt Rivers (2018) and Rogero on a cloak sacred to the Tupinambá de Olivença people, of a ceremonial significance where the cloaks 'probably functioned as supernatural skins, transferring the vital force from one living organism to another.' (2024, para. 12) The Pitt Rivers' own Curator of World Archaeology, Dan Hicks, has written an important book on cultural restitution centring on artefacts in the British Museum (*The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*, 2020).

representing King Ghézo wonders aloud its origins, its longings and its identity. No-one in that film ‘hears’ that story, but the inference for the viewer is there will always remain something inaccessible to interpretation, fragments of archive and experience which can only ever be imagined, but which must nevertheless be acknowledged. What Abramović suggests is that through just such creative practice, a restorative acknowledgement of and engagement with the unseen – with what can never be ‘known’ in any concrete or realist sense – is possible. One does not have to subscribe to her views on object auras to acknowledge the power that this idea has in our ongoing negotiations with the past, in a contemporary environment where the critical disruption of historical certainties meets anxieties around species and habitat loss, the silencing of identities and cultures, and the role of technology in our ability to speak with any confidence in public and in private. Analytically speaking, the terms of what the archive – in its most capacious sense – can communicate is under constant review, such as in new work by literary scholars Barbara Cooke and Nonia Williams in which, quoting Sophie Oliver (2022), they suggest that ‘the existence of an archival artefact in the present has the power to “collapse... historical time”, bringing the subject into a different, deeper mode of contact with the past and possible future contexts and circumstances that make that object significant.’ (2024, p. 6) In this context of (re)evaluating the (im)material in narratives of the past (and present), Abramović insists we pay attention as much to what cannot as to what can be seen: ‘Emptiness is so important.’ (Pitt Rivers, 2022b, para. 6) Abramović’s and Diop’s work – and the novels discussed below – are instructive not as solutions but as examples of how creative practices might perform alternative modes of presence – ones that register both harm and loss without claiming to resolve or fully re-present them. Rather than neglecting or overwriting the unknowable, the goal becomes attentiveness to what has been obscured, and the ethical risk of speaking into or around that absence.

A short walk through the centre of Oxford, a small exhibition space at the heart of the Ashmolean Museum makes a different kind of acknowledgement. Opened in 2017, ‘The Ashmolean Story Gallery’ contains artefacts and portraits that were part of the founder Elias Ashmole’s original gift to Oxford University in 1677. As well as many of his own manuscripts, coins and antiquarian

collections, Ashmole donated a discrete cabinet of curiosity often referred to as ‘The Ark’.² This enormous repository of natural and man-made wonders – from seeds and minerals to shoes and weapons, and from clothing and carvings to shells, skeletons and skins – was an exceptionally fully-realised example of the sort of proto-museum kept by Renaissance gentlemen in their private houses, an expression of their enthusiasm for a world that – geographically and epistemologically – was rapidly expanding, and an attempt to represent its wonders in miniature, underpinned by the belief that ‘by using the devices of symbolism and allegory inherited from the Middle Ages, creation could be replaced in miniature and represented by the careful and deliberate assemblage of signifying objects, and that the juxtaposition of the constituent items could no more be fortuitous than the universe it was said to mirror.’ (Shelton, 2004, p. 184) The Ark itself was first assembled by celebrated plantsman and gardener to Charles I, John Tradescant the Elder (1570-1638). It was then maintained, expanded and – a first for England – opened to public view by his son John the Younger (1608-1662) and his wife Hester (1608-1678) before passing to Ashmole. In the Ashmolean gallery a caption on a portrait of John the Younger summarises the transfer of ownership: ‘In 1659 Tradescant signed a Deed of Gift which, upon the deaths of both him and his wife, would transfer the collection to Elias Ashmole. In his will Tradescant stated that he wished his collection to go to either Oxford or Cambridge University.’ And below the neighbouring portrait of Hester: ‘Following her death the Tradescant collection passed to Elias Ashmole, who gifted it to the University of Oxford along with his own collection.’ (Ashmolean, 2017) So far, so straightforward – and demonstrable. The Deed of Gift was signed (Josten, 1966, vol. II. p. 768) and the collection transferred (vol. I. p. 218) as the museum’s narrative states. What cannot be seen here is what is elided, concealed or simply left out. John Tradescant’s will that the museum references was made three years after the Deed of Gift, and explicitly left the

² The Ark’s original contents have themselves been subject to the vagaries of history and archives. As well as spreading out within the Ashmolean and across Oxford – ‘coins and medals in the Heberden Coin Room; paintings in the Department of Western Art; ethnographic objects now in the Pitt Rivers Museum, zoological and mineralogical specimens in the University Museum, and manuscripts and printed books in the Bodleian Library’ (Case, 1983, p. vii), they have at times been summarily disposed of. The iconic Oxford Dodo – a Tradescant specimen – long rumoured to have been thrown on a fire when cleaning out the original collection room and only a foot rescued from the flames – in fact survives in fragments in a curator’s drawer in the Oxford University Museum of Natural History – and in the pages of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. (Potter, 2006, p. xxi, 369)

collection to his wife to make her own decision about the eventual home of 'The Ark'.³ Three weeks after John's death the powerful lawyer and court favourite Elias Ashmole took the semi-literate widow to court to ensure his ownership, which was granted, though leaving the collection in Hester's care during her lifetime. Not content with his legal victory, Ashmole eventually moved into the house adjoining Hester's, initiating a dispiriting catalogue of domestic disputes which culminated in him writing an abject public 'Document of Submission' for her to sign. She eventually relented, gave the collection up to him, and was shortly afterwards found drowned in her garden pond (Josten, 1966, vol. IV. p. 1607). Emptiness is so important.

As scholars have interrogated and developed the theoretical disruptions arising from the post-structuralist analyses of the the 1960s, examining the absences and presences of the 'historical record' – and the structures of power that underpin them – has increasingly become a preoccupation across a broad spectrum of creative and critical endeavours. Writers of fiction are as self-consciously employed in the task as any, and writers of women's stories in particular.⁴ That these are 'historical fictions' is clear – though as we shall see that category is both expansive and unstable, at its most simplistic it can be taken to mean fictions set in a time before an author's own consciousness. Beyond that, how fiction views the past and its relationship to it creates a landscape of almost infinite variety. Significantly, on the question of absences, since the turn of this century a steady stream of novels have taken as their organising principle re-tellings of 'given' narratives from the point of view of a female protagonist.⁵ Many of the most canonical texts of Western literature have been subject to this pointed questioning of authorship, with writers finding particularly rich material in classical mythology and drama: Margaret Atwood on the Odyssey (*The Penelopiad*, 2005), Ursula K. Le Guin on the Aeneid (*Lavinia*, 2008),

³ 'Item, I give, devise, and bequeath my Closet of Rarities to my dearly beloved wife Hester Tradescant during her naturall Life, and after decease I give and bequeath the same to the Universities of Oxford or Cambridge, to which of them shee shall fit think at her decease.' (National Archives, 1661) The Tradescants cannot have been aware that a Deed of Gift is not revocable in law without a specific clause. (Potter, 2006, p. 340-341)

⁴ This is of course true of many historically marginalised identities, groups and individuals. My focus here is unhappily non-intersectional, relating primarily to women of European origin in the seventeenth century. The theoretical proposition, however, applies to narratives of any historical figure(s) whose voice(s) have been erased or (mis)represented by the dominant gatekeepers of public discourse, and is informed by their insights in turn.

⁵ This manoeuvre has, of course, been enacted before – in Janet Lewis's *The Wife of Martin Guerre* (1941), Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* (1988), for example. But I argue that those books published after the year 2000 are, like any novel, more or less consciously preoccupied with a set of affective and analytical concerns peculiar to the moment of their composition.

Natalie Haynes on Oedipus (*The Children of Jocasta*, 2017), the Iliad (*A Thousand Ships*, 2019) and Medusa (*Stone Blind*, 2022); Kamila Shamsie on Antigone (*Home Fire*, 2018), Pat Barker on the Iliad (*The Silence of the Girls*, 2018), Madeline Miller on the Odyssey (*Circe*, 2018), Nina MacLaughlin on Ovid (*Wake, Siren*, 2019) and many, many more. Colm Toibín has written an account of Mary, mother of Jesus (*The Testament of Mary*, 2012), R.M. Lamming of seven Biblical women (*As in Eden*, 2006) and Jeet Thayil of fifteen women whose lives overlapped with the life of Christ (*Names of the Women*, 2022). Elsewhere, you can find Maria Dahvana Headly on *Beowulf* (*The Mere Wife*, 2018), Sophie Mackintosh on the *Mabinogion* (*The Water Cure*, 2018), and an increasing number of works addressing mythologies from other cultures, such as Vaishnavi Patel's *Kaikeyi* (2022), a retelling of the Ramayana. More recent works of literature are no exception: Kit de Waal on *Moby Dick* (*Becoming Dinah*, 2019), Katherine Bradley on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (*The Sisterhood*, 2023), and Xiaolu Guo on *Moby Dick* (again) (*Call me Ishmaelle*, forthcoming from Penguin in 2025). So much so that commentators have questioned whether the publishing industry is at 'saturation point' for such works, wondering aloud about their 'unoriginality' (Shaffi, 2023, para. 8), a doubt quickly answered by the nature of storytelling itself, rooted in oral cultures of endless adaptation. Writers have, of course, always repurposed each others' texts; it is the volume and the consistency of approach in these works that has signalled a profound resonance with our contemporary interpretive culture.

Within this roar of retellings, a quieter note can be traced that returns to the Pitt Rivers, the Ashmolean and a more precise set of questions around material archival absence. The texts listed above, while wielding enormous narrative and discursive power, are principally literary constructs rather than stories of identifiable historical events or personages. But a recent clutch of novels has focused in on precisely those kinds of figures, all of them European women from the medieval or early modern period, all of them in some way subject to gaps in the archives and their telling.⁶ In these works female writers examine the lives of individual women in consciously situated imaginative detail, offering a form of feminist restitution where accounts bound by the conventions of narrative historiography

⁶ Again, there are plenty of novels operating on comparable principles that do not conform precisely to my criteria: Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996a), Hilary Mantel's *The Giant, O'Brien* (1999), Naomi Wood's *Mrs Hemingway* (2014), Gavin McCrea's *Mrs Engels* (2015), George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), Alex Pheby's *Lucia* (2018), Amy Bloom's *White Houses* (2018), Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet* (2020) and Caroline Cauchi's *Mrs Van Gogh* (2023), for example. All of these works (re)animate a historical subject or subjects with the explicit intention of investigating gaps or inequalities in the historical record.

largely fall silent. Through the lens of absence, then, readers are (re)introduced to Mary Boleyn (Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl*, 2001),⁷ Venetia Stanley (Hermione Eyre's *Viper Wine*, 2015), Margaret Cavendish (Danielle Dutton's *Margaret the First*, 2016), Katharina Kepler (Rivka Galchen's *Everyone Knows Your Mother is a Witch*, 2021), Rebecca West (A. K. Blakemore's *The Manningtree Witches*, 2021), Marie de France (Lauren Groff's *Matrix*, 2021), Cecily Neville (Annie Garthwaite's *Cecily*, 2021), Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe (Victoria MacKenzie's *For Thy Great Pain Have Mercy on My Little Pain*, 2023), and others. Provisionally, we can now add to this list Hester Tradescant, whose story is the subject of *Unquiet Things*, the novel that accompanies this essay. These works are theoretically distinct, offering particular provocations around the nature of authorship and contributing to the ongoing analytic process of renegotiating what might constitute a society's 'historical record' and 'history'. Thematically and stylistically, they are successors to postmodernist fictions of the past that consciously interrogated and pastiched the construction of grand, binary narratives and identities; however, their ethical concerns are not with demonstrating the meaninglessness of all categories. Rather, they seek to enrich contemporary understandings of figures whom those categories have never privileged. Their intention is restorative, interrogative and poetic: what Alison Gibbons has characterised as a 'rehabilitated ethical consciousness' that narrativises 'the self not as game, but in order to enhance the realism of a text and tackle the sociological and phenomenological dimensions of personal life.' (2017, para. 10) The critical and political context within which they are written and on which they reflect offers, on the one hand, a renewed interest in the analytic possibilities of the immaterial as described above; on the other, they are female Western writers working in a cultural landscape where the concept of 'history' itself is 'a weapon in America's daily war over contemporary politics,' (Green, 2023, para. 18) and an ideological tool in some of our most devastating contemporary conflicts. Globally, violent erasures of individuals, identities, communities, rights to bodily autonomy and ecologies are openly in

⁷ This title of Gregory's sits slightly apart from the others in my selection, as it was published a decade or two earlier (it can be argued that *The Other Boleyn Girl* really kick-started a whole new era for feminist historical retellings, and new ways of looking at the Tudors) and is less concerned with stylistic innovation – but I include it for its great and conscious influence over the publishing industry in the decades that followed. Following the release of the TV adaptation of Hilary Mantel's *The Mirror and the Light* (2020) in 2024, Gregory was interviewed in *The Guardian* on precisely this question. She said: 'One of the things I brought to [*The Other Boleyn Girl*], which I thought was quite fresh, was trying to look at the wives as agents of their own lives. I was at university in the 80s and that was a time when women's studies was being taught and feminism was creeping into an academic consciousness.' (Williams, 2024, para. 9)

process; this conditions literary production, of texts set in historical periods as much any other.

Gibbons continues: ‘with the end of postmodernism’s playfulness and affectation, we are better placed to construct a literature that engages earnestly with real-world problems. This new literature can, in good faith, examine complex and ever-shifting crises – of racial inequality, capitalism and climate change – to which it is easy to close one’s eyes.’ (2017, para. 12) In their idiosyncratic fictional registers, then, these novels by women sympathetically enact the simple truth that writing things differently can be a matter of life or death.

Knowledge of the past, argues Diana Wallace in *The Woman’s Historical Novel*, has long been a political tool for women, and for other ‘unrecorded’ identities, to ‘shape narratives which are more appropriate to their experiences than those of conventional history.’ (Wallace, 2004, p. 2) Throughout the twentieth century women writers of fiction have anticipated later developments in narrative historiography with stories that offer alternative accounts of historical eras, be they queer (Mary Renault’s cult 1950s novels of homosexual characters in ancient Greece; Virginia Woolf’s era- and gender-hopping *Orlando*, 1928), imaginative (Sophia Lee’s *The Recess*, 1783) or escapist (the 1930s-1970s Regency romances of Georgette Heyer), where ‘the need for escapism itself indicates a dissatisfaction with what is available.’ (Wallace, 2004, p. 2) Fiction functions here as a space where women can exercise oppositional habits of mind without the requirement to justify themselves to a patriarchal academy, while nevertheless dealing in archival ‘facts’ and leaving disruptive traces in popular discourse. This ‘seductive interplay’, writes Cleo Kearns in her analysis of historical romances, ‘constitutes at once this form’s appeal and its faint uneasiness.’ (1990, p. 38) *Soi-distant* historical fictions have always existed in an uncomfortable tension with narrative history; those written by women are uncomfortable squared. Not only do they destabilise the prevailing authority of principally male-authored, institutionally sanctioned accounts of the past, they express the possibility that a significant proportion of humanity has been experiencing things differently all along. As such, a historical lens continues to hold a dual appeal for women writers, irrespective of sub-genre. It also makes the choice of early modern subjects identified above particularly pertinent, sitting as they do along a constructed epochal divide to which we can trace the roots of many exclusionary positivistic ontologies and imperialist practices of extractivist excess that continue to dominate our twenty-first century cultures. As Martha Tuck Rozett has

suggested of Shakespeare's England, 'novelists have sought out this period in history... because it offers instances of divided and destabilised societies, characterised by political and religious tensions, high ambitions and rapid social and cultural change.' (2003, p. 8) Twenty years after Rozett, the ever-more fractious and exploratory century after Shakespeare offers rich comparative material for authorial imaginations – and the setting for the three novels discussed below.

If women are well-versed in using fiction to disrupt a cohesive sense of historical authorship, critical approaches to discourses of the past have undergone all the more recent interrogations of the post-structuralist challenge to rationalist grand narratives and notions of objective truth. This has created both a far more uncertain relationship between the past and what we can say about it in historiography generally, and an infinitely richer range of possibilities for historical writing, including fictions set in the past. The poststructural critics of the 1960s 'exposed the imperialism of Western rational thinking, its dominance and its dualism, and its sexism and racism too.' (Turner, 2024, p. 9) The resulting analytical revolution across the social sciences created an environment where the ability to make authoritative statements about *what happened* was radically problematised, questioning the aspirational status of historiography as a scientific endeavour drawing on indisputable facts, and emphasising instead the situated nature of knowledge production. By the 1980s Michel de Certeau was able to announce that 'the past is a fiction of the present', and that 'fiction is the repressed other of historical discourse.' (1985, p. 11). Rather than the sovereign framework for analysing the past, history in this view becomes just one tool in interpreting a cultural moment. It is worth emphasising that history has, in fact, always occupied a contested ground with regard to the singularity of its discourses – 'instead of opposing history to poetry,' writes Hayden White, Aristotle 'suggested their complementarity, joining both of them to philosophy in the human effort to represent, imagine and think the world in its totality, both actual and possible, both real and imagined, both known and only experienced.' (2005, p. 147) Elsewhere, Martha Tuck Rozett points out that 'until the early nineteenth century historiography was regarded as a literary art' (2003, p. 7) – an unstable categorisation that makes the writing of the past such a rich field for questions of interpretation.

History itself, then, was being reframed as 'what *might have* happened.' (White, 2005, p. 148) At the same time, both the subjects and the sources deemed appropriate for historical enquiry were also

undergoing a profound shift, opening up to include history ‘from below’ and material cultures. This movement began earlier in the twentieth century with the work of the French Annales School, who in their pursuit of a ‘total history’ added elements of society such as agriculture, technology and ‘mentalities’ to their field of enquiry, rejecting an exclusive focus on politics and conflict. They showed ‘how innovative use can be made of familiar forms of documentation and how questions about the past can be formulated, and how to build up the context within which history from below might be written.’ (Sharpe, 2001, pp. 30) The content and function of these stories ‘from below’ has since developed – at its inception, the preoccupation of the (all-male) School was with ‘class structure or some other cognate form of social stratification... mining history from the perspective of women or children would give different insights into what subordination might entail.’ (p. 32) The rich, in-depth ‘microhistories’ of small geographical areas produced by Annales historians chimed with later developments in narrative theory, epitomised by the New Historicist movement. If, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz suggested in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) all of culture is a text, the possibilities of source material for historiography and the significance of partially observed lives are subject to a radical expansion. Concretely, this might present as ‘arguments about the rise of individualism and privacy in the early modern period... based not only on the evidence of diary-keeping, but also on such changes as the rise of individual cups.’ (Burke, 2001, p. 13) It also welcomes the poetic content of the past, as described by Gallagher and Greenblatt: ‘New Historicism invokes the vastness of the textual archive, and with that vastness an aesthetic appreciation of the individual instance... while deeply interested in the collective, it remains committed to the value of the single voice, the isolated scandal, the idiosyncratic vision, the transient sketch.’ (2000, p. 16) Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the content and form of writings about the past shifted dramatically. Across disciplines, positivist interpretations based on ‘the autonomous subject of the humanist tradition, a subject capable of knowing both the world and itself,’ was now being seen as ‘a utopian dream of the European Enlightenment.’ (Moxey, 1998, p. 1)

The terrain of the novel participated in these paradigm shifts with new thematic preoccupations and experimental forms. Martha Tuck Rozett suggests that the New Historicist movement opened the door to ‘historical fiction as academically respectable genre vehicle for

recovering and reimagining the past in unconventional ways,' starting with Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980) – a wildly inventive and ambitious medieval mystery incorporating historical research and literary theory. She argues that this was the novel that indicated a new type of 'postmodern fiction' was emerging, a fiction that expressed (2003, p. 2):

a resistance to old certainties about what happened and why; a recognition of the subjectivity, the uncertainty, the multiplicity of 'truths' inherent in any account of past events; and a disjunctive, self-conscious narrative, frequently produced by eccentric and/or multiple narrating voices. Postmodern fictions frequently play genres off against one another, making fluid the boundaries between novel and autobiography, novel and history, novel and biography.

Linda Hutcheon grouped such novels together as 'historiographic metafiction', identifying a new form of 'fictionalised history with a parodic twist,' written 'in the context of serious interrogating of the nature of historiography.' (2005, p. 50) She identified works such as *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie, 1981), *Waterland* (Swift, 1983), *Sexing the Cherry* (Winterson, 1989) and *Possession* (Byatt, 1990), with their knowing narrators, multiple viewpoints and unstable temporalities, as 'denaturalising of the conventions of representing the past in narrative – historical and fictional – that is done in such a way that the politics of the act of representing are made manifest.' (p. 56) All the foregoing work of destabilising narrative authority is here enacted in novel form, an exuberant reworking of the idea that 'past events existed empirically, but in epistemological terms we can only know them today through texts. Past events are given *meaning*, not *existence*, by their representations in history.' (p. 78) This distinctive body of work made a literary virtue of the complexities of knowledge construction, and in so doing raised questions about the role of fiction in reevaluating what could be counted as academically responsible accounts of the past.

In the meantime, feminist and postcolonial critics were examining a dual problem contained within the wholesale deconstruction of universality and the subject postulated by poststructuralism and expressed in postmodernism. Writing from decentered positions, they observed that not only had many identities never possessed the Enlightenment autonomy poststructuralism claimed to counteract,

experiencing the conditions of their constituted subjectivity in often violently embodied ways, but that denying them this autonomy neutralised their political agency. Writing on science and technology – but arguing for the role of poetry in that space – Donna Haraway observed that ‘feminists don’t need a doctrine of objectivity that promises transcendence, a story that loses track of its mediations just where someone might be held responsible for something.’ (1988, p. 579) In literary criticism of the postmodern fictions discussed above, Patricia Waugh identifies an element of mourning or longing for the ‘illusion of full subjective presence’, a nostalgia that disregards the possibility that others ‘*may already* have sensed the extent to which subjectivity is constructed through the institutional dispositions of relations of power, as well as those of fictional convention.’ (2006b, p. 2) And on historical fiction, Jerome de Groot notes that ‘in attacking grand narratives such thinking shut down the possibility of political progress and programmatic change.’ (2010, p. 133) Even as critics and novelists were flamboyantly destabilising historical certainties, voices who had only relatively recently been able to express themselves in those circles were insisting on the importance of *saying something*, of expressing ‘a subjective identity, a sense of effective agency and history for women [hitherto] denied them by the dominant culture.’ (Waugh, 2006b, p. 2)

These debates precipitated the surge in feminist (re)tellings discussed above, a conscious manoeuvre where not only is ‘problematizing the contemporary self in the face of the historical... something which is innate to the genre,’ (de Groot, 2010, p. 137) but where, as Aughterson and Phillips have suggested, ‘the marginalisation and “othering” of women in a patriarchal society puts them into a different relationship with the forms and language of a dominant culture and its ideologies – and so into a different relationship with the novel form,’ resulting in a ‘necessary experimentalism’ in women’s writing. (2021, p. 3) After the historiographic metafiction of the 1980s, women writers started to insist anew on the importance of self-determining identities with distinctive voices that have, throughout human history and into the present day, been subject to the political and domestic silencing of patriarchal discourses. While this cannot always be artistically successful, the best of these novels ‘affirm belief in the need for “strong” selves without presenting the self as an unchanging, ahistorical essence or as an isolated ego struggling aggressively and competitively to define itself as unique, different, separate.’ (Waugh, 2006a, p. 14). In particular, the narratives of the (re)visioned classical

mythologies discussed above emphasise interconnectedness, community, process and care in the lives of their female characters, while being always alert to threats to bodily autonomy, ‘asserting the contingency of matter over and against the crystalline perfections of rationalistic philosophy.’ (2006b, p. 196) Set against these developments, the choice to write out of particular silences in the historical record, as the fictions of seventeenth-century women identified above have done, is not merely a formal exercise. These works contain within them both a conscious political urgency and a particular set of suggestions about how archives might be read differently. They attempt not to relativise historical meaning past the point of interpretive value, but to offer fictions of identifiable historical subjects that illuminate complex and embodied human subjectivities, demonstrating the hollowness of history told without such material.

Rather than celebrating a radical disruption between discourse and meaning, then, these recent historically-situated novels by women undertake a political reworking of given texts, emphasising the analytical and archival work still to do and offering carefully mediated imaginative interpretations of their chosen subjects. Donna Haraway has argued for just such ‘better accounts of the world’ in pursuit of liveable societies, arguing that ‘we need the power of modern theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life.’ (1988, p. 580) By positioning themselves in the niches left in shadow by the methodologies of conventional narrative histories, these novels of seventeenth-century women question the assumptions of discourses that have created or disregarded those suggestive absences, and suggest fiction as one tool for rethinking them. Again, Donna Haraway’s thought is useful as it collapses the artificial division between science and poetry, arguably more conventionally opposed forms than fiction and history. Developing the approach of the New Historicists, she suggests that ‘many poets and biologists have believed that poetry and organisms are siblings,’ and that true objectivity is ‘about taking risks in a world where “we” are permanently mortal, that is, not in “final” control.’ (p. 596). By releasing ourselves from an artificial commitment to objectivity that privileges a patriarchal structuring of society, and embracing the potentialities of imagination and affect, we might come closer to a form of knowledge production more suited to the ways in which human subjectivity is constituted and lived. The risk taken by these new fictions of seventeenth-century women is to occupy

a position, to excavate its richness, in full knowledge of its limited nature and the degree to which it underscores the losses of the past, while interpreting it for present and future readers. They celebrate Haraway's 'privilege of partial perspective', where 'feminist objectivity is about limited location and situation knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.' (p. 583) These fictions, then, offering restorative interpretations of partially-known subjects where the hitherto 'accepted' historical record either falls silent or actively suppresses women's experiences, find agency in absence. They are a practice of hope.

In the remainder of this thesis, I have adopted the phrase 'better accounts' as a guiding framework for works of fiction set in the past that ethically reimagine marginalised historical figures (in which I include *Unquiet Things*). The term is both ambitious and generative: ambitiously, it expresses narratives that strive to engage with the gaps and silences of the historical record, and I use it particularly to refer to women whose lives were not self-authored in the archive. Generatively, it aspires to multiple, diverse, repeated attempts at such accounts, signalling an open-ended approach that does not seek certainty or resolution. Rather, it centres the unending, imperfect process of re-examining historical narratives as an ethical position, seeing uncertainty as a 'feminist tool' (Oliver, 2025) that more accurately reflects the position of the writer/researcher, of her subject, and of her contributions. A better account, then, is not necessarily one that is 'truer' in any positivist sense, but one that is more attuned to the affective, partial, situated, and imaginative dimensions of historical recovery. Formally – as we shall see in the analysis of texts that follows – this means embracing narrative strategies that foreground fragmentation, instability, and absence, reflecting the disordered ways in which many historical lives (especially those of women) appear to us now. Ethically, it requires particular attention to the risk of appropriation: as Saidiya Hartman has it, any effort to 'fill in the gaps' must reckon with the violence of archival silence as well as the author's own positionality in any restorative attempt, and not be tempted to 'provide closure where there is none' (2008, p. 8). Narratively, then, a better account seeks resonance over resolution, uncertainty over closure, and attentiveness over authority. This presents a particular set of challenges for writers of fictional 'better accounts' set in the past, which must make a choice between the constraints set by what is archivally 'known' and the demands of fictional narrative artifice, 'life brought to different life by the highest artistry' (Wood, 2008, p. 186). On

this question, each author makes the best decision she can for the story she is trying to tell, and I shall examine my own choices regarding *Unquiet Things* in the latter part of this essay.

These 'better accounts' are also set specifically against a mode of historical fiction, sometimes considered 'traditional', that has suggested the 'true' role of the historical novel is to interrogate and express ideas of national identity – a cultural and theoretical legacy that has tended to overlook the female experience and interpretation of history. A 2011 article in the *London Review of Books* by the American sociologist Perry Anderson rehearsed this dynamic, stating that the historical novel was 'inaugurated' by Sir Walter Scott with *Waverley* in 1814, and became a 'recessive form' after the First World War. The 'classic' expression of the form, he wrote, 'is an affirmation of human progress, in and through the conflicts that divide societies and the individuals within them', and a 'product of romantic nationalism'. After the trauma of the world wars, he states, the historical novel suffered 'a terrible hangover from melodrama' and became 'déclassé... falling precipitously out of the ranks of serious fiction'. (para. 15) This analysis, as a number of responses to the article pointed out, not only privileges an account of history predicated on the primacy of conflict in the service of 'progress' as the defining human experience, but also assumes that fiction which is *not* preoccupied with such concerns – such as much fiction written by women – is inherently no longer 'serious'.

Anderson's piece takes as its starting point the work of Hungarian theorist Georg Lukács, whose definitive Marxist analysis *The Historical Novel* was written in exile in the Soviet Union in 1937. In his introduction to the 1983 edition, Fredric Jameson discusses 'the coordination between an emergent new *form*, the historical novel, and an emergent new type of *consciousness*: a new sense of history and a new experience of historicity.' (p. 1) Lukács saw Walter Scott as a great genius and originator in his ability to 'portray the struggles and antagonisms of history by means of characters who, in their psychology and destiny, always represent social trends and historical forces.' (p. 15) These characters are perforce not history's 'great' figures, but Hegelian 'world-historical individuals' who can experience both sides of a conflict, such as Edward Waverley himself – a young soldier caught between the Jacobite Rising and the Hanoverian regime, between honour and civilization, and between two different romantic attachments. Through such conflicts, history progresses. The problem, as Wallace wrote in

response to Anderson's piece, is not only that writers – some of them women – were producing historical novels long before Scott, but also that (2011, para 2):

Women's historical novels simply do not fit the Lukácsian model... They very rarely work with a notion of history as 'progress'. They have been much more likely to be histories of defeat that explore the ways in which women have been violently excluded from both 'history' (the events of the past) and from 'History' (written accounts of the past). What's more, the historical novel did not become a 'recessive form' after the First World War as Anderson claims. It became a predominantly female form.

Lukács, it may be noted, includes not a single female writer in his analysis.

Of the historical novel, Jerome de Groot has written that if it 'is not self-aware, interested in undermining its own authority and legitimacy, then it might be failing in its duty to history.' (2010, p. 108) This is as true of the authority of identity as it is of narrative, the two being inextricably interlinked. The assumptions of the Marxist historical dialectic, as influential as they have been and remain, are exclusionary; these new fictions of seventeenth-century women, then, continue the work of establishing alterity in the canon of historical – and therefore, human – experiences that are deemed relevant, interesting and possessed of agency.

In the analysis that follows, I am preoccupied with a necessarily specific form of *fictions set in the past* – I use the phrase to signal an intentional, if aspirational, distancing from the terrain of 'historical fiction' outlined above. To properly treat the breadth and complexity of this continually unstable term would overwhelm this discussion – one of its most dedicated contemporary analysts, Jerome de Groot, begins an overview of its many forms in *The Historical Novel* (2009) with a quote from 1968 stating that historical fiction consists of 'stories that in any way whatsoever portray the life of the past' (Baker, p. vii in de Groot 2009, p. 46), and concludes it with another written in 2005 that observes 'the problem is not that historical fiction is too narrow to deserve its own section in libraries and bookstores, but that it's too broad, and that it overlaps with other genres.' (Johnson, p. 11 in de Groot 2009, p. 50). Far from being unified, the term 'historical fiction' encompasses such a diverse range of approaches as to

become analytically unwieldy, with a tendency to trip over its lingering (if unjustified) association with ‘the kind of thing you find in drugstores that have cloaks and raised silver scrollwork titles on them’ (Atwood 1996b, p. 1509-10). Atwood proposes ‘novels set in the historic past’ (ibid) to distinguish serious fictions from romantic ones – my version is comparable in that it privileges the literary undertaking over the temporal context, if only by a slight and precarious margin. The two are inextricable; but I suggest there is a category distinction between (1) those novels for whom the historical effects – of period atmosphere and setting – are the principle motivation for the work, and to which plot and character are subordinate (they are created in order to support the writer’s exploration of the former); and (2) those fictions whose entry into a particular moment in history is driven not primarily by an aesthetic or political or philosophical interest in that time period, but by their literary or methodological preoccupations. Texts in either category can belong simultaneously to many others – romantic, speculative, pulp, literary – but those that interest me here, and in which category I place my own work, are those ‘better accounts’ that are *feminist literary fictions of a historiographical bent* – formally innovative fictions set in the past, often but not exclusively authored by women, that respond to silences in the historical record, and are intellectually self-conscious about that enterprise. The ‘literary’ classification is the least stable in that set, as it relates to narrative expectations – as de Groot has it, for texts to be ‘literary’ in this context they must supersede the ‘genre’ classification through their ‘formal, historiographical and theoretical radicalism’ (2009, p. 93) and further that they must ‘reflect on their own status as representations’ (2010, p. 21). But what is more important is that these texts employ literary strategies to address identifiable gaps in historical records. That is their *raison d’être* – without those gaps, they would not exist. They are not, therefore, tied to a particular genre – a ‘better account’ could, like the texts discussed below, be formally experimental – equally, they could be written in a style expressly intended for a mass market readership (Philippa Gregory, *The Other Boleyn Girl*, 2001), or somewhere between the two, being both plot-driven and immersive but with a degree of thematic and artistic sophistication (Geraldine Brooks, *Horse*, 2022). My choice of texts which are ‘literary’ in both concept and execution is a question of personal preference.

The above precision naturally informs my own work, discussed in more detail below. But it is important to note that in pursuit of a ‘better account’, the creative and technical decisions that went in

to the text of *Unquiet Things* were part of my own process of positioning vis-a-vis the unstable landscape of 'historical fiction'. While conscious of genre conventions, the novel's concern is more immediately with processes of silencing and erasure, and with how the act of addressing their production in the 1600s might echo in the present day. 'Better accounts' are intentional and specific – a 'historical novel' might illuminate, explore and reframe a past era, but it does not necessarily seek to inhabit an identifiable archival gap regarding a historical individual. In this sense, the novels under discussion here are in a more particular relationship with historiographic methodology than with a work that addresses these questions at a thematic level through imagined scenarios.

For feminist historical writers, narrative elisions of the past are compounded by what is – or more likely, isn't – available in the archives, a condition of enquiry particularly acute for authors who are explicitly writing into gaps in the written record. The range of materials incorporated into historical studies has vastly increased during the last century, and as discussed above, Clifford Geertz's influence encouraged a move towards a 'historical anthropology', 'microhistories' and 'history from below', with New Historicists producing densely researched narrative accounts of individuals and their world views that went so far as to suggest the possibility of imaginative interpretation where the records cannot answer questions of motivation, in such works such as *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Seventeenth-Century Miller* (Ginzberg, 1980) and *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Zemon Davis, 1982).⁸ Feminist anthropologists of the past, however, have to face the absence of substantive records on which to base their fieldwork – whether or not history has been written by the victors, it has largely been *written*, and the number of women's accounts of their own lives from eras where literacy was

⁸ Natalie Zemon Davis's celebrated account follows the case of a sixteenth-century French peasant who, having returned from war for several years and had another child with his wife, was revealed as an impostor when the true Martin Guerre walked into a courtroom in Toulouse. Forty years earlier, Janet Lewis wrote a luminous fictional account of the same tale that examined the psychology of Martin's wife, who must have been aware of the deception (*The Wife of Martin Guerre* (1941)). To read both works sequentially is a powerful experience, an unusually closely matched study of microhistory and historical fiction investigating the same material and offering complementary – if contrasting – insights.

almost exclusively the preserve of male elites is vanishingly small.⁹ Studies such as Antonia Fraser's *The Weaker Vessel: Woman's Lot in Seventeenth-Century England* (1984), while insisting on the agency of their subjects, are faced with a related problem – the female voices they recover are principally those of the elite, literate individuals whose mentality is marked out as singular by the very fact of its recoverability. To present accounts of women who broke the surface of the historical record is a critically important undertaking – but the subjectivity of the vast majority remains ultimately inaccessible. Saidiya Hartman's radical essay on women in the Atlantic slave trade 'Venus in Two Acts' considers lives where the archive presents 'little more than a *register of her encounter with power...* We only know what can be extrapolated from an analysis of the ledger or borrowed from the world of her captors and masters and applied to her.' (2008, p. 2, my emphasis) The cases Hartman discusses exist within a historical situation so extreme it would be misguided to compare them here, but the analytical questions are posed with crystalline precision: 'How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know?', she asks. 'Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive?', 'How does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?', 'How can a narrative of defeat enable a place for the living or envision an alternative future?' (p. 3, 11, 3, 14) Fictions of the past attempting to (re)inscribe subjects whose agency was brutally repressed during their lifetimes on account of their identity, texts hoping through their inscription to enable different possibilities, must consider these material and ethical questions, knowing they can never be satisfactorily answered but preferring to make an attempt over allowing unexamined silence to continue.

In search of Haraway's 'better accounts', the range of cultural texts considered available – ideas of what might be 'epistemologically salient' (Schröter and Taylor, 2018, p. 5) material in the construction of historical narratives – has continued to expand beyond the innovations of the New

⁹ The vogue for women-centred accounts of the past is also enjoying a surge in popular non-fiction, with recent titles including *Unwell Women: A Journey Through Medicine And Myth in a Man-Made World* (Cleghorn, 2022); *Femina: A New History of the Middle Ages, Through the Women Written Out of It* (Ramirez, 2023); *The Missing Thread: A New History of the Ancient World Through the Women Who Shaped It* (Dunn, 2024); *Normal Women: 900 Years of Women Making History* (Gregory, 2024). Each has its own methodology for accounting for gaps, and each – by treating 'women's history' as a discreet category – underscores the structural inequalities of historical knowledge production, where to write a 'men's history' of anything would be tautologous. It is worth noting that these publications were preceded by a bestselling account of processes of erasure in operation today – *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (Perez, 2019).

Historicist and historical anthropology movements. Both the intangible and its affective power are being given consideration in contemporary social science research, as are the critical tools to translate them. Like Marina Abramović, her hand held over an empty space, scholars are starting to attribute value to what cannot be seen, and to learn to listen differently. As John Law has argued, writing in support of ‘mess’ in research, ‘pains and pleasures, hopes and horrors, institutions and apprehensions, losses and redemptions, mundanities and visions, angels and demons, things that slip and slide or appear and disappear, change shape or don’t have much form at all, unpredictabilities, these are just a few of the phenomena that are hardly caught by social science methods’. Examining what is left out of conventional methodologies, Law acknowledges how ‘poetry and novels wrestle with the materials of language to make things, things that are said to be imaginary. It is the making, the process or effect of making, that is important... people, machines, traces, resources of all kinds – and we might in other contexts extend the list to include spirits or angels or muses – are all involved in the process of crafting.’ (2004, p. 2, 84) Considerations of the unknown in literature therefore take on a further significance, that of historiographic methodology. As de Groot observes of Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* (2009), ‘gestures towards ghosts and the spirit world in the novel are thematically and historiographically crucial, sharing the movement from one sensibility to another... studiously not the ghostly remnants of Gothic writing, echoes of transgressions and misdeeds, but an attempt at communicating historical sensibility.’ (2015, p. 28) Haunting, mess, waste, affect and – I would argue – sound, as expressed in the emerging field of archaeoacoustics (Goh, 2024, p. 27) are all finding new significance not solely as literary metaphors but as engaged commentary on what we attribute value to in our contemporary ontological universe, including our understanding of the past. Crucially, Law argues for the importance of ‘trying to make and know realities that are vague and indefinite *because much of the world is enacted in that way*.’ (2004, p. 14)

Kevin Hetherington has argued that ‘we encounter the unexpected presence of absence as a ghost,’ a figure of value untranslated, and that ‘we understand haunting as an unacknowledged debt and feel a sense of guilt in its presence... it is a debt that has to be settled.’ (2004, p. 170) In contemporary popular discourses we might discuss the concept of trauma being inherited (Henriques, 2019), while in social research the parameters of inquiry are being reconceptualised. ‘Normative methods try to define

and police boundary relations in ways that are tight and hold steady. An inquiry into slow method suggests that we might imagine more flexible boundaries, and different forms of presence and manifest absence.’ (Law, 2004, p. 85) The significance of the early modern period as an era riven with theological and political tensions for new fictions of the past has been discussed above; to this can be added its containment of the roots of rationalist approaches to science, still intermingled with medieval figures of fantasy and magic. The instability of discourses around marvels, wonders, witches, demons, faith and the unknown, the sense of absolute possibility and excitement, makes the seventeenth century particularly appealing as a setting for women concerned with questions of what gets heard, how and by whom. If, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot has written with regard to the history of the Haitian Revolution, ‘any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly,’ (1995, p. 35) then fiction can be just one part of a process of opening up the possibility of ‘better accounts’. Still, it is important to note that if the agency of silence invites new fictional interpretations, the resulting novels advance more decisively into the terrain of narrative history, particularly historical biography, with its specialist knowledges and methodologies. Few writers of fiction would disregard the importance of that scholarly skill set, or pretend to be able to match it. At a time when historians and the humanities more widely are facing acute existential challenges (Green, 2023), when ‘truth’ is a politically weaponised concept, such humility and particularity is important.

For an archival absence to be identified and understood as significant – in this context, significant enough for someone to want to write a book about it – that absence must have agency, with which it is imbued by the conditions of its production and reception. It is what frames a space that gives it its power, as concretely identified in by Jessica Baker in her 2017 contextual study of architectural absence – ‘although absences exist everywhere, these can only really come into play through the presence of an object, marker or trace.’ (p. 2) Similarly in discourse, ‘only when we can hold non-occurrence of speech against the possibility of occurring, and only when we can hold something that gets not said against the possibility of saying it, are we dealing with epistemologically salient cases of absence.’ (Schröter and Taylor, 2018, p. 5) The act of removal leaves a space that can then be remarked on, so the moment of production contains within it the – fragmentary, imperfect –

possibility of its own agency. The closing scenes of Annie Proulx's generational epic of the global timber trade *Barkskins* (a very different kind of historical novel to those discussed above, but one just as inherently preoccupied with the nature of historical storytelling) hinge on just such a fascination, allegorically situated in the world of ecology (2016, p. 708-709):

And that's the allure,' [Sapatisia] went on. 'The slippery composition of ecosystems in general. It is uncomfortable to live in spinning world of hallucinatory change. But how interesting it is.'

Tom Paulin leaned forward. Felix thought he had loosened up since dinner – maybe it was the wine. 'I'm thinking about the other end of the Amazonian stick – not the hyperdominant species but the rarities. The extinct species. I'm thinking about "dark diversity". Like dark matter.'

'Dark diversity?' Felix liked the sound of this.

'A little like absent presence – when you pry a sunken stone from the ground the shape of the stone is still there in the hollow – absent presence. Say there is a particular rare plant that influences the trees and plants near it. Say conditions change and our rare plant goes extinct and its absence affects the remaining plants – dark diversity.'

'But if conditions change again will the absent plant return?' asked Jeanne. 'Are you saying extinction is not forever?'

This is the question posed by these fictions of absences. Somehow, a 'dark' figure in the historical record leaves enough of a trace – or their absence is so acutely marked to contemporary eyes, it affects the material around it – that it becomes a demanding presence. By writing those figures back in, novelists ask whether the quality of that erasure can be changed. The archives with which they are preoccupied are 'dark' both in Proulx's sense above – stimulating change in their environment through absence – and in the sense of their content, which though it is not accessible, still existed. The term 'dark archives' is principally used in computer science to indicate 'a repository for information that can be used as a failsafe during disaster recovery – it is a copy of an archive that consists only of meta-data

and is not for public use,’ but also, more generally, ‘the information in an archive that cannot be seen’. (Dekker 2019, p. 135) Rather more mordantly – but not inappropriately – it has also been used to describe the tradition of anthropodermic books, those bound in human skin (Rosenbloom, 2020). Taking these related interpretations together, it is possible to see the role of these contemporary fictions of the past as imaginative expressions of dark archives, where ‘the dark archive is a safe haven for ideas and ways of life not tolerated in the present, but infused with the possibility that, one day, they may come into the light... queer intimacies, ephemeral traces of taboo relationships and under-appreciated manuscripts whose caretakers are convinced will ultimately reach the readers that are their due.’ (Cooke and Williams 2024, p. 8)

If notable absences are produced by the material around them, so too are the subjects attentive to their presence. As anthropologist Jack Bilmes has argued, ‘neither sound nor silence exists without a hearer.’ (1994, p. 4) That hearer (or Barthesian reader) is also situated. In the case of historical fiction the hearer of silences is also the author of the account of that silence, and they themselves occupy a historical position – which, as Hartman suggests above, runs the risk of replicating the act of ‘speaking for’ it is attempting to undo. Bilmes goes on (p. 18):

To hear silence it is not enough to have functioning ears. One has, first of all, to make culturally learned and contextually conditioned distinctions between noise and relevant sound. Moreover, silence can be very particular; we learn not only to hear silence but to hear it as the the silence which is the absence of some particular sound or talk, and to draw appropriate references.

Women in the twenty-first century are listening hard for particular archival silences in the quest to retrieve themselves from ‘the dustbin of history’ (Fleming, 2016), conscious that by doing so, they are occupying those gaps for their own ends. It is a clumsy cliché to observe, as many a reviewer has done, that the subject of a historical fiction would have approved of their new interpretation (on Margaret Cavendish, ‘the duchess herself would be delighted at her resurrection,’ (Grant, 2016, para. 2)) – and as much as a writer might fantasise about meeting her subject, it is also not really the point. The ends are politically urgent – this writing is taking place in a contemporary context where women’s voices and

reproductive rights are under attack or being rolled back in supposedly developed countries worldwide. This is one of Bilmes's 'contextually conditioned' distinctions, and which may also account in part for the attraction of the early modern era as suggested above. Women are looking to times when their very personhood was often in question – in search of understanding, and as a warning. They show an acute understanding of 'the way history shapes, wounds and implicates us... The process of remembering is, by definition, an act of imagination and invention, and the hardest stories to tell have become the stories we need most, those in which there is no tweetable takeaway – only the invisible dead, the ghosts who lie in wait... In our days of sloganeering and apocryphal tweets, it's also a form of resistance.' (O'Grady, 2019, para. 4)

I have used the above discussion to situate new fictions of the seventeenth century by women writers within a particular set of theoretical concerns, and to suggest that they are offering 'better accounts' of their subjects as part of a wider ongoing process of renegotiating the relationship of contemporary discourses of knowledge with those of the past. Two of these recently published accounts have in my view been particularly successful and are particularly pertinent to the thesis presented here. They are *Margaret the First* (2016), an account of the unconventional playwright, poet and philosopher Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623-1673) by Danielle Dutton, and *Everyone Knows Your Mother is a Witch* (2021), an account of the smallholder, innkeeper, mother and widow Katharina Kepler (1547-1622), who was imprisoned after accusations of witchcraft but eventually released after the intervention of her son Johannes Kepler, a celebrated astronomer. Both women present different forms of archival absence, and both accounts are distinctly original, offering meaningful interventions into the practice of writing out of past silences in a fictional mode, which I will demonstrate below. I will also further consider Hester Tradescant, the subject of my novel *Unquiet Things*, who has been repeatedly and deliberately excluded from accounts of the Ashmolean Museum and the men whose ambitions converged to enable its establishment at Oxford. *Unquiet Things* presents a different case to the two published novels under discussion – not only does it address a specific archival gap (while dividing the narrative equally between Elias Ashmole and Hester), it does so in a context that could potentially have meaning for the narrative of a public institution. The foregoing discussion investigates the dynamics that have shaped this project: the absence of Hester's subjectivity, full of gaps and

hauntings, became irresistibly present for a particular person at a particular time, and its (re)visioning has taken place in a critical environment where the potentialities of the immaterial in historiography and social science more widely are the subject of increased attention.

‘How could the world be wound up like a clock?’

Constellated subjectivity in an account of Margaret Cavendish

On a rainy afternoon in 1667 Danielle Dutton’s *Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle* makes her way by carriage to London’s recently established Royal Society. She will be its first female guest, after which it will remain an all-male institution until 1945. All London speaks of Margaret’s eccentricity, less of her body of work. Dutton – with her authorial slippages of perspective – follows Margaret’s journey in prose as jerky but full of momentum as the carriage itself (2016, p. 148), rumbling over potholes in the road:

They’ll make much of what she wears – a gown embroidered with glass Venetian beads, red-heeled shoes, a cavalier’s hat, an eight-foot train, a man’s black *juste-au-corps* – a completely peculiar hybrid. One member will even mistake her for a man, until he sees her breasts. Yes, much will be made of her appearance, though she doesn’t know it yet. Just now, in the carriage rushing down John Street, she doesn’t know – what they will say, what she will say – and she tries to assemble her thoughts, fixed in one point, like a diamond.

Her thoughts spin out instead.

Like history itself, perhaps, the carriage bears her – a self-styled ‘completely peculiar hybrid’ – fitfully onward. The narrative voice is conditioned by Margaret’s position as a historical subject; to the reader she is already a construction, has already been made and remade, and though the Margaret of 1667 cannot be fully aware of this she is also a woman who works hard to make an impression, and to be remembered. She knows that to do what she is doing makes her exceptional, and she embraces it. Even as she approaches the institution against which she – and her peers, and those who come after her – may come to define her intellectual legacy, her future composition is already slipping into the text – ‘though she doesn’t know it yet.’ And as Margaret marshals her thoughts, some conscious sense of this emerges, a wider reflection on the disorderly nature of subjectivity (p. 149):

Then, once again, the carriage is off, at two o'clock on a damp grey afternoon. Can life be said to have a point toward which it moves, like a carriage down a London road, or rainwater in the gutter headed for a drain? At two o'clock on a grey afternoon? But no, she thinks, a life is not like that.

Dutton's insistence throughout the novel is precisely that 'a life is not like that' – neither in the living nor in the telling. Instead, she presents an account of a seventeenth-century woman which, while essentially linear in construction – following Margaret from birth to death – resists a stable narrative mode. The text is self-consciously composite, knowingly sharing its artifices with the reader – a postmodernist strategy that recalls Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, those works that 'frequently play genres off against one another, making fluid the boundaries between novel and autobiography, novel and history, novel and biography and combining different "registers of discourse".' (Tuck Rozett, quoting Hutcheon, 2003, p. 2) Narrative discourse enacted in this novel is certainly composite, conflicted and inconsistent, full of loss – but it also invites new voices and offers a version of how they might speak, celebrating the 'role of women in shaping historical narratives across a range of public and private, creative and scholarly spaces, as well as myriad material and textual forms.' (Pelling and Tabois, 2021, p. 515) *Margaret the First* takes the absences of its material and fills them with something impudent and generative, through a remarkably tight, kaleidoscopic lens filling a scant 160 pages. 'I wanted a complicated portrait of a complicated person,' Dutton explains in an interview (Patrick, 2016, para. 18) – and her subject's peculiar identity allows her to create a distinctive, experimental intervention into the possibilities of historical storytelling. Rather than exposing the historical subject as fraudulent, Dutton writes to celebrate the embodiment and materiality of her Margaret, be she ever so chaotic, imperfect and strange – much like the age in which she lived. By extension, Dutton implies that history written without its shambolic, masticating, haemorrhoid-ridden, insecure elements is no history at all.

Margaret Cavendish's archival legacy is exceptionally prolific and completely unique for a female seventeenth-century subject – she was a woman who wrote much and about whom much has been written. She was born into a noble family, but received little formal education – her wild spelling being

just one of the issues in her work for both critics and her own self-consciousness. Accompanying the exiled Queen Henrietta Maria into France during England's civil war she met and married the worldly William Cavendish, who became her great supporter and champion in an unusual marriage that brought her into the most advanced scholarly circles of the times. She published poetry, plays and philosophy to both mockery and acclaim, and was known as much for her outlandish dress and conversation as for her ideas. She was in some ways a rather modern celebrity, the subject of enthralled yet disdainful commentary during her lifetime and the centuries that followed. The stuff of Margaret's archival presence is plentiful, and it insists magnificently on the singularity of her mind and expression. She cannot be said to have been erased or silenced in ways comparable to Katharina Kepler or Hester TrDESCANT, discussed below – illiterate or semi-literate women who left no direct written traces of their own. Rather, it is Margaret's very exceptionalism that draws attention to the ways in which she has been absented from her own legacy. Her voice, while bewitching, is a lonely one, fighting to organise itself without formal education or institutional recognition and dismissed from the annals of 'serious' science and philosophy both during her lifetime and in the centuries that follow. For most, Margaret has been a 'fascinating footnote' (Jordan, 2016, para. 3), while for Virginia Woolf she was, famously, an object of some derision. 'What a vision of loneliness and riot the thought of Margaret Cavendish brings to mind!' Woolf wrote in *A Room of One's Own*. 'As if some giant cucumber had spread itself over all the roses and carnations in the garden and choked them to death... Evidently the crazy Duchess became a bogey to frighten clever girls with.' (1929, p. 56) In a text that rigorously explores the structural subjugation of women in literature, Woolf cannot find empathy for the 'hare-brained' Duchess of Newcastle. And yet, Woolf's absenting of Margaret from worthwhile intellectual history was theatrical enough to make a twenty-first century writer feel her presence, and want to make a new account. Dutton (who also founded the feminist literary press Dorothy, based in St. Louis, Missouri) explains that 'Woolf seems sympathetic and wanting to like Margaret, but she also criticises her harshly. I have the advantage of feminism having happened, and feminists can reclaim Margaret Cavendish. I decided I wanted to find Margaret for myself' (Patrick, 2016, para. 6)

That process of discovery led Dutton to create a voice for Margaret that both embraces her archival presence and fashions something new. The debt to Woolf is openly acknowledged, featuring both directly and indirectly in the text (Patrick, 2016, para. 8):

Woolf just never left. She was there at the very beginning, and the more I wrote the book the more I found myself turning to Woolf's own writing. The rhythms of her language really helped me. Woolf infuses this book. Woolf's prose, too – she sort of paints with words. I wanted people to have that feeling from my book. How does Woolf talk about a tree? Her prose is so lyrical without being just poetry. It feels like there's a narrative, but that the language is poetic.

Patricia Waugh suggests that 'to ask "Who am I?" is to articulate a question which usually assumes an *a priori* belief in an ultimate unity and fixity of being, a search for a rational, coherent, essential "self" which can speak and know itself. For Woolf, like many women writers positioned in a patriarchal society, a more appropriate question would be "what represents me?"' (2006, p. 10) *Margaret the First* is free of any search for an essential self. It foregrounds preexisting representations, while also creating a new one – one that embraces incoherence, that draws together all different aspects of a life, both 'known' and imagined, to create the possible outlines of a myth, like a sign in the zodiac laced together from indifferent stars. Woolf's own reluctance regarding the subject in question is disregarded in this new, composite representation. As Dutton's Margaret observes and interprets the world, she draws on Woolf's prose and 'paints with words' as Dutton suggests above, but also quotes her own works and uses unmarked phrases from her own writing – such as 'sharkly habits' (p. 3), 'tunable voices', 'wharling in the throat' (p. 9). Beyond their literary antecedents her sentences are filled with the rich material strangeness of the seventeenth century, its sense of wonder that both enthralls and makes bizarre. Margaret's voice also exhibits a profound and inimitable connection with a world that was only beginning to be classified as distinctly 'natural' as opposed to 'man-made' – an empathy that came to characterise her philosophical writings in contrast to the emerging rationalist disciplines of the era.

Here, newly arrived in Paris as England tears itself apart, Margaret announces herself ‘bored – so bored... at the height of history, the very middle of the world’ (p. 26-27):

... the incessant pointless duels, those ghostly caryatids, a monkey in a doublet roaming the halls... while ladies-in-waiting pranced and spun, gave chase to honking swans, I only sat and watched them from the knotted flower beds, ignored the book in my lap, and recalled the grounds at St. John’s Green: the fields of purpling wild lettuce, the spidery fern-ringed pond.

This poetic voice shrugs off any ‘division between lyric’s aesthetic intensity (pure affect, close to music) and the meandering drift of the story (one thing after another)’, as Ian Duncan describes in an argument about the ‘classical form’ of the historical novel. (2017, p. 390) It also makes space for playful interventions that bring the act of writing Margaret into the experience of reading her. This has a different intent and effect than in the postmodernist historiographical metafiction, which ‘refracted reality into endless language-games... when authors, or other real elements appear in fiction now... their presence is intended to signal realism, rather than to foreground the artifice of the text.’ (Gibbons, 2017, para. 4) Dutton herself, an American, is apparent as author in the text not only in the frequent interventions into the narrative point of view, but also through slippages of vocabulary – anachronisms, surely intentional, like ‘math’ (p. 42), ‘pub’ (p. 152), ‘braided up at back’ (p. 34), and ‘something of a hit’ (p. 75) make visible her situated positioning, and reject any artificial attempts at an ‘authentic’ seventeenth-century voice. They also anticipate a related breed of historical cinema and television characterised by flamboyant anachronism and scatological scriptwriting, which portray Queen Anne (*The Favourite*, 2018), Catherine the Great (*The Great*, 2020-23), the Villiers family (*Mary & George*, 2023) and Lady Jane Grey (*My Lady Jane*, 2024), for example.

There are more stars in this biographical constellation. The words of Margaret’s contemporaries are also woven into the text, given critical and affective weight. This has the effect both of distancing the reader from Margaret, seeing her through yet more eyes, but also drawing closer to her in imaginative sympathy. Dutton’s Margaret is acutely self-conscious, preternaturally ambitious and rather vain, profoundly affected by what her society says about her – texts which, of course, are available in

the archives. Dutton is able to work with comments such as those of Mary Evelyn, wife of the diarist John Evelyn, who after hearing Margaret discourse upon her *Description of a New World, called the Blazing-World* wrote ‘never did I see a woman so full of herself... so amazingly vain and ambitious.’ Learning this, Margaret falls into one of her regular depressions, declaring ‘I not only pity myself, but others pity me, which is a condition I would not be in.’ All this drives her usually placid and accepting husband to muse that ‘women should never speak more than to ask rational questions, or to give a discreet answer to a question asked of them.’ (p. 131) The conspicuous use of archival material gestures as much to biography as to fiction, but its very presence underscores the fictional nature of all historiographical endeavours. If I can do this, Dutton seems to say, what is everybody else doing, after all?

Not all of Margaret’s interlocutors are known to her – even as a child describing her father’s estate, her present first-person voice slips into future reportage (‘what one visitor would describe as a scene of “rosemary, cut out with curious order, in satyrs, centaurs, whale and half-men-horses and a thousand other counterfeited courses”’ (p. 7)) In later years, unbeknownst to her, up pops Pepys – watching, writing. Margaret’s visit to the Royal Society is framed in the novel by his efforts to see her, fascinated by her celebrity (‘she was *everywhere* that season... *everyone* had seen her, yet he could not manage to spot her’ (p. 151)), and Dutton is able to use his own words in the final report: ‘A mad, conceited, ridiculous woman... I do not like her at all.’ (p. 153) *Margaret the First* never invites the reader to relax into the sense that this is a pure fiction into which one can sink, believing Margaret and the world unaware of the motor of historical narrative always already in operation. It darts forward and back in time and point of view within the space of a paragraph, enfolding reportage and epochally discontinuous viewpoints into a millefeuille of intertextual references. On her wedding night, Margaret is prepared for bed by her maids (p. 38):

Dripping cold and naked, I thought: *William, Willy, Wally, Bill.*

It was the century of magnificent beds. Beds like ships from China, or beaded purses, in black and white, or pearled. Beds that disappeared behind a cloud of scented silk...

“A strange enchantment,” I told him. “As if I live in the world but also somehow out.”

Margaret's own voice switches, too – from first person in the first half of the book during her youth and years in exile, to third person in the second half when she returns to England, reflecting her shift from someone *experiencing and creating* her impressions of the world to someone more reflective, consciously *being produced* by her writing and the discourses that surround her. This is not a comfortable process, and to some degree seems to mask the traumas of Margaret's youth – the violent pillaging of her family estates during the civil war, when the family coffins were open and their contents strewn about, and the deaths of many of her family members. Evident throughout the novel are 'the efforts and costs of maintaining the lineaments of the self in the face of a sceptical or hostile world.' (Jordan, 2016, para. 8) Here, afflicted by a skin condition, Margaret buys 'velvet patches in the shapes of stars and moons' to cover up red marks around her mouth (p. 142-143):

'These black stars serve,' she says to [her husband] William, 'like well-placed commas, to punctuate my face.'

'They look obscene,' he says.

On May 1 the duchess goes out in her silver carriage.

On May 2 she walks the lawn in a moiré gown.

And [her friend] Flecknoe tells her – as they walk on the lawn – how the previous night he heard someone telling someone else that after visiting at Newcastle House Mary Evelyn told Roger Bohun that women were not meant to be authors or censure the learned – he lifts a low-hanging branch – but to tend the children's education, observe her husband's commands, assist the sick, relieve the poor.

The vanity patches are yet more stars, yet more text ('well-placed commas'), inevitably contested. From her toilette to her writing process, Margaret is in this sense a recognisably contemporary – or indeed timeless – woman, one aspect of how the novel fulfils its function as a historical work 'offering a critique of the present through [its] treatment of the past.' (Wallace, 2004, p. 2) Further, it enacts Haraway's call to 'insist on the embodied nature of all vision and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere... the

gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation.’ (1988, p. 581) Margaret’s marked body is not subtle – on her treatment for infertility, she recounts ‘a week of the steel medicine (steel shavings steeped in wine with fern roots, nephritic wood, apples, and more ivory), described by a maid as “a drench that would poison a horse.”’ (p. 54) And throughout the text, all the characters are always eating, their dialogue rhythmically punctured with acts of consumption, humorously anchoring their philosophical endeavours. Within one short scene (p. 130-131) in which Margaret and William discuss Mary Evelyn’s report, we observe them variously ‘dipping bread in soup’, ‘pushing away her plate,’ ‘reaching for some toast’, ‘he wipes his mouth’, ‘her throat blocked up with bread.’ Viscerally, then, at the level of daily sustenance, Dutton inscribes ‘a female authorial viewpoint that experiences history in both personal and general terms.’ (Lazzaro-Weiss, 1993, p. 138) And even as the text insists, there is a consciousness in the reader that the unmarked category is still in operation, has written most of Margaret’s – and by extension our own – history since, and is still writing it.

Beyond bread, the material culture of the era is littered across the text. This is a stylistic choice, signalling the early modern enthusiasm for acquisition and invention and the cluttered exuberance of Margaret’s mind, but it is also an inheritance from the cultural anthropologists and New Historicists as described above, who expanded of the readable text of history to include its objects and rituals. This necessarily makes our view of the past microscopic rather than aerial, the detail illuminating the whole. As Jill Lepore has written (2001, p. 133):

Traditional biographers seek to profile an individual and recapitulate a life story, but microhistorians, tracing their elusive subjects through slender records, tend to address themselves to solving small mysteries, in the process of which a microhistorian *may* recapitulate the subject’s entire life story, though that is not his primary purpose. The life story, like the mystery, is merely the means to an end – and that end is always explaining the culture.

Neither a microhistory nor a straightforward biography, the small mystery of *Margaret the First* certainly takes a view on seventeenth century culture, and how it formed and narrated the person of Margaret

Cavendish. Inevitably as it does so it also speaks to our contemporary experiences of the material world, layered over those of the Renaissance. Here, Margaret is tasked with packing up her house in Antwerp ahead of a return from exile to England (p. 86):

Flemish tapestries, drawing tables, lenses, the telescopes from Paris, books, of course, and perfumes, platters, ewers, ruffs, tinctures, copperplates, saddles, wax. There were little green-patterned moths dashing around the attic, bumping at the glass. I thought I felt like that. I dreamed the moths crept upside down on the surface of my mind.

Like a cabinet of curiosity, these assemblages of fascinating *objets trouvés* constitute a narrative rich with contradiction and possibility, a relationship to *stuff* that is both delighted and distressed – and so with our relationship to the historical archive. This echoes in the staccato and fragmentary assortment of scenes that make up the book, through which Dutton (re)models the seventeenth century's own narrative mentalities. She explains: 'The seventeenth century... was a very anti-systematic period and a very hybrid period. A man could be a poet and a scientist and an ambassador, all at once, or in one lifetime.' (Patrick, 2016) This hybridity, as New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt has observed, is particularly evident in contemporary reports from the expanding frontiers of the 'known' world, themselves allegorical of any attempt to navigate and interpret the past (1999, p. 106):

As is appropriate for voyagers who thought that they knew where they were going and ended up in a place whose existence they had never imagined, the discourse of travel in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance is rarely if ever interesting at the level of sustained narrative and teleological design, but gripping at the level of the anecdote. Their strength lies... in the shock of the unfamiliar, the provocation of an intense curiosity, the local excitement of discontinuous wonders. Hence they present the world not in stately and harmonious order but in a succession of brief encounters, random experiences, isolated anecdotes of the unanticipated.

And so with *Margaret the First*, which arranges these 'anecdotes, what the French call *petites histoires*, as

distinct from the *gran récit* of totalising, integrated, progressive history, a history that knows where it is going' (Greenblatt, 1999, p. 114) into a patchwork image, with major 'world-historical events' such as the execution of Charles I and its aftermath dealt with in a single paragraph on an otherwise blank page, the narrative then returned to Margaret. This account also has some of the qualities of that rare beast, the historical short story. If, as George Green suggests in *Short Fiction in Theory & Practice*, many historical novels 'give us an illusion of comfort through detail and time,' then 'the good short story is implicitly destabilising, uncomfortable, challenging and, by the same token, potentially more true to life than the novel, or perhaps offering a different sort of truth.' (2011, p. 60) Margaret's life here (and by implication, all lives) is a blazing intervention – brief, contradictory and leaving more questions open than answered. And so, in its own way, it offers a historiographical epistemology – an unstable, poetic, constellated one, emphatically not taking a stance on the nature of English nationhood during the civil war and its lessons for today's students of statecraft. Unless – an emphasis on the plurality of historical mentalities, an insistence on the reality and the value of the embodied subject, and of poetry. Why shouldn't that be as political as *Waverley*? After all, 'contemporary female authors can be seen to disrupt and fragment the discourse surrounding the historical female figure, removing the power from any one account to act as the definitive portrayal.' (Cooper and Short, 2012, p. 15) These interpretive gestures, perhaps limited in scope, are part of a far larger project to (re)vision ways of being in the world.

Margaret's thought and writings share this account, but Dutton does not make undue claims for their brilliance. Her intent is not an intellectual biography or restoration, rather to present the outspoken Duchess as a complex human being, with flashes of true virtuosity mixed with confusion, ego and plain error. At the same time, Dutton is careful to match the apparent wackiness of some of Margaret's thought with that of her male peers, a reminder of the generalised grab-bag of impressions and theories that often constituted discourse at the era, whatever one's education – a time of plagues, conflicts and religious ruptures, when 'the two-headed cat or shooting star that might have otherwise aroused only mild interest as a wonder provided anxious interpretations as a portent.' (Dalston, 1999, p. 89). Here, for example, Margaret's husband discourses on without irony on the origins of the barnacle goose (p. 146):

William... begins to tell of a recent meeting in which Sir Robert Moray gave an account of an astonishing grove – in Scotland? was it Wales? – its trees encrusted with barnacle shells. ‘Inside the shells,’ he says and chews, ‘when Moray pried them with his knife, what do you think he found?’ He looks the length of the table, for everyone listens now: ‘Miniature seabirds!’ He says. ‘Curled up and still alive!’ The party is delighted.

True insight and originality are there in Margaret’s writings, often constructed directly in opposition to or in conversation with her most significant contemporaries. And those contemporaries, after centuries of hagiography focused principally on their intellectual legacy, are here viewed with the same combination of irreverence and magic, part of a collective, hit-and-miss effort of compromised humans trying to understand the world. Thus, after the death of Descartes in 1650 (p. 57-58):

He thought the soul was attached to the human body through a gland, I remembered. He thought the universe was like a machine, the body like a clock. He’d once nailed his wife’s poodle to a board. He believed nothing could think or feel but a man. But how could he know a poodle didn’t feel? Or even a magnet? A vase? Now he was gone, and I ate my bread. And yet, I thought, he lived. Unlike my sister and mother, Descartes was here, and always would be, as Shakespeare would, as Ovid. But I did not feel like a clock, I thought. I listened. I chewed my bread.

In the same breath as she queries the thought of the ‘first modern philosopher’, Margaret reflects that his intellectual legacy keeps him alive in a way unavailable to women, and to her, bogged down in reality, eating bread. She is mournful, and yet she wants the same legacy for herself. She will not submit to the evidence of ‘women as the subjects of historical narratives, rather than as its authors or makers.’ (Pelling and Tabois, 2021, p. 515) By 1655, she is arguing that ‘all matter can think: a woman, a river, a bird... how could the world be wound up like a clock? It was pulsing, contracting, attracting, and generating infinite forms of knowledge. Nor could man’s be supreme. For how could there be any supreme knowledge in such an animate system?’ (p. 74) Her thought is contemporary, revolutionary –

and largely absented from intellectual history. In a podcast on Margaret's *Blazing World* (1666) – a fantastical work of 'feminist science fiction' (Penguin Classics, 2022) that describes the adventures of a girl who is abducted by pirates then crosses a boundary into a mirror world joined to ours at the North Pole – Michael Bravo, Senior Lecturer at the Scott Polar Research Institute, stood before an original copy of Robert Hooke's famous *Micrographia* (1665), open to the iconic image of a flea,¹⁰ and said: 'We continue to be surprised by the image, almost no matter how familiar it is. And that speaks to Hooke's desire to give this instrument an extraordinary authority. What he's doing with the flea isn't so different to what Margaret Cavendish is doing with the North Pole – something invisible to the world suddenly becomes visible – the question of course is on what terms this should be believed.' Within *Margaret the First, The Blazing World* provides both model and philosophical stimulus. Michael Bravo again: 'What does it mean for a world that we take to be known, whose boundaries we think we know, and to discover that it is connected in some mysterious way to other worlds?'¹¹ The question pertains to historiography, to fiction, and to discourses of knowledge production.

If 'a life is not like that', then what *is* a life like, in Dutton's and this Margaret's view? It is no surprise that fictions of the seventeenth century should employ allegories of the stars – at the time, celestial insights were commonly employed in medicine, navigation, prognostication and spiritual life, indeed they often structured daily practice – Elias Ashmole and his astrologer colleagues lived by the Hermetic maxim 'as above, so below', referring to the influence of the heavens on the terrestrial sphere, and often made 'horary calculations' to determine planetary interpretations of events several times a day (Josten, 1966, vol. 1, p. 37). Dutton's Margaret, of course, takes hold of the skies in her own way, and in the service of her own mythology. Lonely and out of place, abroad for the first time and away from her family as a lady-in-waiting to the exiled Queen Henrietta Maria in Paris, Margaret hides from the rest of the court and writes letters (p. 26):

¹⁰ Robert Hooke (1635-1703) among many other pursuits was a microscope enthusiast, and one of the first people to use the instrument to observe living things at a microscopic scale. *Micrographia* (1665) included enormous fold-out copperplate images of his drawings of insects, of which the flea is perhaps the best known.

¹¹ In this podcast, which examined *The Blazing World's* position in intellectual history, both the presenter, the main guest and the secondary guest were male, with the two guests both holding very senior positions in the scientific academy at Cambridge. A woman was allowed to make a brief appearance, to take down a first edition of Margaret's works from a shelf in a library and declare herself 'not that familiar' with the work (2022). To hear the panel discussing Margaret's feminism in this context demonstrated how current the dynamics that shaped her absence remain.

And idly one afternoon, I wrote something else:

‘I had rather be a meteor, singly, alone.’

Plus Paris was noisome. Even with its glittering bridges and orangeries, even if the birthplace of ballet.

‘I had rather been a meteor, than a star in a crowd.’

Thus begins Margaret’s self-expression as a writer. Within three lines she has moved from her wish for brilliant solitude – to be a lonely meteor – into a mode of editorial readjustment. The city stinks, she is worn down by its physical reality. A meteor must have its background, something against which to stand out – mere stars in a crowd, against which she can blaze. She shifts, too, into a historical view – ‘I had rather *been* a meteor’ – instinctively repositioning herself as the subject of a myth, a legend. It enacts what Patrician Waugh has suggested: ‘perhaps more politically effective than deconstructing subjects would be their *reconstruction*, the production of alternative modes and models of subjectivity.’ (2012, p. 20) Here, living in Antwerp (p. 71):

I split my days, so split myself: it was mornings with my husband, afternoons at my desk. My thoughts spun round, like fireworks, or rather stars, set thick upon the brain.

The repeated use of constellations has a serious historical intent, evidence of an active theory of subjectivity that resists any narrative of opposing forces or any boundaried presentation of identity. It recalls Walter Benjamin, who in his *Illuminations* (1940), ‘offers a pathway for associative, as opposed to linear, patterns of thoughts that characterises ideas or insights as stars in a constellation’. (Cooke and Williams, 2024, p. 3) Carol Lazarro-Weiss extends this thought to the work of historical fiction, suggesting that ‘when included in narrative forms... history most often understates the fictional role of causality, that is, the *constellation* of problems, events, and social, economic, or psychological forces that keep the plot moving forward and to which the characters must respond. It is here that the choice of narrative form in which the text is cast becomes important, since many of the possible generic forms have causal systems that conflict with the ideological view of history the author may claim to

represent.’ (1993, p. 153, my emphasis) As discussed above, Dutton’s fragmentary approach to her account of Margaret Cavendish enacts her resistance to just such a conventional view of causality and the self. In this view, history and subjectivity are something like our contemporary experience of the stars: distant, bewitching, unknowable, inconsistent.

‘The useless world of books’

Unwritten archives in an account of Katharina Kepler

For a woman who cannot read, Rivka Galchen’s *Katharina Kepler* refers frequently to the published work of Martin Luther. She refers just as frequently to the wisdom of cows, but of them she has formed her own impressions. ‘There are two things a woman must do alone,’ Katharina announces to her neighbour. ‘She does her own believing and her own dying. So says Martin Luther. Or so you say Martin Luther says, or said.’ (2016, p. 4) Her knowledge of Luther’s doctrine has been absorbed from her friends, relatives and other interlocutors, in the same way that she absorbs all written material – pamphlets on witchcraft, legal proceedings, her son’s astronomical theories. And in her telling Luther’s texts – all texts – become something else; they are part of the worldview of someone illiterate, employed in service of a particular metaphysics. In the early pages of *Everyone Knows Your Mother is a Witch* Katharina says that ‘God writes the gospel, Luther says, not only in the Bible but in the woods and the stars.’¹² (p. 22) And throughout the book, Katharina finds as much interpretive material in the landscapes and animals she encounters as she does in her received wisdom of the written word. She enacts the truth of Luther’s observation both in her own spirituality and ethics, and as applied to historiographic practices. If the texts of culture and environment, for Katharina, contain just as much if not more value as written ones, then the losses to her present-day researchers – who must largely be content with the written archives of her life that remain accessible – are manifest. Galchen’s subject, therefore, is absent at a material level quite distinct from that of Margaret Cavendish. Katharina’s silence is both an archival one and an experience of the world that is ultimately inaccessible to anyone who has the power to tell it in print.

Katharina Kepler (1547-1622) lived in the duchy of Württemberg in the Holy Roman Empire, or modern-day Germany. Born Katharina Guldenmann, daughter of an innkeeper, she married Heinrich

¹² According to Ulinka Rublack, this is a reasonably accurate summation of an aspect of the contemporaneous Lutheran worldview in which Katharina was raised and which Johannes Kepler championed. ‘Our neat distinctions between the rational and irrational, religion and magic, obscure how knowledge about humans and nature mattered to him and his contemporaries... what happened to a living tree or stars, they both believed, might register in your body; for micro- and macrocosm, human nature, the world of plants, and the universe were interlinked... He likened the earth to a woman in labour, who gave birth to perfectly geometrical crystal shapes, which humans to their astonishment could mime.’ (2015, p. 8)

Kepler in 1571 and had seven children, four of whom lived into adulthood. One of them was Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), an important figure in the history of astronomy – and also science fiction, for his pamphlet *Somnium* (1608). When in 1615 Katharina – by this stage widowed and financially independent – was accused of witchcraft by another woman in her home town of Leonberg, it was Johannes who organised her defence. But the accusations gathered strength and by 1620 the 73-year-old Katharina was arrested and held in prison for fourteen months, under guard, in chains and threatened with torture. She refused to confess and was eventually acquitted, but died six months later. Her case was one of the most well-documented German witch trials, producing mountains of documents, but for a long time was largely seen as a footnote to the career of Johannes Kepler – if that, for as Galchen notes in a video interview, nineteenth-century biographies of Johannes would leave out the witchcraft story for fear of staining his reputation (Center for Fiction, 2021). Then Ulinka Rublack's 2015 biography *The Astronomer and the Witch: Johannes Kepler's fight for his mother* took on the material and created a new account. She researched and (re)presented the trial, centring its significance both to the Keplers and to the study of witch trials and the era more widely.¹³ This was still a narrative led by its connection to Johannes, tied to the written record. The Canadian-American novelist Rivka Galchen, almost by chance while researching another topic, read the book and felt a connection. In the novel's acknowledgments she includes an explanatory note describing how 'a detail in Rublack's book – a neighbour of Katharina's asking to be dismissed from serving henceforth as her legal guardian – caught my heart and opened up this novel for me.' (p. 273) This set of connections captures some of the possibilities of historical fiction – Galchen has been able to write an account that would not have been possible for Rublack, and which does something very different, but which is nevertheless complementary. She can fully imagine Katharina's experience, and offer a self-consciously contemporary interpretation.

In her explanatory note Galchen makes a point of acknowledging affect in the archive – the haunting power of a subject that seems almost to reach out and insist to a writer that this is a story

¹³ Rublack offers her own apologia in the book's epilogue, situating her account within the microhistorical tradition and quoting Elliot (2012): 'Such history "from the ground up" is the craft of restoring nuance to our account of past lives and respect for different voices from a wide social spectrum through the use of local archives. Sceptics of this approach raise an important question: how can the story of exceptional individuals and trials tell us anything of "universal import" about a "silent majority"? The answer is obvious: by setting them in a broad enough context.' (2015, p. 306)

worth (re)telling. In the agency of a marked absence discussed above, this is one way in which the subjectivity of a writer meets that of a historical figure – one way in which, as Cooke and Williams have described, as ‘transient and surprising experiences’ in the archives seem to ‘insist upon their significance’. (2024, p. 22) It is well established that novelists interested in the ‘particular concerns of marginalised communities haunted by a history of oppression’ use historical fiction to ‘insist on the political urgency of rewriting history from the perspective of the disempowered.’ (Chabot Davis, 2002, p. 728) When writing a fictional new account of a particular historical subject, such an interest is inextricably entwined with something in a writer’s life that allows a ‘cognitive sparking’ (Cooke and Williams, 2024, p. 2) to occur, which can underpin the drive to complete a creative work. As Galchen describes above, an archival detail ‘caught my heart and opened up this novel for me.’ This enacts Cooke and Williams’s ‘new forms of knowing’ that can disrupt established discursive processes. As Kevin Hetherington has suggested in his work on material secondhandedness, ‘the destructive waste of a life or of precious goods is seen as a conduit of the ongoing maintenance of social stability. The waste becomes a material expression of translation in the practices of ordering.’ (2003a, p. 160) Operations of discursive power by their very nature enact suppressions or othering of competing narratives in search of reinforcing their own dominance, but ‘the absent is only ever *moved along* and never fully gotten rid of,’ which is why ‘we encounter the unexpected presence of absence as a ghost.’ (p. 170) Rather than laying these ghosts to rest, historical fictions invite them to make their presence known, to remain unresolved, and to take on new forms. Intellectual and affective reactions to disempowerment frame much of the agency of absences in the archive. But approaches to these absences can equally be celebratory or restorative – ghosts do not have to be disquieting, and observing the moments where they announce their presence can, as Cooke and Williams suggest, uncover significant analytic insights. Something in the archive which trips you up contains within it a familiarity or an act of recognition – here is something you already felt, you just didn’t *know*, and to happen upon it induces that sense of haunting. In the novels discussed here, this effect guides the writers’ thematic and aesthetic choices as they go through the process of (re)presenting a subject that, they might argue, feels as much as if it chose them as the other way around. Hetherington, discussing the role of touch for the visually impaired in museums, identifies the concept of *praesentia* – ‘an intimate and touching

encounter with the presence of an absence that is Other to direct and previously known representations.’ (2003b, p. 1937) As affect takes its place in analytical studies, so it meets aspects of creative practice long familiar to writers of fiction.

The detail that drew Galchen to Katharina also structures the novel: it begins in Katharina’s voice, but in the same breath is framed as a translation: ‘Herein I begin my account, with the help of my neighbour Simon Satler, since I am unable to read or write.’ (p. 3) *Translation* is the term used by Galchen herself to describe the act of interpreting a world ‘across language and time,’ (p. 274) which can be compared to Haraway’s observation that ‘science becomes the myth, not of what escapes human agency and responsibility in a realm above the fray, but, rather, of accountability and responsibility for *translations* and solidarities linking cacophonous visions and visionary voices that characterise the knowledges of the subjugated.’ (1988, p. 590, my emphasis) There is a moral element to any new account, of which Galchen’s is one. To support this act, Galchen centres the invented Simon’s account of Katharina’s invented words, but intersperses it with sections in Simon’s own voice, as well as fictionalised court transcripts of witness testimonies, and adapted versions of extant letters from the trial archives. Reflexively, Katharina concludes the opening passage: ‘This is my truest testimony.’ (p. 4) It is not until the afterword that we learn that she really did have a legal guardian who translated her experience into the written word – but Galchen tells us that she has ‘not used that neighbour’s real name, Veit Schumacher, because his voice and his life in this novel are wholly imagined.’ (p. 273) Here again, in the decades following historiographical metafiction, consciousness of their constructed nature is embedded in works of literary historical fiction – but is not the point of them. They play with the uncertainties of the discourses on which they base themselves, but they are also intentional political interventions: examples of, in Hetherington’s words, ‘how we *account* for or are held *accountable* by that which we have tried to dispose of but have left unfinished.’ (2003a, p. 163)

In the first instance, it is Katharina’s community that tries to dispose of her. Galchen’s interest lies less in the sociocultural rationale for the historical persecution of witches than in the comical pettiness of bureaucrats and villagers – times are hard, war is brewing, but these historical imperatives are mere background to her study of the small-minded jealousies and greed of Katharina’s accusers. At the root of the trouble – both in the novel and in the archival record – is Ursula Reinbold, wife of the

Leonberg glazier, who claims that Katharina gave her a poisoned drink and unleashed a slew of subsequent misfortunes. Katharina begins her account against the backdrop of a ‘rotten spring’ and ‘savage winter’ (p. 5), but it is a sunny day when she is called to the office of the new ducal governor Lukas Einhorn to answer Ursula’s accusation. A key feature of Galchen’s translation of the world of Leonberg and of Katharina’s particular brand of Lutheranism immediately manifests itself; animals and plants provide a distinctive vocabulary for the characters’ understanding of the world and each other. During the scene of the initial accusation – which is presented as chaotic and absurd, entirely rooted in social jealousies – Katharina designates Ursula a ‘comely werewolf’, her brother ‘the Cabbage,’ (p. 7) and Einhorn himself is the ‘False Unicorn’ (p. 8). This habit of naming persists throughout the novel, also allowing the cast of persecutors to be seen as archetypes in the sorry tradition of witch hunts – by any other names the avaricious failure, the dim and preening bureaucrat, the rubbernecker and the shit-stirrer. A century before Linnaeus, this idiosyncratic taxonomy holds the imaginative world together, both endearing and threatening; of Katharina’s accuser, one of the prison guards complains she ‘has the brains of a pigeon, the heart of a prickly bush. She has the greedy eyes of a lame fox. She can’t hunt on her own. She’s content to take the earnings of others. She’s a horsefly.’ (p. 233)

Beyond their taxonomic power, the actions and experiences of animals in *Everyone Knows Your Mother is a Witch* are as meaningful as any human’s (p. 5):

The preceding winter had been fierce. One snowy eve a goat had turned up at my door, a beggar like Christ, I thought, and so I let the goat in, and he was so frozen that when he knocked his head against the leg of my table, his chin hairs broke off like sugar plate. I met a shepherd from outside Rutesheim whose nose fell off when he wiped it.

The most significant of these creatures is Katharina’s cow, Chamomile. Cows anchor Katharina, provide connection and succour in a world that seems determined to punish her. When pushed beyond all bearing, she asks ‘why didn’t God leave the world as frank and easy to understand as a cow? Instead, it’s all a puzzle, for us to tease out which points of light are planets and which are stars, and who can be trusted and who cannot.’ (p. 100) While Margaret Cavendish was made up of stars and created worlds

on them, to Katharina they are both portentous and obscure – the domain of her son and his literate world of courtly appointments, which is conceptually and geographically remote. Chamomile, then, is more than a companion (p. 100):

When I'm sick, I tell myself: Chamomile needs to see my face. I make it down the stairs. I scratch her chin, and also pet her nose. If the size of eyes is indicative of the size of souls as maybe Paracelsus says – someone says it – why isn't there more praise of cows? She likes to lean her head against my neck. I have never wished we could speak, because we understand each other.

The simplicity of Katharina's emotional investment is a reminder that 'in place of postmodernism's cool detachment, its anti-anthropomorphism, realism is once again a popular mode. Emotions, furthermore, are again playing a central role in literary fiction, as authors insist on our essential relationality – our connectedness as humans to one another in the globalising world and with fictional characters as representations of ourselves.' (Gibbons, 2017, para. 4) For Galchen's Katharina, this relationality extends to the natural world. There is a subtlety to this portrait which eschews the literary tropes of witches as either unsettling old herbalists who are already social outcasts (*Waterland*, 1983; *Restoration*, 1989) or disadvantaged but compellingly attractive and conveniently literate young women (*The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, 1958; *The Manningtree Witches*, 2021). The cultural fascination with the herbalists' role has led some critics to observe a trope where 'the protagonist is a woman whose role as a healer distinguishes her, and prompts her to undertake an amazing journey (sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively)... The plethora of women healers in historical fiction seems analogous to the phenomenon common in past-life regression: everyone was royalty in a previous life; no one was a serf.' (Leveen, 2012, para. 12) Katharina certainly uses herbal remedies (on her first encounter with Simon, she tries to treat his cough with cowslips soaked in wine (p. 40-41)), and her son certainly advises her against it ("you can't persist with your little remedies, whatever they are," he said. 'I've done nothing wrong either, but you don't see me trying to convince churchmen of the vision of Copernicus.'" (p. 95)). But at no time does this define her either as her occupation or as the basis for the accusations of

witchcraft. Galchen's is a satirical work, not intended as an authentic seventeenth-century voice or imaginary, but it takes the ethics of its narrative responsibilities seriously. There is no need for these established witchcraft tropes, she suggests. Far less is needed to make one an object of persecution.

Katharina in this telling is also, crucially, annoying. Charming to Galchen's readers, yes, but in perfectly quotidian ways exasperating to her family and society. Her personality is also conditioned by her worldview which, while being permissive enough to provide material to her accusers, Galchen is still careful to anchor in small-town early modern Württemberg. Like the vanity and ambition of Dutton's Margaret Cavendish, the aspects of Katharina's character that grate on those around her are repeatedly emphasised. On meeting her interlocutor Simon's daughter Anna for the first time, a young woman conscious of her smallpox scars, Katharina launches without preamble into a set of unwanted advice and insights (p. 42):

It's a little thing and you shouldn't be ashamed. These days people talk about makeup as if it's for loose women and for men playing girls in plays. Or for Italians. Maybe rouge or lip paint would be too much. I respect humility. But I wouldn't leave my life behind in a cave on account of some new idea about face powder. I used it as a young girl and it set my shoulders back, and my own daughter, whom everyone says married very well, married at twenty-seven, her virtue unquestioned.

The terms of Katharina's intervention here take a confident approach to negotiating what is on offer for women in her society, but it remains credible for a woman of her outlook – the justification for using face powder is still a good marriage, its risks still archaically socially conservative. Her words are also irksome and maladroit ('She's a prune,' Anna tells her father afterwards (p. 43) – although soon after Simon recalls Katharina's kindness to him during a flood, 'calling out plans in what I now recognise as her usual off-putting way. Her intrusive nature had this resplendent underside.' (p. 44)) Katharina earns our sympathy in other ways, which do not demand that the reader frame her as something she could not have been – someone who steps outside of her own time to offer a contemporary feminist critique of it. The characterisation underscores Haraway's observation that 'the

standpoints of the subjugated are not “innocent” positions.’ (1988, p. 584) The fact of a woman’s persecution and/or silencing does not make her a martyr to contemporary causes. Discussing women’s fictions of the seventeenth century, Katharine Hodgkin warns against the tendency to ‘write our own wishes into the silence of the oppressed. If it is a mistake to write as if all servants in the past were happy folks who knew their place, it is equally a mistake to fill the novel with implausibly tolerant, sceptical, liberal-minded characters, who appreciate the injustice of hereditary hierarchies and patriarchal power.’ (2007, pp. 25) Lois Leveen, similarly, has identified a vexing tendency in contemporary historical fiction to imbue structurally marginalised historical characters with a contemporary ‘pluck’, with which they overcome the conditions of their society to exercise their triumphant narrative arc. ‘It’s no crime, of course, to create a protagonist who is exceptional. But the exceptionality of a plucky protagonist can imply that it’s pluck – rather than systemic factors of race, class, and gender – that determines one’s narrative trajectory, whether on the page or in real life.’ (Leveen, 2012, para. 13). Twelve years after Leveen’s article one might be slightly less inclined to identify, as she does, in a particular week in the American fiction chart, that ‘of the top ten bestsellers... two had “wife” in the title, and two others had “girl.” Also popular, though not among the top ten at that particular time, are titles that use “daughter.” Plucky heroines apparently seem most appealing when there’s no suggestion that, rather than being someone else’s spouse or offspring, they might be independent figures in their own right.’ (para. 15) But only slightly. Galchen’s portrait of Katharina, and Dutton’s of Margaret, both write against these tendencies.

There is a further significance to this framing of character in novels which are explicitly identified as feminist re-workings of historical narratives. Joan Scott recognises the ‘temptation to pile up counter examples as demonstrations of women’s political capacity’, the agency of absence desired by contemporary interlocutors. But this, she argues, is to ‘neglect the changing, and often radically different, historical contexts within which women as subjects came into being.’ (2001a, p. 286) When twenty-first century authors write historical female characters who seemingly instinctively resist – and communicate that resistance – to the limitations imposed by their gender in their society, they are assuming a continuity of politicised subjectivity that is largely fantasy: ‘women’s activism on behalf of women.’ (p. 287) As discussed above, the idea of history as ‘a fantasized narrative that imposes

sequential order on otherwise chaotic and contingent occurrences' (p. 289), has been an insight enthusiastically embraced by writers from the late twentieth century onwards, but there is a reluctance to seriously consider the implications of this when ascribing agency to historical subjects. 'What might be called the fantasy of feminist history secures the identity of women over time. The particular details may be different, but the repetition of the basic narrative and the subject's experience in it means that the actors are known to us – they are us.' (p. 290) While the framing of both Galchen's and Dutton's accounts can be understood in this way, the details of their characterisations are of people for whom their gender is not their primary preoccupation, recognising that 'commonality among women does not preexist its invocation but rather that it is secured by fantasies that enable them to transcend history and difference.' (p. 288) Neither Margaret nor Katharina seek a gender-based collective to address the inequalities they experience – in fact they are as likely to undermine and be undermined by the women in their circles – nor do they generally conceptualise the very real threats to their bodies as the effects of a disadvantageous binary – this is Scott's 'fantasy' of a contemporary readership. The materiality of this reality is rather more marked in Leonberg than in London, where the effort of staying alive is matched by the explicit nature of the threat. On the day of Katharina's first accusation she finds her daughter-in-law in thrall to gruesome pamphlets about local witch executions,¹⁴ and she knows the stakes all too well: 'If my defence fails, a confession will be sought through torture, first with thumbscrews, then with leg braces, then with the rack – or something like that. It depends who the council hires for the job.' (p. 3)

Much like her quality of being annoying, Katharina is not unduly troubled by her illiteracy – she has her own ways of dealing with the world that make more sense on her terms – but as her very existence comes under violent threat, mediated through a documented bureaucratic process, the question of the value ascribed to different traces begins to dominate. We are told that it is Katharina's attempt to resist the process on its own terms that is the real trouble – when she is initially accused, the governor's office doesn't follow the correct procedure, so she files a complaint of slander. This

¹⁴ It should be noted that both men and women (if more women) were the objects of witch hunts in seventeenth century Germany. Rublack suggests that Württemberg was relatively restrained in its persecutions: 'Württemberg secular courts interrogated or prosecuted only 600 women and men on charges of witchcraft from 1560 to 1750 and executed around 197 victims; figures which are significant, but small in comparison to the 3,200 witches executed in the other 350 territories that made up south-west Germany between 1561 and 1670'. (2015, p. 5)

humiliates the governor, who would rather see Katharina burned alive than admit his own mistake, so he expedites the claims of her accusers while burying her complaint. (p. 57) The novel offers a counterpoint to Katharina's experience in the character of her daughter Greta, who is both literate and biddable. Katharina explains in her inimitable, rambling, conversational way that 'she's nothing like me, Greta. Leonberg had schooling for girls by the time she was of age... Greta lacks the unhappiness and difficulty that has helped me so much in my own life.' (p. 25) Sympathetically, Katharina never expresses a wish for her qualities to be other than they are – they are tools for survival as much as condemnation. The nature of that survival, three hundred years later, is at the centre of Galchen's account, developing historical fiction's inflection of 'the historical or archival record through consideration of the personal, the individual, the unwritten, the unseen, the unheard or unsaid'. (de Groot, 2015, p. 20) And *Everyone Knows Your Mother is a Witch* has no illusions about what is at stake. Even after her acquittal, Katharina cannot return home. Weighing in with the full threat of posterity, her accusers 'let it be known that her head would be put on a pike, her body roasted in the town square, that her blood would be used as an ink to make a sign warning others, that her corpse would be treated with none of the respect of a pig at market day, that the story of the evil she had done would live long, and survive as a tale to frighten children until the end of days.' (p. 266) Worried about his own role and eventual abandonment of Katharina, Simon 'began to wonder if maybe it was simply that Katharina couldn't be bothered to convict me. That she was too morally exhausted... her apparent defeat could as well be a sign of terrible defeat as a sign of the grace of God.' (p. 270) And in the final lines of the book, war and pestilence wipe out most of the characters we have come to know. Viewed from the twenty-first century, this fiction might seem less historical than prophetic.

In a tragicomic act, after Katharina's death Simon takes his edited account of her trial to the Frankfurt Book Fair – still, today, the world's largest annual trade fair for books and a prominent feature of any publishing professional's calendar. It is an eerily perfect match for a text about the ownership of narratives. While there, Simon encounters Johannes Kepler's widow, Susanna, who is also trying to repackage a text. Describing his approach to her table, Simon observes that 'the stalls on each side of her both sold books from a century ago. Why no interest in the awful and dramatic present?' (p. 257) – a tongue in cheek apologia for historical fiction. It turns out that Susanna is trying to interest the

book fair customers in *Somnium*, her late husband's science fiction juvenilia – which was used as evidence in Katharina's trial, as it featured a mother talking to her son about daemons. Explaining it and herself, she says (p. 262):

... it's all imaginary, you see. Hans makes that very clear in the footnotes. He really, really didn't want anyone to misunderstand. One of the daemons describes how to get to the moon. What the geography is there. What the earth looks like when one is standing there. It's a story for a schoolboy, you see?

Susanna is widowed, her children are dead, she was cheated out of a large sum of money for her husband's gravestone, which was then destroyed by soldiers. She is telling her stories to survive, but what is Simon's motivation? That is less clear. He struggles to define it, his subject haunting him (p. 262):

'It's hard to say. It's a Christian testimony of a kind. I haven't figured out how to describe it. Maybe that's my problem.' I laughed, like a dog. 'I couldn't be a worse salesman.' I felt the ghost of Katharina... She rested her head in her hands and looked at me askance.

'I was and remained a too-quiet witness,' he concludes, before sharing his own history of persecution as the son of a dishonest tradesman. (p. 263) Galchen gives Simon a testamentary role explicitly denied to Katharina by traditional historiography: haunted by his own history he is able, however imperfectly, to translate her voice and try and pass it on – much like the historical novelist. Though Katharina herself refuses to let this go quietly, being 'astonished at the expense and effort given to the useless world of books.' (p. 181) And so her 'truest testimony' will never reach us. There will always be stories – subjectivities, worlds, beyond any interpretation. The historical novelist can revel in the attempt – in an interview Galchen suggests 'historical novelists are part of the fantasy genre... dreaming about full access.' (Center for Fiction, 2021) As such, her use of Johannes Kepler's work *Somnium*, which has been called the first ever work science fiction (Asimov, 1981, p. 15), is significant, with its connection to the

effort of the astronomer, searching among the stars for ways to explain the world. Back at the book fair, the next stall over from Simon's is occupied by an Englishman selling a story of 'a young woman set marry a much older man.' He says to Simon (p. 260):

'If you don't mind a bit of advice: People don't like an old lady story, you know? I wouldn't lead with that part.' What would he lead with? He said he wasn't sure, he would give it a think. He went on: 'Even Shakespeare, very popular on all topics as he is, sticks to daughters and wives. An occasional mother. But not front and centre, you know? You don't want an old lady front and centre. Honestly never heard of such a thing.'

It would be a fond fantasy to imagine that such a conversation could not take place at the Frankfurt Book Fair today. But as a coda to Katharina's story, it underlines the text's enactment of an alternative, a text that offers a better account of a persecuted 'old lady' from the archives who has been denied a voice in history. This can, self-evidently, now be written and published – as long as it has 'witch' in the title.

Galchen published *Everyone Knows Your Mother is a Witch* in 2021, during the first Donald Trump presidency. His proclivity for appropriating the experiences of the persecuted has been well established: in 2019, *The Nation* reported that Trump had 'Tweeted the phrase 'witch hunt' 'nearly 300 times since becoming President', while the same year a book was published – a *New York Times* bestseller – called *Witch Hunt: The Story of the Greatest Mass Delusion in American Political History* (Jarrett, 2019). The book's blurb asks 'how did a small group of powerful intelligence officials convince tens of millions of Americans that the president is a traitor, without a shred of evidence?' Questioned about this correlation in an interview with the Center for Fiction, Galchen said that she mentally 'ran away' from much of the political narrative of the era, but that 'when you're running away from something it's guiding your path.' (Centre for Fiction, 2021). And indeed, the petty bureaucrat responsible for escalating Katharina's trial asks her "'Frau Kepler – in your long life, have you ever witnessed such a persecution as mine?'" In April 2024, referring to his hush money trial in New York, Trump's YouTube channel posted a video simply entitled 'WITCH HUNT!' Working with Galchen's text in November, trying to argue for the relevance of such fictions at the moment when Trump's return to

the White House was confirmed, feels queasily apposite, the ironies of his narrative beyond parody. The risks posed to women's bodily autonomy by a rightwing American administration, and to those of minorities, is not that once faced by 'witches'. The networks by which fear and rumour are spread are different, too. This not the place to explore this aspect in depth, but there is something essentially, regrettably human about it all. Does this make works such as Galchen's *more* important? Or does it underline their irrelevance, set against the machines of populist movements in the 2020s? Perhaps for now it is enough to note that, three hundred years after their violent erasures, some stories like Katharina's are finding new purchase, however small.

‘Better not to speak of it’

Listening for echoes in an account of Hester Tradescant

Back in Oxford, having travelled from Marina Abramović at the Pitt Rivers to the Ark’s gallery in the Ashmolean on Beaumont Street, another short walk through the city centre and along Broad Street leads to a foursquare neoclassical building hard by the Sheldonian Theatre and the Bodleian Library. It is currently home to the History of Science of Museum, but was originally purpose-built by the University in the late 1600s to house the Ashmolean. On a glorious late summer day in 2021 I found myself fleeing its guardians, suspected of planning a heist.

The confusion was brief, and amicably resolved; staff had recently undergone security training and were understandably perturbed by a lone figure haunting the upper gallery of their institution, ignoring the exhibits, writing in a notebook and muttering to itself.¹⁵ For I was not there to admire the array of sundials, astrolabes, armillary spheres, spectrometers and the like arranged in glass cases – rather, I was gazing with lunatic intensity at the gallery’s floorboards, cornices, and window frames, hoping to capture some essence or details of the space to use in a scene in a novel, and responded with poor grace to the staff’s repeated efforts to engage me in conversation. Small wonder, then, that as I abandoned the effort the museum’s Director of Operations appeared in the stairwell and asked me to explain myself. Walking back out into the sunshine, the incident seemed as good an allegory as any for the work of a historical novelist – out of place among the ‘proper’ archives, looking for things no-one else would be interested in, making things up and getting into trouble – as Margaret Atwood has it, attempting to ‘concoct plausible whoppers’. (1996b, p. 1503)

It was also fitting given the experiences of the woman I was writing about, who never managed to find a secure place for herself in the world of collecting she came to inhabit, and for whose name the archive – and an Oxford institution – has become a place of conflict and erasure. Hester Tradescant’s own family origins are somewhat obscure – thanks to her family’s intermarriage with the

¹⁵ All such observations are from a research trip to Oxford in September 2021, funded by the Consortium for the Humanities and Arts South East (CHASE), for which thanks. Thanks, too, to the Head of Operations at the History of Science Museum, Cai Marshall, for his gift of *Solomon’s House in Oxford* (Bennett et al., 2000), and for not having me arrested.

de Critz dynasty of court painters they have been the subject of painstaking but conflicting studies by Rachel Poole (1913) and Mary Edmond (1980), but it seems likely her grandfather was a tailor from Valenciennes, among the French Protestant emigrants arriving in England to escape Catholic massacres across Europe in the late sixteenth century. The de Critz family also emigrated from Antwerp around that time, and in due course a relation of Hester's became the second wife of old John de Critz, though the precise lineage is unclear – Hester referred to her as a cousin, but in the early modern lexicon of family this could have meant almost anything. Nothing else is known about her life before she married John Tradescant the Younger in 1638, when they would both have been about thirty years old, and John well established as one of England's foremost plantmen. From his father, he had inherited the role of Keeper of Vines and Silkworms at Queen Henrietta Maria's palace in Surrey, Oatlands, where he would have worked alongside John de Critz II, Sarjeant-painter to the King.¹⁶ It is likely that the de Critzes facilitated an introduction to Hester for Tradescant, who as a recent widower was in need of a wife to care for his house and children, John III and Frances.¹⁷ He would also have intended to have more children. And so Hester enters the historical record as a person of significance, but as with so many individuals of that era, her own archival traces are faint at best. She must have interacted with the many visitors – some very distinguished – to her husband's garden and collection, but if they did leave reports of their visits they speak of the plants and rarities, not of their impressions of the household. If she appears in Elias Ashmole's diary after his first visit to the Tradescants in 1650 it is a glancing reference – even when his own wife asked to go and stay with Hester for a summer, fleeing his infidelities. Knotty questions about Hester's life and role are left open to imaginative interpretation. We know that she traded from the collection later in life, but did she interact with it before her husband's

¹⁶ The role of Sarjeant-painter was a sought-after position with responsibility for decorating and maintaining the many fixtures and fittings around the Royal court. As 'limners' rather than 'picturemakers', the de Critz family would have largely made copies of society portraits rather than be charged with the original commission, but their artistic skills mean that we have been left with several excellent portraits of their kinsmen, the Tradescants. Now in the Ashmolean collections, these portraits have been described as 'some of the most unusual painted in England in the seventeenth century,' and their attribution – whether painted by the de Critz sons John, Thomas, Oliver or Emanuel – as "the most celebrated puzzle of all" in the history of British painting' (Millar 1975 in Edmond 1980, p. 156)

¹⁷ In a neat piece of symmetry, John de Critz II also inherited his court position from his father – old John de Critz, who also worked with John Tradescant the Elder at Hatfield House for Robert Cecil (Potter 2006, p. 282). The two families, the many Johns, were therefore colleagues and perhaps friends for two generations before John the Younger and Hester were married. In this tale of conflicted legacies and meaningful monuments, it is also interesting to note that old John de Critz was charged with decorating Elizabeth I's magnificent tomb in Westminster Abbey.

death? How did she experience its contents? She and John never had their own children, but was she ever pregnant? Why was Frances Tradescant married at 17 to a widowed 56-year-old barrelmaker, who had previously been married to her own grandfather's sister, with Hester giving her consent on John's behalf? And why did Frances receive only a token sum in her father's otherwise generous will? Does the richness of Hester's dress in the family portraits represent her own interest in fashion, or was she simply enacting the part of a society success on behalf of her husband, who seemed singularly ill-suited to the role himself? (In 1652 the Danish collector Ole Worm wrote to his own son about John, 'I have heard he is an idiot'. (Potter, 2006, p. 297)) How much of her own imagination is represented by the extraordinary tomb she commissioned for the family plot, perhaps the only trace remaining in which she had a real hand? On all these and uncountable other questions, the archive – however conceived – can give no firm answers. I have suggested above that works of fiction set in the past that choose to pay attention to those unanswerable questions – 'better accounts' – can play a generative role in narrative historiography. This was the task I set myself with *Unquiet Things*.

To write a 'better' account is not to forcefully imply a hierarchy of literary or historiographical achievement – as discussed above, the multiplicity, heterogeneity and incomplete nature of the effort is inherent in the proposition. Nor is the category of 'historical fiction' one which remains stable when subject to even the most superficial scrutiny. Rather, if there is a set of conventions to which a 'better account' responds, it is the persistent authority of written archives in discourses of the past and of the structures which produced them, structures which would likely remain in operation without deliberate and ongoing interventions. Certainly, historiographical and cultural narratives of the past have developed radically since the Annales School – but that work is far from done, its methodologies far from settled, the space for better accounts far from replete. A new fiction that draws on an incomplete record of the past can therefore offer an interpretation that is simultaneously informed by methodological uncertainty and is of constructive intent – like *Margaret the First* and *Everyone Knows Your Mother is a Witch*, having the aim of reframing and enriching, rather than merely exposing, without attempting to be definitive, and to revel in the imaginative liberties offered by the form. Conscious of its positioning within this specific sub-genre of fictions about the past, then, *Unquiet Things* required a particular series of negotiations and choices regarding the available archival material.

Such choices rest, finally, with the individual writer, and they may be informed by such varied and complex factors as intellectual conviction, literary and aesthetic preferences, and commercial considerations. With a ‘better account’, the writer must in the first instance decide where to position the narrative between the archival ‘knowns’ of the historical record and the possibilities of invention or narrative artifice, where the latter includes both the larger shape and feel of the text – the characteristics of its setting and of its narrative voice(s). A recent example of one approach is Caroline Cauchi’s *Mrs Van Gogh* (2023), where the documented events of the subject’s life are adjusted to allow for a tidier proposition. In a novel that explicitly addresses the absence of Vincent Van Gogh’s sister-in-law Johanna Bonger from the legend that she was largely responsible for creating, Cauchi’s novel places her characters in a setting which, archivally speaking, did not take place. Here, the author explains her decision (p. 456):

I relied on Johanna’s sensibilities and voice from her diaries and letters, but facing huge gaps in her archive meant that the novel’s narrative arc was unstable. As I’m neither a historian nor a biographer, I had little choice – and much pleasure – in writing an imaginative construction of a brief marriage and the story of how a young widow changed art history. As expected, creative license occurred and it was never more resourceful than having Johanna move to Paris at the beginning of the novel. I could argue that this single detour from fact allowed for a hastier unravelling of plot – alongside comment on Parisian society, on women and on Vincent – but the truth is that Johanna Bonger wasn’t living in Paris during that summer of 1888.

In this case, the novelist has explicitly entered the realm of the speculative in order to meet her own expectations of a satisfying plot – which I would argue has less to do with any imagined conventions around historical fiction than it does with an individual position on the function of a creative work, combined with the expectations of one strand of the publishing industry. At a contrasting point on this spectrum we might encounter Hilary Mantel, who in her 2019 Reith lectures discusses her own process of decision-making as she researched her 1992 novel of the French Revolution, *A Place of Greater Safety* (my emphasis):

... what I wasn't prepared for were the gaps, the erasures, the silences where there should have been evidence. These erasures and silences made me into a novelist, but at first I found them simply disconcerting. I didn't like making things up, which put me at a disadvantage. In the end I scrambled through to an interim position that satisfied me. *I would make up a man's inner torments, but not, for instance, the colour of his drawing room wallpaper.* Because his thoughts can only be conjectured. Even if he was a diarist or a confessional writer, he might be self-censoring. But the wallpaper – someone, somewhere, might know the pattern and colour, and if I kept on pursuing it, I might find out.

Without implying a value judgement (a novel's success or failure depends on myriad factors, and as long as its proposition is consistent, it executes them on its own terms), my own position on archives for *Unquiet Things* is closer to Mantel's. Ashmole and the Tradescants produced a microscopic amount of primary and secondary material in comparison with Mantel's subjects, but my instinct was that in a novel whose purpose was to act as a 'better account' of an already patchy and highly subjective historical record, and of a story that was not a secret but not canonical either, I wanted use the same material as other narrative accounts, i.e. to work within the framework provided by the archives, and not to substantially invent or change the established events of my characters' lives. Indeed, I felt that to do so would be to undermine the authority of my own attempt. This became an organising principle of sorts, with every chapter responding to an archival fragment (though this is not directly signalled in the text, it could be in future drafts). My 'better account', I decided, would address the gaps as I found them, for better or worse.

The constraints of this model shaped subsequent choices in its turn, enmeshed in the text's dual function as a novel and as a research method in its own right. The decision to alternate chapters between Hester's and Elias's points of view is representative: primarily, I was interested in writing a polyvalent account, attempting to imagine the complexities of both perspectives locked in a historically conditioned power struggle. More practically, the almost total absence of extant material authored by Hester meant that a novel from her perspective alone would be a different kind of intervention into the

story of the Ark, when I wanted to closely consider the nature of Ashmole's undeniable contribution and to include the beginning of the collection's afterlife in Oxford. I was also determined to maintain Hester's semi-literacy, resisting the trope of exceptionalism in early modern female characters as discussed above. In *Unquiet Things*, Hester's lack of formal education is not artificially overcome or triumphantly transformed – it remains a limiting factor, entangled with her character and with the story of the Ark and its eventual appropriation. In this sense, the novel departs from conventional narrative arcs by refusing to render Hester's subjectivity entirely legible or redemptive, conscious of the tendency to demand of an oppressed figure that they be 'exemplary in [their] goodness' (Hartman and Wilderson, 2003, p. 189).

In contrast, I took the freedom to 'make up a man's inner torments' in a direction which enacted my methodological interest in intangible archives. I wondered what might happen if a character could, in my working term, 'hear archaeology'. Inaccessible to the written archive, to her contemporaries and in many ways to Hester herself, the sounds that she hears from the collections' objects allow them to resist any imposed narrative, and to retain their complexity and individuality, their consciousness of themselves as containing historical and cultural multitudes, independently of the seventeenth century struggles for control of their collective setting. This approach does not claim to recover the 'truth' of Hester's interiority or of the Ark's myriad histories, but suggests a different mode of listening: one that treats affect and atmosphere as forms of historical knowledge. *Unquiet Things* enacts questions around archive, authority, and erasure – by using the novel form to inhabit and expand those silences. The creative decisions are not merely illustrative but performative: they attempt to place the reader in affective proximity to the unknowable.

In practice, the lines between 'known events' and literary artifice are of course far from distinct, often woven inextricably into the myriad creative decisions that go into each line. To take, for example, the first chapter in *Unquiet Things* written from Elias Ashmole's point of view, in June 1650 – he experiences a vivid dream, the content of which is based on one that he recorded in his diaries, though not on the night before his first visit to the Tradescant Ark. In the dream, the stones of Lichfield are described as being 'the colour of an old bruise' – an observation based on my own research trip to the town in 2022, and a drizzly circuit of the cathedral in whose shadow Ashmole was raised. On the next

page, lines – or rather, horary questions, to which he would have used charts of the heavens to calculate responses – are included verbatim from Ashmole’s diaries. Between the dream and the quotes lie a set of actions and memories – a flashback to Oxford during the Civil War, a view of the street below his chamber, the experience of a disturbed stomach – that navigate a similarly variable landscape from the archivally recorded to the imagined or observed, but narratively significant in terms of the novel’s progression and framing of character. This short example illustrates the hazards and opportunities of any act of historical interpretation, and as discussed above, every individual author finds her own position within an infinite array of possible variations, line by line.

In the archive, Hester’s (translated) voice only begins to find its own place in a relation of unequal conflict, the disputes with Elias Ashmole. These start to be inscribed in the archive after her husband’s death in 1662, when she was 53 – court documents, letters and diary entries authored by people (mostly Ashmole) who held far more social power than she did and whose interests ran directly counter to her own stated wishes. What traces there are of her, then, are already echoes – a common enough metaphor, but pertinent in the detail, as outlined by Joan Scott in her work on the ‘Fantasy Echo’ of historical identity: ‘echoes are delayed returns of sound; they are incomplete reproductions, usually giving back only the final fragments of a phrase. An echo spans large gaps of space (sound reverberates between distant points) and time (echoes aren’t instantaneous), but it also creates gaps of meaning and intelligibility.’ (2001, p. 290) The analytic distortions of Hester’s experience are a given, but the uses to which her trace material has been put are particular. To Ashmole she was an irritation and an impediment (though the violent legal and domestic gestures with which he came to threaten her suggest she troubled him on a rather more profound level), but his biographers and those of the Tradescants have made little or no effort to question his version of events. C. H. Josten’s five-volume 1966 work *Elias Ashmole (1617-1692): His Autobiographical and Historical Notes, his Correspondence, and Other Contemporary Sources Relating to his Life and Work* amply fulfils the promise of its title, while offering a portrait of Ashmole that, while it includes the occasional wart, is unwilling to see a serious character blemish as anything other than a beauty spot. Hagiography is nothing new, but its flip side is Josten’s assessment of Hester, based on Ashmole’s words and written from within the Oxford academic establishment. Reciting Ashmole’s account of the night of the disputed Deed of Gift, Josten concludes

that the murky and poorly documented events can only demonstrate Ashmole's 'considerations of honesty and fairness' (Josten, 1966, vol. I, p. 126) – but Hester claimed Ashmole had got John drunk, and that she and John had erased their names from the Deed the following morning, though it was never produced in court. Of their later disputes, when Ashmole occupied the house next door to Hester and wrote a 'Submission' document for her to sign, all that is said is that 'Mrs. Tradescant was certainly an erratic and unbalanced person.' (p. 209) Subsequent biographies of the Tradescants have done little reparative work – the most recent and generally excellent, Jennifer Potter's 2006 *Strange Blooms: The Curious Lives and Adventures of the John Tradescants*, admits that the court judgement that found in favour of Ashmole must have been 'devastating' for Hester, and that 'whatever his legal rights, Ashmole's persecution of the ageing widow is one of the shabbiest chapters in the Tradescant story.' (p. 345) Still, despite detailing many of the impossible inequalities Hester faced, her overall assessment is damning, echoing Josten in calling her 'increasingly unbalanced' (p. 358) without exploring Ashmole's role in any perceived instability, and framing her life thus: 'Of all the women in the Tradescants' story, Hester is the only one to gain her own voice, which became increasingly shrill in later life.' (p. 281) Her words recall Mary Beard's essay in *Women and Power*, 'The Public Voice of Women': 'In making a public case, in fighting their corner, in speaking out, what are women said to be? "Strident"; they "whinge" and they "whine"?' (2017, p. 29) In echo, Hester's voice has only served to reinforce the structural disadvantages within which her subjectivity was produced, and which remain in many places very comfortably in operation today. While the Tradescant family, with Hester's role variously framed, have been the subject of both biographies (Leith-Ross 1984, Potter 2006) and fictional portrayals (Winterson 1990; Gregory 1998, 1999), it is highly unlikely that the archival detail available would suggest Hester to a historian as the subject of a conventional biography. But perhaps a novel can. 'By granting the echo agency, can we allow sound to transform us?' (Revell and Shin, 2024, p. III)

I first encountered Hester years before the History of Science incident, in another museum altogether – the Garden Museum in South Lambeth, which occupies the deconsecrated site of St-Mary-at-Lambeth, the parish church attended by the Tradescant family. Founded by Tradescant fan Rosemary Nicholson in 1977 to preserve the site and its traces, it now 'explores and celebrates the art, history and design of British gardens and their place in our lives today'. (Garden Museum, 2024, para.

1) The extraordinary Tradescant family tomb – commissioned by Hester¹⁸ – is still in the former churchyard, now a rare plant garden enclosed by a learning centre and museum restaurant. Ignorant of all this, I accompanied my brother (a professional gardener) on a visit, during the course of which I read an aside on an exhibit caption that referenced the Ashmolean, Hester's role in the founding collection's journey, and her presumed suicide – the circumstances of which we only know through Ashmole's own diary notes. 'My wife told me Mrs: Tradescant [sic] was found drowned in her Pond. She was drowned the day before about noone as appeared by some Circumstances.' (Josten, 1966, vol. IV, p. 1607). As someone who grew up in Oxford and frequented its museums, who felt out of place between the 'town' of my peers and the 'gown' of my parents' academic community, the discovery of this – to me – unknown history was an enactment of the psychiatric aspects of research – it felt like a hand reaching out and pushing me in the chest, the message deeply felt: *this needs telling*. To me, Hester's absence from the narrative of the Ashmolean positively shouted its presence – I felt I knew immediately, instinctively how she must have been frustrated and ignored by the ambitious men around her, and how the bullying that resulted in her losing a unique collection of wondrous objects with which she had lived for thirty years would have destabilised her mental health.

As with Rivka Galchen's experience of affect described above in her discovery of Katharina Kepler, these embodied moments of recognition are increasingly finding their place in archival studies, part of the process of enabling new approaches to knowledge production. A recent article by Barbara Cooke and Nonia Williams ties this both to recent work on 'cognitive sparking' in neuroscience and to a longstanding recognition of a similar phenomenon in literary studies, Virginia Woolf's 'moments of being' (2024, p. 2). Quoting Susan Howe (2014), they describe 'somatic and affective responses to our archival encounters... what could be thought of as "insignificant visual verbal textualities and textiles" may in fact form a gateway to new forms of knowing that are inaccessible via primarily rational, elaborative and step-by-step thought processes.' (2024, p. 2) To fully explore the significance of my

¹⁸ She paid the 'vast sum' of £50 to be allowed to erect a monument so unique Samuel Pepys made a special trip to visit it, and had drawings of it made (Potter 2006, p. 335, and others). To be buried in a churchyard at all at that era was unusual – most people opted for the inside of the church – but chest tombs, too, were almost unheard of (Marsh, 2020, para. 5). The role of the family in monumental artwork was key (Llewelyn, 1991, p. 102), and Hester would have worked closely with the stonemason. The legend on the tomb lid she put in place began 'This monument was erected by Hester Tradescant...' but it was removed by the Victorians, her name only returning to the lid during a later restoration. (MacGregor, 1983, p. 15) Institutional interest in Hester's contribution remains almost non-existent.

particular moment of affect is beyond the scope of this essay, but it can be situated within the overarching thesis that these new fictions of seventeenth century women are part of a movement towards (re)imagining historical knowledge production. Cooke and Williams, adapting Maryanne Dever, call for moments of ‘being-in-the-archive’ and the ‘epistemic jolt or insight afforded by their precarious spontaneity’ (2024, p. 2) to be allowed to support new ways of thinking about archives – and arguably museums too. One cannot epistemologically isolate nor reproduce the chance conditions that introduce a writer to her historical subject, or give her the necessary impetus to complete a work of fiction. But ‘the embodied nature of the encounter with the physical archive must be acknowledged and accounted for... because of how this makes fuller modes of knowing and valuing the archive possible.’ (p. 4)

In that spirit, it is relevant to note that in suggesting that trip to the Garden Museum, my gardener brother Michael was the reason I first encountered Hester. Later, he was perhaps a large part of the reason why I continued writing about her sad story, and certainly influenced my thinking. Two years after that first visit to the Garden Museum I had committed to writing the novel, but my plans were interrupted by Michael’s attempted suicide and its aftermath. This was followed not indirectly by the end of my relationship, which led to selling a house, leaving a job and relocating to Norwich from just outside Oxford to undertake this PhD (just down the road from Walberswick in Suffolk, the birthplace of John Tradescant the Elder). The affective constellation of connections around Hester and my experience is surely coincidental, and yet it is a feature of the process of writing without which its telling is incomplete. And in the future, it may become the subject of a critical-creative essay in its own right.

Quoting Judith Felksi, Cooke and Williams go on (2024, p. 4):

Such positions insist that ‘affective and analytical aspects of meaning are closely intertwined’ – that the initial emotional response is a kind of fore-knowledge – and are open to how ‘details vibrate and resonate with special force when they hook up with our passions and predilections, our affectively soaked histories and memories’.

In the context of historical fiction, the response described is a reminder of some aspects of Joan Scott's 'Fantasy Echo' (2001) discussed above – that for a connection with a past historical figure to be felt by an individual in the present – and for that encounter to be framed in terms of identity, in this case a female identity – is to indicate both a constructed and misleading sense of temporal coherence of a group, and the desire of a situated contemporary subject to find a political connection with an incommensurable past. The echoes, as suggested above, might say more about the surface off which they rebound than about the originating voice. But to acknowledge this is not to dismiss the opportunity for the echo's agency, nor what it can tell us about the context in which it is heard.

On a subsequent visit to the Garden Museum, in 2022 (following a 2015-17 refurbishment of the space during which the original caption referring to Hester vanished), I found that a new exhibit had been put in place with seven audio recordings playing from speakers set on the church's pillars. A paragraph stencilled on a nearby wall entitled 'Shadows of the Past' explained that the recordings 'bring to life' some of the parish residents buried in the church and churchyard 'from the 11th century until 1854.' (Garden Museum, 2017) One of the recordings, I was intrigued to see, was of Hester – but as soon became apparent, she was presented in a way that seemed to wilfully obscure any real opportunity for her role or her loss to be interpreted. Most significantly, in a museum dedicated to the Tradescants, she is listed as 'Hester Pooks' – her maiden name, though when she arrived in the parish in 1638 she was already married to John Tradescant and as such bore his name and continued to do so for the next forty years, including when she commissioned the tomb in the museum's garden – a structure around which there is much admiring commentary but no mention of her role. The stencilled 'shadow' of her portrait next to the speaker that plays 'her' recording is recognisable as one of those in the Ashmolean, but it seems unlikely that anyone without prior specialist knowledge would be able to identify this. She is, once again, a strangely delineated absence. In the recording, certainly, she talks about her fears of losing her inheritance, her financial worries, wonders aloud what she should do – but there it ends. To understand its import you would need an explanation of the context, which isn't there. Standing in the church-turned-museum, listening to the tinny recording that obscures as much as it reveals, the reinscription of Hester's historic erasure felt gratuitous, the project of a book about her life as weighted as ever. Could it draw the museums' attention to the relations of power enacted in the establishment of

their institutions and in their curatorial choices, disrupt the philanthropic narrative of Elias Ashmole's gift to Oxford? In his introduction to *The British Museums* (2020), Dan Hicks references Swedish writer Sven Lindqvist's injunction to 'Dig Where You Stand'. (p. xii) Hick's work addresses the need for 'action-oriented "necroographies" – death-histories, histories of loss', and asks whether museums are operating as tools for the 'production of alterity... still operating, hiding in plain sight.' (p. xiv) (Re)telling Hester's story was a conscious imperative to dig where my own history stood, on conflicted but immeasurably privileged Oxford ground.

Across the nave from the speakers is Elias Ashmole's tombstone, which is set in the floor of the south aisle and bears the legend *Durante Musaeo Ashmoleano Oxon. nunquam moriturus* – 'while the Ashmolean Museum endures, he will never die' (John Aubrey described the museum as 'his greatest memorial' (Scurr 2015, p. 388)). I should emphasise that none of this project is intended to denigrate the very real achievement and significance of the Ashmolean, both in the seventeenth century and today. What human institution is without its shadows? Rather, it is the implication that to properly acknowledge these shadows would somehow undermine the institution's legitimacy that, it seems to me, is important to question. Leaving Hester out implies that a woman's voice doesn't fit with how an institution should be. When the museum was opened in 1677 it contained on its statutes the following magnificent piece of self-aggrandisement regarding the 'knowledge of Nature' (Josten, 1966, vol. IV, p. 1821-2):

I Elias Ashmole, out of my affection to this sort of Learning, wherein myself have taken & still doe take the greatest delight: for which cause alsoe, I have amass'd together great variety of natural Concretes & Bodies, & bestowed them on the University of Oxford, wherein my selfe have been a Student, & of which I have the honour to be a Member.

Even the male Tradescants, whose work the Ark principally was and from whom Ashmole 'inherited' the collection, don't get a look-in here – though at least today they have their place in both the Ashmolean and the Garden Museum. Seeking to secure his own legacy, Ashmole succeeded beyond all measure at enacting the 'sense of spiritual or moral entitlement to archival ownership that is allied to

the persistent idea that 'The Archive is the lodestone of academic enquiry.' (Cooke and Williams, 2024, p. 16) He catalogued the collection and ensured its future with the University of Oxford in an audacious act that, following the Tradescants' original lead, can reasonably be said to have founded England's first public museum – and which reflected a genuine enthusiasm for and commitment to communicating his scholarly interests. Almost certainly, the collection fared better – in terms of material coherence and as a site for public education – in his hands than it would have in Hester's. Posterity has, evidently, concluded that these achievements are sufficient to disregard any minor complications such as a court case and a suicidal widow at the heart of the institution's origin story. History has been literally and comprehensively written by the winner, a brutal privileging of 'the belief that researchers' interactions with archival material are the only significant or authentic ones, and the value of any other may be judged by the extent to which it serves intellectual enquiry. At its worst, it enables researchers to believe that serving them and serving 'intellectual enquiry' are one and the same.' (ibid.)

What is not deemed important in this story, aside from the questions of legal or moral inheritance and ownership, are practices of care and preservation. As John Tradescant's wife Hester would have had responsibility for managing the Ark's daily care, cleaning and maintenance, and after his death she continued to show it to the public and trade items from it (Potter, 2006, p. 341), suggesting an informed and engaged commitment to her guardianship.¹⁹ Both material preservation and active curation and display, then, are clear – but the Ark was also, in significant ways, Hester's home, a repository of family memories and connections she lived with her entire married life and widowhood. She went through a traumatic and challenging court case to try and retain her ownership of it. Barbara Cooke, visiting a relative of Evelyn Waugh's to explore his archival holdings, observes (2024, p. 14-15):

¹⁹ The concern here is with representations of this particular story in the Ashmolean Museum's foundational narrative, but the enquiry of course sits within the wider landscape of restitution and heritage discussed above. It is important to note that, while John Tradescant the Elder and his son acquired the majority of their rarities through plant-hunting expeditions and via networks of friends and colleagues, many or most of those opportunities arose through relations of colonial trade and conflict. Each of the objects in the Ark will have its own story to tell, and many of them represent agonising instances of colonial rapacity – the 'cloak of the King of Virginia', for example – currently the centrepiece of the 'Ark to Ashmolean' gallery – was acquired from the Powhatan people, whose land was the first occupied by English settlers of the 'New World' around 1607 and whose population and culture was subsequently decimated. The 'Oxford Dodo', part of the original Tradescant collection, is the only surviving soft tissue in the world of a native Mauritian bird extinct by the 1660s thanks to the activities of European colonists. (Oxford Museum of Natural History, 2024)

Alexander's archive was indisputably his, initially through right of inheritance, then earned through hard work, long years of seeking out materials, investing in their transcription and upkeep and honing unrivalled knowledge of their contents. Like most people who accrue and care for a personal collection, Alexander is owner, curator, discoverer and gatekeeper of his own archive. He can do what he likes with his own stuff.

And yet in Hester's case, no such ownership has been permitted. In ignoring these aspects of experience, the institutional view of history, and by extension human experience, is evident: affective concerns and the painstaking daily work of care, so often women's work, doesn't count. In removing the Ark from her possession Ashmole exercised all of his structurally gifted and personally amassed financial, legal, educational, social and scholarly power to insist that he was the collection's rightful owner and that its value should be translated into (as, indeed, it has turned out) a permanent honouring of himself in national cultural history, a position with which subsequent cultural gatekeepers have happily colluded. In this view Hester's 'increasingly unbalanced' outlook starts to look quite reasonable, and her 'shrill' voice something like resistance. In a case such as this, a novel – a 'better account' – can suggest alternative ways of approaching the available material, and ask questions within an exploratory creative framework.

All of the above can only be read within the wider context of contemporary debates around decolonising archives and museums, and the stories that are told from them before, during and after any processes of object restitution (see page 7). While Hester's constrained agency within a patriarchal societal dynamic is intersectional to some degree, in writing her story it was essential to retain consciousness both of my positionality as an author entering this space, and of hers as a relatively wealthy, white property owner within a colonising society, to whom the ownership and control of objects would almost certainly have been detached from any significant moral or ethical considerations regarding their origins, or narratives around their display. In her conflict with Ashmole, could she offer any kind of restorative alternative to the collection, or does she simply reinscribe the dynamics of their acquisition, imaginatively archiving them for her own ends? The journey of the Ark to the Ashmolean

is the moment in English history when collections moved from the private to the public: so what could *Unquiet Things* say to a contemporary cultural context preoccupied with ongoing questions around the rightful homes of objects in museums that were acquired from their originating cultures through structures of colonial control?

I wanted to acknowledge this complexity without introducing narratives that risked making Hester an ahistorical and condescending ‘saviour’ figure, and without artificially overreaching regarding contemporary restitution debates – to be able to highlight the significance of the artefacts’ origin without suggesting a unified solution. As Alexander Herman writes, ‘every claim for return, no matter how compelling or frivolous, ultimately seeks redress for a wrong that was committed. That wrong may be difficult to prove for factual or ethical reasons, and herein lies the problem. One person’s intensely felt hurt may be another’s distant memory. One community’s icon of identity may be another’s keenly held property.’ (2021, para 7) The Ark was partly – though certainly not entirely – made up of objects obtained through colonial trade networks, and some of those quite possibly – as indicated through the imagined scene of John’s acquisition of ‘Powhatan’s cloak’ – though outright violence or theft. But any particularity in those stories is lost to us, far more comprehensively than Hester’s. Consciousness of this power structure and the erasures at its heart significantly informed my creation of a space for the objects ‘speak’ to Hester, who from a position of disempowerment is able to ‘hear’ them but not – crucially – to meaningfully translate their sounds or to make decisions that might be shaped by the memories they carry. Her curatorial relationship to the Ark – embodied, affective, chaotic – nevertheless stands in opposition to Ashmole’s extractive, ordering, and institutionalising impulse. In this sense, the novel gestures toward the idea that preservation-as-control is not inherently more ethical than loss, and to map out possibilities of fragmentation as well as containment, without artificially assuming certainty about their respective ethical values. In *Unquiet Things*, the objects in the Ark ultimately resist both Hester’s and Elias’s possession. Elsewhere, Hester’s lack of solidarity with other women and her fixation on the Ark’s objects can be read as a reflection of how colonial structures enable hierarchies even among the marginalised. Her unhappiness does not exempt her from the privileges and violences of her position, and *Unquiet Things* aims to hold that tension open without absolving her.

The Garden Museum's use of an audio recording, the sound of an actor whispering a scrambled version of Hester's loss somewhat vainly from the museum's margins, recalls the status of what Ella Finner has called 'the familiar sonic metaphor for having agency to act and represent oneself' (2020, p. 315) – 'having a voice'. The idea of 'giving voice' to marginalised historical figures recurs in commentary around these fictional (re)presentations, but returning to the nature of echo, this can seem like a dubious claim. Classically, the nymph Echo was cursed by the goddess Hera for speaking out of turn, so that she could only repeat others' words back to them, thus fuelling the self-regard of her love object Narcissus – and has been used as a signifier for female voicelessness throughout Western cultural history. Reflecting that her punishment transformed 'vocal agency into an enduring vocal captivity,' Finner asks, 'can Echo disturb gendered power relations if she is doomed to repeat the trailing remnants of others' words?' (p. 321) Similarly, Joan Scott wonders whether 'If all we have is the echo, can we ever discern the original? Is there any point in trying, or can we be content with thinking about identity as a series of repeated transformations?' (Scott, 2001b, p. 292) Finner goes on to argue for echo's agency, suggesting that 'in relying on a reproduction of one's voice, bounced back from a reflective surface, the sound will always return altered. This important practice of speaking in order to listen again differently to that speaking is part of Echo's compelling legacy and how she can participate in a feminist project.' (p. 323) Considering the multiple and conflicting echoes of Hester's voice as described above, the original 'voice' seems all but out of reach. But if as Finner's 'differently positioned author,' a writer can cause Echo – a silenced subject – to 'claim her own assertive first word,' (p. 322), a new fiction might offer Hester's voice something through naming her very absence.

During the writing of *Unquiet Things*, sound came to be a rich resource for communicating all that is lost, unsaid, restated and hushed up in the history of the Ashmolean, its guardians and its objects. Allowing the text to ask, if not answer, how 'sound, listening, speaking, writing, remembering words, records and archives relate to one another... Can they be considered bodies of sound? What happens in transmission and translation?' (Revell and Shin, 2024, p. II) Hester accesses much key information through eavesdropping, with all its sonic and interpretive distortions. As the novel progresses, she begins to experience auditory hallucinations in the collection room – to hear sounds the Ark's rarities might have produced in their originating contexts. In these ways she is made strange to herself and

others by the immaterial, while experiencing – though she could not have thought of it like that – the collection in a way that is arguably far more authentic and generative than Ashmole’s taxonomic project of cataloguing and display. In the last chapter of Hester’s life in *Unquiet Things*, her isolation and loss have contributed to her mental decline as she attempts to build her own physical archive of memories – submerging sound-giving objects that she associates with her past in the pond in the garden – in an attempt at a restorative process that would certainly seem ‘unbalanced’ to most outside views. To her family and servants, she is becoming a danger to herself and others, and the decision is taken – Hester half-hears – to keep the door to her bedchamber locked. ‘Better not to speak of it,’ they agree. Since her death – which though it had every appearance of a suicide was not classified as such by her community²⁰ – that has seemed to be the consensus among museums and biographers alike. The ‘shrill’, ‘unbalanced’ woman who made such a fuss about losing her inheritance, the archive she cared and fought for, has been quietly let lie.

²⁰ Potter summarises, somewhat fancifully: ‘From the hostile evidence of Ashmole’s lawsuits, suicide while the balance of her mind was disturbed seems the most likely cause of Hester’s drowning, but her burial in sacred ground suggests that her contemporaries took a gentler view. Perhaps like Hamlet’s Ophelia, she was found to have drowned herself in her own defence and was therefore, as a gentlewoman, deemed worthy of a Christian burial.’ (2006, p. 347)

Conclusion

How do we enact Donna Haraway's idea of 'better accounts', interrogating our perceptions of value in knowledge production and rethinking how we tell stories – in science, in history, and of ourselves?

Marina Abramović's work in her 'Presence and Absence' installation in the Pitt Rivers Museum used performance to move that 'emptiness is so important' in our interpretive relationships with archives.

(Pitt Rivers, 2022b, para. 6) This essay has discussed the significance of this insight in a related set of contexts – museums, social science and historical fiction – and suggested that a recent set of novels about real seventeenth-century women express and develop contemporary analytical insights through experimental literary forms, producing just such 'better accounts'. These accounts coexist with many others in the varied landscape of historiographic storytelling, supporting a view of subjectivity which, after Benjamin (1940) is less linear than constellated, made up of multiple and shifting collections of insights. It is therefore possible to argue – as others have done – that there is a place for works of historical fiction within our pedagogy of the past – in fact, that to exclude them is to misunderstand how historical narratives are constructed and absorbed in a landscape where 'cultural forms of history and memory such as film, television or literature are extremely influential in creating and sustaining a particular type of historical imaginary.' (de Groot, 2009, p. 49) And when Ruth Hoberman writes that 'because they are above all readers, historical novelists write out of a tangle of texts: those they have consulted about the past, non-historical texts that have shaped their assumptions about human beings, the cultural ideologies they have absorbed – knowingly or unknowingly – since birth,' (1997, p. 5) she could be writing about any participant in discourses of the past. To understand historical fiction as one strand of a nexus of discourses that constitute our ideas of ourselves – '*because much of the world is enacted in that way*' (Law, 2004, p. 14) – is not to detract from the immeasurable value of deep research, but to enrich our historical understanding. And if, to re-state once more, 'for women, resisting the past means reading erasures,' (Hoberman, 1997, p. 12) the uncertainties of that art reflect as much on those doing the reading as they do on the erased, always already implicating the full range of our discourses about times before our own.

All over Oxford, processes of historical (re)visioning and restitution are at work. The controversy about removing the statue of imperialist Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College rumbles on (BBC, 2021; Oriel College, 2021). As discussed above Dan Hicks, Curator of World Archaeology at the Pitt Rivers Museum, has written an important book on cultural restitution centring on his own professional sphere (*The Brutish Museums*, 2020). You can walk around the city with an organisation called ‘Uncomfortable Oxford’, whose tours ‘highlight histories of race, gender, class, and disability, while raising uncomfortable questions about the lasting legacies of empire’ – although the Tradescants do not feature in their ‘Uncomfortable Ashmolean’ tour. (Uncomfortable Oxford, 2024) In 2021, in another gallery of the Ashmolean, the caption on an artwork made of smashed teacups read: ‘You don’t see the story behind the pretty objects’. The display reflected on the legacy of the British Empire, and of the Windrush generation in Oxford. It was just one instance of repeated, serious uses of creative practice to raise questions about the objects in the museum’s collections, and about our relationship to historical narratives more widely. Few curators or museum-goers would resist the urgency of such projects – or disagree that there is infinite, complicated work still to be done. I have argued that the ‘better accounts’ of historical fiction are an important strand of this work, and that a number of recent publications have made important experiments in the genre. I have followed Cooke and Williams in suggesting that ‘in order to deepen and extend the kinds of reading and thinking that experiences of the archive might make possible, our work with and in the archive can and should engage with what is felt, both emotionally and somatically’. (2024, p. 4) but this is only one more iteration of the many conversations about telling stories from the past that spread out, like constellations themselves, winking in and out of brightness and only visible thanks to the darkness that surrounds them.

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UNQUIET THINGS

A NOVEL

NOTE

This is a fictional interpretation of people, objects, events, portraits and documents of archival record.

I

1638

II

1650-1652

III

1659-1666

IV

1674-1678

V

1683-1684

I

1638

Hester pooks the daughter of dannyell

Baptism records of St Clement Danes church, London, 12 March 1608

JUNE

She has been sent to buy butter, out into the impatient city. London meets her bodily: carts, dogs, pigs, bells, rain thrown in sudden irregular fits from a sky the colour of mother-of-pearl. The smell of the street is a blunt knife at the back of her throat. From its sheltered edge, she peers upwards past the fretwork of timber and chimneys. Smoke, birds. They insist on containment, on waiting a little longer.

‘Hester,’ calls her maid, hurrying to catch her long stride. On any other morning it would have been Catherine who ran the errand alone, but today Hester must be occupied for an hour while her parents decide if she will be married. She lessens her pace a fraction and Catherine takes her arm, pulls on it. Hester lowers her head with its tall hat of beaver felt, meets the girl’s grey eyes.

‘Are you anxious, hurtling about so?’ Catherine asks. ‘Do you think they may refuse?’

‘Perhaps I want them to?’ Hester says, for effect.

‘You know you don’t,’ says Catherine, unmoved. ‘You told them, didn’t you? You’ve seen him.’

‘Aye,’ she says. ‘Seen his big beard and his crooked eye.’ Not that she turns heads herself. She overheard her father’s apprentices once, enjoying a laugh about the boss’s spinster daughter. The graceless one. Heron-woman. It has stuck to her idea of herself. Odd proportions, a watchful eye. Catherine guides her around puddles and turds and two cats fighting over a fish head. Her spindly heron’s legs. She is too capable for beauty, anyway. The petty merchant’s daughter. You manage your father’s house and are grateful that he is mostly kind.

‘What do you care how he looks, anyway?’ says Catherine, mirroring her thoughts. ‘You’ve waited this long. You want him because he’ll take you out of London and make you mistress of a fairground. You think you’ll be different there.’

Catherine is right, of course, or partly. Hester’s father’s trader colleagues, all Huguenots, stopped asking for her hand years ago. It was she who turned them away: time and again she pleaded her mother’s illness, asked her father to give her another year. She could never voice her true thoughts – why should she exchange her father’s house for one just like it, and perhaps worse? But this man, this

John Tradescant, has never lived in London. He has never sold cloth. When she met him he had just returned from Virginia, his skin still tanned by foreign weathers.

‘How could I not be different?’ she asks now. ‘And it isn’t a fairground. It’s...’ but she doesn’t have the words, and must use her father’s. ‘It’s a marvellous collection of all that is strange and rare.’

‘You haven’t seen it yet.’ Catherine pulls her out of the path of a man with a goose under his arm. ‘It’s probably an old dog he’s had stuffed to look like a monkey. Maybe some magic toenail shavings. You’ll be stuck out in Lambeth wishing you’d never left Holborn. Or that you’d joined a nunnery.’

‘If those are my choices, I’ll try the toenails first.’ But, but. There is a secret part of her that feels alive at the thought of it all. That wonders at the possibility it should be her – her! – who has somehow been chosen for a life unlike any other. What could she make of it? When John – she tries his name carefully, *John* – visited her father’s house he told her of his orchard business, his work in the Queen’s gardens at Oatlands Palace. His house, surrounded by exotic plants and trees, the front gate flanked by a pair of whale ribs planted in the ground. And of his collection – the clothes of foreign peoples, the bones of their animals. Things from places beyond the edges of maps. He called it the Ark, a place scholars from England and beyond travel to admire. And he brought a plant for her, that he himself had plucked from a swamp in the Americas. It is a monstrous thing, with toothed red flowers oozing a sticky syrup, and it eats flies. Whenever she looks at it she smiles.

There would be a family, too, of course. His own to start with, for he is a widower, and seeks to marry so his children can be raised. And then, soon, hers. Theirs. A life.

Leaving the house of the butter-woman, Hester and Catherine meet Hester’s kinsman Emanuel de Critz strolling along Eagle Street. The whole marriage arrangement is Emanuel’s doing, for he is a painter like the rest of his family, and works with John Tradescant at the palace. When he heard John was looking for a wife, it was Hester he thought of. She likes to imagine them, the one tending pomegranates, the other gilding their likeness on a sundial, talking of her.

‘Pox,’ he hails her. His eke-name for her from childhood. Her family name is Poux, meaning *flea*. ‘It is done? You are to be Mrs Tradescant?’

‘Not yet. My father is at home, deciding. And I am here, as you see.’ She shows her crock of butter, its cracked glaze beaded with cellar-dew.

‘He will accept. He would be a fool otherwise. I told him so.’

‘He worries for my mother.’

‘Enough, Pox. There is duty, and there is being shut away in an attic for no reason. With no offence to your parents. I wish you every happiness, and I believe you can wish it for yourself.’

‘So formal, Manu.’ They could have wed themselves, years ago. Spent childhood hours among his father’s pigments, daubing each other’s faces to look like fruit, like mummers, like savages. Before he was sent to the schoolroom to become a real painter and she was sent to learn laundering, he kissed her behind curtains and easels. These days he is husband to another and chooses to forget. She remembers, though. The smell of the colours, how they looked on her skin, their names. Umber, ultramarine, madder, verdigris, album, smalt. How would she paint herself now? Her grey ochre feathers, her yellow heron’s eye.

‘We should get back,’ says Catherine. ‘She’ll not want to wait to become the sorceress of South Lambeth.’

‘Not going with her, then?’ says Manu, and Catherine presses her lips together.

‘Catherine thinks the Ark is all stuffed dogs and toenails,’ she smiles.

‘Does she? Well, she can pay sixpence to find out, like everyone else.’

‘Everyone?’

‘Anyone with sixpence may visit the collection. Did John not tell you? The fairground comes to them.’ Catherine elbows her in the ribs. ‘A novel enterprise. You will have to entertain all manner of public. Though I expect he has a man to manage it all.’

The wind rises, heaving fragments of straw down the narrow alley, pushing them towards home. Hester fidgets; her father may already have decided, be waiting with her future.

‘We should be going,’ Hester says.

‘Wait,’ says Manu, and draws close so only Hester can hear. ‘Pox. I wanted to talk to you about John.’ She is ready to laugh at him, but for once his face is earnest. ‘You know his father only died last month, while he was in Virginia. Yes, he told you? But he would not have said that he only made the

voyage to please his father, and that when he returned he was undone. Old Tradescant built it all – the house, the garden, the collection, the post at the palace. If – when – you are married – be gentle, dear, be patient. John is a quiet man, and it will take time now for him to be at ease.’

She can hardly hear him. Her John. All she wants now is to end her waiting, to hurry to Lambeth and begin a life among rarities. And before she can say anything in reply Manu has stepped back, bowing farewell.

‘I’ll paint your portrait for your new home,’ he says in parting. ‘A gift.’

They arrive back at her father’s house in another pelt of rain, blown ragged through the front door. Inside they take off their cloaks and hats as quickly as they can, listening. Her father’s voice can be heard, rising and falling in the small parlour, and Catherine widens her eyes and points. Hester hustles her away to the kitchen, laden with cloaks and butter-basket, ignoring her looks. She wants this news to herself. *Selfish*, Catherine mouths as she goes. Hester has always been like it, guarded her private moments jealously, made herself strange to others. It does not make her popular.

She smooths out her gown, follows the trail of rain water Catherine has left along the corridor. Behind the parlour door Daniel Poux talks on. He cannot have heard them return, so Hester steadies her breathing and comes close to the door, lays her palms and her left ear lightly upon it. Her father is running over familiar ground – the profligacy of this King, his papist wife, violent bishops, petulant wars. Does this mean he has decided? His attention freed to unfree itself again, back to the perpetual matter of imminent catastrophe? Hester’s right hand strays to the hem of her shift below her sleeve. Her mother’s stitches band it round, a design of columbine and vines, a path through a meadow that circles back on itself. She traces its outlines while she listens, finds a loose thread and loops it around her finger, draws it into a tight pinch. At last her father pauses, as if his audience had finally been convinced. She can imagine him gathering himself, the effort of putting aside the state of the world to think of intimate matters.

‘*T’es d’accord pour la fille, donc?*’ For the question of his daughter, her father reverts to the language of his ancestors, the first fugitives from the Paris massacres.

If her mother makes a sound in response, Hester cannot hear it. For almost as long as she can remember Madame Poux has remained in a particular chair in the small parlour, the one without a view of the street, and she has sewed. The household's needs can hardly keep her occupied and she cannot take instruction from paying strangers so gradually her parlour, then the other rooms in the house, have grown bridal under the profusion of her samplers, her raised work, her lace and ribbons. She cannot always have been like this, but in the years following Hester's birth at least eight more children were carried to term, none of whom managed to gulp more than a breath or two of London air before returning to the starry depths from whence they came. These children – red, greedy, misshapen things, in Hester's imagination – took with them not only a great deal of their mother's earthly body, but also as much of her spirit as they could carry in their brief and livid arms. And so Madame Poux stays mutely at the centre of this confection, her needle in constant motion, taking her meals on a tray and her rest sitting upright, hands in her lap ready to begin again. When her person becomes unbearable, Hester gives her a draught from the apothecary – valerian, nightshade, poppyseed – and she and the maids bathe her as they would a corpse. In general Daniel Poux talks to his wife as he might, were he the sort of man to consider such a thing reasonable, converse with a bird or cat – artlessly, expecting no useful response. But for the marriage of his only child, for once he seems uncertain.

'My one remaining concern,' he goes on, 'if you will permit, my dear – is your care and comfort. With the savings from Hester's keep we can employ another maid, but of course their management will be less sure and – I hesitate to speak of it, but under the circumstances – maids have at times been hard to keep. *Donc, ma femme?* Can you do without her?'

Hester pictures Madame Poux, goaded by her husband's relentless reasoning, pushing aside the shrouds that envelop her to speak at last. When it comes her voice is low, and faint, but Hester presses her ear hard against the door, cupping the sound like a moth.

'Let her... go. She must...' but the effort is too much, the rhythm of her sewing fingers broken, and she subsides again into her waking dream. Only once more the mother says quietly of her daughter, 'Let her go.' And Hester snaps the thread around her finger. So it shall be. She will marry John Tradescant, and her life will be far away from here.

Too quickly the door swings open, inwards. She almost falls into her father's arms. His expression changes from resolute to enraged.

'Toi?' In surprise and discovery he is furious. She is too relieved to fear him.

'Papa...' she wants to thank him, to thank her mother, to tell them they will do well without her. But Daniel Poux is too outraged by his daughter's transgression to listen, and advances as if to strike. Hester flees, up the stairs towards her chamber. Her father's voice follows her up to the landing where she pauses, out of sight but within earshot. Here she all but squawks with glee, senses at last a new country opening up before her.

'T'es pas normal, tu m'entends? Il va savoir, ton nouveau mari?' Not quite normal, left too long alone with no occupation but the caring of her mother, the sponging of her marbled flesh. No more. She can be – she is – someone else. There is a dead spider crouched between the banisters. Daniel Poux is still in the corridor below, calling back to Madame that their daughter should be beaten rather than wed and he wishes John Tradescant good luck in the keeping of her. Wild with relief, Hester takes the spider and drops it neatly down on to the hairless crown of her father's head. It stays there for the rest of the day, a crooked ink-blot known only to her.

OCTOBER

Two white ribs, taller than a man, flash past her at the gate. The rest is cast in darkness, invisible through rain. She thinks of bones she has seen – rat, pullet, swine, pirates on the gibbet – then robes this arch in flesh, calculates the great fish whose breath it lifted laid out along the Lambeth road, lip to tail longer than the church she was married in. Then the carriage stops and she must hold her cloak tight around her wedding gown and follow John's lamp across the yard to the front door, where figures move beyond a band of light. For the first time she feels fear.

Inside she sees the place in flashes, bright and strange. A large hallway tiled in **black** and white, a grand old staircase. The children come forward, flanked by maids. A girl and a boy, finely dressed to welcome her, their faces wary. The fact of them – their fragile skin, their small hands which from today are somehow her concern – is astonishing. On the wall above their heads is a portrait of a woman dressed in white silk patterned with mulberries. Their mother, Jane, wearing a hood that exposes a half-moon of golden hair. The children, too, are crowned in buttery curls. Hester is what they have now, an ungainly heron-woman left out in the rain.

John beckons the pair forward. He is loosened and roughened by the wedding feast, where Emanuel and her other kinsmen pricked him with jests, and wines, and dances, and Hester watched him become bear-like, one of those that performs outside the playhouses, shambling out someone else's idea of merriment. No matter, she thought then. In Lambeth we will begin quietly. Now he introduces his daughter, Frances, nine years of age. His son, Jack, who will soon be seven. The boy clings to his sister's skirts and hides his face. But the girl raises her chin bravely from her bow.

'Come and see the Ark,' she says. 'The lamps are lit.'

At once? Hester presses down an urge to say she is not ready, surely she must be better prepared. She thinks irresistibly of Catherine, of toenails and stuffed dogs. But Frances is already leading the way, and together the four of them cross the hallway and go through a door to the left. It gives on to a short corridor, and another door. This one is set about with carvings, the lintel crowned

with a wooden Noah's Ark, painted faces peering from its windows. Frances opens the door and stands back. Through there, Hester senses, something waits – alert, awake. She tries to see into the room from where she stands but there are only indistinct shapes, she cannot make anything out with any certainty. Her ears crackle strangely as if the corridor were full of birds, and she wants to shake her head to clear it. But the family are watching her, so she tries to still her thoughts and steps inside the room to view their treasure, which is somehow hers now too.

And then everything changes.

A jumble, a mass, a cluster, a shock. The walls have grown new worlds. She revolves just inside the door, undone by the presence of so much.

The room is perhaps sixty feet long and a third as wide, its high windows dark and muttering with rain, set with lanterns along its length and a low fire burning in a far grate. The first thing that draws the eye is the ceiling, where beams and plaster are obscured by hundreds of suspended birds splashed with colours she has only seen in paintings – cobalt yellow, crimson, viridian, blue chalcedony. They have long sweeping white feathers and shining tassels. Beyond them darker hanging objects start to take shape and she moves closer to take them in. She sees a lizard the size of a man, a forest of snakes, a clutter of skeletons that suggest many kinds of bears, sea-monsters, and rats as big as monkeys. The mass creeps down the walls – more unknown scales, bones, feathers, teeth, fur, fins, tails, complete and partial skeletons tipped with plaited, curling horns. Even what is familiar is unfamiliar, larger and more numerous and varied. Antlers frilled like a fish's gills, hides striped and spotted in wild patterns. She can hardly take a step without coming up against a table or cabinet overstuffed with things she could barely name. Or if she could, she can see that they belong to minds from the other side of the world, whose idea of things has never thought to encounter hers. There are swords with blades like plumes, arrows fletched with beads and more strange feathers, helmets for armies dreamed up in fairytales. There are seashells like spun sugar, like mushrooms, like crowns. Huge foreign costumes like phantoms are hung about, roomy tunics sewn with beads and fringes. Along the lower walls are chests and cabinets with glass fronts containing coins, and medals, and carvings and precious stones. Below them, many layers of drawers, each bearing a legend. She half-turns and there is still more – a whole wall of shoes, boots and slippers, some for dwarves and some for giants. A mountain

of dappled eggs. Pots and jars, shields, gloves, paintings, jewellery, baskets, fans and figurines. Her head pounds as if it had been broken open to be filled with all it did not know, its pieces scattered about and reassembled into something altogether different. She smells dust, and spices, and old saddles left out in the rain. She feels as if drums were beating close by, making her heart jump and roar.

John and the children are behind her, waiting. She turns to them open-mouthed.

‘Is it possible?’

Frances nods, approvingly. Then moves through the room like a country dancer, keeling and pitching around bearskins and giant’s bones. Somewhere in the back she bends to a drawer and rummages. John rubs his hand across his eyes and lowers himself to a stool, the boy Jack burrowing into his side.

‘I am afraid it will be a burden to us,’ says her husband. ‘It was my father’s passion, and without him I am somewhat at a loss. I have sometimes thought I should sell it.’

To have all this and not keep it? Her eyes are still jumping around the room, her breath unsteady. Clusters of woven twigs that remind her of bird’s nests but are shaped like musical instruments. A line of magnifying glasses in different shapes. A massive shrivelled beast’s head, larger than a crouching man, its brutish face clutched around a violent horn.

‘But you went to Virginia,’ she protests. ‘You told me in Holborn you filled a ship with things.’ Something in his forehead twitches and he lifts Jack on to his knee.

‘Aye, true enough. I thought of my father, of how happy he would be.’

Of course. She tries to concentrate. Frances returns, a file in her fine white hands.

‘I have it all in hand, Papa. Grandfather taught me everything, you need only take care of the gardens.’

‘Is it so, chit?’ he replies, a bear now clumsy with drink and fatigue. ‘And I suppose you will clean it, and air it, and treat it for mites, and deal with traders, and be a guide to whatever paying gentleman shows up at our door, with your pretty yellow head? And then no doubt once you are married and with child you will sail to the Indies yourself and find rarities to add to it, so that no other collection will compete with the Tradescant Ark?’

Frances pays him no mind. She sticks her tongue out, then presents Hester with the opened file. Inside are papers, lined untidily with ink.

Hester swallows.

‘My grandfather sailed to Russia with the Ambassador,’ says Frances. ‘He kept an account of his journey, since he could not bring back everything he saw. See.’ She points to a line.

Hester starts to make a show of reading, but the marks waver so much on the pages they make her eyes water. She feels a tightness in her own smile as she hands them back.

The girl’s brow furrows. ‘You cannot read?’

‘A very little.’

‘Oh.’ Frances considers, lifts an eyebrow. Points to a distant shelf.

‘Shoes, then. He brought them back from that voyage. Those are shod with iron. And those, you strap them to your boots so you can walk across the snow without sinking. And there, birds he trapped himself. Like our linnets but smaller.’

Russia. What does Hester know of Russia? She turns to John for help, but he is resting his chin on Jack’s head, staring off into the feathered ceiling. She begins to understand – twice bereaved, of his wife Jane and his father, he has been preoccupied, and has let the girl grow headstrong and fantastical in this cave of wonders. If she is not checked, she will become unmanageable. Already she speaks as if the world is at her command.

‘And what is your favourite thing?’ Hester asks, to distract her.

Frances considers, then points to a smallish hairy object fixed on a wooden plinth beneath a dome of glass.

‘Agnus Scythius,’ she says triumphantly.

Hester feels she has lost again. Must she explain she has no Latin? That her schooling was in darning and brewing? But Frances does not seem to have counted this failing, instead cocks an eye at her father.

‘May I?’ she asks.

And John, with Jack nodding urgent encouragement from his lap, agrees tiredly to whatever it is she is proposing.

‘Sit,’ Frances commands, and Hester does, finding a chair set between a table of bulbous, serrated fish and a suit of armour. The girl stands in the centre of the room like a preacher in a marketplace, and starts to speak.

‘I will tell you a tale of a traveller in Tartary. Worn down to a scab by weeks of riding across the steppe, he came at last within sight of a narrow river. It was evening, and his body and that of his horse cast long shadows...’

She is, Hester sees at once, remarkable. As if she has put on some mantle, invisible to the eye, and become a player on a stage. One of those that make you feel you could be intimate friends, while remaining untouchable.

‘When they reached the water’s edge,’ Frances goes on, ‘the traveller threw down the reins and lay on his stomach on the bank. He drank deeply, washed the dirt from the creases of his skin. For the first time in days, he felt that his life might not end there on the plains, rotting quietly into the grass. At length he sat up and looked around. A little distance away in the dimming light was a scattering of grass hummocks where young sheep were grazing. On taking a knife from his pack and moving closer, the traveller felt his mind begin to creak – it was no ordinary flock. The hummocks were in fact large, strong-looking plants, and from the centre of each plant sprouted a long stem, to which a lamb appeared to be tethered. He shook his head to try and clear his vision, but could not escape the fact that the lambs seemed to be *growing* from the plants. Not only that, they could not escape. He saw with horror that several of them had nibbled and scratched the grass within their reach down to the bare earth, then starved. Their wilted stems and corpses were scattered across the scene. But the bodies did not appear to disturb the living creatures, who observed the traveller fearlessly through blue eyes, munching.’

The account is practised, memorised and perfected. Hester looks at John. His gaze is fixed on his daughter, his eyes wet with tears. This barbarous tale must be one of his father’s.

‘Thinking of his empty saddlebag, the traveller attempted to marshal his wits. He strode up to the nearest plant and put his knife to base of the stem, then pulled the blade into it. It was surprisingly tough, a tense cord of fibres in a woolly sheath. As he sawed the fibres leaked blood and the lamb cried out, a moan that soon faded away as it fell to its knees. The plant seemed to sigh and shrivel before his

eyes. The traveller was too tired and hungry to try and understand. He set to skinning the still-warm lamb, running his hands through its silken wool. As he tore into its flesh blood filled his mouth and leaked between fingers, and he found it tasted of honey. He ate until his belly was full and the bones of the lamb were licked clean, then fell into a sort of stupor. If vultures circled over him in the dusk he was not troubled by them. When he woke it was morning, he and his horse were surrounded by the remaining lambs. He rode away as fast as he could to escape from their accusing blue eyes, and the meal sustained him as far as Kashmir.'

Frances bows. Jack and John applaud. Hester stares at the snub-nosed thing in its glass dome and thinks of Holborn, where there are no wonders and no unknowns, either. Frances is triumphant.

'My grandfather met this man at a bazaar in Algiers. He bought the body of the vegetable lamb from him, and here it is. Its Latin name is *Agnus Scythius*.'

'Well, you forward wench,' says John, rising and yawning as if his eyes have never known sadness. 'Enough. Now Madame Hester is here you will start to pay attention to your duties, and not indulge these fables from your grandfather. We should all retire – I will send a maid to put out the lamps.'

He does not look at Hester. She is almost relieved – there has been so much strangeness already today. She thinks of Manu, leaning close in the street. *Be gentle, dear, be patient.*

John goes out first, with Jack in his arms, and Frances follows. But at the door, her father already disappeared into the gloom beyond, the girl turns and looks back. She and Hester regard each other, considering. Then the child puts a hand to the table to her right and lifts something from its place, the quick movement of a thief. Her eyes do not leave Hester's. Frances smiles, slowly, then turns and hurries away.

Alone in the Ark, with its rows and piles and outcrops of things still all strangers to her, Hester is suddenly, immensely fatigued. She reaches out a hand to steady herself, finding the plinth of the vegetable lamb, close to its knotted tuft of a face. She finds she can conjure what Frances described, the blazing peacock skies of Tartary, land rolling way infinitely towards distant horizons. Can all but hear it tearing at the grass, its gasping bleat as the traveller severs it from its stem. Catherine called her the sorceress of South Lambeth, but it is the collection that enchants. Never mind that in another

house possessing even one of those things would have your neighbours look askance and talk of witchcraft. Emanuel told her that in country villages people have the habit of nailing live toads to the inside of their chimneys, hoping they will draw out wickedness as they die.

Her new maid shows her to her chamber and dresses her for bed. The girl, Meg – little more than half Hester's age, brisk and guarded, trained by the children's mother – points to Frances and Jack's rooms, and John's, at opposite ends of the house's upper floor. Hester's is in the middle. It is plain but comfortable, with a bed, a linen chest, a table with a ewer and a deep window seat that looks south over the gardens, or will in daylight. Meg pauses briefly before she departs, as if to allow for questions, but Hester asks none and the maid shuts the door gently behind her, leaving Hester alone with a lit candle. In the silence that follows she thinks not of her husband but of Frances, of that slow smile and the challenge in it. Quickly, she stands and slips along the landing to the child's room.

Inside Frances is sitting up in bed, the drapes still drawn back, her right hand cupped against her ribs. She looks affronted, her eyes darker in the shadows of the bed canopy.

'Madame?'

Hester has not planned what she will say. What she knows of children she has learned from her cousins. She likes them, but they have not been hers to manage, they slip from her like eels. Or sometimes come close, moments of strange delight. She knows only that to let the girl alone, or to refer the matter to her father, is to invite further disobedience. She chooses plain speaking, and sits herself firmly on the edge of the bed.

'Frances, you need to give me what you took.'

The girl becomes crablike, her claws up.

'I didn't take anything.'

'Frances. I am your mother now. You will not lie to me.'

'My mother –'

'– is dead. And I am sorry for it. But we must start well together, and I will not have you steal.'

'I didn't steal.'

'Give it back. It is not yours.'

‘No more is it *yours*. You don’t even know what it is.’

‘Who taught you to speak this way?’

They regard each other, furious, an impasse. Above them, the bed hangings are stitched with unicorns in jewelled collars, their faces mild. Hester considers them. Waits for the girl’s breathing to slow, then tries again.

‘Very well. You can ask me three questions. And if I answer well, you will give back what you took.’

A considering silence. Then the brittle little voice concedes.

‘Very well. How old are you?’

‘I was thirty in March.’

‘You are old. As old as my father.’

‘Is that a question?’

‘No.’

‘Well then?’

‘You are not beautiful.’

‘No. Another question?’

‘My mother was beautiful.’

‘There is nothing I can do about that.’

‘No. You cannot.’ A pause. ‘Why weren’t you already married?’

Hester sighs, and banishes Emanuel’s face into the shadows.

‘My mother isn’t well. It was never the right time. Later, my father said I had sat on the market for so long I had started to stink.’

‘Like a fish.’

‘Exactly.’

‘My last question, then. Why did you take my father? You know nothing of what we do here.’

Hester thinks of Catherine, her mocking grey gaze.

‘Because I wanted to be different.’

Silence.

‘Did I answer well? Pass me what you took.’

With a grimace, Frances opens her fist and something rolls across the covers. An egg. Hester examines it in the candlelight. It seems undamaged – medium size, with a chalky white shell. It has a pattern of fine red veins, an unmapped land.

‘It is a dragon’s egg,’ says Frances, as if that should be obvious. ‘Grandfather bought it from a Turkish merchant. It is as much mine as anyone else’s.’

‘Would your father think so? Is he happy for you to steal, and hide things in your bedclothes?’

Silence. And then –

‘I have one more question.’ Hester looks down at the egg in her hand. It lies still, indifferent. A dragon? Why not? Someone somewhere made a pinprick in the red-veined shell and let the liquid inside drain away – was it a yellow yolk and a clear jelly, or inky red and black? Perhaps the rest of the clutch were left to grow dense and scaly inside their chalky nests. The sudden thrust of a tiny claw, unfolding winglets shattering the shell. Somewhere in a distant cave, a growing chorus of snorts and hisses, the smell of things being singed. Frances’s performance has affected her mind. But why shouldn’t her visions of the unknown be as likely as anyone else’s?

‘Very well.’

‘You didn’t seem frightened. Women often are.’

Hester waits.

‘Do you think we can keep the collection?’ The girl asks at last, tightly. ‘Papa says he will sell it, that he doesn’t have time for it. But why shouldn’t a woman have charge of it?’

To sell the Ark, when she has only just encountered it? She realises with a new resolve that it cannot be. She thinks of her sense of great good fortune, of being strangely chosen for this place.

‘Your father has other troubles. Now I am here things will be easier, he will surely think differently.’

‘There are women who cared for the Ark in the Bible. The wives of Shem, Ham and Japheth.’ But then Frances drops her eyes. ‘I suppose, since they have no names in Genesis, they do not matter.’

Hester relents. There should be no more troubles tonight.

‘Just because something is not written does not mean it does not signify,’ she says.

‘You cannot read.’

‘Which is how I know. Good night, Frances. And let us be better friends tomorrow.’

In her chamber, Hester puts the egg behind a curtain. Tomorrow she will find a way to return it, and trust that Frances sees the concealment as an act of friendship. She gets into bed but leaves the candle burning and the drapes drawn back, waiting for John to come to her. Around her in the dark something snickles in the walls, a-chumbling and a-rustling. Perhaps not rats; out here beyond the city it is as likely to be moths, or bats, or birds. Or the creatures of the Ark come alive, talking to each other in croaks and howls of their new mistress. She goes over it all again, wondering, as if she had happened upon buried treasure. So John does not care for it, and Frances is just a child. But without it, she knows now, the world would be once again drab and boundaried. It is as if she is being asked to help.

She lies still, holding her belly, praying.

In the morning she wakes to birdsong sweeter than any heard in London. The candle has burned down to nothing, and John did not come to her in the night.

She goes to the window and lowers herself onto its wide seat, folding her pointed limbs about her. Below, a wide terrace flanked by broad-leaved trees, descending to flowerbeds in a pattern of knots around a central pond. The rain has passed and the light is clear and cool, the garden flame-tipped – she sees leaves the colour of claret, the colour of fresh quinces, all shades of resin. Finches and titmice glimmer in the hips and haws. Beyond the trees are roof tiles, barns and outbuildings, part hidden by branches. She is already half in love with it, half frightened of what she has done. She must find a way to flourish.

At breakfast, in a small dining room overlooking the garden, she looks for some sign from John that all is well but he is silent, his skin grey. Does he still smell of sack? She asks him about the day ahead, wonders if he will show her the estate, but as she speaks his face closes. He picks up his bread and pushes back his chair.

‘Take the morning,’ he says. ‘The maids have managed so far. You can make a start later on.’ Then stops, as if to overcome some internal struggle, and relents. ‘The garden demands much of me in

this season,' he says, more gently. 'And tomorrow I am due at the palace. Frances will show you around, for she knows as much as anyone. I cannot tarry.'

Then he is gone, and Hester is alone at the table with the children, the autumn sun haloing their two yellow heads with light. Frances keeps her eyes on her plate, but Jack – his shyness gone – reaches cheerfully for the porridge.

'The garden demands much in every season,' he says. 'When I am done with my lessons I will be a gardener too, and help Papa.'

'A good thing too, brat, since you are so poor at 'em,' replies his sister, but gently.

Hester considers her anew. She has strange, delicate features, which seem not to settle from moment to moment. Her forehead high and pale above dark eyes, a flaunting profile, all cast in the changing shadows of one who lost a mother young. Might she be a beauty? In a few years they will know, and what sort of trouble she will face.

Frances guides her round the house, and Hester tries to understand the extent of her duties. The house is so much larger than any Hester has known. The child is meekly well-mannered as they go from room to room. Here are the servants' beds under the eaves, whispering with swallows and mice. Here linens, and winter clothes – brushed with wormwood, set about with rosemary and cloves, packed with dried walnut leaves against moths. Here you must dust, here wax, here polish, here let out bees knocking against the glass. There is a chamber for guests, parlours front and rear, a dining room, a breakfast room, the hallway with its staircase and harlequin floor. Jane's picture is just as beautiful in daylight, and Hester resolves to replace it with her own portrait, the one Manu painted for her wedding. Her dark curls, pale skin, beaky face. But smiling, eager for her new life.

Then downstairs to a cellar kitchen, where the servants nod cautiously at her over their work, knowing how much she has to learn. Below ropes of onions and armfuls of drying herbs the great table is set with baskets of autumn fruits: apples for cider, pears for perry, nuts still in their green cases. There are storerooms with butter, fat, meat, honey, ale. Autumn is the best season, says Frances, and the hardest. Everything needs doing.

And the Ark? Hester wants to ask. What of its needs? But they are going outside. Hard by the house is a walled garden full of herbs, more than Hester could imagine being able to name; it is angled south, but part is cast in shade by the larger house next door, which she now sees is joined to their own, the two houses made from one building. It was part of an ambassador's estate, Frances tells her, a Dutchman who as a foreigner could not entail his property on any but his children. He had none, so the house went to the manor of Vauxhall, who divided it into two for the rents. The neighbours with whom they now share a wall and a boundary are farmers – a large family with market gardens stretching into Surrey. They are away there a good deal, or selling their produce in the city. To them the cultivation of exotic plants and the collecting of strange objects is a queer vanity, and relations are cordial but no more. Together the two houses face the London road head on, the gardens behind extending out towards the marshes.

From the herb garden they go into the main park, which Hester saw from her bedroom window. It is startling in its beauty. She knows nothing of the work but in its shapes and colours she can see the strangeness of the Ark reflected. Above the known crocuses and gillyflowers are trees whose leaves, it seems to her, might pass for the ears of elephants and the wings of lizards; great plumes rise from behind banks of evergreens and the flowers make patterns richer than tapestries. They pass an apprentice with a wheelbarrow, but most of the men are in the far orchard, planting new trees and preparing the soil for next year's fruit. The work of the garden is all-consuming, says Frances. In the early mornings women from the village come to weed, on their knees and nibbling at the earth like ducks. They sing to each other, sometimes, making a strange sort of worship in the dawn.

They reach the barns beyond the garden; stables, pigs, chickens, geese, and everything for John's work. The orchard extends east behind the neighbour's property, but here Frances only pauses at the gate and points out the lines of apples, pears, cherries, peaches, plums.

'We won't disturb Papa. There is work to do,' she says.

Hester thinks of her father, and that perhaps men are everywhere the same. The city with her parents in it feels impossibly far away, though it is not more than three miles. To get to church she will pass the horse ferry and the palace of the Archbishop with his trail of severed ears, see Westminster across the river.

‘You have an accent,’ says Frances, as they walk back to the house. ‘Just a small one, sometimes.’

She has such an odd manner, this child, treating Hester as an equal, though they can never be.

But there is no-one else, and Hester is tempted into talk.

‘My parents are French,’ she tells the girl. ‘They came here when they were children. France was killing Protestants. They had to leave, or die.’ And yet she barely speaks French, only understands the words of others, and of course cannot read it. It is like only ever being half a person. ‘But I was born in London,’ she says, with a confidence she does not feel. ‘And now married to an Englishman. In no common situation,’ she adds, as much for herself as for Frances.

Frances seems hardly to hear her. ‘If I must marry,’ she says, ‘let it be to a man who can help my father, so I do not have to go away.’

‘You want to stay here?’

‘I cannot leave the Ark. Also, I do not want to die a wife and nothing more.’

Such words from a girl of nine.

Then Frances stops, with an abruptness that echoes John at breakfast, and cocks her head as if listening to some far-off strain of song or music. Hester listens, too, but there are no bells, no carts passing, no men calling to each other across the fields.

‘I must go,’ says the girl. ‘We may have visitors.’

Now, thinks Hester, is the time for things to change. She must take her place.

‘If there are visitors, I will greet them,’ she says. ‘Then I must speak to the servants. We shall begin.’

Frances looks at her, horrified. Can she be so ignorant of Hester’s duty? Then flushes red, and scuffs her feet where she stands.

‘I must speak to my father,’ she says, and runs back down the path towards the orchard.

Left alone, Hester balls her fists beneath her shawl, tilts her chin and takes the path to the house. So this is her family, and the work ahead of her. But instead of planning it, her thoughts return to the waiting Ark, and how she might show John she can be its guardian. And as she walks she recalls the warning from Genesis, how on Ararat old Noah was seen sprawled blind drunk and naked in his tent and thus did curse half his family in perpetuity, as if God’s great cleansing flood had been for

naught, barely touching the rot at the heart of humans begun with Eve. She walks on through the remarkable garden, imagining the creatures of that first Ark let loose, grazing from the broad-leaved trees, spreading out beyond the garden, hunting through the fields and woods of England. And among them the wives of Shem, Ham and Japheth, shaking the filth of the voyage from their bodies, trying to make sense of the land where they find themselves.

II

1650-1652

I Elias Ashmole, was the son (& only Child) of Simon Ashmole of Lichfield Sadler eldest son to Mr. Thomas Ashmole of the said Citty Sadler, twice cheife Bayliff of that corporation, and of Anne one of the daughters of Anthony Bowyer of the Citty of Coventry draper, & Bridget his wife only daughter to Mr: Fitch of Ansley in the County of Warwick gent:

Josten, C. H. (ed) *Elias Ashmole: His Autobiographical and Historical Notes, His Correspondence, and Other Contemporary Sources Relating to His Life and Work*

1650

JUNE

Elias Ashmole dreams he is back in Lichfield, searching for Eleanor among church stones the colour of an old bruise. The grass is unmown, the sky an empty white. He passes an apple tree, the crop small and red and clustered close along thin branches. One drops heavily into a mush of windfalls at his feet and splits apart, two white hearts marked with dark pips. He walks on and then he is a raven perched on the apex of the church roof, watching himself cast about between the graves. Elias, he calls. You won't find her here. She's buried in Astbury. But his raven self flaps off and down here he keeps on searching.

The graves are lying open, the carcasses within languorous with decay. Distantly he is aware that one of them might be his father but he pushes this possibility to one side, only glancing around quickly to make sure no dead Simon has risen to strike him down. He rounds a corner of the church and instead there are children, a dozen of them, standing in a silent ring looking down into one of the graves. Now, he knows with absolute certainty that here he will find Eleanor. He joins the children, whose faces are blank and who move jerkily at the knees, kicking dirt and mould down into the hole so that it covers the body. But as he looks the mould vanishes and he sees her, it is her, though her eyes are closed and her face has wasted away. Still he kneels and reaches down, he must kiss her, while the frantic movements of the children increase in speed and they start to emit cries like lost birds. He is nearing her face, love bubbling on his lips, when her eyes open and they are blank black holes. The children scream in earnest and he rises as if from a well, fighting for air, sure he will die, but emerging with a shout into the shuttered closeness of his own chamber, just a man in a bed with his linens soaked in sweat, his bowels in uproar, his mouth rank with sleep.

He stays there for some time, trying to return to himself, but for long minutes mortality stalks the room. God's wounds, the horror of that dream. He reminds himself that he is different now. Yes,

Eleanor died with his child inside her. But he has found other ways of becoming the man he wants to be.

When was the last time he dreamt of her? Oxford? Yes – heaving awake in a bare room in Brasenose shared with a succession of crapulent soldiers, a knife under his pillow. It was the middle of the war, and the soldiers slept on despite his yells. He had taken himself to the casement in the stairwell, pressed his cheek against the cold stone. December, and in the quadrangle outside a man was burning books in a brazier. Elias called down to him to stop but the only response was a cheerful wave, and a cry of ‘God Save the King!’

But it has been five years since Oxford and he has remade himself, as they have all had to do. The King is dead, his son in exile. He shakes himself from his bed, a sleek dog otter leaving its holt strewn with bones. Moves, still cautious, to the window, pushing open the shutters so their gaudy spars of light unfold and admit London. In the street below, a busy passage of hats and capes, baskets and livestock. He turns away and sits, voids himself into the pot. Better.

At his desk he moves papers about, reluctant to include the dream in his notes. They are mostly lists of questions, written in his own cipher, each with their planetary calculation.

Whether it is safer for me to go to live in the country or stay in London.

Whether I shall receive hurt or good from Cromwell while he is general.

Whether I shall receive prejudice by the act that is now come out against swearing.

Whether I shall receive prejudice by the act against adultery and fornication.

Everything is in question, in this shit-strewn England of Cromwell's. Now he scratches out his account of the dream, then quickly covers it with the notes. Another set of questions lies uppermost.

Whether my wife be with child or not.

Whether my wife's fits are occasioned from her womb.

Whether I shall lie with Martha Beale and feel her bare cunt.

This last prompts a thought and he fondles his member in an exploratory fashion but no, the dream lingers, and the release is denied him. Later.

His man Samuel comes in to shave and dress him. Elias sits silently while the blade scratches across his cheek, watching the tracery of birds in the sky beyond the window. Their patterns recall those heightened, trance-like days after the King was beheaded. Grieving, Elias made lists of omens seen across England. Soldiers set on fire, stars falling from the sky, diseases breaking out, cloths spotted with blood. The blind were cured, a whale beached and died, ducks hovered about the King's scaffold. The day Eleanor died he saw a chicken running in circles for half an hour.

He has slipped backwards into memory again, made himself squirm under the razor.

'You are distracted,' says Samuel disapprovingly, holding up the blade in his square black hand. 'I have never cut you, not once, and today is not the day.' His manservant has travelled half the world, believes he has earned the right to have things a certain way. Most of the time, Elias finds it useful.

'I had a dream, Sam.'

'A pleasant one?'

'No.'

Samuel does not reply immediately but finishes his task, then puts down the blade and tidies him with a cloth. Steps back to assess his master's face and nods. It is a good face, well-made, with large eyes of hazel green beneath strong brows, completed by a firm chin and a distinguished nose. At thirty-three, Elias knows himself to be handsome.

'You think it signifies something,' says Samuel.

A statement, not a question. Elias found him working in an alehouse in Oxford, and he has learned his master's ways.

'Aye,' he says. 'That the past is gone and there is much to do.'

'That,' replies Samuel, returning the razor to its case and touching a finger to the scars on his own cheeks, 'cannot be argued with.'

Elias knows full well the power of the past but he resists the dream as he would resist a dish of maggots. He stands for dressing. The ritual, as ever, soothes him. Fine linen underclothes, embroidered at the wrists and throat. White holland shirt, lace cravat, grey cloth suit. A fortune teller once told him

he should dress in scarlet, but in Cromwell's joyless London he must resist drawing attention to himself, so contents himself with a cloak of sober brown. Still, with each piece of his costume he feels the images of the night fading further. Samuel lays out a beaverskin hat and cordovan gloves.

'Where to today, Sir?'

'Out of the city. South Lambeth.'

'Lambeth? The Palace?'

'Hardly. It's a nest of Puritans. No, I will go further. There is a man lives out there who was formerly gardener to the Queen. Somehow he has escaped the attentions of Parliament, and keeps a garden and collection I am told is worth visiting.'

'Back late?'

'I expect so. You can go to Middle Temple and bring my letters.' Since his days as a solicitor, before the war, he has maintained an office there.

'I will. And Mrs Ashmole... ?'

Elias raises an eyebrow.

'What do you think, Sam, have you seen her? Will she travel?'

'I have not. But her maid seemed to think she was well enough.'

'Bless us all, then. She'll come along.'

Samuel turns to go but, assessing himself in the mirror, Elias remembers something.

'Sam – any flies today?'

'In fact, no. Nor fleas, not caterpillars. The maid said the kitchen and the parlour were clear of toads.'

'It worked, then!'

'As to that I cannot say, but this morning the house is free of vermin.'

'And how else were they banished? The method has been proved. Excellent, Sam. I will see you tonight.' He turns back to the glass, fully restored to himself by this success. He adjusts his chestnut hair where it lies against his collar, raises his chin to a more pleasing angle. An astrologer, an antiquary, a man of industry and learning. A lover of women, and they love him in their turn. If the shifting of the moon suffuses his sleep with the past, he accepts it, but the only past that concerns him is of

magicians and philosophers. To banish vermin through his own artistry! He looks forward, to everything he will accomplish. For if a man leaves no mark of himself on the world, what then has he lived for?

Now he must go down to his breakfast, his wife, and then a boat to South Lambeth.

~

Elias stands in the Tradescant parlour, giving his account of himself. He has spoken of his legal training, his many areas of study, his coin collection, his mother's gentle birth. Less so of his father, or his apprenticeships, lighting fires for other boys to study by.

'And in '44,' he concludes, 'I went up to Oxford, and fought in the service of the King.' There is a pause, which he takes to be admiring. He waits for the usual questions about those years – people are always eager for the chaos of it, the Royal court and the privy council occupying the University, soldiers barracked in the colleges, spaniels roaming the cloisters. But his host ventures nothing. The man is a puzzle – his estate is theatrical enough, the gate framed by whale ribs, a canoe lying in the grass. But he is uncommunicative, and dresses for the garden. He is neither showman nor scholar and his beard grows wildly, perhaps to distract from a face that is strangely off-kilter, with one eye set higher than the other. A troubled man, then, overshadowed by the reputation of his father, more comfortable with his plants. His wife is a plain woman, fortyish, with a slight accent. French? She is somehow angular – next to plump Mary Ashmole, she resembles a mop and bucket. She sits watchfully forward, as if expecting to take her husband's place, but it is Mary who, to his vexation, fills the silence.

'Since our marriage I have kept him safe,' she twinkles. 'From muskets and from mischief. Oxford was in such disorder then, scholars and soldiers all mixed in together, I warrant he learned as much of drinking and swearing as he did of philosophy. Aye, and debauching, too, for his wife Eleanor was four years dead, and he was much admired by women. But now I have him he is a gentleman at leisure, occupied with his planets and potions.'

This is his Mary, Lady Manwaring. She is a handsome woman of fatiguing humours and hysterical fits, who walks with a cane and has the wealth of three dead husbands behind her. At fifty-

two, with six children living, she believes she has licence to speak freely. Less than a year into their marriage it plagues him beyond all bearing.

‘My wife exaggerates,’ he tries to smile. ‘Though it’s true I was widowed, I took every opportunity to study. Natural philosophy, mathematics, astrology, astronomy. When not on military duty.’

‘He was a Gentleman of the Ordinance,’ continues Mary. She leans towards Mrs Tradescant and lowers her voice conspiratorially, though not at all inaudibly. ‘Though between you and I, my dear, it was the costume and the parades he liked, the proximity to the King, and did very little fighting. Such ambition! Yet I love him for it, as we women must love our men in all their parts.’ The other woman only smiles politely, but he catches her eye resting on him, making some sort of calculation.

‘I have no doubt you fought bravely, Sir,’ says John Tradescant at last. ‘And you are doubly welcome here. We lived in fear of attack, like so many. If Parliament could tear down the houses and turn over the graves of the nobles, what might they do to us?’

They are interrupted by the entrance of a youth of arresting beauty. He stands in the doorway in his gardener’s smock like some classical statue, loose golden locks framing a face of divine proportions. That sulky lip, that porcelain brow! Elias would have him sculpted.

‘Father,’ says the lad, and it is the voice of an educated man. Father? How did these two dark, dull people produce such a boy? ‘I am sorry for interrupting, but there is a new kind of infestation on the vines, or one I do not know. I would have you look at it.’

John Tradescant rises, seemingly with relief, but stays to make the introduction.

‘My son, Jack. He is learning as I learned from my father. Forgive me, June in the gardens is a strenuous season.’

‘My London house is lately much plagued with insects,’ Elias says quickly. ‘Caterpillars and spiders, too. But I have cured them with my arts.’

‘Go on, Sir?’ says John Tradescant, with real interest.

Elias relishes the opportunity. It is his view that the occult is increasingly and wrongfully neglected by men of supposed learning, and he takes every opportunity of sharing his discoveries.

‘The celestial constellations being auspicious, one invokes certain angels, and then makes casts of the vermin in lead in their full proportion. I have made these figures against caterpillars, flies, fleas and toads, and thus prevented them.’

The man looks amazed. ‘Lead?’ he says. ‘And you put it by the infestation?’

‘Merely cast the figures in my study,’ Elias smiles. ‘And the next day – poof! – the vermin are gone. These are the ways of the astrologers.’

‘Ah,’ replies John cautiously. ‘We put sheep’s hooves on sticks in the flower beds. When the earwigs crawl inside, we take the hooves away and burn them. The ways of gardeners.’

‘Charming,’ Elias replies. ‘I will learn much from you in my turn.’

But if the gardener notices this request for the tour to begin, he chooses to ignore it. ‘I must attend to this matter of the vines,’ he says instead. ‘My wife will show you the collection.’

His wife? Elias swallows his protest, but he is astonished. What sort of place is this, where an unlettered woman stands in for a man? ‘But you will be our guide to the gardens?’ he asks. ‘I have some small knowledge myself. I would be honoured to talk of them with you.’ By small knowledge, he means the arts of the herbal are his to command.

‘Of course. My son and I will attend you there in due course.’

As they rise, Elias notices a painting on the far wall. It shows Mrs Tradescant, with two children – it must be the boy Jack, but not above eight years old, and a girl of perhaps twelve, with the same golden hair and lively profile of her sibling. Again, their appearance is so different from both parents, he thinks there must have been some mischief in their breeding. There is something odd about the grouping. The painter has arranged the figures so that the woman, in reaching out to touch the boy’s shoulder, pushes the girl aside. The girl seems to turn and gaze up at her parent in unacknowledged appeal, for Hester Tradescant looks straight out at the painter. He wonders what artist would produce such a tableau, and what family would permit it. He nods towards the image.

‘That must be your daughter?’ he asks.

Something stiffens in the room. Has he blundered? Is she perhaps dead?

‘John’s daughter,’ says Mrs Tradescant. ‘From his first marriage. My cousin painted it soon after I arrived here.’

‘Frances,’ says her husband. ‘She is married now. Away in the city.’ He pauses. ‘She is now one and twenty,’ he adds, for no apparent reason.

‘Come, Sir,’ says the woman. ‘I will show you the Ark. This way.’

And Elias follows her out of the parlour and back towards the front hall. Mary’s stick taps along behind him.

~

It is early evening before they leave South Lambeth. At the horse ferry he stands unmoved by the clatter and stink of the river, staring off towards the city. A syllabub of cloud mounds up above Westminster, lit from below with pink and gold. As he watches, he imagines it as a great ship, its belly heavy with cargo. He peoples it with deckhands, passing boxes into the hold. Puts himself in the prow, squinting into the light upstream, on a voyage to find more treasures for what must surely be the finest collection in England.

He has, of course, seen other cabinets in great men’s houses – large cupboards with many small drawers, or a few rarities displayed on a table. There are scientific collections in the universities at Copenhagen, Paris, Leiden, and two or three that are spoken of outside of London – Edinburgh, Norwich. But when he walked in to the collection room behind the Tradescant woman, he knew he had discovered something altogether different. An unmapped land, occupied by people with no real idea of what they have in their possession. In his mind’s eye he quarters the room again, astonished at the scale of it, the variety. Old John Tradescant, the woman told him, her husband’s father, travelled on the command of bishops, Lords and at last the King to search out plants for their gardens, and in so doing acquired a taste for the fantastic objects he encountered in foreign places. He wrote to every merchant and friend he could in pursuit of them, his acquisitions accumulating wildly. But it is impossible to imagine the extent of his success without standing among it. The birds, the beasts, the fishes and the shell-creatures. The insects and assorted animal parts. The medals in lead, silver, copper, gold. The corals and gems, salts and minerals. The seeds and dried fruits, the petrified things, the stone and pigments. Outlandish garments, toys and shoes and other instruments. Utensils and household stuffs.

Gold and silver coins, and copper, Greek and Roman and Hebrew. Paintings, carvings and mechanical things. Swords and shields, lances and stirrups and a hundred other foreign objects he cannot yet name. It is America, Africa and the Indies, hidden away in a room in South Lambert. What a man must old John have been, to have created such a thing? And did he know who he was leaving it to? This gardener and his wife are mere caretakers. If it were his he would make himself a sultan of curiosities, a King Solomon with his palace of wonders designed to enhance the wisdom of man and preserve his name.

‘I shall order a good dinner, I think,’ says his wife at his elbow. ‘We have gone so far today. I feel as if I had travelled to the Indies, not just seen its artefacts. A veal pie, perhaps? With an egg?’

‘Please, Mary. I am thinking.’

‘And you can live on thought alone, can you?’

‘I did not say that.’

‘And these great thoughts preclude conversation?’

He drags himself back to the riverbank. This is how it begins, with barbs and complaints. It can end in such abject scenes it is easier to humour her.

‘A veal pie, you said. That is fine.’

‘Well, let us not quarrel.’ She is as changeable as the weather, and quick to paw at him. What ails thee, my Mole?’

‘Nothing at all. Only that collection, that garden – ’

‘Not that.’ Her hand presses heavily on his sleeve. ‘You have been in a churlish humour since breakfast.’

‘Oh. Well. I... had a dream.’

‘The one where you are a prophet, and can turn lead into gold?’

‘That isn’t a dream. At my christening... ’

‘Yes yes, I know. You were to be called Thomas, but at the last moment, leaning over the font in St Mary’s Lichfield, your godfather spoke the name Elias. Which happens to match an ancient prophecy by a man named Paracelsus, about a great alchemist yet to be born. One who might at last discover the secret of the philosopher’s stone, and make us all rich while he’s at it.’

‘Precisely.’

‘It occurs to me, my dear, that now you are thirty-three, and so handsome and well-made, you might consider fulfilling your destiny. Our sovereign in exile could certainly use the funds.’ She considers a moment. ‘Perhaps I think, too. So why then must I eat?’

‘Mary.’

‘Yes, my dove?’

‘The collection. The Ark, so called. It is – exceptional. The garden, too.’

‘Fit for an alchemist, I should say.’

‘Fit for a scholar and a scientist.’

‘You are jealous.’

‘I am – concerned. That couple – ’

‘ – are not like you, so you consider them undeserving of their good fortune, and would like to relieve them of it.’

‘Did I say so?’

‘You don’t need to. But I think you mistake the matter. The woman Hester I like very much. French, you know, from a family of court painters. She takes charge of the collection, and all is intended for the son in due course. And that Jack – well! That golden child, that Adonis. Perhaps he will be more like his grandfather, and make a new success of things when our King returns.’

‘I could visit them again.’

‘You could. Indeed, I might come with you. That freakish pile of stuff does not tempt me, but Hester’s company could.’

A boat draws alongside and Elias helps Mary into it, leaps nimbly after her. Night has fallen while they waited, the pink syllabub cloud faded to a smudge over the glittering city, the water drawing a cloak of cooler air over itself. Mary grasps his hands and talks of the poetry he wrote for her during their courtship. This is the price of devoting himself to scholarship. Without her lands and income he would still have to make his own living as a solicitor. So he allows his mind to drift. What if he were to offer to catalogue the collection? Such arts are new enough, out of reach of the gardener and his wife, but an area he excels in. Completed and bound, it would be an excellent gift for the King on his return. He considers it – some items are already in rough groupings, but as likely by colour and texture as any

scientific method. *Crustacea*, he thinks. *Coins. Birds. Beasts. Mechanicals. Medicinals. Fish. Clothing. Medals. Rocks.* He could bring his books and make as many identifications as possible. The garden, too, could be added to the project. He saw more flowers and fruits today than he can properly recall. That fig, that pomegranate! And if John Tradescant agrees to his proposal he will become his benefactor, a figure inextricable from the future of the collection. He will hardly sleep now for the planning of it. There is so much to do it makes his blood rush about in a sort of ecstasy.

He thinks then of Martha Beale, who will be dining at the Mermaid, her black hair shaking loose, her gown straining at its last viable button. He turns to Mary.

‘On reflection, my dear, I think I must visit Dr Wharton this evening.’

‘Dr Wharton? So suddenly? Are you unwell?’

‘No, no. Only that he is going out of town tomorrow, and I must speak to him of this matter of the collection. I have a proposition in mind, and I will need all my associates’ expertise.’

‘I see.’ She releases his hand. ‘I dine alone, then.’

He feels such relief that he does not address her pique, but lets the surface of the river slide by peacefully, tessellated in gold.

It is the next morning before he stands again before his desk, the light outside the pearly grey of early dawn. Unsteadily he notes the occasion of his visit to John Tradescant, wonders if he bored Martha Beale with his account of it. But he thinks not. He spoke to her of Roman lamps and Tartar saddles, of barnacles and hippopotami, of Moorish daggers and hands of jet, of stalagmites and belemnites, of birds of paradise, of the head of a lion and the eyeball of a whale. Throughout it all she watched him, lips parted. Perhaps it was later that he lost her, pounding on the table, crying – I will write to Copenhagen, I will write to Leiden, I will gather men of learning and I will show this backwater family what such a cabinet can be. Perhaps it was then that she laughed at him and slipped away. No matter, she will be back. The stars say so. He himself was born under the sign of Mercury; it stands for eloquence and skill, trading and thieving, a messenger of the gods. A quicksilver element. And some great destiny awaits him, he can feel it. Something just beyond his sight, but that he knows will be revealed to him. He can almost feel the shape of it, its weight, its glow.

Before he turns at last to his bed, the dog otter replete with the current of the river, a thought occurs. Go on, says an inner voice, confident with drink. A man of your capacities. What has been written has been mastered. And so he cautiously extends a finger to the papers on his desk, moves the upper layers aside. His dream is there, waiting for him.

JANUARY

‘We must burn pine,’ says Hester, ‘and juniper and rosemary. He is coming again tomorrow and the Ark smells like a cellar.’

‘Who is coming,’ asks Jack, ‘Ashmole? That popinjay, that tufthunter? That star-monger, that goatish green-bag, that purveyor of quackery?’

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘Him. Your father had a letter this morning. And must you talk like a Gypsy?’

Lit by candles the boy – no longer a boy, he is nineteen and resembles a poplar in autumn – doffs an imaginary cap, jigs an imaginary jig. Shaking her head, she marches him out of the warmth of the winter parlour – spiced wine and cardamom biscuits, frames and furniture edged with evergreens – and towards the wood store.

‘You know,’ he says as they go, ‘a man who will spend his life in voyaging must learn to speak in many tongues. And I, who am such a man, do merely rehearse the instrument of my adventures. Are you not aware that over and above my father and grandfather, I am to be the Tradescant of whom the nation speaks in wonder?’

‘Wonder, Jack?’

She indulges him; he is fettered and made impatient by this winter, so deep the river has frozen and people have set up tents on it, selling ale and haircuts. Away from his school friends, the garden under snow, she is often almost the only person he has to talk to.

‘Wonder, aye. His bravery, they will cry! His appetite for escapades! His tales of heroism and savagery! Moreover’ – and here he comes close, and takes her hand, and gazes into her face in a pantomime of sincerity and sorrow – ‘moreover, when the world is shaken to its foundations, things do slip through the cracks. You know I am a child of war, of regicide, of politics and all manner of upheavals. My speech that so offends you expresses the great loosening of the times, for there are no more kings in England, and a woman may preach as well as a gypsy. Do the Levellers not say so, and

the Ranters, and the Quakers and the Diggers and the Shiverers? Has Cromwell not led by example? So forgive me, and forgive yourself. It is with such fine words – that wapper-eyed dandyprat! That dimber-cove, that paper-skull! – that I will sail the world and bring you all the riches of the Indies and beyond. Or, better, you should join me. Yes, Mother, that is fitting. I would see you in a crow's nest, admir'd by all in your slashed breeches, surrounded by clouds and the glittering sea, a porpoise playing for you on a pipe. The wind would lift your hair and you would have no more need of Ashmoles. Truly, does it not speak to you to travel?'

'Travel to the wood-pile, my lad,' she says, 'and bring me pine. Mr Ashmole has his airs,' – Jack snorts – 'but your father near sold the Ark again last year. What use will your riches be with nowhere to put 'em?'

Who is she, after all, to mock Elias Ashmole? He spends his life among alembics and philosophers, intent on distinguishing himself in the eyes of the world. Had she been a man she might have been like him, preening and posturing and casting about for advancement. As it is, thirteen years has not made her less amazed at her life in Lambeth, and now she might be the cause of the collection being catalogued. If she cannot read it, she understands the power of naming things, of writing them down. It is something like enchantment. You possess them more securely. They become part of something larger than themselves.

'Oh, Mother,' Jack says now. 'Untether your imagination. This piling up of articles, this airing out of musty hides. This plague of Ashmoles and their horary calculations. On my adventures I will see the birds sing in their native trees, break bread with the tribes of the New World, converse with Egyptian princes. And they will marvel at me in my turn, with my yellow hair and gypsy tongue, my tales of English wars and sieges, my inheritance of flowers. You see? It is all thought out.'

'That is all very marvellous for you,' she says, 'but some of us must stay and keep the place from falling apart. And your name will take you further and faster if it already has an Ark behind it. Now, will you fetch that wood, or must I find a switch, and whip you like a schoolboy?'

He laughs at her, covers his behind. 'You never did, Mother,' he says. 'Nor shall. And for that I will get your wood, even though it is dark outside, and cold, so that you can entertain your popinjay.'

‘That popinjay,’ she retorts, ‘will help keep the Ark for us. A catalogue will improve our standing, bring new business, and heaven knows we need it since the wars. Unless you have a mind to do the work? Or think your father will?’

‘Oh, Mother,’ says Jack. ‘We Tradescants disappoint you.’

There is a pause, then, a flaw in their play, quickly covered. He sees how she and John move around each other like two unwilling stars. Of his sister he never speaks. Ah, Jack. She wants him to have everything he could ever wish for, and to stay close to her forever. But now she flaps at him with her apron and he goes, a jaunty shadow of the Gypsy jig in his step. My turtle-dove, she thinks, as she always does. My heart’s own beat.

She brings juniper and rosemary from the kitchen, then calls Meg away from the store-rooms. Good Meg, who has grown from maid to housekeeper now there is a smaller count of servants to run the place than in the times before the wars. Old friends now, they go together to light the lamps in the Ark.

‘What a crypt,’ says Meg, as they open the door and go inside.

And indeed, the Ark in winter becomes dank and fusty. The preserving spices of the many hides and feathers take on a malodorous tang, and strange salts and dark smudges coat the walls on the coldest nights. But when Meg lights a taper – rasp and spark of steel, flare of tinder – to Hester it is as astonishing as her first sight of it thirteen years before. More so, because though the rarities are as strange as ever, now she has the keeping of them. She knows them as no-one else can, their needs and their histories. With them and with Jack, she has made something of her life in South Lambeth.

She and Meg move around the room, lighting the lamps one by one, and slowly the collection emerges fully into view, as if their light had brought it into being. She greets each of the rarities with a nod, as if they might have decided not to appear on this occasion, and repeats their outlandish names to herself. Zebra, rattlesnake, ibex. Dolphin, sea wolf, unicorn. Feathery idol, coral, bison. Hip-po-potamus. Scarab, porcupine, vegetable lamb. Sulphur, bel-em-nite, sta-lag-mite, cymbal. The desk carved from whalebone. The distorting looking-glasses. Shoes from Guinea, Lapland, Babylon, Turkey. Hairy-tongued lizard, phoenix tail feather. These and so many other things populate her dreams, come alive in their night-time seas and forests. Or sometimes she lies awake and listens, imagining how the rarities

might occupy themselves while no-one is watching. How they might stretch and shift and speak to each other in their own private languages of places she has never seen.

Such are her unspoken thoughts, which must remain so, or have John send her to Bedlam. But she is used to them, and they make the Ark ever more dear to her – more and more it seems like something whole, with its own thoughts and desires. Elias Ashmole might be an ambitious, conceited sort of man but if he makes a catalogue of the collection it will be another reason for John to keep it.

By her side, Meg crosses herself.

‘Understand I am happy, Mistress, that this man Ashmole is taking an interest in the collection, and that it might improve our fortunes. Yet I do sometimes wonder what twist of fate led me to work in such a place.’

‘You hardly work *in* it, Meg, but keep the rest of us hale and hearty, that we might do so.’

‘It’s still here, though, isn’t it? I am standing in it now. And doesn’t it take up more space than had rightfully been assigned to it? Can you truly tell me your days would feel the same if it were not here? No, of course you can’t. As for me – I shouldn’t say such things, Mistress, but such is the nature of winter nights – I sometimes have the sense that it follows me about.’

‘Follows you about, Meg?’ says Hester, though her skin is alive with recognition.

‘You laugh at me,’ Meg replies, ‘but I am sure you feel the same. Listen. There are times when I walk to the village and it happens that my thoughts wander for a moment. I might be paused on the path, considering the ripeness of the blackberries or the readiness of the elder, or my attention might drift as I listen to Cole the flour-merchant, or I might be distracted by the village children tying old bottles to stray dogs. In such moments I happen to recognise a feeling, a certain lightening of the spirit. And if I examine this feeling, I realise I am free. Free of this room, which squats and plots and lumbers within itself, which *looms*, Mistress, over thought and deed while I am in this house. Not that I wish for any change in my situation, you understand. But more to say – this place, these things, they do have a power.’

‘You are better than such idle, superstitious fancy.’

‘What fancy? I don’t say what it means or doesn’t mean. But I feel it nonetheless.’

‘Then I am sorry to tell you that you will spend the night here tonight. We must keep the fire burning until morning, for Mr Ashmole is coming early. He must find the room warm and scented, and I cannot risk a conflagration.’

‘Oh, not that, Mistress!’ cries poor Meg. ‘Ask any other servant, do. Any one of the maids could do it, or the garden apprentice, or call some assistance from the village. Master Jack could serve, even, if he’d forget for just a moment the fact that he is so handsome, and lay his shining head near the floor.’

‘Why Meg, you mistake the thing entirely,’ says Jack, coming in behind them with his basket of pine. ‘My vanity does not enter into the discussion, if it is even as heavy a weight as you suggest. No, my dear mother has chosen you, and only you, to keep the flame alive, because any other guardian, being drowsy and pig-headed, might fall asleep for long enough that a slight spark will have time to catch and grow, undoing in minutes what has taken several lifetimes to build. You, with your dear frightened heart and sweet head prone to whimsy, will be awake all night like a starving stoat.’

‘It’s true, Meg,’ says Hester. ‘Only you can be trusted with Jack’s inheritance.’

‘Such cruelty is unnatural!’ There are real tears in Meg’s eyes.

‘Don’t be disheartened,’ says Hester. ‘I’ll come and check on you.’ But her old friend shakes her head sadly.

‘No, don’t, Mistress,’ Meg replies, shaking her head sadly. ‘Approaching footsteps will only make it worse. No, I’ll take it as my penance for whatever sins I might have done you all, be they unremarked and unintentional. I’ll keep your bestiary warm ’til daybreak. This man Ashmole is giving you a fortune, I hope?’

‘Only words, Meg. He proposes writing a list of everything in the Ark. And he knows many important people.’

‘Writing! I never heard such nonsense. What do I want with writing? And come to think of it, what does that thing want with it either? Or that?’ She is pointing, now, about the room, gesturing angrily at the jabiru bird, the bloated toadfish, the Indian abacus.

‘Steady there, good Meg. You’ve lived through worse.’

‘That as may be, but the mind’s its own domain, I reckon, unmapped, and I’ll not answer for what mine turns up if I spend a night in here. At least with soldiers you can see ’em coming, and know what sort of injury they threaten.’

Jack laughs at her.

‘What a mind you must have, Meg, if these assorted novelties hold more fear for you than roundhead soldiers!’

‘Pardon me, young sir, but roundhead or cavalier, a soldier’s a soldier if you’re a servant woman alone in a lane at night.’

‘Enough,’ says Hester. ‘Jack, go and find your father, remind him that he must meet the Ashmoles in the morning.’

He does so, whistling. Hester is left with Meg, who keeps on grumbling. She casts her eyes around the room, looking for things to improve. The lamps have settled to a low flame; it feels as if the rarities might circle about themselves and settle sighing into knots, like dogs at the end of the day.

‘Here,’ she says Meg, to distract her. Points to a cabinet half-filled with shells. ‘Help me move these. They should be on a table near the door, piled up. Won’t they look better? They will catch the eye as soon as he comes in.’

‘Oh yes,’ mutters Meg. ‘It’s all for Mr Ashmole, the hours you spend in here tinkering about.’

But she goes obediently enough to the cabinet while Hester rearranges the tables. Meg brings the shells over one by one and together they start to build them up into something that starts to resemble a stony outcrop. Only when you come closer would you see its details – huge pearly waves and curls, jagged teeth, frills like ruffs from another age, salty echoing depths.

‘Pretty things,’ says Meg. ‘Frances loved them so. She should have taken one with her, poor thing.’

‘Poor thing?’ asks Hester. ‘She is well married and cared for.’

‘I only meant,’ says Meg quietly, ‘that she liked the shells.’

This is the other power the Ark. After so many years of care, it seems her own memories have become almost as much a part of it as the objects themselves. Though she could hardly ask Mr Ashmole to write down what stories she has of them. Imagine –

Item, scorpion. It is missing a pincer, because she was so nervous the first time she showed the collection to a visitor she knocked it off a table and trod on it.

Item, stone from Apollo's Oracle in Greece. Jack used the original to throw at a rat and it broke into pieces, so this one is an offcut from Mr Blake the mason.

Item, head of an elephant. Beneath it she sat weeping after her mother's death. And after the King's death. And after a month of treatments for her failure to conceive that left her sore and bleeding. And on other diverse occasions.

Item, bird of paradise. The first of the rarities she spoke to as if it had a soul of its own, then wondered if she was running mad out here in the country with a house full of dead things.

'What else?' asks Meg. 'Tell me, for the longer you stay the less time I will be here alone. Let's make it impossible for Mr Ashmole to refuse.'

Hester walks around to the entrance to see the room as Elias Ashmole will when he arrives tomorrow. The shells glow splendidly where they are piled up on the table. But now she sees the eye is drawn to the wall behind them, where near eight feet by five is covered by a single garment – a great rough cloak made from four flattened deerskins stitched together. This is the cloak of the King of Virginia, and one of its hangings has come loose, the top part flapping sadly down. She sends Meg to find a ladder.

While she waits, she checks the cloak more closely. It is sewn with small white shells in close rows, to make three tall figures and a pattern of circles. At the centre, a human shape, with two ears and five neat fingers on each hand but nothing to show whether it might be a man or woman. On either side of this are two animals – she could suggest a deer and a cat, for one has cloven feet and the other paws, but really they could be anything. And all around them, evenly spaced, the circles, which with their tight turns of shells seem alive with movement. It might as well show the Ark itself, she thinks, drawn by someone who had never seen a painter's studio. With her at its centre, flanked by the unnameable creatures, and all around the collection, points of light in the dark. A shame, then, that the hind limbs of the flanking beasts and a number of the lower circles have been picked at by the collection's visitors, who when Hester is not looking have the habit of slipping souvenir shells into their pockets. She wonders if, as they tug the shells from their fastenings, their thieving fingertips briefly

meet those that first stitched the garment in Virginia, their traces brushing the same loops of thread. She puts her hand to one of the circles. Beneath her palm the remaining shells are cool and hard, leaving impressions of their native sea- or river-bed on her skin. What did the women sing of as they sewed these shell-shapes?

Frances had a particular way of introducing the cloak, telling the story of its journey to Lambeth. It was one of her best performances. She would describe how her grandfather arranged to meet John Rolfe himself when that industrious tobacco farmer brought his tight-lipped princess to England, and how old John Tradescant bargained with him for his bride's ancestral cloak before the poor woman was removed to Gravesend to die of the plague. Imagine it – Pocahontas in a room above an inn, conceding at last to the acquisition of her heritage. Frances would conclude her tale by reflecting that cloak of the King of Virginia rests not so far, after all, from his daughter's grave. It came with her across the ocean and it enfolds her memory still. Then she would tilt her golden head and raise her chin at a regal angle, waiting for her audience's admiration.

Hester shakes off the thought. What's done is done. Though it is hard not to remember Emanuel, watching while she herself was guiding visitors around the collection, telling that story of the cloak. Afterwards he looked at her strangely and said, 'Pox, what have you become?'

'Here,' says Meg, coming in with the ladder. 'Careful now.' They angle it carefully around the crowded room, and Hester climbs up to pin the cloak back in place. Seen from above the collection has a different aspect, everything looking towards the centre of the room as if it was waiting for something.

'One more thing,' she says, climbing down. 'Can you find me the book stand? The big one?' While Meg casts about she goes to the shelves at the back, where the few books and manuscripts are kept. They are as inscrutable to her as ever, except for one. She does not need to search for it, but lifts it down – a thick volume bound in vellum – with familiar ease.

'Mr Marshal's flower paintings,' says Meg approvingly. 'Nothing better.'

They arrange the stand where it will best show the pages to a passer-by, and Hester lowers the book on to it. She opens it to a page of everlasting peas, their flushed peaks like women in gable hoods, their fine tendrils reaching for the edges of the paper. She traces the tiny curls with a fingertip. She has its title memorised – *A Book of Mr Tradescant's Choicest Flowers and Plants by Mr Alex Marshal*.

‘He should come back again,’ says Meg. ‘I’m sure there are more plants for him to study in the garden than when he was last here.’

‘Perhaps he will,’ says Hester. ‘Or perhaps he has forgotten us by now. It’s been years.’

She knows he has not forgotten. It took a year for him to finish the paintings in the book, staying with them for weeks at a time. And for a while he was just another guest to her – the children were still young, and she was still learning the ways of South Lambeth. Then one day she was hulling peas in the yard when Alex came strolling up in that way he had, as if he was about to happen on something marvellous. She felt her hulling becoming slower, more deliberate, staring with unnatural intensity at the household habits of her fingers, the unremarkable sequence of their movements across the pile of pods, the rhythm of the work. The peas fell tapping into her basket, the pods flew with a rustle to a bucket for the pigs. Suddenly she was taut with the possibility that he would speak to her, terrified by the probability that he would not.

‘Mrs Tradescant?’

‘Mr Marshal?’

‘Do I interrupt your labours?’

‘By no means. It’s only peas. How can I help you, sir?’

She noticed his russet head, close-cropped, his straight dark brows, his grey eyes. He held his hands before him, clasped around something.

‘I happened to catch a moth in the lavender bed. He is a handsome beast of a prodigious size and I would not like to lose him, but with my hands closed thus I find myself as much held captive as he. Might you furnish me with a jar, that I may liberate myself?’

She nodded and rose, putting aside her basket. ‘Shall I find you at your desk? Then even if he escapes the jar, he will only go to the window and you can recapture him.’

‘A sound proposal. Come, Pantagruel, we shall await your Mistress thither.’

In the kitchen she sent a maid to recover the peas, found a green glass tumbler drying on the side. Meg eyed her and though Hester had no reason to explain herself, she waved the glass.

‘For Mr Marshal. For his painting.’

She did not stop to consider the quality of Meg’s answering smile.

Alex was waiting for her by the desk he had set up in the summer parlour, with drawing board and paints and brushes. His subject that week was irises, and a fresh sheaf of them was set in the window. The light showed their petals white, thickly veined with purplish black.

‘My saviour,’ he said, and part of her leapt. She held the glass out to him, unsure of what to do next. To her surprise he came close and puts his hands to the rim of the tumbler, pressing forward so that she must push back. Slowly he uncupped his hands at the base of the glass, releasing the moth.

‘There!’

He flattened one hand against the opening and took it from her, turned it upside down. Within the warped green cup something large and papery blundered.

‘Now our friend Pantagruel is boxed in, might you help me with a sheet of paper – yes, there, that’s it – and slide it next my hand to cover the glass?’

This done, Alex placed the makeshift cage on the desk.

‘Look,’ he said, gazing fondly at his trophy.

‘It is hard to see,’ she said, standing and peering.

‘You must come closer, here – ’ he passed her an eye glass. She tried to ignore the closeness of him, leaned towards the moth and put her eye to the cup. It rushed into clarity, still now, its body a fat thumb of dun velvet, its wings a pair of leaves turned silvery with age. A flicker of those wings made her gasp.

‘Its eyes!’

‘You remark them? I saw them peering at me from the lavender and nearly took it for an angry bird. Though I do not know of a bird with eyes of such a blue, ringed with such a red, unless there is one in your collection. Of course, these are merely marks on its wings.’

‘I see such creatures all the time in the gardens, but I do not spend time looking at them.’

‘Few do. But there are scholars – artists and scientists – now who are trying to change that. We are only starting to learn to look, to understand their forms accurately. And as we do so, we discover God’s great grace in the tiniest details of the most insignificant insect. Be wary, Mrs Tradescant, do not indulge me, or I will write a sonnet to a spider and a hymn to a horsefly, and read them endlessly at dinner.’

‘Hester. And I should like that.’ Her words felt clumsy. But he did not seem to notice.

‘My drawings of your husband’s plants will be full of such studies. This moth, and this iris, for example – a Syrian type, I believe, called the mourning iris – its fine dark markings will be joined on the page by a fly of clearest amber, the tracery of its wings an echo of the veining of its petals.’

He is so different from Manu, she thought, and from John. They never speak to her of their work.

‘My cousin is a painter,’ she told him. ‘A limner at court.’

‘He will be a rich man, then,’ said Alex cheerfully. ‘He did this?’ He pointed to her wedding portrait, which was yet to replace Jane’s in the hall. ‘A goodly work. And he knows you. You look as if you’re about to smile.’

‘How long do you think you will stay?’ Something in her voice made him look at her properly then, with the assessing gaze he must use on his flowers and insects. She added hurriedly, ‘to finish your paintings. We are all eager to see the completed collection.’

In the end he painted the garden in every season, was in her life for a year. He told her you could not know a plant unless you saw it in all stages of its life. What was the fullest bloom without its withered winter stalks, both as beautiful in their own ways? From him she learned to look differently. And sometimes to feel differently, too, though nothing was ever said. When she misses him now, he is there in his paintings – irises, fritillaries, moths, caterpillars, tulips, mice. On the inside cover, a line she has pored over for more hours than she would admit to anyone, forcing it into clarity. A line no-one else would remark. *If this florilegium should please you, ingenious reader, it is in great part due to the help I received from Mrs Tradescant, her kindness and friendship.* Her memories of him are threadbare now with use, but the line stands.

‘I’ll need blankets,’ says Meg. ‘If you are determined to make me suffer.’

Hester shuts the book. Tomorrow it will be on display for Elias Ashmole.

More snow falls overnight. Meg wakes her even earlier than usual, red-eyed after her watch by the fire, so Hester lets her rest and starts the work of warming the rest of the house, banking fires in every room. As the world outside turns from black to grey, Hester looks at the thick covering and wonders if

the Ashmoles will come at all. But eventually carts start to pass back and forth along the London road, and then a carriage turns in at the gate.

She trudges out across the white garden to find John, who is in the glasshouse cosseting his orange trees with sacking and manure. He looks up when she comes in, but says nothing. He says less and less every year.

‘Mr Ashmole is here.’

‘I’ll be there directly.’

‘I’ll go in with you.’

If she doesn’t, he might stay out here for the rest of the day. The garden absorbs him as completely as the collection does her. She watches him tucking the sacking more firmly around the bases of the trees, which steam from the warmth of the fresh manure.

‘I wonder,’ he says, ‘if this business of the catalogue, of Mr Ashmole, is really necessary.’ She bites her lip. This is how he is with the Ark, always finding new ways to be reluctant.

‘He is here because we agreed it. You invited him.’

‘But nothing has been decided. It will be more work than I like. I have plans for the orchards next year, I can’t be in two places at once.’

‘I will help Mr Ashmole, if he needs it. Jack, too. Come, you know better than I do how this will please all manner of scholars, will mark us out as something above the ordinary. It will only help ensure Jack’s future.’

He says nothing, only forks more manure.

‘And from what I know of him,’ she says, for time is short, ‘your father would have been the first to embrace such a plan.’

He puts down the fork.

‘Very well. It’s a cold day for business, though. I’ll need to be back here while it’s still light.’

‘We’ll go to the kitchen first. There’s warm water there. You cannot greet Elias Ashmole smelling of a dungheap.’

She shows them proudly into the collection room for the second time. There is no trace of cellar now, only a well-lit room full of wonder. The Ashmoles are much as she remembers from their visit the previous summer. He is sharp, observant, proud. She is twenty years his senior and somehow always manages to remind everyone of it. It would be an almost comical pairing were it not for Mary's real and evident sadness. She is made frenetic by her husband's indifference, while he grows sleek on her fortune. Hester turns the pages of the florilegium for her, but she can hardly take her eyes off Elias as he circles the room, talking only to John, taking notes. And then he puts his paper down.

'Now,' he says to Mary. 'You will not want to stay here while we discuss business, my dear. Perhaps you and Mrs Tradescant could take the carriage to the river, look at the fair? We'll follow on behind when we are done.'

'Sir,' Hester begins, 'you will find my knowledge useful...'

'Yes,' breaks in John, suddenly full of resolution. 'You should go. Mr Ashmole and I will make good the plan for the catalogue. When we are done we will come and join you at the river.'

It is as if John has taken new heart from their visitor, and remembered that while she might care for the collection, it is his to do with as he wishes. Somehow, not half an hour after she welcomed Elias Ashmole, and after a night of preparing the collection of him, she is on her way to the river in his carriage with his wife. As the carriage lurches forward, she imagines she hears an indignant howl from the collection. The wolf's teeth, on a dish in a drawer, sprung up snarling in her defence. But of course the only true sound is Mary Ashmole, who talks steadily of her sons. Six of them, each more impressive than the last.

At the white river the fair makes a strange new city, tents in place of boats. They leave the carriage at the bank and walk carefully down the makeshift steps. Mary takes her arm and talks to her of Elias. They go past jugglers, and gamblers, and fortune tellers made brighter by the snow and ice.

'He courted me for years,' Mary says. 'I could not be persuaded. Such a handsome young man, so attentive, but I was tired of being married. A fourth husband seemed greedy. But I do not like to be alone.'

'And now?' Hester asks. What are they saying, back at the house?

‘Now, as you see. He is the most ambitious man I have known.’

‘I hope he will convince John to have the catalogue made.’

‘Oh, he will have his way, don’t fret. Not everyone likes it. My son Henry thought him too forceful with regard to my estates. He got drunk and broke into his chamber at night, shouting he would murder him in his bed. We laugh about it now.’

There is a stall selling hot spiced ale and they buy two mugs. For the first time, Hester feel doubt creep in. What sort of man is Elias Ashmole, really? Then she sees Jack, who hails them but is drawn into a ball game. She and Mary watch from the sidelines as the young men throw, and kick, and churn the snow about. And then John and Elias are there too, buying more ale, toasting their agreement to make a catalogue of the Ark.

‘There,’ says Mary. ‘I told you so.’

Hester drinks her toast, sees how John stands straighter, looks to Elias with a new respect. Yes, she has what she wanted. But it is Manu who comes into her mind, looking at her with narrowed eyes, saying, Pox, what have you done?

1652

MAY

Elias, ducking behind the sawing-horse in his father's workshop and fleeing through the alleyways of Lichfield, knew nothing of the pull and drift of stars that sets the course of a man's life. Yet he watched where the sun sat in the sky, for Simon Ashmole's temper waxed and waned as he drank, and ensured his son lived by a singular division of the hours. It went like this: from dawn until the light tipped over the ridge of their house on Breadmarket Street, Simon slept and Elias might rest easy in the kitchen with his mother and the servants, drawing saddles – his father's occupation – in the cold ash by the grate. Then Simon would begin to stir and call for wine, and while the sun hung above the marketplace the young Elias would best be abroad in the woods and fields, spying on goose-girls and digging for treasure. Once it had passed over St Mary's and sunk towards the land in the west, returning home was a game of chance. If business was good enough to keep Simon from the taverns, Elias might watch him at work, be given a rag to polish stirrups and snaffle-bits. If not it could be the belt, or the boot, or just fists for simplicity – but Elias feared these outbursts less than the days of silence, made colourless and bitter by his father's nameless displeasure. As he grew he found solace in his lessons, in the regularity of mealtimes, in objects dug up from the fields. Things that could be ordered and whose form, though not always inert, held no threat of violence.

He had relatives of gentle birth, his mother's. But of them the Ashmole family saw nothing. His mother had married low, and been laid lower by the man she chose. He speaks proudly of them now, but by the hearth in Lichfield his well-born family were objects of envy and resentment.

Later, Elias excelled at his legal studies. He absorbed the rigidity that first attracted him to the practice and expressed it fluidly, rolling and diving through bills and statutes, an otter at play. His clients fascinated him, the way they came to him shyly, eager for his counsel, lost without his guiding hand. When he arrived at Oxford he discovered Hermetic philosophy and its precepts seemed to him an embrace from the ancients, welcoming him to a hearth he had not known to call home. He learned that

a man's life is organised according to the rules of the stars and planets, and also that the workings of this system are at best dimly perceived by humanity; only the chosen few, those with access to secret knowledge, can divine the heavens' intentions. He – trained in watchfulness from the cradle, touched by prophecy – is such a one. His wounds are necessary. His father, his mother, Eleanor, the child she carried. All dead, all destined. And now his present wife, with whom he has been sitting at breakfast for half an hour without a word exchanged, who averts her eyes from him and hunches her shoulders high, who sighs and mutters and flares her nostrils, whose hair is untidy, whose robe is stained and egg uneaten and whose malevolent silence reminds him of Simon. This, too, is a stage on the path assigned to him.

The meal is long complete; he has drunk his beer and picked his eel clean. He admires the feathery ribs, the spine's cog teeth. Its delicacy makes him itch to be in his study and at work on his casting. But how? To get up and leave without a word spoken lays bare too much, as does asking her what the trouble is. The only sound in the room is his new clock, whose hollow ticking marks out the intervals of Mary's displeasure. Her cane leans against the wall of the dining room and for a moment he imagines himself seizing it, breaking it across his knee and fleeing. But they must live together, so he marshals himself and ventures an enquiry into her health. *Whether my wife will grow better in her sickness or ill, now we are married.*

'And have you seen any improvement, my dear?'

'Improvement?' There is disdain in every syllable. He disregards it, and forges onward.

'In your, ah – in the trouble of your – following the casts I made of –'

'Since you made tiny lead models of my private parts, and yours?'

'Quite. The method's efficacy against the pox –'

'I don't have the pox. And if I did, I should know who to blame.'

'You do not? Then it has worked?'

'Who says I ever did? It was you who did a cosmic calculation and decided that was the trouble, then got out your toys. In fact I lost the nasty amulet a few days past – it fell away while I was making water and I was not minded to retrieve it.'

'Then you are no longer troubled by...?'

‘I do not count it among my present concerns.’

‘Well, that is excellent news. Our hopes for an heir – ’

But at this something heaves up in her and breaks out, not in tears, but in spilled beer, the mug dashed across the scene by a repelling hand. The liquid splays across the wood, running long fingers around every bowl and dish and reaching for the edges of the table. Elias and Mary regard each other unmoving over this small disaster. Then the maid Anna rushes in, alerted by the sound. Amid the moppings and exclamings Elias sees his opportunity and rises, but Mary will not permit it.

‘Already?’ Across Eliza’s fussing, his wife meets his eyes with a violent challenge.

‘Can I be of service to you, my dear?’

‘We need to talk about Edward.’

Ah. Perhaps this was the trouble all along. Perhaps she received a letter on the business, that provoked her grief? For her eldest son, Edward Stafford, died at the beginning of winter. An odious death, whose image haunts him. The fever ripped through his son-in-law in a matter of hours, leaving behind a chalk-white corpse half the size of the living body, the face aged to a man of seventy. But Elias cannot mourn the man who was once so far gone in drink and rage he tried to climb into his bed and murder him, nor who organised his affairs so badly as to die hock-deep in debt, debts now transferred to his wife and sons. Including a debt to Mary, which makes it a debt to Elias.

‘Do not trouble yourself, my dear. I have it in hand.’

‘But that is my concern. Sarah writes that her lands in Berkshire are to be seized.’

‘Not the lands, only the income. Once the debt is settled they will be returned to her. Or, more likely, to her sons.’

‘Is that necessary?’

‘It is three thousand pounds.’

‘Are we not content enough? Must we deprive them?’

‘I am not sure I understand, Mary. We can hardly forgive a debt of such a size. Another man might insist on its immediate repayment, but this allows the cost to be spread and the family to retain their lands. I can hardly do more.’

She does not reply, so he bows and makes again to take his leave. But she is not finished, and has no thought of restraining herself in front of Anna, who is failing to prevent the beer from running onto the carpet.

‘Do you go, then?’

‘Was there something else? Only the hours do run on.’

‘And you have so many urgent things to do.’

‘I have a new subject for my casting. I would begin as soon as possible.’

‘What is it this time?’

‘A lizard.’

‘A lizard?’

‘Cook knocked one down from the kitchen ceiling.’

‘I thought your casts had banished all the vermin.’

‘That was for flies and toads. Fleas, also. This is another art, a life cast in silver. It is much practised on the Continent, and I believe I advance in it.’

‘And later?’

‘Later I must visit Doctor Wharton.’

‘You are always visiting Doctor Wharton.’

‘As you know, my dear, John Tradescant has accepted my proposal to catalogue his collection. Doctor Wharton is instrumental to my preparations, and the work will soon begin. You should know that I will be in South Lambeth a good deal from July.’

‘I do know.’ Her lip trembles, threatening a further outburst, but then subsides. ‘Go, then. There is nothing here more important than your lizard.’

He refrains from agreeing and makes his escape.

In his study, Elias returns to himself. The room is under the eaves, more properly intended for servants and storage, with a low ceiling and a small window. But it is undisturbed, being reached by a sole long, narrow stair. Here is peace, and the pursuit of excellence. Here he studies the work of that Hermetic magician, Dr John Dee – that advisor to monarchs, that father of empire, that occult prince. Here is

where he can reach beyond that which is known and seen by ordinary men, can devote himself unfettered to his work. Look, now. The morning outside bright and clear, the square casement admits a long bar of light that cuts emphatically across his books and manuscripts, his astrological charts, his alembics and astrolabes, his celestial globe. It is hinged by the surface of the table, which is clear except for the lizard which lies, reduced in death, on a plate.

He puts a hand to it: it is dry yet plump. The soft skin yields quickly to his touch, forms only the gentlest barrier to the viscera. He thumbs spine, thorax, gut, pelvis. In Oxford he dissected a hundred of them – labours well spent, for he now expects Thomas Wharton to invite him to practice on a human corpse. What will be the cause of death? A hanging, a tumour, the passing of the years? But this creature's innards will remain undisturbed. Elias takes his manuscripts by Palissy and Biringuccio and lays them nearby, though he has already studied them repeatedly and absorbed their lessons. Practice, they teach, is far superior to theory. Fail, fail, fail, then at last perhaps succeed, yet do not class these arts as lowly and mechanical. There is a careful philosophy within, and if you are one of the chosen few, you can become a master of it, and produce something more beautiful than nature itself.

He sits. Marks off his apparatus – pins, knives, spatula, a plaque of yellow potter's clay. More clay in a pot. A pitcher of distilled water, a bowl of powdered gypsum. His wife's angry face falls away and the world narrows to this: desk, hands, bar of light. As he lifts his subject to the plaque the sun anticipates the effect he will make in silver, illuminating every disc and rivet of the natural catafalque – the baggy skin at the joints, cramped legs and elongated toes, the rims of the eyes – so that the creature appears more perfect and extraordinary than it could in life, where it bubbles up from mud and lives on flies. He determines its monumental attitude, sliding pins through flesh and clay to hold it steady against the flow of plaster. Slender tail curved around, toes separated, head raised and alert. This part is straightforward, when all is promise. Beyond is skill, and effort, and a thousand different possible errors.

The lizard braced by pins, he dips into the pot of clay and uses the spatula to build small channels leading to the elbows, chest, tail tip, feet. Once enclosed, the mould will be filled with plaster – mixed neither too firm nor too loose – which must run in smoothly and envelop the creature to the

exclusion of all else. Here is where the first faults might occur, unseen, that can spell disaster. If the plaster does not set precisely against the skin, if a bubble of air intrudes, if a leg or chin evades the flow, then it will dry to form a freak, a creature with a swollen head or absent limb, with blots on its armour and webs on its feet. Then the work will be lost, the body wasted, the silver kept solid for another day.

The clay yields to his will, the walls of the channels rising up across the plaque like fortifications. Could such a thing be built, to make a cast of a human form? A more perfect impression of a body in silver? He pictures this vast mutilation, imagines what sort of man might be the occasion of it. Where such a statue might stand, in the palace of what prince.

Then the study door crashes open and his pure narrow world breaks apart. Mary stands there, her face undulating with emotion. He did not hear her mount the stair. Her cheeks are scarlet from the climb, her breast heaves where her robe is loosely tied, and he suppresses a small snarl of lust. This is how women are, however intemperate – built for fucking.

‘Mary. Are you quite well? What is the trouble?’

She shakes her head and gulps at him like a pelican.

‘Has something happened?’

‘A drink,’ she gasps out, and he sighs and takes up a cloth to dry his fingers, pours her a glass from the pitcher.

‘Are you this distressed about Sarah? I assure you, she and the boys will not suffer on account of their debt to me. There is no cause for such upset.’

‘It is not Sarah,’ she wheezes. ‘Although I do not believe you.’

‘What, then? Do sit there, and calm yourself.’

Whether my wife’s fits be occasioned from her womb.

She lowers herself to the chair, drinks, and starts to breathe more slowly.

‘I came to ask you... I want to go to South Lambeth. To stay with Hester Tradescant. Just for the summer. Two months, perhaps more.’

He puts down the cloth.

‘You want to do what?’

‘Don’t look so. Why should I not? She has become my friend, and I need the company. And you –’

‘I what?’ She gives him that look again, but sits up straighter.

‘You said yourself you will be much occupied in Lambeth with the catalogue this summer. Why not see each other there, rather than in London?’

‘You are my wife, your place is here. I do not understand the reason for this proposal.’

‘You do not? But I have been – so much alone, these past months. In Lambeth I would have company always.’

‘All men have their occupations. Their wives do not ask to live away from home, to be visited like oracles. How should such a thing be explained?’

‘Tell anyone who asks that I fear the plague, so have gone out of town.’ Seeing him pause, she snaps at him. ‘Ask your precious star charts, if you must.’

And despite himself, he starts to wonder if there might be a possibility here. Could it be done, and give him a summer of comparative peace, and liberty?

Whether my wife shall have any disgrace by going to Mr Tradescant’s to live.

His fingers are still powdery from the clay. He looks down at his desk, at the lizard at the centre of its coming entombment. He notices that one of its feet needs re-aligning, when he had been so sure he had it right. He must remember the advice of Biringuccio – that these are labours endured with pleasure. Then there is a movement, and before he can react it is done and the plaque has shattered against the wall behind his head. He turns to see a yellow shit-scape of clay across two shelves of books and the lizard – belly up and skewered by pins – lying limply over his crystal ball. His wife stands before his desk.

‘What in God’s name, woman?’

‘Will you listen to me now?’ The cast is ruined beyond all repair but she pays the mess no mind – she is all emotion, her colour mounting ever higher. ‘I wish I had not married you. You courted me with lies, you hold my son’s widow to ransom, you neglect and betray me.’

He has heard it many times before. But never across the wreckage of his experiments.

‘What on earth do you mean by this?’

'I mean for you to mind me when I tell you I want to get away from here! You see... I know. I know about Martha Beale. And the rest. Your sluts and trollops.'

Ah. Somewhere, distantly, he hears an echo of his mother's voice rising up through the floorboards to his bedchamber in Lichfield, catches a whiff of saddle-soap. And yet he is a thousand times the man his father was.

'Who told you such a thing?'

'Anna. The servants all know. Everyone knows.'

That little bitch Anna, who can't even keep a fire alight. Mentally he dismisses her without a good word, to work in the washroom of a whorehouse. But before that, his wife must be calmed. He rises and returns her to her chair, draws his own closer.

'So you propose leaving me?'

In her foulest mood, she knows that to be impossible.

'I ask only to go to stay a while with my friend in Lambeth. I will not sit alone in this house while you sport with whores and insects.'

And if she should go? He could work in the collection room and see her in the evenings, but his time in town will be his own. They can both breathe their different airs, and he can change the servants. But he must consider it carefully. The first thing is to calm her.

'It is not so great a thing, Mary. An idle flirtation, no more.'

'Is that all you can say to me? Your wife?'

'What would you have me say?'

'You think nothing of my humiliation.'

'It is not a humiliation if you do not make it so. Consider – you have been mourning Edward for months, you have been unwell. A man must have his release. And if you are well again, we can hope for an heir...'

'Do not speak to me of heirs.'

'Should I not? It is a thing we both hope for. Is that not why we are married?'

Whether my wife be with child or not.

'Let me go to Lambeth. I can hardly look at you now.'

He takes her hand, as gently as he can manage. Carefully does not look back at the ruins of his casting. And reaches for words he knows she can never resist.

‘Come, Mary. Do not speak so when you know the truth of our love. Was our marriage not destined? You cannot forget how long I waited. How I pleaded. Years I thought you might not accept me, but you were worth all the strife. You will not cast all that aside now, for a little distraction on my behalf? This will pass, as such things do between husbands and wives.’

‘You speak as if you had already lived three marriages, not I.’ But her hand in his has opened out. She can never keep this up for long. When her humours rage she is infuriating, but like all women she is soft, and for him she will always, in the end, become weak and eager to please. If he wanted to insist on her remaining in London, he could do so now. But he is still weighing the possibilities.

Unaware of his inclination, she rises and goes to the window. It is half open, and she takes some crumbs from the pot he keeps on the shelf next to it and scatters them on the sill. He likes to watch the birds come to the window while he works, to consider their physiognomy while they peck tamely just beyond the glass.

‘All I ask for now is for a few weeks in Lambeth, some country air and quiet. But you know, I could be of use to you as well.’

‘How so?’

‘It is obvious why you are devoting all this time to making a catalogue of another man’s collection. You want him to be in your debt, because you have some idea that he will one day be useful to you. Perhaps you can even acquire the rarities from him.’

‘You think me so cunning?’

‘I know it. At times it is your best quality. At times not. But you have not accounted for something.’

‘What is that?’

‘Hester. Oh, she is just a woman, but you know that John is weak and can be led. She has occupied herself with the rarities for over ten years now, she all but keeps it in trust for the boy Jack. I believe she thinks of herself quite as its mistress. She would certainly try and stop John from discharging any part of the collection.’

‘And if you go to Lambeth... ’

‘I will know which way the winds are blowing.’

‘You are angry at me, yet you offer me this?’

She turns back to him – weary, passionate, pugnacious.

‘A woman must consider all the means available to her. And at the end of the summer we will still be married. If I hate you now, my duty and love is still for you. For the collection I care not – and I do not see why Hester does. If you want it, I will help you.’

‘Very well,’ he says. ‘If the stars are auspicious, you may go.’

‘Oh yes,’ she says, obedient at last. ‘Only then.’

1652

JULY

In the country, Hester finds, people speak of every summer as if they had never seen its like for rain, or cold, or heat, or caterpillars, for as long as anyone can remember. But this one is indeed as dry and blazing as any she has known, and all Lambeth is dazed by it. Bright blue day follows bright blue day, and everyone with a patch of growing things to tend lies awake at night wondering how they will keep them alive until the weather breaks. Every morning and evening, before and after the sun's highest heat, John and Jack make a caravan of wheelbarrows and water-tubs along the gravel paths to try and keep the precious plants alive, and like stranded fish all their talk is of ponds and wells and dykes. The fruit crops wax fat with sunlight, and the orchids and exotics bloom extravagantly under glass.

Mary Ashmole passes most of her time in the shadows of the winter parlour, wreathed by herbs on a fainting-couch, alternately calling for her husband and wishing him damned. Wilting, Hester still remembers how when the sun shone on Holborn it conjured unholy fumes and she would lie awake trying to breathe, listening to the rats, checking her mother and herself every minute for fevers, for plague boils. So she goes about her work lighter than she might. Her days are divided by the movements of air and shadows, careful to shield the rarities against dryness, against moisture, against night chills, against mites and mould and sunstruck bluebottles. The heat has set the house alive; insects bloom uncountable from floorboard-grooves and plaster-cracks, they advance in waves, impervious to the lead casts Elias leaves lying about. She has to take an imperfectly preserved bird of paradise to the rubbish heap, maggots in its eye sockets.

There are other small destructions; a number of dried fishes split their skins, a bunch of tobacco from the Amazon turns to dust. But this last she can fix, for who should know the difference between the foreign weed and their own, once hung and dried? She is cutting stems from John's tobacco beds, kneeling among the flat-faced white flowers, when a rider arrives with a letter for Elias.

The man's pony is dark with sweat and she points them towards the trough by the kitchen before she takes the letter inside.

Elias hardly acknowledges her as she goes in to the collection where he sits cataloguing, and hands him the letter. He has cleared himself a space at the centre of the room and had a desk put there, banned public visitors while he is working. Generally she keeps away from him as much as she can, for while she desires the catalogue and knows him to be doing the collection a great service, he has quickly shown her just how little he regards her work and care for it, as if tending to its needs and deteriorations is something immaterial. How can Mary can still love him? The jests Jack once made about him seem too light-hearted now; he is a troubling man, vain and heedless of others. So she would rather leave him to his letter, but as it is past noon and the sun has started to sink she takes up the pole to open the windows that face east, reaching her body high across the wall hung with weapons to reach the catch. The cooler air sighs in, a paper lifts, the blades blush blue.

'Ah!' Elias exclaims behind her.

She puts down the window-pole and turns back to him; he has the letter open and his expression is one of delight.

'Some new identification?' she asks, for whatever she might think of him, his connections often yield surprising information about the rarities. From him she has learned that a bristly leather sack sitting unattended in a corner is the body of something called a penguin, a bird from the frozen north that is too fat and wingless to fly. She tries to imagine it, a roly-poly thing, perhaps dappled like a song thrush, crawling on its belly through the snow, eating ice like sugar-sticks.

'Not that,' he says. 'A lawyer friend writes from Kent, of the latest witch trials there.'

'Oh,' she says. 'Not again.'

'Indeed,' he says. 'It seems there are women who think of nothing but harming their neighbours. For whom the Devil's whisper is a seduction to be embraced.'

But that was not her meaning. Witches mean war. The mention of them takes her back five years to those days of shaking, when England betrayed itself and every day brought reports of battles and mutilations. And as they waited for news of the next horror, feared what it might bring to their own house, there were tales of even stranger terrors flowing from the eastern counties – tortures and

enchantments, persecutions and hangings, hauntings and murders. For a time Jack followed the doings of the witch finders, seeking out their pamphlets and delighting in the most unspeakable crimes as if they were a wartime entertainment. It was just after Frances was married, and Hester's sleep was troubled by visions of crying women, disfigured cattle, and monstrous rats. Though she never spoke of it, she was afraid someone would look at the woodcuts of witches and their demons, those grimacing women pointing stiffly at arrays of admixed creatures sent from God knew where, and think of her in the Ark.

‘Still,’ Elias continues, ‘in this case, perhaps the Ark may benefit. My associate writes here of an unusual aspect of the case. It seems the accused women,’ he reads closer, ‘received a gift from their master the Devil.’

She swallows. ‘Is that so unusual?’

‘Once they had answered his call,’ he goes on as if she had not spoken, ‘once they had welcomed in his imps and submitted to his touch, once they had spoken to him of the evil they wished on their neighbours, he had them hide it in the fields beyond their village, and when they wanted him to appear and affect their desires, they had but to rub their hands on it and he would come.’ He puts down the letter. ‘And here is the strangest part. This artefact has been discovered, and is now on display to the public at the Swan Inn in Maidstone.’

She does not want to ask, but she sees that he is going to tell her anyway. He smiles with unnatural satisfaction.

‘A piece of flesh, all burned and twisted up.’

She feels sick. That such a thing could be spoken of in the same breath as the Ark.

‘This cannot have anything to do with us.’

‘I think it would make an excellent addition, and I am sure it can be acquired. I will speak to John, and see if we cannot go down to Kent and make a bid for it.’

‘Sir, I do not think...’

But he has returned to his books, his attention never really on her in the first place. The air in the Ark is stifling and she leaves him, wanting to forget the whole exchange. In the corridor she passes Mary, on her way to ensure her husband comes to the midday meal. Poor Mary cannot leave him alone even

when it is clear she makes things worse for herself. He is the kind of man who cannot abide women who make demands, yet she is driven to distraction by his coldness, so returns again and again to insist, ever more fruitlessly.

Back in the tobacco bed, she reassures herself that John would never undertake such an expedition. The man she once admired as an adventurer, as the Queen's enterprising gardener, is really a person of small, regular habits. By the time Jack finds her, bringing with him a pitcher of sugar-water, she is almost calm again. He hands it to her and she drinks gratefully. His skin is a golden red, peeling at the neck and nose.

'How,' he says, 'is a man to travel the world, if he is tied all year to the laying on of compost?'

His smock is snagged by thorns and stained with sweat. She has noticed that these days he jests and dances less, but rather shakes his head as if to clear it, dissatisfied with everything before him. Quietly, she fears him going out into the world, though she knows it must be soon. And if he travels, there is always a risk he will join the latest war against the Dutch.

'You'll never guess,' she says to distract him, 'what our friend Elias has dreamed up now.' And she tells of the witches, of the devilish piece of flesh, of his plan to go to Maidstone with John.

'Of course your father will not go, and will not accept the artefact,' she says. 'In any case he cannot leave the garden, and I am glad of it. Such a vile object should not be here with us in Lambeth.'

But Jack is not distracted, or not how she had hoped.

'To Kent?' he says. 'If Father will not go, then I will. Oh, to be done with this endless watering, with everything parched and hayseed in every crack!'

She realises her mistake.

'Jack...'

'No, Mother, it is not to be borne. I will get out into the world. Father does not think of travel now, but how else will I follow him and my grandfather? This could be something new for us, for the collection, and a way for me to make my mark. People are wild for witchcraft, we could have a hundred visitors for such an artefact.'

'These are dark tales from our countryside, not rarities from new worlds. The stuff of village tricksters. Why would you encourage them?'

‘If it would get me out of Lambeth, Mother, I’d ride to Scotland for much less. I will speak to Mr Ashmole myself.’ And he leaves her to finish gathering her tobacco plants and take them in to dry, a small offering that gives her little comfort.

When John forbids Jack to go on account of the garden, Hester is put all too briefly at her ease. The boy sulks; dinner is brief. After the meal the men must go again about their watering. To catch the cooler air, they all follow them out into the garden. Elias strides ahead to catch up with John and keep talking to him about Kent. She makes to follow, thinking to distract him, but Mary takes her arm and complains of pains in her hip, so she must slow down and strain to listen. The softening evening light coaxes shadows from between the leaves and new colours from the pleats of rose petals, glazes the air with the scents of hay and the memory of rain. The beds of stock and lavender wear a ghostly frill of moths.

For a while she can hear Elias, lecturing while John empties buckets of water. He is discoursing on a philosopher called Bacon who, it seems, has written of the ideal estate of a prince, a model of the universe made private, an inspiration for the Ark.

‘It should contain a library,’ he says, ‘that holds every book ever printed anywhere in the world. A garden with every plant that ever grew, ringed by stables and cages containing every rare beast and bird to be found in God’s creation, and two lakes – one fresh, one salt – for every variety of fishes. And in the palace, a laboratory, with every instrument for discovering the philosophers’ stone, and a cabinet, containing every item Man has ever created...’

John doesn’t answer that she can hear, but so far he has not absolutely said no to Kent. For all he seems indifferent to the Ark, and loathe to travel, he is strangely fascinated by Elias. Hester sometimes wonders if he sees his own father in him – a more outward-looking man, more knowledgeable. She wonders again if she should try and speak to him. But Mary is pulling her away, towards the circular path around the pond.

‘At my age,’ she is saying, ‘it is wise not to lose sight of home. This way you will not have to carry me back across your garden like a sack of turnips.’

‘I would ask Jack to do it, anyway.’

‘Then perhaps I should collapse here. He would feel better for proving himself up to the task, and I would certainly enjoy it.’

‘Perhaps you should. This question of Kent has put everyone at odds. It would provide a distraction.’

‘You think so? I thought just your boy. But it is right to keep him here – he is too well-made to be sending out among Kentish maids. He would cause more of a riot than all the witches in Maidstone.’

‘You know I do not like the plan.’

‘But my dear, why should you concern yourself? Surely this is a matter for John and Elias.’

‘Don’t pretend to be duller than you are.’

Though Mary can be made a fool of in her dealings with Elias, Hester knows she is a sharp and thoughtful woman. Now she tuts and shakes her head.

‘You fret so over that room full of rubbish. Oh, don’t look so – I know its worth, believe me. I have half lost a husband to it. And I know that without you John would not care for it half as well. But you could instruct a servant in its care well enough, and spend your days on other things. This question of a nasty artefact, what difference does make when all in there is clutter and confusion and nonsense, and Elias taking charge of it for you?’

‘Surely you don’t think we should have such a thing in the house.’

‘But why should you worry? London is not Kent. A horror there is a curiosity here. And I say again – leave the men to it. It is not as if it will ever be yours.’

‘It has been mine to care for these ten years and more. I will see it safely into Jack’s keeping.’

‘You are too attached to it. You imagine yourself its keeper, but it could be sold tomorrow. Perhaps...’ but then she stops, rearranges her cap.

‘Perhaps if I had children of my own, I would not concern myself with men’s things?’

‘You know it, then.’

‘How could I not?’

She scuffs at the gravel with the toe of her shoe, unwilling to speak for a moment. Sometimes she almost forgets herself, it is so long since she stopped wondering whether she will bear a child.

Stopped praying and crying. But of course to almost forget is just habit, the habit of not quite being a woman.

And there is the other thing, the thing that Mary will never know. That only John knows, or suspects, and as far as she can tell he chooses not to think about it.

She listens again for him and Elias but they have gone, into the further reaches of the garden.

‘But, Mary. You must not think of me as always mourning a different life. I have more purpose here than most women in England.’ Is this an empty consolation? How can it be, when she was chosen to be here?

‘Is that how you see it? Is that not a vanity? Jack seems desperate to leave. What if he doesn’t want it? What will you do with it then?’

For perhaps the first time Hester is conscious of Mary’s loyalty to Elias.

‘Jack is nineteen. He will settle down. In the end he will want no other life, as I do not.’

They walk in less companionable silence. Somewhere near their feet, an animal or a bird rustles urgently through the undergrowth. Hester thinks of Alex and his bird-eyed moth, how he fed it on willow leaves while he made his painted study, then set it back among the flowerbeds.

The rustling in the undergrowth changes pitch, and ends in a splash. In the pond something surfaces and starts to thresh, cutting a silver fork into its surface, a quick steady trapped sound. The moonlight shows a movement the size of a fist, back and forth to the pond’s round smooth sides.

‘What horrid thing is that?’ asks Mary. ‘I’ll fetch the master to have it out.’

‘Wait,’ says Hester. She leaves Mary standing there and goes to kneel by the pond’s edge. The thing churns past her, close. It has a small nose and huge paws.

‘It’s a mole. I never saw one swimming. It must be desperate from thirst.’

‘Come away and let it drown. Nasty hill-digging things, it’s not natural it should be in water.’ Mary leans forward on her cane. ‘Perhaps we should fetch Elias. They are magical creatures, you know. And his namesake. He told me once if you write a woman’s name in mole’s blood and put the paper under her door, she will dance out naked to fetch it.’

The mole swims back and forth, back and forth. Soon it will tire, and in the morning they will find it floating, swollen and still, and Elias will drain its blood. Hester makes a decision, leans, scoops,

ignoring Mary's noise of disgust. The thing is almost blind and does not resist her. Its body in her hands is slight and slick, its bones fragile. She sets it down quickly and it runs, as if air or water or soil made no difference to it, and vanishes again.

'Well,' says Mary. 'More molehills, and no spells. We had better not tell the men.'

The garden has turned black and silver under a summer night sky of dark kingfisher blue. Hester shivers, though the day's wearying heat still rises off the baked earth. The desperate mole, and Mary's talk have unsettled her, made her fearful for the future. If Elias must pursue this horror to Kent, could he not do so without John? What does he mean by taking him away?

When they are nearly back at the house, Jack comes striding up from the yard. She can hear the anger in his voice.

'Father has been persuaded to go Kent,' he says. 'They leave in the morning. Will I never see the world beyond Lambeth?'

1652

AUGUST

They ride quietly through the Kentish forest in a single line, two men, two servants, shielded from the worst of the sun. The heat gathers still, massed between thick bracken and old oaks. It seams riders and horses with sweat and flies, and as they start to descend from the Weald Elias imagines he can smell putrefaction on the breeze. An illusion, he thinks, conjured by the weather, and his anticipation of the object that awaits him. Of what, in his hands, it could achieve.

He rides out in front, eager among the banks of campion and wood sage. Eager to possess this monstrosity, this Devil's leaving. He imagines how he will display it in the Ark. He will clear a space on the central table, encase it in a glass dome. Add an outsize lock and hasp – not strictly needed, but suggestive of things that need keeping in, as much as out. He will invite London's astrologers and they will gather round, trying to hide their jealousy and unease. He will add the entry to the catalogue and star it with his own name. *Benefactor*. And John Tradescant will be more in his debt than ever.

He shifts in his saddle, tries to ignore insect bites and the persistent faint tang of rot. Perhaps the smell is not an illusion but an animal, hollowed out by maggots somewhere in the belly of the forest.

He should be spending the ride gaining the man's confidence, not daydreaming. *Whether I shall advance my prospects by going into Kent*. He reins his horse in and waits for John to catch him up – the man rides as he does everything else, deliberately, watching the ground as if he might fall over it. Elias is mildly astonished that he was persuaded to leave the garden and go out into the world at all, and how he ever travelled to America is beyond imagining. Surely this man takes no real interest in his collection, and may in time be persuaded to part with it.

'This is no great expedition for you, John,' he says. 'I hope what we recover is enough to make it worth your while.'

'Oh,' says the gardener after a pause. 'You mean, after Virginia. Yes.'

‘Your industry is clear from the catalogue. I can see everything you added to the collection from that journey, and am marking it *Virginia*.’

‘It was a long time ago. A great deal of work.’

‘I should say so. Wild cat. Musk rat. Fox. Reed combs. Bows and arrows and quivers. Bitterns. Bats. Purses. Crowns. A child’s cradle. And the many plants.’

‘You know the collection better than I, these days. As does my wife.’

Elias ignores this mention of Mrs Tradescant, who he keeps falling over as he goes about his work, a mop and bucket left unattended.

‘And of course,’ he goes on, ‘you already had the great cloak. Which formerly hung about the shoulders of Powhatan, King of Virginia.’ He has marked it so in the catalogue. ‘That is a magnificent thing, a rare achievement.’

‘It was never Powhatan’s,’ says John. ‘My father did not buy it.’

‘What’s that?’ Elias thinks he is joking.

‘That’s just a story.’

‘But your wife told me – ’

‘Or if it was his, I never knew it. I cannot remember when the idea took hold but it must have come from my daughter. My wife has only repeated it.’

‘Your daughter.’

‘Frances,’ John explains. Elias had almost forgotten her existence. ‘She was – is – so lively, perhaps too lively, and she made a kind of performance for the rarities she liked best. I think she got the idea for the cloak story from her grandfather. He did correspond with John Rolfe, who married Powhatan’s daughter, though he never saw the cloak himself. She must have dreamed the rest. It never seemed to matter that she invented the tale, then after a time I all but forgot it wasn’t true.’

‘But... ’ Elias tamps down his outrage. He was almost made a fool of by the fancies of women and children. ‘Then where is it from?’ The gardener’s face twists.

‘From Virginia, certainly. I brought it back with me. But it was a filthy bargain. I wish I had not made it.’

‘How can you say so? What could it have cost?’

John says nothing for a long moment. Then, perhaps lulled by the forest and the rhythm of the horses, he starts to speak.

‘When I was at Jamestown, the governor arranged a guide for me. He was also a kind of protector. I was going into the forest for plants and you cannot be at ease there, what with the animals and insects and mire and poisoned woods. The whole place is trying to kill you before you even meet an Indian.’

Elias can see it now, the unhappy gardener trying to prove his worth to his father, bitten and miserable in the Virginian swamps.

‘This guide,’ John goes on, ‘was much experienced in the beaver fur trade. He was always talking about it – those parts that are now in the collection are his.’

Elias recalls the entry – *beaver’s skin, teeth, testicles*.

‘He arranged for me to meet this Algonquin he knew through his business dealings. It was in a tiny shack some way from any settlement, a dirty desperate place, and the man was – I think he must have been some kind of outcast from his people. He was scarred by the pox and worse and looked likely to die, although the Indians have a great knowledge of medicine. He brought the cloak with him, rolled up in a sack, though where he got it I do not know. I believe he stole it, in some great insult to his people.’

‘He wanted to sell it?’

‘Yes, and he wanted – oh, I cannot remember, some price the guide considered too high. I did not know how business was done there, how to deal with the natives, so I stayed quiet while the guide bargained. But the pair of them became more and more agitated. I did not know what I should do. In the end I watched the guide stand over the man, shouting, pulling out his knife, and watched...’ he trails off, as if disenchanted by his own speech.

‘The Indian was killed?’

‘I have known much cruelty since then, and death, as we all have in England. But still nothing to match that. When it was over the guide pointed at the cloak, and laughed, and told me I could take it for nothing. I did so, for I knew its value to my father. Of course, when I returned he was already dead.’

‘In that case, the tale of your father buying it from John Rolfe must stand.’

But John is still lost in his regretful Virginian bog, unconcerned with questions of the present.

‘Since then I have not liked to look at the cloak. I do not want my family to know its provenance.’

‘Of course.’

John Tradescant, Elias knows, has no real ambition. By this tale he is also a tender man, weak and womanish. Elias is newly conscious of how he must seem to the gardener – an assured scholar, enterprising and determined, giving him the direction he lacks without his father. He feels more confident than ever that he can make himself indispensable.

‘Sir,’ calls Sam, from the back of the line. ‘The smell.’

‘It does seem to be getting stronger,’ says John, looking green.

‘We must pass it soon,’ Elias replies. ‘We cannot be far from the town now.’

And then, as if through sorcery, they break out from under the cover of the trees. There is the town, snaked about by the glittering Medway, the air freshening as it comes off the water. The horses lift their heads and Elias lets his mare surge forward. They have travelled all day and the light, suddenly, is all but out of the sky.

At the city gate the guards are ill-mannered and inquisitive; the assizes have been in session all week and Maidstone is wary of strangers. Once inside the walls they find pretty lanes and the placid river, but the twilight is edged with unease. It is strangely empty for a summer evening so darkly bruised with heat and scent it should be keeping all the town from their beds, or in them loudly. Instead the houses are still and watchful, their doors and shutters left ajar for cooling air, for warnings of malice.

‘This is a suspicious place,’ says Sam.

They gave him the hardest stares at the gate. It is some time since Elias travelled outside of London with him, and he had forgotten what effect a Moor can have.

‘The provinces,’ he replies. ‘And in a doubtful humour, with a gaol full of witches. You had better stay close tonight, Sam. Tend to the horses, and retire.’

‘Gladly.’

The feeling is infectious. When Elias leaves the lodging with John and they walk into town in search of the Swan, his eyes cannot help but linger on a black cat's furtive dart up a garden wall, or on two women walking ahead of them with heads bent together, who then turn through a low archway and are gone. John is openly ill at ease, glancing around and starting at shadows. Elias must be careful or he will run and hide in the stables too.

'Now, John. The witches are locked away. The worst that could befall us is a swindling.'

The gardener starts again, then makes a show of laughter.

'I cannot hide from you, it seems.'

'It is natural to feel unsettled. But no ill can befall us here. Remember, we have a higher purpose.'

'My wife thinks the artefact degrading to the Ark.'

'Does she. But what could be degrading about adding to your store of wonders?'

'You must admit its associations are... unpleasant.'

'Certainly. But should we, men of science, turn away from what is out of the ordinary?'

And so he bears the gardener onward. They know the Swan before they see its white bird stamped against the sky, for unlike the rest of the town the inn is thronged with bodies, their noise and the press spilling out into the street from the narrow doorway. All Maidstone, it seems, has been drawn to the Devil's flesh.

'The proprietor is a man called Rudd,' says Elias. 'I am told he is expecting us.'

Has John turned pale in the moonlight?

'We should drink first,' he says. Elias has noticed this before, how he turns to liquor quietly and with purpose. All the better, perhaps.

'Kentish cider,' he replies. 'They tell me there's one that's grass tart and honey sweet, the colour of hay in the sun.'

At this, John follows him willingly enough past the straggling edges of the crowd, past farmers and clerks and craftsmen, past fat burghers and their wives, inside the belly of the Swan to its sweat and fug, red faces and pipe smoke, hops snagged and wilting. They find a corner to sit in, and a girl brings them their drinks. At his question she jerks her head towards the back of the room, where a doorway

has been curtained off. Instead of hops it is hung about with herbs and charms, and the crowd of drinkers seems to skirt it by some agreement, so that a space is always left around it. Next to the curtain a square, black-haired man sits in an upright chair, watching the room. His clothes are greasy and he seems unaffected by the oddness of his position, as if the patrons of the Swan were a stage play acted just for him. Now and then one of the crowd, or a nervous couple, will sidle up, hand him a coin, and be escorted behind the curtain.

‘There,’ Elias says, ‘and that must be Rudd.’

John drinks off half his cider.

‘He looks like he’s enjoying himself. Are you sure he wants to sell?’

‘He will sell. Come on.’

The man Rudd eyes them knowingly as they approach.

‘Now, gents,’ he says. ‘I’ve heard tell of you, from the clerks at the assizes. Friends of the Justice, who has just this week caused us to be delivered from the latest pains of devilry. And your generosity is much appreciated.’

Elias palms him coins, not displeased at being so easily recognised.

‘Let’s see it then,’ he says. ‘Before we talk more.’

‘Are we to talk?’ says Rudd. ‘Well, you’ve heard the tale. A filthy thing.’

‘Aye,’ Elias says, ‘and powerful.’

Grinning, the man rises and pulls back the curtain. Beyond is a cupboard-like space only just large enough for the three of them and a small table at the rear. A single lamp is set in a high alcove, casting a dim circle of light. John makes a sound like a startled frog, but Elias ignores it and shoulders him inside.

They gather round the table. On it, a leather purse, opened out and laid flat, pinned about with a red cloth. At its centre, the thing they have come for; stiff and scorched like a piece of wood, but certainly bodily. They have to squeeze uncomfortably close to each other to see it properly, the room close and dark. But Elias can see its rigid fibres, sense its malevolence. He shivers with want.

‘A gift from the Devil,’ says John. He sounds wretched.

‘Not everyone believes so,’ says Rudd, his voice lowered. ‘Some say it is a piece of bacon fallen off a cart. The withered limb of a dead cat. A lost stirrup-strap.’

‘You know we have come from London to see it,’ says Elias. ‘Will you tell us we wasted our journey?’

‘Oh no,’ the man replies. ‘For I was at the trial, and saw the women scream when it was brought out. Saw how they hungered for the power they found in it. This here is the Devil’s work, and has been used in all manner of filthy enchantments. Those women sunk boats and killed cattle. They caused violent pains to children.’

‘Excuse me,’ says John, and backs out past the curtain.

‘Yes,’ says Elias hurriedly. ‘To business. And more drinks.’

They return to their corner and Rudd joins them, keeping one eye on his curtain. John drinks off another cider. It seems to rally him, and he talks sensibly enough of Lambeth, of the collection, of the price he would pay to include Rudd’s artefact. Elias lets him talk, keeping his attention on the proprietor of the Swan. The man’s eyes are flat and opaque, and one might think him an idiot, but when John pauses to drink again he speaks with calculating force.

‘Quite a story, gents. But I’ve a business to run. This here’s set me up for the rest of the year already. I think I’ll pass.’

The drink seems to have set something in John in motion, and to Elias’s surprise he goes on the attack, though it will only alienate Rudd further.

‘You think so? But the assizes will end and people will tire of you. London is the place for it, part of something bigger. I will make it so. Here it will fade. Become merely a piece of bacon, and you still living hand to mouth, longing for the time there were witches in Maidstone to make you interesting.’

Elias leans forward to steady him. ‘Of course,’ he says, ‘you will have a fair price. And consider, you wouldn’t want the evidence recalled to the women’s trial. Then you might never get it back.’

‘Custom’s been very pleasing already. And as for the women,’ grins Rudd, ‘they did ’em a few days back.’

‘Hanged?’ asks John, fearful again. ‘The witches? Already?’

‘Up on Penenden moor. You can see ’em on your way back to London. You must have passed within half a mile already. Though I will say they have not done too well in this heat.’

The smell in the woods.

‘They made an awful racket. Cried out they were pregnant, then said it was by the Devil. Now if you’re finished, gents...’

‘Of course,’ says Elias, ‘my friend the Justice awaits news of my visit. I expect to see him tomorrow, and tell him how I have found Kent. He has always valued my opinion, and my experience in all manner of litigation.’

Rudd folds his arms. ‘He has nothing to reproach me with, nor you.’

‘Certainly not. Except... a solicitor’s reproaches are unusual. They take particular forms. And once made, they can be... long-lasting. Difficult to do away with. Expensive.’

‘Invented, you mean?’

‘Let me make you a better offer.’ He names a price, higher than the one John proposed.

Rudd strokes his greasy beard.

‘Double. And you can come and get it in the morning, I’ll not make a spectacle of its departure tonight.’

‘Very fair. Let us drink to it.’

‘I’ll take my leave of you, gents. Before you have anything else to reproach me with.’

Elias turns back to John as Rudd stamps off back to his seat. The gardener looks stunned.

‘How did you do that?’

‘The law has many uses. You don’t always need to apply it strictly. A man like that will be cheating everyone from the customers to the bailiffs. It’s not worth his trouble to have me against him. Anyway, he just wanted a better price.’

‘I did not think we would really get it. It seemed too outlandish.’

‘My dear John, I would not have made this journey without being quite certain that I would succeed in my object.’

The gardener looks wretched.

‘You are not pleased?’

‘I... did not consider that... I will need to carry it home, keep it in my house... ’

‘But John, that was the entire object of our coming, and we have succeeded in it.’

‘It looked... so sinister, lying there. So much evil caused.’

Elias resists the urge to shake the man, who clutches at his mug of cider as if he might disappear into it. It is a good thing he did not know his father was dead when he was in that swamp, or the Virginian cloak might have stayed among the Indians. Instead, John Tradescant lets its associations hang over him like a storm cloud. At this, an idea occurs.

‘Perhaps,’ he says. ‘There is an alternative.’

John looks bleakly grateful.

‘Perhaps I should keep it for you,’ he says. ‘Until you are ready. It will be safe in my chambers in Middle Temple. And if – when – you so desire it, I will restore it to you.’

The astrologers will gather round, and he will have another storm cloud hanging over John Tradescant.

‘Oh,’ says the gardener, slurring now. ‘Yes. You think of everything.’

‘Come then, John. We will need to be back here in the morning, then another long ride.’

As they leave, Rudd calls out from his chair.

‘Say. I heard you brought a Moor with you? I haven’t seen a Moor in a few years. Stay another night and we can deal some more. There’s many around here would pay to touch him.’

Elias glances back at him. A grubby provincial with no higher purpose whatsoever.

‘No,’ he says, steering John Tradescant towards the door. ‘No Moor.’

As the morning warms from grey to gold, he collects his prize and it is he, not John, who slips it into his saddlebag. They are a silent party that ride out of the city – the gardener pale and sweating, Sam wary until the city walls are well behind them. Following Rudd’s direction, they leave the town by a different road. It runs a little east through acres of fruit orchards, the gentle leaf lines honeyed by the early light. The place where farmed land gives way to heath is marked by hawthorn, a single tree of stately height and spread, a phylactery against disaster. Beyond it is close-grazed turf and scrubby

copse, mounds of stinking yellow gorse. They pause here as if at some great threshold, for although they cannot yet see the women, they can hear the crows.

A little further on six scaffolds, quickly built, line a ridge beyond a ditch. They rein their horses in, as they snort and baulk at the ragged things suspended in the air. For all John is weak, their party are not coddled youths; they have seen heads mounted on poles on London Bridge, stepped out of the paths of plague carts, picked their way among the war dead, crossed oceans, buried their own wives. But here even their gorges swell and choke. Three days the women have hung there in the summer heat, three days of blistering and pestilence and rot. The crows continue their busy work, pick and shred, rising and falling with angry cries as they squabble for the meat so recently alive and cursing. The lost scraps of their scavenging fall to the ground, where other things nibble and writhe.

'I had rather see 'em hang,' says Samuel, his hand to his nose. 'To know the moment the devil goes out. There is nothing here but a warning to the others.'

'Warning enough,' Elias answers, 'except they will hang more before the year is out.'

'That women should choose such a master,' says John.

'He was no help to them at the end,' Samuel replies.

'They were weak,' says Elias. 'Their lives were wretched, and they chose evil as their succour.'

John turns to him, and there is entreaty in it. 'Let us get away from here,' he says.

Before Elias replies he keeps his gaze on the six, looking closer, looking longer. Six bodies, each with its scattering of crows, each submitting in its particular variegations to the bruising and collapse of decomposition. He recalls their names – three Annes, two Marys, and a Mildred. Common country women, poor and stupid, hungry for temptation. Their eyes that sought out evil in the hedgerows and milking-parlours that bounded their world are now raw holes, no more to look beyond the duties of their station.

'Ride on,' he says at last. 'There is work to do in London.'

Beside him, Sam wets his forefinger and raises it high.

'The smell will not follow us,' he says. 'Though it met us on the way. The wind blows now easterly, from the sea. You can taste the salt.'

SEPTEMBER

With autumn the mood in Lambeth changes, as the poplar leaves turn a singing yellow. Harvest has begun, and from its summer lethargy the household wakes to new industry – in fields, and hedgerows, in kitchen and store rooms. When Hester visits the collection now it is fleeting, to banish any late blooms of ants and to clear away after Elias visits, as he works to complete the catalogue. With the new season she can avoid him, slip in and out at odd hours. She finds herself listening differently as she walks up to the collection door, alert to the sound of him muttering, rustling papers from one pile to another. If she hears him, she turns back. It was a blessed relief he kept the witches' artefact for himself. But since their ride to Kent, she has noticed a change in the way John behaves with him. There is something craven in it, afraid.

Once, twice, sidling her way along the corridor to the Ark, she thinks she hears something else inside it. A knocking, crackling noise? A strange booming sound? A squeal? But when she turns into the room it is empty and still.

In the shortening twilight Mary comes to find her, follows her between linen chests as she unpacks winter clothes and blankets from their nests of herbs and leaves. She tells her she has made her peace with Elias and will return to London with him within a few weeks.

'Again?' Her arms full of linen, Hester speaks without thinking. 'You will not stay here?' she adds, more softly.

But Mary only folds her hands on her stick. 'To what end?' she says. 'Other than your company. He is my husband. He says what happened does not signify. I cannot stay here forever.'

The truth of it makes them both pause. The shadows around them deepen. Beetles tick in the walls.

'Do not think...' Mary starts, then seems to change her mind. Instead she says, 'I have tried to talk to him of divorce. More than once.'

‘Oh, Mary. I had not thought it possible.’

‘He says it is not. He says that he loves me. And unless he wishes it there is nothing I can do. So I must try my best to be a help to him.’

Hester sees him more clearly all the time. It appears that nothing exists for him except in that it advances the interests of Elias Ashmole. And even Mary, who seems fearless, cannot really change that.

‘And you, Hester?’ she asks now. ‘Perhaps you too can make your peace, and leave the collection to the men?’

‘I have no desire to make such a peace, Mary. We are different. I can no more cease my care for the Ark than you can yours for your husband.’

‘You know it is not the same.’

‘No, it isn’t. The collection is something greater than me. Greater than all of us.’

‘That is vanity.’

‘You think so? If I were your husband, would the sentiment not be admired?’

The next day she is alone in the basement kitchen, picking over apples. Above her a quick wind whips up, winnowing at the walls, bringing in armfuls of sound from the London road – great flocks of geese screaming their way to market for Michaelmas. She thinks of their stout bodies, their peg-legged gait rolling them surely towards a neck-wringing.

Jack comes in, stamping mud and leaves across the floor. She bites her tongue. Since John refused to let him go into Kent he has become harder, more impatient. But now he puts down his pruning saw and joins her, sorting the fruit and thumbing it for bruises, their fingers waxy and scented. A basket for the stores, a basin for cider, a bucket for the pigs. It is the best season, Frances said, and the hardest.

‘Mother,’ he says after a while, and it is the gentling tone she has heard him use sometimes when he is pruning roses, murmured to his favourites.

She meets his eyes, the permission of family. She knows at once that he has found a way to leave.

‘Where?’ she asks, and it comes easily, as if they had both known for weeks, not decided in that moment, that she would not resist. ‘How?’

‘Paris,’ he says. ‘A few weeks only. A beginning. And soon, before winter.’

‘Few pirates,’ she says, meanly. ‘Or porpoises, come to that.’

‘No, but I must begin somewhere. It is your parents’ land, Mother, do you not like it? Grandfather was there too, buying plants from *la famille Rose*.’ The language is even stranger on his tongue than hers.

‘If you join the navy I will find you and kill you myself,’ she jokes. But from his smile she knows she has lost him, her words as weightless as moths.

‘Father has not given his permission yet. But this time he will.’

‘You have not asked him?’

‘Elias is speaking to him, even now.’

An apple rolls away from her across the table, bounces along the stone floor. The interests of Elias Ashmole, she thinks. But what can he gain by Jack going away?

‘That popinjay?’ she tries. ‘That hill-digger? You will take his money and his direction, and leave me here alone?’

‘He thinks I should visit the Royal Gardens, and meet Doctor Evelyn. He will write me letters of introduction. And if something else should come up, I need not come straight back from Paris.’

‘But you have never liked him.’

‘He will help me get what I want,’ he says. He leaves off the apples and takes up his pruning saw again. ‘Didn’t he do the same for you, when he offered to make the catalogue?’

He goes back to the orchard then, leaving the door ajar, and the September light and wind run into the emptiness he leaves behind. She keeps counting out apples and pears, saying their names to herself: Belle-Bonne, Bluster-Pear, Summer Pearmain, Red-Greening Ribb’d, Queen Hedge, Bloody-Pépin. Let him go, then. Let him go.

She finishes the apples, takes the baskets to the store, to the cider press, to the pigs. She stays a while in the barn to watch the beasts eat, finding comfort in the lavishness of their satisfaction. Let him go, she thinks. He is just a boy who wants to travel. Would you keep him here forever? And puts the

answer aside. She idles there, so that for longer than she should have she does not hear the sounds coming from beyond the pen, from the orchard and coming closer.

Shouts, screams, cries for help.

And then the hours begin to rise and fall like lungs, lifting and declining to some unknown rhythm of breath.

Later she has to try and stitch it together, make something of what she remembers beyond the roar of her heart.

She remembers hurrying from the pen into the garden, casting back and forth to find the source of the alarm. The wind had dropped and raised a claggy mist, shot through with strands of light by the low sun. Still she breathed easy, then, turning to the house to see if anyone could tell her what was happening. She saw women appear at the windows – Mary in the summer parlour, maids in the upstairs chambers. A great slowing, then, as she understood that they looked past her at something she could not see, that she must turn to face. But she did not, would not, chose to wait, observed only that the wind had plaited the poplar leaves into the grass, the sharp scents of soil and rot, the jagged clouds gathering rain. Then she turned: John coming keening through the mist, his outline distorted by the weight in his arms.

She does and does not remember, she has been told, how he fell from high up in one of the oaks that flanks the orchard, reaching laughing for a dead branch to cut it free, imagining perhaps a ship's rigging. How the wind heightened his colour, how the slip was quick, how he could have been a branch himself, or a leaf, how it was over before any of them could move. How it was only afterwards they saw where his head had struck, a sharp gnarl in the trunk now dipped in blood, and worse.

She remembers there was no sound, no breath, no time, no sight of the day or of anything but Jack, his head gouged red, his eyes staring but not meeting hers. No sound, nothing, for a long time, only a far-off ringing, the infinite tolling of a bell.

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Two days later, they are to bury Jack with his grandfather in the churchyard at St Mary's. In the morning she watches the sexton turn up autumn crocus, pinkish flutes trembling. It seems important that she watch the digging, be sure of the ground where he will be laid.

The mourners gather at the house all through the day. She sits unseeing in the parlour, next to Jack's body that she dressed and trimmed. From early morning she has been able to smell the drink on John. Her ears ring constantly.

As evening comes on it is time to follow the coffin to the church. The company gather at the front of the house, ludicrously framed by the whale ribs. Most of them carry lanterns on long poles, making a shifting constellation of lights in the gathering dusk. Emanuel is there, Mary, Elias, but they see her face and they keep away from her. Then the pallbearers bring out the bier. They are all men from the Company of Gardeners and they wear its livery, wide sleeves and fur trims. They carry the coffin out into the road and she and John take their places behind it. He is restless, looking around and twisting his thumb between his fingers.

'Where is she?' he asks. 'I wrote to her.'

'She will be here,' she replies, as if she could know the answer.

They start the walk to the church, a quiet trail of mourners along the London road. Passers-by fall silent at their approach, stopping and lowering their heads until they have walked past. It is a mild evening, a fat orange moon rising over a black river. One couple coming from the city do not stop at the sight of the procession, but keep hurrying towards them.

'There,' says John. A tall, wide man and a pale girl with yellow hair showing under her cap. 'Frances.' He makes the pallbearers wait until Frances and her husband reach them and when they do, he embraces his daughter for a long time. Hester looks away.

'Hester,' says the man, moving his bulk between them. Alexander Norman. 'Such a tragedy.' He takes her hand and presses it, too hard.

'Uncle Norman,' she says.

The family always called him that, before she ever arrived in Lambeth. He was in the habit of coming to the house often, especially when help was needed with bigger works in the garden. John

knew him, after all, as the widow of his own father's sister. A powerful man, a barrel-maker, though now above sixty years old. Next to him Frances, twenty-four and thinner than ever, seems like a creature from another world.

'We shouldn't wait,' Hester says.

John releases Frances and signals to the pallbearers. Norman takes his wife's arm and they walk behind Hester and John, onwards towards the church behind Jack.

It is almost completely dark by the time they are all assembled around the grave, the coffin lowered in. The church bells begin to sound – three times three knells for a dead man. Nine chimes in all, then nineteen more, one for every year of his life.

Every chime meets the dull ringing in Hester's ears, making a strange music. She keeps away from all the others, under the blessed obscurity of the night. What if it could stay dark forever? And the daylight not be faced, when even the burial is over and there is nothing left of him on this earth?

The bells fall silent and no-one moves for a long time, making their own silent prayers. She waits as they start to move away and back towards the house, and means to wait until no-one is left. She knows they will not make her walk with them – she has always been like this, that glint in her heron-eye that warns people away.

'Will you let me walk with you?' Someone breaks into her stillness, comes out from the deeper dark under a yew tree. Alex.

'I didn't see you,' she says.

'I came very late. I only came back to London this morning, to this terrible news.'

'But you came.' It has been years since she saw him. That he is so suddenly here, on this day, is so strange she accepts it as she might a dream. His voice is the same, his outline.

'The news pierced me,' he says. 'I had to come, at least for the burial. I will always remember him how he was at Lambeth that year. That eager, beautiful boy.'

'Yes.'

'Here. Take my arm.'

Alex has a lantern and they walk under it, adrift from the others in the constellation. Hester wants him to talk of anything but why they are here. If he tells her he is married now, she would not feel it.

‘You said you had only just returned to London,’ she says. ‘Where had you been? Talk to me of other things.’

‘I was staying with friends in Oxford,’ he says. ‘Old acquaintances who did not mind if I spent all my time drawing in the botanical gardens. You see I have not changed since I stayed in Lambeth, only grown more like myself. I will often choose the company of plants over people. Even if the world sees that as a detrimental quality I cannot change it, so I continue on my way.’

‘It is no detriment, since you draw as you do. You know I have the same tendency, if the company is rarities. Though in my case this only makes me an object of ridicule.’

‘It is my greatest happiness, nowadays, though there are plenty who ridicule me for it. And there are some magnificent things in the Oxford garden. It was all but an army store-room during the war but they have worked hard on it, and it is coming back to itself.’

‘They asked John’s father to plant it, when they first had the idea,’ she tells him. ‘He had a hand in the early designs. But he died before they started the work.’

‘I didn’t know that. It seems the Tradescants are with me everywhere I go.’

‘We have your book of paintings, so you are always here with us.’

What else can be said? If it is all the happiness she has, to walk with him on this saddest night under an orange moon, she can only try and notice every moment of it, as he showed her how to notice a moth, and keep it safe.

‘I did think of something,’ he says. ‘I would not have spoken of it now, but the connection of your family to Oxford is a remarkable coincidence. Would you be offended if I spoke of the collection’s future? I know how hard you work on it.’

‘I would be grateful.’

‘It is a poor thing to speak of inheritance on such a day.’

‘It will be a poor thing to speak of it tomorrow, or any day. He will still be gone.’

‘Then let me speak of it in a general sense, that some comfort might come in thinking of days to come. The idea came to me because my friends in Oxford are much occupied with the new experimental sciences, microscopes and so forth. Some of them have visited universities on the continent – Copenhagen, Leiden – and mourn that neither Oxford nor Cambridge can boast an experimental laboratory to match them. And they have fine collections housed with them.’

‘Elias Ashmole has said something like it.’

‘Yes, I suppose he would. Now, if by this tragedy there is no longer a son to inherit the Ark, could something useful be made of it? Could something be arranged at a university in his name?’

‘I am not sure I understand.’

‘I am thinking of authors who send their books to university libraries to ensure they are read. It is common practice, you know. Writers make gifts of their works, and if they are lucky scholars then read them, and so their words are put to use as philosophers form our ideas of ourselves. So why not rarities instead of words?’

‘I know so little of such matters, Alex. John has said nothing yet of what he will do with the collection now that...’ she does not need to say it out loud. Now that Jack is dead. ‘And I am not at all sure I have any sway. Perhaps less than I used to.’

‘It is just an idea. Something to think about that isn’t – this. It could be the seed of something in years to come.’

‘Thank you.’

‘After all, what do any of us make our terrible efforts for, but in the vain hope that we will be remembered? Marking some tiny part of ourselves into paper, or stone, or science, that we might not be bound by the limits our pitiful lives?’

‘You think putting the Ark in a university will help us all cheat death?’

He smiles then, or she thinks he does, can hear it in his voice.

‘I am next to heresy, it seems, when I let myself run on. But there, the thought was for you. You could talk to John when the time is right. You would not want the collection to go in a private sale, I think.’

They are back at the gate to the house, the last to arrive. Her ears had ceased their ringing while she and Alex were talking, but now they start again. It is as if for a few moments, the weight of what happened eased a little, but now it is back. She makes herself release his arm.

‘Will you stay, and drink a glass with us?’

‘Forgive me, Hester. I wish I could, but it has been a long day with much travelling and I have more business early tomorrow. I will go straight from here to the horse ferry.’

‘Of course.’

The ringing in her ears changes pitch, more like singing.

He takes her hand.

‘But I wanted to see you, Hester. I wanted to remember Jack, and the time we had together. Remember it, and remember what I said.’

When she opens the front door the hall is empty. The mourners must all be in the rear parlour overlooking the garden – there is a faint sound of voices from the back of the house. She looks around. Everything is swagged in black cloth – she and Meg did it all while he was laid out. All the mirrors and windows and bowls of water and polished things kept dark, to keep his spirit from returning.

She won’t go and meet them and talk of him, not after the sweet shock of seeing Alex. Instead she turns left and slips away down the corridor to the Ark. Perhaps with quiet she can banish the ringing in her ears.

Inside she lights the lamp that sits just inside the door and goes to kneel before the empty fireplace. And here, at last, she weeps. She wets her shawl with it, the strings of her cap, the lace at cuffs and throat. The skin on her hands gleams with a sheen of tears, and no cloth to cover them. The light from the lamp makes her wet skin alive with dancing points of light, and when she looks up she finds them echoed everywhere in the room, the Ark’s own constellations. Light caught in the curves of Greek spoons and precious plates, on the polished case of an armadillo, in the swoops and curls of feathers plucked from birds of paradise. Light seeming to dance on the surface of an Indian lip-stone, of insects in amber, of turned cups and nutshells filled with carvings; dried capsicum; the rigid toadfish

like a pig's bladder with its fretwork pattern and stitched lip. She rises and goes to the nearest table, thinking her movement will break the spell, but the lights hold steady around her. She puts out her hand and a pile of polished amber clicks and rustles as if its captured insects still spoke. She lifts a piece of coral and the air drawn through it sounds like rushing water. A toadfish, its dried skin taut and shining, snaps and slips at the wood, at her fingers.

Something moves and she almost screams.

'Stop,' says a voice. 'I'm not a ghost.'

'Frances.' The girl – woman – is very close. Her eyes are very dark. 'You were here all along? Alone? With no light?'

'Yes,' she replies, simply. 'I don't need a light in here. And I didn't want to be discovered.'

Hester tries to calm herself, to stop all thoughts of lights and ringing ears and lost loves. She tries to dry her eyes and face what is in front of her. Not a ghost, perhaps, but an unwelcome apparition. Frances seems to be waiting for her to speak. In here, in the dimness, she looks very young. For a moment Hester remembers her as she was before everything soured, before the fights and the scandal, quickly covered up. She remembers her holding out a dragon's egg, under the mild eyes of unicorns. She should try and be kind.

'You could have stayed hidden,' she says instead.

'Perhaps I should have. I did not like to hear you weep so alone.'

'I chose to be alone.'

'Of course you did. You always did.'

She looks so like Jack, when she holds her head a certain way. Hester brushes down her gown, readies herself for going back to the others. It will be better than being in here with Frances and the small knives of her words. But the girl has not finished.

'So,' she says, as if they had been having a long conversation. 'Your plans are interrupted.'

'What plans?' It is like finding an old pair of shoes and putting them on, remembering the particular creak of leather, the places you walked. Frances will have her quarrel.

'Everything you put in place so that you would have the Ark to yourself.'

'Must we speak like this?'

‘Must I speak of the past, you mean? Perhaps if you had allowed me to speak then, it would not be pressing on me now. The lies you told.’

‘Frances...’

‘You think I am raving?’

‘I think you are grieving.’

‘Aye. And so are you. But still, we understand each other. Come now, I have been married seven years, the deed is long done. I am only sorry it was in vain.’

‘Everything I have done, I have done for our family.’

Frances laughs then, and not pleasantly.

‘So you told my father I seduced my uncle for my benefit?’

‘That was no lie.’

‘Of course you will say so. But you knew him as well as I. You knew it was against my will, what he did to me.’

‘Does it matter now? You married a steady man during a time of war. It was a happy thing.’

‘Happy...’ Frances laughs again. ‘Married to my grandfather’s widow. And now Jack is dead and you won’t even get to keep the Ark. I could be sorry for you, if you hadn’t sold me to that oaf to get rid of me.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I heard Papa talking to that man from the city. The one who made the catalogue. At least, he was talking and Papa was listening. He was making it very plain Papa would want to think of a new plan for the collection now, and that he is the man to help.’

‘That doesn’t mean anything.’ But then why does she feel fear creeping in, another sense of something she has been ignoring, come home to insist she pay attention?

‘Papa is drunk. That man knows what he is doing. With Jack gone he won’t have too much trouble to prise the Ark away.’

‘Frances, stop this. Your father won’t be thinking of that business now.’

‘No, he won’t. Papa is too good, too simple. But you and me and that man from the city – we aren’t like that. We are always trying to better ourselves, but it makes us cruel. You made sure I was sent away, but you won’t win against him.’

The ringing in her ears rises.

‘How can you say such things? You might regret your marriage, but everything that was done was done for you.’

‘You came here to be different, didn’t you? Always jealous of your painter cousins, nothing to do but mind your parents. Then you found I had made the Ark my occupation, and you knew you would never signify. So Uncle Norman did you a favour when he forced himself on me. Perhaps you don’t even know it yourself. But you should let the Ark go now. You are all Papa has left.’

Hester raises her lamp so they can see each other clearly.

‘You speak so on such a day?’ she says. ‘Very well. You think me ignorant, but I know how to make the Ark into more than any of us hoped for. It should be installed at Oxford or Cambridge in our name, and be a place for men of learning long after we are all gone.’ She had not thought of it since Alex said it, but now she has said it herself, it is real.

‘A fine scheme. But not for you, or for Papa. You won’t manage it.’

‘Why not?’

Frances waits to reply, gathering herself and going to the door. She turns there, an echo of that first night, the first time Hester saw the Ark.

‘He is too gentle,’ says Frances. ‘And you can’t even read.’

And at last she is gone.

Hester finds a chair, meaning only to rest a moment before she goes back, to shake off Frances’s words. So many things past that should not be spoken of. She is tired of the ringing in her ears, of all the dancing lights. She closes her eyes, tries to empty out her thoughts.

And then something happens. Some rush of blood, some contracting of the humours that transports her to a place of noise and loneliness.

She seems to be sitting on a step on a long stone stairwell, while metal pans are heaved down from somewhere above. A thousand pans and bowls and urns and assorted household stuffs made of

copper and pewter and lead, jolting from one wall of stone to the other, on and on, more and more. The noises reach unbearable proportions and her heart buffets her chest. She wants to call for Meg but cannot. *The mind's its own domain, unmapped, and I'll not answer for what mine turns up.* She cries out, *Stop.*

Then, it does. Her ears are clear again and she gasps with relief. A momentary hysteria, after the horrors of the day.

Except that something has changed. She picks up the lamp and makes to leave the Ark, for once finding no profit in solitude. She pauses by the door, where the stripes and curls of dried snakes are pinned to the wall in a strange set of hieroglyphs. Out of habit she adjusts their positioning, checks their scales are still in place. But there is something else about them now. It cannot be true, but she is quite certain she can hear them hissing.

III

1659-1666

The King was pleased to use this expression, That I was a person greatly deserving, & he had a particular kindness for me

Josten, C. H. (ed) *Elias Ashmole: His Autobiographical and Historical Notes, His Correspondence, and Other Contemporary Sources Relating to His Life and Work*

OCTOBER

Elias decides to deliver the books himself. A brisk cold wind is running through the city and he is restless and in need of occupation. He rides to the printers on Cornhill and fills a saddlebag with the last copies of the catalogue, wrapped in sacking. Then straight on to the bridge, past its cramped houses and finials of mortified heads. The wretched things insist, mutely: the country has not yet lived through enough strife, and who will be counted a traitor hangs in the balance once again. Cromwell is dead, his son laughed out of office, and what England will be next is uncertain. His mare dances uneasily over the cobbles. Above him the sky is troubled and uncertain, grey mixed with gold, clouds thick with rain edged with a dark violent blue. The coming winter gathers on his tongue, the air newly sharpened.

Strangely, despite the daily threat of anarchy, despite the wild reports of intrigue and rebellion from all quarters, he feels freer than he has done in years. The last of Mary's lawsuits has been settled, and with this private victory he allows himself an illogical feeling of optimism about his political future, about the possible return of the King. He notices that the mare's hooves ring out louder on the cobbles of the bridge than they do in summer, metal on stone filed to points by the cold walls of the cramped houses. He wonders why sound changes with the weather, and if it can be quantified, and if the colours and habits of creatures formed from the air and the earth are determined by the seasons. If a snake falls from a cloud heavy with summer rain will its skin be yellow and green, its temper mild? Or if from a winter storm, will it be black and turbulent? These days, he can entertain such thoughts without interruption. And he does, riding along the river and past the marshes. Grey fields, low dark roofs and a distant twist of smoke. The journey is so familiar he realises how long it has been since he made it. He is impatient to be in South Lambeth again.

When he arrives the house is almost obscured by the fading swags of the garden's summer growth, the whale ribs at the entrance less like a gateway than a mouth struggling to close. Exotic trees

have grown to overbearing maturity, overspilling walls and beds. Late season flowers and grasses, brown and stiff, await their winter clearance. He dismounts and leads his horse into the front yard, assessing. It is not precisely neglected, but in former years John would not have left the work so late. The canoe is barely visible, choked by plants in its place under the sumac tree. Has something else happened to the family? Quite apart from his struggles with Mary, he has been too preoccupied. Since the death of the boy Jack and the printing – some three years later – of the catalogue, Elias has completed his treatise on good health *The Way to Bliss*, has begun a catalogue of the Roman coins in the Bodleian library, has performed all manner of experiments.

He is about to walk his horse around to the stables when the door to the left of the yard opens, the secondary one from the collection's annexe. Cheerful voices issue from within, which he finds provoking. The summer he worked on the catalogue that door was almost his private entrance, affording easy access to the garden on summer days. A couple he doesn't recognise are coming out – they are of middling age and dress, still half-turned towards the collection and talking to someone within. The man is gesturing with a copy of the catalogue, which he must have just purchased. Elias had all but forgotten the Tradescants' other pursuit, that of allowing anyone with sixpence to poke about among the rarities. He has never liked it, and now he feels obscurely envious, as if he has happened upon a party he should have been invited to. Not wishing to announce himself directly he turns and fiddles with the straps of his saddlebag, knots his reins about the pommel. He wishes he had brought Sam but he is back in the city, preparing for a trip into Surrey to make notes of important tombstone inscriptions.

The couple are coming out into the yard now, greeting him cheerfully. He nods and raises a hand, still working at the saddlebag. Too late, he sees he should have left well alone; the weight of the books pulls the strap loose and with a crack the whole falls heavily to the ground. The mare shies and he has to go to her head, irritated by the ill-timed commotion. The couple come running up and insist on trying to help, but only get in the way. They are talking excitedly of everything they have seen, saying they have never known anything like it.

'Have you already seen the collection, sir?' asks the man, once the mare is calmed. 'Or is this your first visit? I must say, I have seen a few things around the city – pygmies, and a live ostrich, and the

dodo bird in Lincoln's Inn that ate pebbles – but this array is beyond anything I could have anticipated. We had no conception of what was possible in the world, and will be forever changed by it.'

They are plain people, shopkeepers perhaps. Elias regrets that the Tradescants are so indiscriminating.

'He knows the Ark as well as any of us,' says a voice from behind. 'Perhaps better. This is Elias Ashmole, to whom we owe our catalogue of the rarities.'

It is Hester Tradescant, who must have been the couple's guide to the collection and has now come out to join them in the yard. Elias is not sure he has seen her properly since the funeral seven years before. She was always an odd creature, angular and watchful, out of place in the curious world she was trying to be a part of. At the boy's funeral she looked like she had been drained of all blood. Now, fiftyish, her dark hair is all but grey, her face hollowed out the way some women's do with age. She was never beautiful, but he finds himself briefly considering what it might be like to have her. Something urgent and rough, holding her squirming in place. He wonders why he has not thought of it before, the way one does with women as a matter of course. Then she gives him a look, and he remembers. That peculiar petulance in her, as if she always expected better. He wants to crush her, but not with his body.

'I have been away too long,' he says.

'We weren't expecting you,' she replies. And above the chatter of the guests she meets his eyes briefly, a startling intrusion. There is something new there, an assuredness he has never remarked.

'I hope my visit is not too unpleasant,' he says, in jest.

She turns away then, distracted by her guests. She shows them towards the gate, moving her hand to echo the curves of the whale ribs. Talks of old John Tradescant's voyage to Russia, and though there is no reason as far as Elias knows to suppose that particular whale was harpooned in front of the man in the freezing waters of Archangel, she somehow manages to give this impression. She is, he sees, an excellent guide. It is not a pleasant realisation.

She waves the couple off and walks back to him, that stilted stride unchanged. It irritates him just to watch it.

'I brought you more copies of the catalogue,' he says. 'John sent a note. These are the last of them.'

'Yes,' she says. 'I asked him to. I did not think you would come yourself.'

Without preamble, she hefts the fallen saddlebag. It is as if something in her has dissolved, or fused, and there is no dissembling any more. She does not like him.

'Come,' he says. 'We are old friends. It was an unsettling day in the city, I thought I would visit a place of past contentment and deliver the errand myself.'

She does not unbend, but carries the bag with her back in to the collection's annexe. He leaves his mare at a tether stone and follows.

Inside she puts the bag down on a side table and busies herself with the fire. He remembers this from the summer he spent cataloguing; she was always finding her way in to the collection room while he was trying to work, opening a window or brushing things with bunches of herbs, clouding his peace with her noises and meddling. At least the collection seems much the same as when he last saw it, from a cursory glance. He starts to unpack the catalogues, small cloth-bound volumes, the neat lines of their contents almost indescribably pleasing. He has several at home but he slips another into his coat pocket, as if for luck.

The fire tamped down, she comes over and starts to straighten the pile of catalogues. He restrains himself from shooing her away. She has a new tic, he notices; sometimes she will pause what she is doing and twitch her head as if to clear it, or put it on one side as if listening. It makes her birdlike – something leggy yet inelegant, like a stork.

'Is John in the garden?' he asks, eager to get away. 'I have some matters of business for him.'

She affects not to hear him.

'Mary was here,' she says instead.

'What?' he asks, alarmed. 'When?'

'In the spring. Before she retired to Berkshire.'

'Ah,' he says, relieved. 'Well, she always valued your company.' This, he realises, must be why her manner is so hostile. But he is not inclined to justify himself to this woman. He expended untold efforts on dispelling the lawsuits directed at him by Mary and her family, most significantly her petition

for divorce. He was depleted by it all, but it was necessary to secure his position. And in the end, it was well done – he and Mary are still married, but she lives in Berkshire while his income is safe, and he is at liberty to live freely. He can turn his attention more assiduously to his own future.

‘And John?’ he asks again. ‘He seems behind in the work this year.’

She shrugs. ‘Every year without Jack is harder for him in the garden. There is even more to do this season than usual.’

‘I will not take much of his time. Where shall I find him, in the hothouse or the herb beds?’

‘It’s not a good time for him to discuss business.’

Really. He has had enough of this tiresome woman.

‘Madame, I will happily roam the gardens myself until I come across your husband, but I cannot understand why you would insist upon it.’

‘Is your business so urgent?’

She must understand her place, he decides.

‘Are you so ignorant of the confusion the country is facing? There has already been one uprising in support of the King, and there will be another. My business concerns the collection, and it cannot wait.’

‘The collection is my business, these days.’

‘Is it? And you can pay for a new printing of the catalogue, can you, dedicated to our returning King?’

An internal struggle plays out across her sallow face, and she appears to relent. There is that tic again – a noticeable pause, a transfer of attention elsewhere. Then she shakes herself back into the present. Is her mind going?

‘He’s in the orchard. He...’ she stops, unsure. ‘John has not been well. You may find him changed.’

‘I am sorry to hear it. What knowledge I have of medicine, I offer in his service.’

He escapes, collecting his horse and walking around the side of the house to the stables. The change in Hester Tradescant has disturbed him. From a shadowy presence, she has stepped forward and begun to speak, and in a voice that jars. Of course she has no real power over the collection, as he

has just proved, but John has let her grow headstrong. Being in that room again, Elias is reminded of the work he dedicated to the Ark. Perhaps now is the time to give it his serious attention once again.

He walks through the garden towards the orchard. It is still magnificent, and he pauses just beyond the pond to look back and admire the house's familiar aspect. Late roses, outbursts of cyclamen, sprays of red berries. The foliage around this side of the house has been trimmed back, and he remarks anew the size of the original building, now divided into two separate residences, their gardens divided by a long, informal boundary of plants along an insecure paling. He wonders who lives in the further half now.

On through the garden and to the orchard. The heavy sky that brooded over the city has passed Lambeth by, and the day is pearly grey and still. Save a few winter varieties the ranks of apples and cherries, plums and pears, damsons and greengages are all leafless outlines, chickens pecking over the last smears of wasp-blown windfalls in the grass. With a shudder he recalls his dream, the bodies of Eleanor and their lost child reaching out to him, their screaming chorus. He has not thought of it for such a long time. Perhaps despite his freedoms, he is alone altogether too much these days, his middling years marked by absence. No heir, no wife except in name, no great estate, no philosopher's stone, no King. If he should die today, what would remain of Elias Ashmole? His books, his notes, his coins and collections, the memories of his conversation. Gone in a fire or a change in fashion.

The sound of sawing jerks him out of these melancholy reflections. He should not walk in orchards. There are a couple of apprentices or labourers working through a pile of branches and cuttings nearby, but he does not see John and walks on. Near the far boundary he spots him, digging trenches for the new trees, which wait nearby in their sacks of earth. There is a great gap in the boundary hedge there and he recalls that they cut down the oak tree after the boy fell from it. Jack Tradescant was the only one of the family with any promise. But Elias has never been ignorant of the fact that his passing makes the future of the Ark far more open to question. He hails John and the gardener stands slowly, effortfully.

'Elias,' he says, with pleasure and surprise.

If his wife has aged in the intervening years, John Tradescant has transformed. He has lost much of his bulk, seeming shorter than he used to. His beard grows as wildly as ever across his

crooked face, but is now streaked with grey, and cannot conceal the bloated, yellowish look of his skin, the redness of his eyes. He must, Elias realises, be drinking with more intent than ever.

‘John. I am sorry it has been so long.’

‘Well, well. I’ll wager the time has not been spent idly.’

‘I am as occupied as ever. But today it was Lambeth that called me, and I decided to bring the catalogues you asked for. Your wife said I would find you here.’

John gestures to his trenches, the waiting lines of saplings, his solitary spade.

‘A lonely work, these days. Since Cromwell died it seems men would rather polish their muskets than plant trees.’

‘What if I told you I believe the King will find his way back to us? That we should ready a new printing of the catalogue in his honour?’

‘You think it so likely? I have been too occupied this season. How extraordinary.’

‘I have my methods.’

John quietens then. Perhaps he is thinking of Kent, of the twist of flesh still boxed up in Elias’s chambers in Middle Temple. The boy died so soon after it was all rather forgotten, but the artefact persists. The methods Elias really uses for prognostication are beyond the gardener’s comprehension, but the whiff of fear is useful.

‘If you think it possible, I can only give thanks,’ John says at last. ‘Of course we shall reprint. With a new dedication to his Majesty, God willing.’

‘Your wife seemed rather annoyed she was not consulted.’

‘She’s become more attached to it all since Jack died. I sometimes wonder if she sees the rarities almost as her children. Since she did not have her own, and mine are both... gone.’

‘To face life without an heir... I know something of that, John.’

‘We are blessed men in other ways. And Hester surprised me with an ingenious idea. If we leave it to Oxford or Cambridge, they can house it in our name, to the benefit of future scholars. I like the plan, since she will not hear of selling it.’

‘A university?’ Elias is shocked. It is an audacious thought, and a good one.

‘Aye. I don’t know what put it in to her head, but it might be something worthwhile to come out of our griefs.’

It would be something quite new in England, if it could be effected properly. That such a thought came from Hester Tradescant seems impossible – that she and her husband might negotiate it with the university, laughable. Elias has, he realises, come back to Lambeth only just in time.

‘It will be dark soon,’ he says, peering at the leaden sky. ‘Why don’t we make a visit to the inn at South Lambeth, warm ourselves against the coming winter? I’m in no hurry to ride back to the city.’

It is no surprise that John promptly nods and starts to gather up his spade. His movements are tentative, the old capable body forgotten.

‘I know the brewer there,’ he says. ‘He’ll have us sample his new barrels. Let’s drink to the future.’

DECEMBER

The cellar smells of cold stone, brandy and damp. A narrow window at the level of the courtyard shows an oblong of starred sky, iris black. Hester passes her hands over the shelves of fruit stored there since the autumn, checking for taint as much by touch and scent as by sight. Across the room Meg does the same – two old women bent over in the taper light, working along the rows. They lift each apple, quince, medlar and pear with purposeful tenderness, discarding any that might pass rot to their neighbours. Leathercoat. Greatbelly. Go-No-Further. Dead Man's Pear. Long ago Hester had wanted Alex to paint them, but his art was all for flowers. Still in her mind's eye she can see them recorded as if by his hand, each fruit an astonishment, every blush, speckle and stripe as individual as any human face.

The night sounds of the house in winter tick by, louder in the dark. Ship's timbers sigh in the walls, a log hisses and spits, a branch grates against glass. Further afield, bells sound the hour followed by a rabbit's dying shriek. These are shared, known sounds. Beneath them runs a scattering of chords only Hester hears: the sounds of the rarities, which reach her wherever she is in the house. She calls it the song of the Ark. After that first snake's hiss, in the weeks and months after Jack died this unseen chorus plagued her with fears of Bedlam, and she wept for her mind as well as for the loss of him. But it has never left her, and she has become accustomed it. Not all of it is knowable, for how can she identify with any certainty what might be the chatter of bone belts at a dance, the abrasions of a penitential girdle, the whisper of a snake's belly on sand? Somehow she has ceased to worry at this beat of foreign drums, though she tells no-one what she hears. Honks, howls, exotic voices, and now rough laughter that seems to carry down into the cellar on the night air.

'What's that?' says Meg, and Hester starts. The laughter is real, then. Meg drops the spoiled apple she is holding, a slumpy sound on the flagstone floor. 'Mistress...'

‘Wait,’ says Hester, and they stay still and alert, hares flattened against the ground. These fears are real, and close – one Cromwell dead, another failed, and the men in the city restless. Somewhere out there, armies are on the move once more. But the voices resolve themselves as they come in at the gate: John and Elias in uproarious dispute. The women breathe out.

‘Again?’ mouths Meg. Hester’s relief lessens, and she turns back to the shelves of fruit. She prefers the sounds of the Ark to the point Meg is trying to make. For a long time after Jack’s funeral she thought Elias had forgotten them, that she was safe. But since the autumn he has taken John drinking almost every week, casting some new spell.

‘He wants something,’ says Meg.

Of course he does. He always has. But Hester can’t see his plan, not yet. She works faster and finishes the last shelf. Brushes her hands on her apron, picks up her bucket of mildewed fruit, and makes for the cellar door. At the foot of the stairs, though, the voices of the men from above reach her all too clearly. They are stumbling about the hall, singing.

*A great philosopher
Had a goose for his lover
That followed him day and night
If it be a true story
Or but an allegory
It may be both ways right*

‘Haven’t seen him for months,’ continues Meg at her elbow, ‘and now this every week? He knows the Master...’

‘The Master what?’ says Hester, daring her to keep talking.

Meg hefts her own bucket meaningfully, her thoughts all too clear. Hester knows she is right, that John is more than halfway to a drunkard by himself and easily led by Elias. She knows, too, that she injures Meg by treating her as a mere servant, that it is undeserved, but the situation frightens her. If Elias Ashmole can let his own wife live in another county but keep her fortune, what might he do to her? Out of sorts, she and Meg start to climb the stairs, hearing the sounds of the men retreat to the

winter parlour and the door slam shut. From the kitchen Hester goes on up to the hall and finds one of the maids, Caroline, tidying abandoned cloaks and hats.

‘Did they ask for anything, Caroline?’

‘The fire is stoked, Mistress. I’m to bring them claret. And a poultice.’

‘A poultice?’

‘The Master bruised himself at the gate. One of the bones.’

At the mention of the guardian whale ribs, a series of wild notes rise in Hester’s ears – they are the bellows of unearthly cattle, scraping of irregular strings, old doors creaking slowly open.

‘Are the bones damaged?’

‘I shouldn’t think so, Mistress. The Master tried to pull one up and use it as a cudgel.’

‘But hurt himself, and fell?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘I’ll take care of them. You go on to bed.’

Caroline bows and goes, not troubling to hide her haste.

Hester goes back down to the kitchen for a tray with claret, glasses, a clean cloth, hot water and a bowl of black soap, salt and honey. With this she climbs the stairs again and goes to the parlour, pushes open the door. Inside, John and Elias are facing each other in easy chairs on either side of the fire, which burns high and bright. The heat seems to have stunned them, so instead of singing they stare into the flames, mouths slack. Perhaps Elias, too, is drinking to retreat from his pains. Perhaps there is nothing more sinister to their new companionship. She wishes she could believe it.

‘Ah,’ says Elias, as she approaches with her tray and sets it on the table between them. ‘Succour. John, we are saved.’

At the sound of his voice, a hundred wings take flight in alarm.

‘Praise be,’ says John, heaving himself half upright. ‘Pass our guest a glass, Hester, and one for me. See, I am injured.’

He holds out his left arm, the one nearest the fire, like a child before its nurse. She, knowing how his moods can wax and wane on nights of drinking, is glad of his helplessness, and goes around to his other side, drawing up a stool.

‘A dispute with a whale, I hear?’

‘Devil take it! A bit of sport, only. We had a disagreement, Elias and I. I forget the substance of it. Then a fine figure of a sabre presented itself, and I a fool not to make a play for it. But it was too firmly planted where it stood,’ he says sadly.

She turns back his torn sleeve. The skin beneath is merely scraped and roughened, barely blued. It will not hurt him in the morning, but in her private ear something in the Ark is making a high keening note of worry.

On the wall behind John hangs their portrait, painted by Emanuel four years earlier at the publication of the catalogue. Out of hiding but short of employment, Manu had been pleased with it. ‘Painting family is different to painting a patron,’ he told her. ‘Instead of fearing you capture too little of your subject, you risk revealing just how much you know.’ She and John wear rich clothes before a featureless background, Hester carrying a sprig of myrtle for loyalty. When she first saw the painting her own ageing did not surprise her – her face thinned and folded like a worn-out handkerchief – but John looked to her much the same as he always had, his irregular features half-hidden behind his beard. Now, before the fire, he is a changed man. His skin is swollen and yellowed, his eyes bloodshot. He has the face of a man defeated.

‘Here,’ he raises his forearm again, reminding her why she is there. She rolls back his sleeve and dips a cloth into the warm water, sponges gently. He winces, though she can hardly be hurting him. When she starts to dab with the soap mixture, he takes up his glass.

‘To forgiven slights,’ he says, waving his drink at Elias. ‘To – what was it? No matter, to drink is to forget.’ And they do, smacking their lips.

As Hester treats John’s arm, bent over in the firelight, Elias beams at them as he never has – with a strange sort of admiration, almost affection.

‘There now,’ he says, sounding satisfied. ‘It is a good thing to have a wife. A man should be cared for. My own Eleanor knew this. Perhaps one day I will meet another woman who can match her.’

He drifts off into contemplation, and Hester keeps on binding. When Mary was last in Lambeth she explained why she was returning to Berkshire. ‘I can neither live with him nor leave him,’ she had said. ‘He will not permit a divorce, and my estates are his. He lives at his leisure while I am

shamed and exhausted. That is the truth. Be glad, my dear, that your husband is merely a foolish sot. He will not seek to hurt you.' Hester has not seen Mary since.

'And you have done your wife a great service tonight, John,' continues Elias, staring into the fire and gesturing with his glass as if she were no longer in the room. His fingers tap on the arm of his chair, an impatient habit at odds with his inebriation. John twists slightly as if she was hurting him, but does not complain as she finishes tying the bandage around his arm. What does Elias mean? Whatever it is, she does not want to find out on a dark night with two drunk men. She rises to go.

'Stay,' he says, as if she were one of his dogs.

'It's late,' she says. 'I must retire.'

'John and I have been talking,' he says. 'Haven't we, John? Talking for many weeks. And toasting. Toasting your family, and the collection you have built here.' He pours another glass and hands it to John, raises his own. 'To the Ark!' Elias says. And together they tip more claret down their necks.

'Aye,' says John, belching. 'Making... best choice. Because you, Hester,' and he puts his hand out to her, a gesture so unfamiliar it shocks her, 'are a good woman. Done your best. Done as much as anyone could have expected. More.'

They are not his words, she knows, and she listens hard for the Ark. She traces its call between the murmurings of the fire, the pitch changed in the deeper night, gentle clicks and gurglings. It does not dissemble like humans do. Again she makes to leave, but this time it is John who catches at her sleeve.

'Sit,' he says, and half pushes her back onto her stool.

'The Black Rat has undone you both,' she says. When John drinks, it is best to laugh it off. It changes him, sometimes makes him angry and rough from the first glass, but the next day all is forgotten. 'You'll be needing a poultice for your heads in the morning.'

'No,' says Elias. 'Listen. We have agreed an excellent plan, your husband and I. It is to all our benefit. We have prepared a document between us, and all you need to do is sign as a witness.'

'Sign?' she asks. Is this what he has been planning? Something written, something you cannot laugh off.

Elias reaches for a pocket of his waistcoat, but pauses in the act of withdrawing whatever is inside, and raises an eyebrow at her.

‘*Can* you sign?’

‘Yes,’ she says, feeling his barb go in. But his eyes are on her while she traces the letters in her mind, slowly, in defence. ‘But what is this plan? What would you have me sign?’

‘A security,’ he says, with a wave of the hand. ‘A reassurance.’

‘Concerning?’

‘When I die,’ says John, ‘the collection will go to Elias.’

A nest of snakes hisses awake, hooves paw at the ground. Something thrashes through undergrowth.

‘You are mistaken,’ she says, pretending calm. ‘It has been settled. Long settled. When the time comes, we will donate the Ark to a university in our name.’

The idea of it has comforted her ever since Alex proposed it. It has made sense of everything lost and broken. John cannot seriously be considering whatever Elias has proposed.

‘No,’ says John, as if she had identified a rose as red instead of white. ‘That was your idea, but I have now decided. You need only sign.’

He is hurrying, wanting it to be over. She chooses not to heed the warning of his flattened mouth, the wrinkle in his brow that makes him look like Frances.

‘You are both drunk,’ she says. ‘Without a clerk...’

‘No matter,’ says Elias, withdrawing a paper from his pocket. There is already a quill and ink on the table. ‘It is within my power to draft a deed of gift. You should of course consult it before you sign. And I have a copy for myself.’ Then heaves himself to his feet. ‘If you will excuse me,’ he says. ‘The claret passes through.’ He moves unsteadily, putting his hand to John’s shoulder as he goes by his chair.

Left alone with John, Hester sits back down by his side.

‘John,’ she says. ‘Stop this. Go to bed, and we will talk in the morning. This is madness.’

‘How so?’ he says, not looking at her, taking another pull at his glass. ‘It is my father’s work, and mine. If I am dead, what remains?’

‘For the love of God, John. I do. My work. My livelihood. Our name.’

‘Your work?’ He sits up, suddenly contemptuous. ‘Dusting, and making a fool of yourself to visitors? You think they would come without me, without the garden? And as for your livelihood, what of it? You will be well enough provided for.’ A fool, who only dusts.

‘John, you do not know what you are saying. Tomorrow you will think differently.’ She should leave it there, but the shock of it all makes her keep arguing. ‘Why would you give away your father’s work, and yours, and mine, to this man who has only ever wanted to advance himself? Haven’t we both been happy with the idea of its home being at a university, one day?’

‘And what do we know of universities?’ His cry surprises her in its despair. ‘I am a plantsman, no more. And you, a woman! You can barely sign your name. Will you go alone to Oxford or Cambridge and do a deal with the dons? Elias Ashmole is of that world, he made the catalogue and paid for its printing. There is no better guardian.’

‘And Jack? Should he be forgotten too?’

He rounds on her then.

‘How dare you speak to me of my children?’

‘John...’

‘Jack, who you only ever looked at with cow eyes? Haven’t you done enough pretending he ever cared what happened to the collection?’

‘He did, he...’

‘He humoured you, when you failed to have your own children.’

‘John!’

‘And Frances? I know what you did to her, she told me in the end. God forgive me for thinking you cared for us.’

‘I didn’t...’

‘Didn’t what? Didn’t have me believe it was she who seduced her uncle, so you could be rid of her?’

It is the thing that is never spoken of, even to herself. She does not know how to answer him. And he does not seem to expect one – instead he grabs her hand and pulls her towards the table.

‘You are my wife, and you will sign the deed as I have told you to.’

With a sob she reaches for the quill. She scrawls the letters as best she can, following their outline through her tears.

E-S-T-E-R T-R-E-D-U-S-C-E-N-T

She stares at the wavering letters, which seem unreal in the half-light. Before either of them can say anything, the parlour door opens and Elias returns.

He walks over to the table, seeming suddenly sober. Looks down at the signed paper and nods. From his pocket he takes a plug of wax and holds it in the candle, then seals the deed with his ring.

‘Wonderful. Shall we have another drink to celebrate?’

Hester runs past him and away, her private ear full of panicked keening.

~

The morning when it comes is white and grey, and her head throbs. The Ark, too, seems stunned into silence, or still asleep under the English winter sky. She passes no-one on her way downstairs. Elias’s hat and cloak are gone from the hall. She images him walking unsteadily away towards the river in the dawn, his breath hot and stinking, his teeth stained red. He is smiling, though, his hand going to his pocket in that gesture he has.

John is still in his chair from the night before. As she approaches she sees he is awake, staring sightlessly into the cold fire. The signed paper is still on the table. She picks it up and holds it out to him.

‘Read it to me,’ she says. And he does, meek again in daylight as she knew he would be. He will not remember what he said to her about Jack and Frances. But she will.

I, John Tradescant... do hereby irrevocably and unconditionally give and transfer, by way of a gift, without any limitation or restriction... my collection of rarities also known as The Ark to my good friend and benefactor Elias Ashmole, of

which I am the sole owner... with the full agreement and consent of my wife and beneficiary, Hester Tradescant, that she retain no rights to the rarities...

He puts it down, as if it pains him to read on.

'I'll burn it,' he says. 'It will be as if it never happened.'

'He has a copy,' she says. 'And in any case we should keep it. Nothing that he touches is without another side. We might need it as proof.'

'It's only a paper,' says John. 'There will be a way around it.'

She waits.

'I'll make a new will,' he says. 'You will have everything. The Ark will go to a university as we agreed.'

'Yes,' she says. 'That is right. But will it be enough to satisfy Elias Ashmole?'

'It must be,' he says, dully.

'You think so? Look at what is in front of you.'

The paper with her uncertain signature lies between them. John can make a new will, but she will always know that Elias means to have the Ark, and what he will do to get it.

1660

OCTOBER

Elias carries the children through Whitehall in a sturdy box, their coffins of glass and wood burrowed into moss. Down from his new study in the Holbein Gate and into the palace yards, where a brisk wind makes coppered leaves leap at his approach. To the King, his footsteps sound out, to the King, to the King who is six months returned, and Elias Ashmole a favoured man. Passing sunlit courts and galleries on his way to the state apartments he is lazy with joy, and neglects to watch for loiterers. They hang around the place, hopeless men with disfiguring diseases and missing limbs, hoping that the King might extend a hand to touch them and cure them of their ills.

Too late to avoid, something like a pile of refuse detaches itself from the crisp shadow of an arch and lumbers into his path. Elias knows this one, for he seems to live here as long as he can stay out of the way of the guards. Arise Evans, for that is his name, reminds Elias of a decaying log. His face is gouged out and half-rotted, oily with fungus, and his smell is also of the forest, something old and not quite knowable. The remains of the hands are lush with blisters and polyps, ripe for harvest. In an attempt to dignify its condition the creature calls himself Evans the Prophet. Now he speaks, a sound like porridge on the boil.

‘What’s that you’re carrying?’ he gurgles. Elias adjusts the position of the burden in his arms, and hurries on.

‘I know you can hear me,’ Evans persists, shuffling alongside. ‘And don’t think I don’t know what’s going on.’

For a moment Elias wonders whether Evans has indeed gained some higher understanding, is able to scry the colours of autumn and see what Elias hopes for himself. But the prophet is a low brute, preoccupied with his own misery.

‘You all know I’m here,’ he says, ‘you happy Cavaliers, and not one of you will speak to the King on my behalf. You think his Majesty will recoil in horror from my person, and from whoever

presents me.' When Elias doesn't reply, merely walks faster, Arise Evans returns his attention to the box he is carrying. 'Something for the King?' he whines, the churning of his crevassed flesh and exhalations of fetid breath compressed to a nasal fluting. 'Courting his favour, as a good courtier should. He'll be pleased, no doubt, with so much work on to bring the place up to scratch, to get another gift.' Limners and carpenters at work on every cornice and window frame, plans drawn up for new apartments, laboratories, statues, portraits, parties. England made anew, but not for Arise Evans.

'No gift,' says Elias. 'A demonstration, merely. The King is a scientific man.'

'Something strange and rare, then, to delight him? Is that not a gift? And from you, of whom much is spoken.' Sensing a slackening in pace, Evans bores into his advantage. 'Haven't you presented the King with your books, and been given a new coat of arms? Aren't you made Windsor Herald? Tasked with cataloguing all His Majesty's coins and medals? Hasn't he given old King Harry's private study over for your use? Haven't you examined his father's traitors in the Tower ahead of their execution? And now you bring him curious artefacts, you cultivate his scholarly mind. He will know his favours are justly bestowed, consider more of the same.' Elias, impressed by Evans's ear for court news, allows his silence to conceded that it might be so. 'I hear,' says Evans slyly, 'talk of the Excise. Comptroller, no less.'

'Hell's teeth, Evans. If you don't stop hanging around and gossiping, I'll have the soldiers remove you.'

'You should watch that,' the prophet muses, unmoved. 'Your tendency to the uncouth. It's big job, Comptroller. Can't show cracks in the varnish.'

'What would you know about it?'

'I know the King needs funds to keep everyone happy. That the excise tax has been neglected since the wars. And now London is full of new pleasures, and people enjoying them with no benefit to the Crown. Rivers of coffee, oceans of chocolate. He'll need a proper man for the job.'

'Those soldiers. Perhaps I'll tell them to boot you to Smithfield? The tanneries? You'd be no good for leather but they'd melt you down for fat. Or Southwark? You could slip right under a gravestone as it was being carved.'

‘Or you could mention me to the King. Am I not strange and rare enough? Would exercise of his gift not be a delight to all?’

This is what Evans wants, what keeps him oozing into the clefts of Whitehall. A touch of the sovereign’s hand that might ease his affliction.

‘Get away, Evans. I’d no more bring you to the King than a poxed trollop.’

‘That’s hurtful,’ muses the prophet, ‘but if I only wait, I’ll have my audience. Why else would the King return, if not to bring succour to his people?’

Elias, lengthening his stride in good health, begins to pull away.

‘You think you’re any different?’ Evans growls after him, sensing the loss of his audience.

‘Aren’t we all beggars at his table?’

‘The King is anointed by God,’ Elias says by way of closure, and is relieved when the prophet stops trying to keep up. ‘And if considered worthy enough for his notice, one should not be greedy.’ The flaking mass of Arise Evans stands in the middle of the passage, receding into silhouette, ready to sink again into its waiting slouch.

‘Remember me to the King,’ it calls out.

‘When the Devil takes me,’ Elias replies, under his breath. He goes on, into the inner rooms of the palace, shifting the weight of the children in his arms. With Evans behind him he inhabits himself fully; a courtier in the new England, with only opportunity before him.

The King leans close to the glass dome, one of the objects Elias has taken out of the box and placed before him. Its curve hides his face and makes his eye enormous through the liquid. A fine, dark eye, its setting perfectly crinkled with the possibility of laughter. It contemplates in silence for longer than a lesser eye would permit, lacking the certainty of rank. The King gives his full attention to the boy child folded into the jar like a wedge of putty, so the men standing about must also stare in silence at the specimen, which seems to gather light and weight to itself, lending a magnetic density to the fraying fissures of its yellowed flesh.

‘Remarkable,’ says the King at last, straightening up and shifting the air of the room as he does so. Charles has the stature and bearing of a myth; a stag in the forest whose beauty makes the hunter

lower his bow. But there is no unfeeling distance between the sovereign and the world – indeed, those fine eyes now shine with emotion.

‘Taken directly from the womb?’ he says, his voice edged in sorrow. ‘It seems as plump and fresh as that same day. As if it were only sleeping.’

‘Yes, sire. The mother died of consumption in Covent Garden four years ago. Doctor Warner cut the child out and transferred it to this liquid.’

Is there a tremble to his own words? Something about Charles gathers you to him; he is lucent with the pathos of a history which is also England’s. Tragedy, exile, redemption – to be in his presence is to be alive to all that can be lost and won, ever drawing back from tears.

‘And this?’ Charles points now to the small wooden box containing two girls entwined in an embrace, the breast and belly of one grown inseparably into the other.

‘They were born around the time of your return to England, sire. The preservation is, as you see, through drying and rubbing with spices – the more common method. It produces this dark and wooden appearance.’ The faces wizened, the arms unnaturally upraised.

‘Ah!’ The breath no longer trembles but is forced out in unstudied anguish. Tears sparkle on the Royal cheeks. ‘To lose a child – forgive me, gentlemen – the cruelty of it, whatever one’s station in life.’

Elias does not allow himself to consider his own losses. The King is asking exacting questions on the preservation process, with the attention and insight of a true scholar.

‘My brother and sister are in London presently,’ he says at last, tracing the arid ridges of the dead girls’ skin with a pale fingertip. ‘We shall arrange for them to see this also. And Doctor Warner – I should like to congratulate him. Now,’ he says, drawing Elias over to the window so they can speak more privately. ‘A word.’

Behind them, there is a jealous rustling of expensive silks.

‘You have a much larger collection out near Lambeth, do you not? I have seen a catalogue of it.’

‘Yes, sire.’ In the end Elias himself had paid for the new copies, with their dedication to the returning King. He is less welcome in South Lambeth these days than he was. But with the deed of gift signed, he need now only wait. He knows John Tradescant has remade his will, and also that the gardener will not be aware of how futile a gesture that is.

‘I should like to see it.’

A thrill shivers through Elias at the offer of Royal approval for the Ark. Injured Tradescant pride over the deed would be irrelevant should the King visit South Lambeth. He only pauses at the thought of what John might say about the collection’s future. Should too much attention be paid before he dies, he might discover the legal realities that will face his widow.

‘Although,’ Charles continues, mercifully overlooking the pause where an invitation should have been, ‘we are much preoccupied at present. But we have great plans for a park, which should be open to the people. We shall build our own cabinet one day, eh Ashmole? Fill it with the lost children of other men.’

Despite himself Elias flinches, then finds his sovereign’s hand has fluttered to his sleeve.

‘Forgive me,’ says Charles, he who need never know the meaning of the word. ‘I make a mockery of my own sentiments. You see, Ashmole,’ – a confidence! – ‘these matters are uppermost in our mind. Now that we are returned, our thoughts turns to marriage, and the begetting of heirs.’ His many natural children, of course, are not mentioned.

‘Have you a brood, Ashmole?’

Elias falters, the rich hue of the afternoon overlain with something grey and bruised. The sound of screaming. Eyes opening to black, apples rotted away.

‘No, sire. My first wife died while with child. My second never conceived.’ He does not mention Mary’s mysterious swellings, effusions and palpitations, the pages of his diaries studded with thwarted desire. He does not mention that Mary is still not dead, but in Berkshire. Those eyes are on him, regretful, searching.

‘And yet you still hope? That’s good. Patience, Ashmole, and resolve. In all matters,’ says the King with a wink, acknowledging the absurdity of these concerns set against the battle for his crown. The rustling behind them increases; a throat is cleared.

‘Now, I think, to the business of state,’ says Charles.

Elias bows, but as he rises he finds himself the subject of an impish grin.

‘And don’t be so sure you don’t have an heir, Ashmole,’ winks the King. ‘Ask your pretty strumpets, eh? Our lineages are not so easily snuffed out.’ And walks away, laughing softly.

1662

MAY

‘Here.’ Hester holds out her hand at chest height, smoothing it across the air, an invisible counterpane. She is showing Emanuel the outline of the tomb she is having made to sit on the family plot. ‘And here.’ Her palms complete the rectangular shape, her arms spread as wide as they will go. The space above the unsettled earth seems both enormous and inadequate and she stretches out her fingers to show the possibilities of expansion. The churchyard flushes grey then blue, white then gold with the swift passing of clouds overhead, the humours of a reluctant spring. Though indecent ruffs of hawthorn blossom and cow parsley overspill every hedge and border, the season seems unwilling to inhabit itself. As if John being dead gave it pause.

Emanuel, his dark suit flecked with white petals, grunts and strokes his beard. In their nursery tempers of old he would have mocked her for dreaming of things she didn’t understand. But she has only been a widow for three weeks, so he is trying not to. Instead he huffs and sighs a little more. She lets him palter, indifferent. Her husband is dead – quietly, after a long decline, so that it seemed almost right. For the first time in her life she need answer to no-one. After the drunken night when John’s outburst made her sign the deed of gift, he became almost loving. In the end he gave her every authority over his estate, and she intends to use it.

‘Outside,’ Emanuel says at last. ‘Unusual.’

‘Where else should it be? The Tradescant plot was always here.’ Most families are laid in the church, their bodies slotted into the walls, the floor. But long ago the gardeners chose to be buried as they lived, out under the sun and the rain.

‘And yet I have seen perhaps one other tomb that size and shape in the city. Won’t you be content with a headstone? Don’t your neighbours consider the family remarkable enough already?’

He is right – to the South Lambeth villagers the Ark is not so much a fairground as a haunted mansion. But now John is dead she can no longer find it within her to mind what others might say. The

family she came to Lambeth for is gone, leaving her with a house full of things from other places, and ears that rustle and croon with unknowable sounds. So she will no longer be afraid, but will make a tomb equal to what she has lost, and what she has gained.

‘I would have liked your good opinion,’ she tells Emanuel now, ‘but I do not need it.’

He grunts again. ‘I am surprised the church allowed it.’

‘They haven’t, yet.’

‘But you are certain they will?’

‘For the right amount of poor relief.’ It will be a palace of a sum, but Hester considers it worth paying.

‘I see. And you are secure enough...?’

‘How can you ask that? You know how John left everything in his will.’

‘Well, I am happy for you, Pox. Though I must say it seems unwise to spend so much, and on such a monument. It doesn’t seem much in John’s character.’

‘But it is in mine.’

‘So I am beginning see.’ His eyes search hers, as if looking for something he recognises, but he shakes his head. Around them the shadows cast by white blossom have darkened in a rush to deeper blue, and she smells rain on the air. ‘And what else do you have in mind? Now the estate is yours?’

‘I have some ideas. Perhaps you could help me.’

She knows the contents of John’s will by heart, but she will need Emanuel to effect the gift to a university. And to ensure Elias Ashmole knows exactly how John left his affairs. She knows the lines by heart.

I give, devise and bequeath my Closet of Rarities to my dearly beloved wife Hester Tradescant during her natural Life, and after decease I give and bequeath the same to the Universities of Oxford or Cambridge, to which of them she shall think fit at her decease.

She is safe, the rarities are safe, and Elias Ashmole cannot change that. She has repeated the lines enough times she almost believes it.

‘But for now,’ she says to her cousin, ‘let’s go back to the house. I want to show you the latest designs for the panel carvings. So far I think they are very disappointing.’

Emanuel smiles at last. ‘Three weeks a widow, and you already command all about you like a man. It becomes you.’

‘Like a man, do I? Then perhaps you will pay attention, this time.’

‘Oh, you have my attention, Pox. The resting place of the Tradescant family will be gawped at for all eternity.’

‘Exactly,’ she says, and takes his arm.

And yet, she already knows that the reality of the tomb can never be what she has imagined. That no one could carve what she really wants – a miniature copy of every object in the Ark in stone, a perfect replica that will last in the churchyard forever. As it is, the Southwark masons are only just humouring her. When she first went there they caught each other’s eyes and hummed and hawed and scribbled notes to themselves for plain plaques while she tried to explain. Only her heavy widow’s purse made them listen, and keeps them redrafting the drawings. The scale of it alone is shockingly out of the ordinary for a country churchyard – a chest tomb above six feet long and two feet wide, with all four panels showing scenes from far-off places where the rarities came from, things she has imagined while they sing in her inner ear.

‘Hester.’

From Emanuel’s tone she knows he has spoken her name more than once. She comes back to him, to the irresolute spring day. They are approaching the house – among the gentle greens and whites of the Lambeth fields her gateway is crammed with deep purple iris, huge daisies, peonies in bud. The glossy leaves of sumac, tulip, and Turkish chestnut trees reach upwards over the walls and roofs, the Tradescant cornucopia.

‘What will you do?’ Manu continues.

‘Do?’

‘When you have finished with such affairs, the monument and so forth. You cannot stay here, of course, now John is dead.’

‘Why not?’

They are turning in at the gate, broad bolts of flowers unrolling all around them. Violets, pinks, lilies, campanula, tulips, gillyflowers. But for Hester, the song of the Ark is more important. It reaches her as she walks across the front yard – a chattering, gabbering, crooning company.

‘Oh come now, Pox. As charming as this estate is – ’

‘It is mine, and I have no intention of leaving.’

‘It is one thing to be profligate, but do not be sullen. You should come back to London and be with us in the city. Sarah and the children would welcome you back in town for as long as you need – ’

‘Manu,’ she says, pausing and facing him outside the front door. ‘Stop. This is my home, and John has left it so that I do not have to imagine another. I won’t go back to the city, and I won’t give up any of it.’ She turns from him and opens the door before he can begin disagreeing with her.

Meg has heard them come in and is there to hand her a letter. ‘Some clerk from town,’ is all she knows.

‘Here,’ Hester says to Emanuel, handing him the paper. ‘Be of use.’

And he, shaking his head, obliges. She will need to find a new servant who can read, or a clerk, now John cannot do it for her.

‘What news?’ She asks at last, when he does not look up to tell her. Still he says nothing and keeps his eyes on the paper, then folds it away and takes her arm.

‘Come into the garden,’ he says. Lowers his voice. ‘Away from the servants.’

They go out of the rear of the house and across the terrace, walk down the steps towards the pond. Here the garden’s beauty is even more astonishing. He takes in the knot beds, the pond with its mat of lilies, the pergolas heavy with roses, the espaliered fruit trees, and sighs.

‘It is perfect,’ he says. ‘Perhaps its final perfection. How will you manage it now?’

She waves her hand impatiently. ‘I haven’t decided. The apprentices will continue for the present. But what of this letter?’

‘The matters are connected,’ he says.

‘What? Does a gardener want to visit?’ Or, she thinks suddenly, Alex? She half expected him at John’s funeral, but he did not come. She does not know how it would be now, the two of them grown old, and her mind half occupied with unquiet things.

‘No, Hester.’ Emanuel takes her hand. ‘The letter is a summons from the Chancery court. Elias Ashmole expects you to deliver him the collection of rarities.’

The pitch of the Ark’s song changes, and something in it gives out a wild scream. But Manu’s words are somehow familiar. As if she has been waiting for this. She reminds herself of her new strength, of John’s will.

‘I’m sure he does, Manu. I think he wanted it from the day he first came here. And now he has heard of the will and is angry. But the matter is settled, and he will have to accept it.’

‘He says you and John signed a deed of gift, which cannot legally be undone and which supersedes John’s will. He says he has rights, legal and financial.’

She shakes her head. ‘That cannot be. John’s will was signed, and witnessed.’

‘Did Ashmole not pay for the catalogue?’

‘Yes, but that was before, and years ago.’

‘And did you not sign such a deed?’

Over two years ago. She and John, facing each other grey-faced the morning after everything was said.

‘There was a night they had been drinking... but John retracted it. He made his will.’ Why does that not seem to matter?

‘Then what Ashmole says is true.’

‘That a paper was signed, yes. But Manu, it was a stupid thing, they were both drunk, and John...’

‘I am not a lawyer, Hester, but I do not need to be. Perhaps this summons will convince you of what I have been saying – that your life in Lambeth is over. You must decide how else to live your life.’

On this spot she stood twenty-four years before, freshly free of the house in Holborn, and saw that a nine-year-old girl found her wanting. Has she been merely passing the time to be told the same thing now?

‘Do not mistake your inheritance for ownership,’ Emanuel is saying. ‘It would be impossible enough without this challenge. Be grateful for what you have lived, and be grateful for whatever comes next.’

‘It cannot be so simple,’ she says. ‘John left everything to me. How could Elias Ashmole take it all with a lie?’ But even as she says it, she remembers him. She knows his ways.

Emanuel seems to agree. ‘Hester,’ he says. ‘Do you not know what this man is, after all this time? Perhaps you do not see it from your position but he is powerful, and only becoming more so. The King favours him beyond all expectation and he is using that wisely. This... game he has played with you and John is only an idle diversion. He will not pause for a moment to consider you should you stand between him and something he wants.’

‘So this is your advice? To give him the collection of two lifetimes? And my livelihood?’

‘My concern is all for you.’

‘Then help me. Help me refuse this summons, and find a way for a university to house the collection in my name. John’s name.’

Emanuel shakes his head. ‘It is hard, I know. But it will be easier if you accept the inevitable. I do not see that you have another choice.’

Later, after Emanuel has gone back to the city, Meg lights a fire in Hester’s chamber against the cooler evening, brings her a glass of wine. She feels as if she is inside a giant shell with confused voices echoing off its pearly walls, and beyond it an uncaring sea. The drawings for the tomb look like a child’s, the very idea of it a joke. This is how Elias Ashmole makes her feel, and now he is back, insisting once again that he knows how things should be done, and that he has the power to make them so. The strange joy she felt that morning in the churchyard, the sense of being in control at last, has disappeared. Below her in the collection room, wolf-like things set up a howling.

‘Hester.’ Sharply, Meg makes herself heard. It is the second time that day Hester has not known someone was speaking to her.

‘Can you not hear me?’

‘Yes, Meg, I hear you perfectly. What were you saying?’

‘Only what you already know. That I don’t know what you are thinking with these drawings. What is this?’ She shakes a paper at her. It is a stonemason’s idea of a crocodile. ‘And this?’ An ostrich.

‘Perhaps you are right,’ Hester says. ‘Perhaps I should not think of standing out. A plain stone might do.’

Meg puts the papers down. ‘Now I am worried,’ she says. ‘In twenty years you’ve never once turned away from something outlandishly foreign. You mustn’t let this Ashmole make you a stranger to yourself.’

‘You don’t even like the Ark.’

‘What of it? I don’t like him either. What a man he is, to covet and steal! I want you to have your home as you wish it.’

‘Emanuel thinks I should give it up.’

‘Perhaps you are fortunate, Mistress, that neither choice is sensible.’

Hester smiles, then her attention is caught again by the song of the Ark. The wolf howls have died away and the night birds have started calling, the booms and croaks she cannot, in the daytime, match to the feathers scraps and labelled bones downstairs.

‘Hester.’

‘Yes?’

‘You didn’t hear me. Again.’

‘We were just speaking of –’

‘Not that. I said your name, but you were listening to another voice. But there is nothing here but fire and us. And out there, wind and the dark with its owls.’

‘It is nothing, I –’

‘I thought you were going deaf, but it’s something else. And it’s getting worse. What are you listening to?’

Hester is worn out from the day, from the return of Elias Ashmole. If Meg thinks she has lost her wits, perhaps it will be a relief to stop fighting it.

‘Don’t think of it as worse,’ she replies. ‘It is a great comfort to me.’

‘And what is it?’

‘I... do not quite know how to tell you.’

‘Please, Mistress, for not to know now is the greater worry.’

‘When Jack died, I – was lost for a time. You know this.’

‘Yes. The same as any mother after she has lost her child.’

‘Around this time, I – started to hear things. To say so makes it seem as if the noises were strange or haunting, and they were, but – I always knew what they were.’

‘What noises, Mistress?’

‘It is as if – well, I must not say so, because it is so real to me it does not seem to be imagined. I hear noises from the collection. The animals, and instruments, and other things I do not rightly know the name of when I hear their sounds.’

‘You hear them all the time?’

‘Not all the time. It sometimes seems as if they are more agitated when I am.’

‘What are they like? You are not frightened?’

‘How can I tell you, Meg, what I do not rightly understand myself? I only know that since Jack died, however strange it is and whatever else happens in the house, I have not lived alone with my thoughts.’

Meg is silent for a long time.

‘So? Will you have me exorcised?’

Her dear old maid shakes her head.

‘How can I, Mistress? I’ve worked here all my life and I’ve never pretended to understand what that room means to you. If you hear it calling to you, I am sure God has made it so for some purpose.’

‘Thank you.’

‘But, Mistress, you should never tell anyone else. If they do not hang you for a witch they will put you in Bedlam. You would make that man’s job an easy one.’

‘I will not.’

They sit for a long time in the dusk, thinking their own thoughts. As the shadows deepen at last to night, Hester knows what she must do.

‘I will tell them no,’ she says. ‘Elias Ashmole, Emanuel, though they both think I will submit, give up the Ark and go back to London.’

‘Of course you will,’ says Meg.

‘I will go to court if I have to. And I will have an announcement printed. We will open the Ark again directly. I will show it can be done.’

1664

MAY

Elias gains the court behind Westminster Hall from one of those stairways particular to lawyers, avoiding the bluster of pamphlet-pushers and sweetmeat-hawkers, the unhappy clumps of plaintiffs and witnesses. He crosses the court with as even a stride as he can manage, seeking his attorneys Glynne and Maynard in the cloisters. They, the great vipers, outsize figures in red robes, are waiting for him by the hall doors. The sight of them braces him.

Moments before, he was standing with Hester Tradescant on an upper corridor, leaning close to her out of anyone else's hearing. He was making sure she knows exactly what she has done by resisting his claim to the Ark, by making him come here today. He whispered everything she needs to know, made sure she will not be able to defend herself. Snatches of his own words come back to him as he walks towards the men in red robes.

Glynne. Maynard. You don't know who they are, do you? Your people haven't told you? They are afraid to, because then even you will know how hopeless it is. You would give up straight away, and your lawyers wouldn't collect their fee. But I will tell you they were strongmen for Parliament, and executed the men who tried to fight for Cromwell. So how are they still alive and practicing, now the King is returned? Because there is no morality in them, no real conviction. They turned to the King when they saw their cause was lost. And they put heads on spikes in his name.

'Good day, gentlemen.'

'Ashmole.' Glynne, with his badger-striped hair and fat white hands. 'Remind me what we are doing today? The matter is so piffling I have all but forgotten it.'

'He jests,' smirks Maynard, gaunt where Glynne is sleek. 'I have just been telling him, that it is not for us to question our brief. Should the King's Comptroller of Excise require a cart wheel to crack a nut, it must have a kernel of pure gold.'

A good thing too, Elias doesn't say, thinking of the fee.

'Why leave room for error?' He smiles instead. 'One waits two years for a complaint to be heard in the Chancery Court, one wants results in an afternoon.'

This is nothing to them. It's their third shit of the day, and a quick one. They do it for me because of who I am.

'We live in litigious times, it's true,' says Maynard. 'Since the great upheavals, every man and his dog now learns their letters. And it seems that because they can do more than scratch their name in the dirt, they must demand formal recompense for the slightest injury. The apparatus creaks at the seams.' All three share a smile then, for dissembling is their business.

'But no matter,' says Glynne. 'Today we shall see about this so stubborn widow, and you shall have your trinkets.'

'This ill humour will not serve,' scolds Maynard. 'Forgive him, Ashmole. His mother often confused him for a sheep, and once tried to put him to tup in the valleys. It makes him sullen in the face of others' good fortune. Also he has no appreciation of art, or curiosity.'

'Such wit concerning my origins, Maynard. You must visit my estate at Plas Glynllifon and share it with the warriors of Snowdonia, who answer to my ancestors.'

Their jesting irritates him, though it is meant to show confidence. He checks over his shoulder, but she has not followed him.

No one will believe you.

'Fret not,' says Maynard. 'We have almost the full company of witnesses inside, I believe, except for – ah, here they come.' He inclines his head and Elias turns.

His old friend Sir William Dugdale approaches, his daughter on his arm. Elizabeth. Bess. Bessie. A little over thirty now, a soft and gentle woman, a doe rabbit, quick to laugh, with her father's straight nose and her mother's wide grey eyes. That she remains unaccountably unmarried is never mentioned in front of him, merely left to his observation.

‘She is a good choice, Ashmole,’ says Maynard quietly. ‘Not so very young, but that is better, for she will not be silly. The Chancellor will enjoy her.’

‘Apologies, apologies,’ Dugdale reaches them, his hat slipping sideways from his crown. Now safely into his sixtieth decade, he is not getting any less fussy with age. ‘This city becomes more absurd every year, the people more unmannerly. Such a jostling at the riverside, I near landed in the water.’ Patient Bess strokes her father’s arm and smiles.

‘Easy, William,’ says Elias. ‘We’ll have you back to Nottinghamshire in no time.’

To the family’s estate at Blyth Hall, where Elias has often been a guest. With Dugdale he has charted much of his grounding in antiquarian and heraldic knowledge. But more than that, he has become almost one of the family, a presence so frequent and so at ease he is no longer thought of as a guest, rather, as a pleasant addition to a large and restless family.

‘No trouble, no trouble, for yourself,’ grumbles Dugdale. ‘And Elizabeth so wanted to help. She is very taken by the rarities, and would not see them moulder away unprotected. We have taught her that much, eh Ashmole?’

‘She is the very model of an antiquarian’s daughter.’

He bows to Bess, who has prettily agreed to be a witness to his character, and the work he did on the Tradescant catalogue while a guest of her father’s. She laughs gaily in response. There is an extra curve to her smile that is just for him, he knows. The air between them hums with memories set to the bee-song of the rose garden at Blyth Hall, quivers with moments tender as petals.

What do you even want, except to vex me? You can only do ill by your interference. Accept what and who you are and forget you ever dreamed of better.

‘And when you have the collection?’ Dugdale is as sanguine as the vipers. ‘What then? It won’t fit into your office in Middle Temple.’

‘You flatter my sense of conviction, William. I wish only to be assured that the deed is honoured. There will be time to consider once the outcome is known.’

‘Elias Ashmole, without a strategy? Look about you, gentlemen, for the laws of nature are most devilishly disturbed.’

‘It has been noted by some,’ says Glynne, looking his fingernails, ‘that our friend builds himself a pretty empire. Herald’s shields, and libraries, and ancient stuffs, and now this cabinet of foreign objects. But what will he make of it all, in the end? We are helping lay the foundations of something only he can see.’

‘The Royal Society lately founded isn’t enough for you, eh Ashmole? You are too small a particle in its workings?’ Dugdale stops fussing long enough to fix Elias with the same watchful eye he casts on suspect coats of arms.

And so? Elias eyes back. Could you wish less for your daughter?

‘His ambition,’ says Maynard drily, ‘is dedicated to the study of the works and creatures of God.’

‘That’s it!’ Dugdale claps his hands in recognition. ‘Solomon’s House! And our dear Ashmole its custodian.’

‘What is that, father?’ Asks Bess. ‘Will Mr Ashmole send the rarities there?’

‘No, my dear.’ Dugdale pats her hand. ‘For King Solomon’s House is a philosopher’s vision. The late Lord Bacon wrote of an ideal place, wherein all substances and enterprises that exist could be kept and studied, the better to illuminate their workings and causes. This imagined estate comprises all manner of laboratories and observatories and sanatoriums, factories and dispensaries, ponds and parks and gardens, islands, lakes, towers, mines, brewhouses and, well, everything. And through these enchanted vistas walk its members – its inventors, interpreters, pioneers, benefactors, apprentices, mystery-men and merchants of light. They experiment, analyse and collect, travel, procure and extrapolate.’

‘The very ideal,’ concludes Glynne, ‘of our friend Ashmole’s legacy.’

‘It all sounds very interesting,’ she offers bravely. ‘And useful.’

They smile together, then, the men, and Elias considers that the company of such women is sorely absent from Lord Bacon’s vision. He offers Bess his arm.

‘Allow me,’ he says, ‘to show you to the witness bench.’

So you have cried to your kinsmen and persuaded some men of standing to speak on your behalf? Your witnesses do not matter. The only thing they damage is their own reputations.

Once inside the hall they are all briefly silenced beneath its cathedral proportions, eyes drawn up along slender columns to the arching roof spars with their watchful angels, wooden tracery stamped into the air above acres of polished stone. The Chancery Court itself seems insignificant, a mere clutter of tables and people at the hall's far end. At such moments Elias imagines the work of three centuries of masons and carpenters echoing through their eggshell bodies, beats of an ancient pulse followed by a voice, a chorus, calling down from the delicate strength above – a song of incomprehensible effort and care, of light and stone and forests and God. And then, as always happens, they remember what it is to be mortal. They tidy a cuff, scratch an itch or start a conversation, and they continue as if they had not just been touched by something larger than their understanding. Glynne, Maynard and Dugdale go ahead to make their overtures to the Court and Elias guides Bess gently forward, as if she might be spooked by the hall's splendour into running away.

'I thank you again for this service,' he tells her. 'I am more than sensible of the honour.' A shade more pressure on her arm, just shy of propriety.

'It is a small service,' she says comfortably, 'to give a good account of such a character.'

'My character pleases you?'

'How could it not? Such a friend of my father's, and of mine.'

What has possessed you to oppose and insult me thus? You show the collection and trade from it, when you know full well it is destined for another?

'Not everyone is so charmed.'

'Not everyone knows you as we do.' They reach the witness bench and he settles her in place.

Just wait, he thinks, with Mary still grouching out her final years in Berkshire. Just wait.

'And where is the other party? The wearisome Mrs Tradescant?'

Gathered up her broomstick and her long face and rolled back to Lambeth in her husband's clapped-out wheelbarrow, I hope, he doesn't say.

'Oh,' says Bess. 'There. My, she looks worn.' He turns, obligingly, to see her coming slowly across the great floor, ringed now by her own party of lawyers and witnesses. Framed by the hall's magnificence she looks stranger than ever, a mangy bird-woman shrunk into her dark clothes. She walks uncertainly, gazing around at what must be, after so long sequestered in her marsh domain, quite overpowering grandeur.

You will not slander me in public, or invent spurious tales that cannot be proved. To mention drink will only draw attention to your late husband's weak character. And should the story of your altercation with him be shared... no family could be respected about which such things are known. Oh, you thought that was private? With your voices so unmannerly raised? You thought you were not found out, a woman who could send her own daughter away in a fit of jealousy, look lustfully on her own son?

'I am hopeful all will be resolved quickly,' he says to Bess. 'And you will not be excessively tired. See, all are taking their places, and we will soon begin.'

'I will not be,' she says staunchly, dear thing. 'What happens now?'

'After the preliminaries,' he explains, 'I will be called, as the one who submitted the complaint, to make my statement. My witnesses will be examined. And then, for her, the same. And when all has been considered, my Lord Chancellor will make his judgement. A simple enough process, and fair.'

He watches Hester Tradescant take her place, head lowered, eyes cast down. *Don't you dare*, he thinks. Her eyes rise to catch the message and she blinks stupidly. She looks different to the woman he faced half an hour earlier, surprised in the corridor outside her lawyer's offices. *Mrs Tradescant*, he had said, and turned to the names on the office doors. *These are your men?* A couple of nobodies, cheap failures, as he already knew. He smiled, slowly, the smile of assured victory. She scoffed at him, and then he leaned in. *I will tell you how this will be.*

‘And now, my dear, I must leave you. But not for too long, I trust. When all is concluded I trust you and your father will dine with me.’ A last warm smile and he is away to the benches, ready to begin. It will work.

Elias listens to the judgements unrolling from the Lord Chancellor’s notes, their numbered finality. They are all in his favour.

The deed of gift, the Lord Chancellor agrees, was lawfully established. John Tradescant and his wife signed it gladly. It was only later, it has been agreed, that the widow started to question whether she would rather have full control of the rarities, and sought to retract and obfuscate. She burned the deed, and has perhaps been hiding rarities away. The court, the Chancellor has ruled, allows Elias Ashmole to send his agents to check over the house and grounds, to ensure everything in the catalogue is still in place. And if not, she must pay him their value.

Finally, once she is dead, all will be his. He tests this thought, the weight of it.

By his side Glynne and Maynard make to rise, shuffling their papers together. For them, the business of the day continues. There is much to do.

‘Well then, well then.’ Dugdale approaches his bench, his humour apparently much improved by his observation of the proceedings. He so enjoys the practice of institutions. ‘Bess did her part well enough, I think.’

‘Of course. She did it beautifully.’

‘And you are satisfied?’ Dugdale leans closer, that watchful eye again. ‘You did not expect more, I hope?’

‘Should there have been more?’ Elias softens this with a smile.

He could not, of course, have expected better. Yet the woman is still across the court from him, and the rarities still in her house. He wonders if he can get her alone again.

You kept your silence, then. You made as futile a resistance as expected. And now everything you thought you owned is mine. Now I go with you everywhere.

‘Elias, my old friend,’ Dugdale shakes his head. ‘You have won a victory. Must you be instantly dissatisfied? Yes, with your nature, I suppose you must. And will die a richer man than I.’

‘You will help me execute the judgement? The loss of a single item will reduce the value of the collection. Both monetary and scientific.’

‘Go and comb over the Lambeth place? Give me a good man to work with and I’ll do you as thorough job as you could wish.’

‘I would only trust you.’

Little things, things less to what you think of as your taste. A few eggs, a few damaged birds. But the prices are enough, and it makes you feel powerful, to play at collecting like this. And how will that stack up against the regret I will inflict on you?

‘A strange little woman,’ remarks Maynard. His advocates stand before him, briefly sated and calm, snakes that have just been fed. ‘She seemed quite unprepared for what she had invited. Can her counsel be quite sensible?’

‘The court has advised,’ says Glynne. ‘She would do well to listen.’ Then leans towards Elias over the table, his viporous breath quiet and close.

‘The chancellor did as much as he could, eh? He would have liked to do more. But I trust you will find your way from here. By the looks of her, you should not have to tarry too long.’

He is right. Across the room, ignoring the clerks and witnesses around her, the Tradescant woman sits, apparently alone. Her face is pale and furrowed, her attention somewhere quite other than the Chancery Court. She looks more out of place than ever, a husk of something that might be blown away any moment.

Why not give it up now?

‘I thank you, gentlemen, for everything you have done today. The rarities are secured, their ownership settled. Your services will be well remembered.’

‘And now,’ says Maynard, ‘you can look forward with happy expectation to the eventual establishment of your House. The only question is, how long must King Solomon wait?’

Later, walking along the Thames to dinner at his lodgings, with William and Bess and others. A messenger sent ahead to tell Samuel they are celebrating, to bring out the good claret. Elias and Bess fall a few steps behind the rest of the company, shoulder to shoulder. Something about the day has changed them, the way it opens up the future.

‘Do you really wish for your own estate, like Father said? Like King Solomon?’

‘Perhaps not quite like that, Bess. But I have always meant to live beyond the city, to make a settled life for me and mine. Lichfield, you know. One always returns to one’s natural habitat in the end.’ And let her think it one of provincial charm, where the crack of Simon Ashmole’s leather whip never disturbed the birdsong.

‘And this judgment helps?’

‘In its way, yes, it does.’

‘Good, then. Though the lady seems not quite in control of her wits – I believe you would do well to mind her.’

‘How sweetly you concern yourself on my behalf. She will not give any further trouble, I think.’ The river in the dark is more beast than water, and it has a feral stink. Lights from the boats seam its long back like constellations, all of them pointing him forward. His destiny is there.

‘Now, Bess, let us speak of the collection, and we shall decide which part of it is your favourite. Perhaps I will find you a rarity of your own. Do you remember when you saw it a few summers ago? You liked the birds of paradise best, did you not?’

On they walk, heads bent together, their companions carefully not turning their heads. And somewhere beyond the river, the widow Tradescant returns to her marsh-house, where the rarities wait dead-eyed and indifferent, and takes her own meal. What comfort she finds there, he has never been able to imagine.

1666

SEPTEMBER

Dawn, or just before, the house colourless and half-seen. A good hour for thievery.

Hester needs no list, nor could she read it if she had one. She knows the weight and shape of everything she seeks, its peculiar nature, the hidden sound of its living. *I'm sorry*, she breathes to the rarities as she lifts the heavy door latch, willing it to slide easily. *I'm sorry*.

The Ark appears inert, flattened and misshapen as if printed in a pamphlet. But it has never been lifeless. In the daytime it might be shining and quiet, polished and arranged. At night it is jittery and uncertain, given to outbursts. They crackle through her now, its whisperings. She has sometimes thought of the sounds as memories, impressions of far-away homelands. Now she fears the rarities speak to each other of her, and of their disappointment.

She moves carefully along the room's right flank, her way landmarked by the touch of familiar years – raised veins on an embroidered tunic, slippery click of Indian abacus, knotted ridge of lizard spine. Each sends an unrepeatably message – a foreign chant, a child's murmur, scaled feet whisking across bark. She pauses by the outcrop of shells, water rushing invisibly through their curves and crenelations. From inconspicuous clefts she selects a glossy cone marked like tabby silk, a starry toothed whorl, and one round and white like a woman's breast, tipped in mallow purple. These she slides between the folds of her robe. The room's charcoal shades complicate as she goes, adjusting to daylight. She moves on, past woven baskets whose songs are deep and slow and long – warm hands and grain, sometimes fish, sometimes blood. Past the boulder of the elephant skull, its tusks and temple stroked smooth, its repertoire of huffs and nibblings. More things flicker from their places into her sleeves. Small things, things that are multiple, things that will not be noticed by anyone but her. She takes an amber-husked cicada, a carved cherry stone, a Turkish riding spur. A dish of mother-of-pearl, a cup made from unicorn horn.

She is tense with her purpose, but there is also another, greater prize to be had. To be here at dawn when the birds of the Ark are singing is to lose sight of the world and be glad of it. As the light at the windows first suggests gold they pipe some early notes, moved by the memory of far distant seasons. She listens as they join each other in waves, all of the birds, forgetting puckered eye sockets and threadbare feathers, missing claws, skewed beaks and all the other indignities of preservation: kingfishers, chickens, bitterns, puffins, pelicans, shovelers, peacocks, herons, ostriches, penguins, emus, aracari, cassowaries, geese, eagles, partridges, turkeys, woodpeckers, dodos, ouzels, ducks, so many more unknown, and some known in elaborate profusion – the birds of paradise, their legs carved off to sustain the myth of their aerial existence, glittering beneath her ceiling. The noise builds and extends in fantastic shapes and she is outside of herself, purified by sound.

When it has passed, the dawn songs settled to a lower pitch, she completes her circuit of the room, where everything is now murmuring restfully. Only the books do not speak to her, and she passes their shelves unmoved. She does not know what they would say if they gave tongue, but she is sure it would be sonorous and critical. Except for one, which is less a book to her than a true history of love – uncountable hours of careful attention to flowers and insects now long perished, their images pressed and bound. Soon she will take it, too. But not yet. There is time.

She hurries quickly back along the corridor and through the hall before the household starts to wake. Everything she has hidden in her robe she has stolen from Elias Ashmole. They said so in the Chancery Court. She only keeps the rarities in trust for him now, and at any moment he could send his men for a reckoning, wave their unreadable paperwork under her nose, demand her accounts. If he found out what she was doing, she could end up in prison. Or Bedlam, where the young men go to mock the lunatics chained to the walls. So what is she doing?

She only knows that with such small thefts she keeps herself alive.

In her chamber she lays her treasures out in a neat line along the edge of her window seat. The dawn light picks out their textures like valleys on a map – bone, steel, shell, wood. In the coming days she will stow them about the house as if they were charms against witches. Knots in beams, missing chimney bricks, cracks in plaster, fissures in stone – these are her hiding places. There is a frail network of them now, a web that keeps her safe. *I'm sorry*, she will say to each of them again, as she fits them to

an indent. She has failed to ensure their future; once she is dead Elias Ashmole may do as he wishes. But no, not quite. She imagines him boxing up the Ark, the room swept out, the doors closed a final time, the collection travelling away from Lambeth. Unknowing, he will leave these traces; these small presences denying the great absence. It is a kind of comfort.

Until then, the collection is still in her home, singing its songs to her. She still trades small things from it, even though it is forbidden. It brings in a little money, though she only sells those rarities that for some reason make no sound. There are a few of them, the voiceless ones. These she can stand to see go back out into the world in the hands of traders, men she knows from when John was alive. Today she expects William Courten, returned to London from bankrupt exile in Italy. His grandfather's money established the English in Barbados, built a cabinet to rival the Ark, but it was all lost in bad investments. Now William roams about trying to reclaim the fortune and build his own collection, scavenging at the reputation of his forebears, doomed to be a poor echo. She can hardly criticise him for it.

Beyond the window the dawn light is fuggy and hesitant. Preoccupied with her small hoard of rarities, she is shocked to realise that the Ark has fallen silent. She straightens up, alarmed. The song always waxes and wanes, but never stops. She listens again, but the only sounds are sparrows in the eaves. It is a fearful quiet, something lying in wait.

Then her chamber door opens.

It is Meg, who starts to see her out of bed. Quick – why is she standing here in her nightgown, an hour before she need rise, a scattering of rarities on her window-seat? But Meg does not seem to notice. Like Hester she is half-dressed, her head uncovered.

‘Did you see?’ Meg asks. There are marks under her eyes like the bruises of a thumb. ‘Did someone wake you?’

‘See what?’

Her first thought is of Elias Ashmole. That somehow he knows what she has been doing, and is even now arriving with his men to catch her in the act of theft. And then William Courten will arrive and all her crimes will be exposed. She must get a message to him, tell him he cannot come.

‘Come.’ Meg puts out a hand, as if to a child.

‘But what is it?’ she asks, as if she did not know. ‘I must dress, and then...’

‘Later. Come and see.’

But this makes no sense. Meg would not take her to see Ashmole’s men like this. Something else has happened. Something terrible. She pushes away the memory of Jack, of a broken body carried across the grass. Of Emanuel, telling her that Frances had died of plague.

‘Won’t you tell me?’ she asks again, but Meg is already going, and Hester must follow. ‘William Courten is coming,’ she calls after her, as they go along the landing and down the stairs. ‘I must get ready.’

‘I do not think he will be coming today, Mistress,’ replies Meg.

‘How can you know?’

‘Come outside.’ Meg is opening the front door.

‘Have you lost your mind? We aren’t dressed.’

‘It doesn’t matter. Come.’

And then they are outside and everything is wrong. Most of the household is assembled at the front gate, and she recognises some neighbours. They stand with their backs to the house, staring out into the road. No, not the road. They look beyond, to what is happening over the city. A great storm cloud? Not that. Something more than weather. Something dark and concentrated, that thrusts a long slanted column east to west across the span of London and away into the clouds.

‘My God,’ Hester says.

‘They sent word from St Mary’s about an hour ago,’ says Meg. ‘The fire is bigger than anyone has ever known. It is out of control. Everyone is running.’

Hester joins the silent crowd, mesmerised by the violent sky.

An hour later, a heavy cart arrives at her gate. The household are still mostly gathered there though a few have run to the river, desperate for news of their families. For the rest they stay watching the fire, the thick smoke a mile high, the terrible orange glow at its heart. City folk pass by on their way from the horse ferry, bringing snatches of news. The fire started in a bakery near Eastcheap in the middle of the night, they say, and somehow the Lord Mayor and his men failed to bring it under control. Now

there is a gale from the east that is building it ever higher; it has taken hold and the city has been abandoned to it. The streets are so full of people fleeing they are all but impassable, a mess of bodies carrying whatever they can in their arms. The river is crowded with boats and debris, the houses on the bridge are alight. It comes at the end of a summer so poisoned by plague, so blighted by the sea war with the Dutch that this can only be some terrible form of punishment.

In the annexe behind them the Ark has recovered its voice. After its first fearful silence it is loud with alarm, but Hester has no way to calm it. It is hard to concentrate on what is happening outside her ears.

The cart makes to turn in at the gate but no-one moves to let it pass. It has fled the fire; it is stacked too high with trunks and boxes lashed untidily in place. The horse is sweating and edgy. Then a man jumps down from behind – Samuel, Elias Ashmole's manservant.

The fear returns. But even if Elias knows what she has been doing, why would he send Sam to her on such a day?

Sam bows; he looks exhausted and his clothes are streaked with dirt. She has nothing to resent in him, he has always been a steady character. She motions him in but he is stopped by a fit of coughing, a smoked sound.

'A drink, Sam?'

He nods and they walk towards the kitchen. She is newly conscious of the garden's disorder; another thing to conceal from Elias.

'Can you tell me why you are here?' she asks as they go. 'Where is Elias?' Surely, she suddenly thinks, he is not dead? Caught in the fire? Could it be possible?

'I left him at Middle Temple,' says Sam. 'He was leaving to ride to friends beyond the city. The fire was very close.'

Of course. So she asks what everyone is asking when someone comes from the city.

'What was it like?'

'You could not see the sky. I was afraid to breathe. But worse than that,' says Sam, 'was the sound.' He shakes his head. 'Only at sea have I known something so great and terrible. At least with a fire, if you are lucky, you can leave before it reaches you. With the ocean you are never so lucky.'

‘And you came here?’

‘Mr Ashmole sent me.’

‘But what for?’

‘The fire moves west, and fast. They fear for Middle Temple. He could not leave his office to burn.’

‘Perhaps not, but...’ then she begins to understand. The loaded cart. ‘You bring me the contents of his office?’

‘He keeps valuable collections there; books and coins and many other things. If the fire reached the Temple he would lose it all. He thought of South Lambeth.’

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘I suppose he would.’ No matter that she has barely spoken to Elias since the court judgements were delivered two years earlier. Sometimes he brings guests to South Lambeth to show them the collection, now that he can treat it as his own. Whenever she sees him, she goes to another part of the house until it is over.

Sam rubs his eyes. He knows her; his loyalty is stretched. ‘I am sorry, Mistress. He instructs me to store the things here until the fate of Middle Temple is known.’

So Elias thinks of the place as his own, and of her as next to a servant. He sends her his luggage as if she is a warehouse. The terrible fire, yes. But he has a hundred wealthy friends; he chooses her because she does not matter. It is another insult.

‘He says you will not refuse him.’

And she will not; the man terrifies her. His face thrust in hers in some darkened lawyer’s corner of Whitehall, spitting out the worst of her sins. After he left her she went back to her lawyer’s office and retracted half her statement; walked into the great hall and felt how deeply she did not belong there.

‘No,’ she says. ‘No, I won’t. You can find a place for it in one of the barns.’

Sam coughs again. ‘It must be in the house, Mistress. He cannot have damp, or –’

‘Ah, now, stop!’ she cries. ‘Must he have everything?’

‘He would not say so, but I have hardly seen him denied.’ Coughs again. ‘He does not think to insult you. He is – a man who lives for the future. His future. He sees a solution and he acts, that is all.’

She feels it again; that sick anger, like a child who knows they have no choice and must obey.

‘Meg will help you,’ she says. And she lets Sam find his own way to the kitchen. Instead she goes around the side of the house and out of the garden by the orchard gate. Telling no-one, she walks away from them all and across the marshes towards the river and the city, the sky above it ever more blackened and bruised.

At the churchyard of St-Mary-at-Lambeth she pauses under a sentry yew, stunned. Less than half a mile from the city the fire is no distant horror but a living thing at purposeless war. It has blocked out the sun, made new weather, its red heart beating hard and fast. She can hear its moans, almost feel its heat on her skin. All those burning homes. In her mind’s eye flickers another fire, Jack’s fatal oak tree. John felled it the week after he died, could not bear to leave its bloodied stump as memorial. Burned it senselessly where it lay, making a scorched patch of ground where the grass still grows uneven.

She looks around to make sure she will not be seen. All eyes are turned to London and the riverbank is frantic with people, but she might not be the only one finding solace with their dead. Seeing no-one she leaves the yew’s spiced shade and crosses the churchyard, its September greens and golds tarnished sickly orange and grey.

In the lee of the church, the tomb is startling. Finally completed, it looms above all the other plain stones and crosses, its stone still bright and clean, its carving sharp. She wanted to make her mark, and she is almost satisfied – the strangeness of her monument has even drawn visitors from the city, has made the village look at her even more askance. She kneels beside it, puts a hand to the cool surface, traces the design once more. The long eastern panel is carved with a scene of ruined antiquity, set between huge trees. Pyramids, fallen columns, broken marble, the way of all human endeavour in the end. The southern face bears the Tradescant coat of arms and on the western side, an expanse of Egypt – some of her rarities at home in their own lands, among sand and palm trees. She managed to persuade the masons, and the stone shows conches and ammonites, and a crocodile. Finally, at the head of the tomb, the side closest to the church, her finest design: a memento mori skull overseen by a seven-headed, dragon-winged, heavy-breasted hydra. A she-guardian.

If she will never now be free of Elias Ashmole, if the city is burning and they are all punished, if the time comes when she can only hear the Ark's ghosts, at least she has left a monument of her own. She kneels again and puts her forehead to it, pressing the carved ridges hard against skin and bone. Imagines the bones within, all of them clean now, and peaceful. John, Jack, and old John Tradescant. From memory she recites the tomb inscription, as if to remind the men and herself. *This monument was erected at the charge of Hester Tradescant, relict of John Tradescant, late deceased, who was buried the 25th day of April, 1662.*

IV

1674-1678

Posterity hath not only been deprived of many passages, whereof it would gladly have been informed,
but the elaborate disquisitions of both *Criticks* and *Antiquaries* have proved fruitless, and of little
advantage, and the things themselves lye yet buried in obscurity.

Ashmole, E. *The Institution, laws and ceremonies of the most noble Order of the Garter / collected and digested into
one body by Elias Ashmole*

SEPTEMBER

Elias Ashmole dreams he has pissed himself in front of the King, a lavish tea-dark spate that surrounds sovereign and advisors to waist height. Things eddy past in the flood – things he should have taken better care of – medals, documents, sigils, saddles, an outsize magpie in a glass dome which seems to flap and sing but makes no sound. Charles smiles at him benignly from above the rising waters but Elias knows this is his ultimate humiliation from which there is no return. Mercifully the Whitehall chamber so abundantly filled with his effluvium dissolves and he washes up in the hallway at South Lambeth, looking around for his rarities. Then Oxford, Berkshire, Lichfield, and it is Simon standing over him, nodding, satisfied. A grin splits his father's face Elias has never seen, a grin of pure delight. He understands then that he is, finally, as expected – an amusing failure lying in a sea of his own piss. Waking to find it is only his bedlinen he has soiled he shudders with shame and relief.

Bess comes in without knocking but his mess is shielded by the coverlet so he struggles upright against the pillows, unsticks himself from his dream. He does not look too bad, surely – still half-shadowed by the bed drapes, his cap in place, the sun not yet fully risen. He makes these calculations constantly in his wife's presence, as if through one-sided bargains with dark and light he can keep her believing she has not married a handsome wreck – bloated, gouty, incontinent. He drinks powdered goat hoof, patches his swollen limbs with turnips stewed in hot milk and chimney soot, swabs his cock with vinegar, consumes honey by the pint. He has, these days, an honorary doctorate in medicine from the University of Oxford. He cannot reconcile the unfairness of this.

'Dressed already?' He smiles up at her, turning sideways to receive a kiss, but she is brisk, looping back the drapes, letting in the light. He flinches down into his pillows.

'Dressed at my normal hour. It is you who lie long and idle. This is what happens when you dine with my father. Always up drinking until dawn.' She is as neat and cheerful as ever, never blames,

never carps. He is daily comforted by the contrast to Mary, who has been mercifully dead for six years. But there is nevertheless an increasing reserve about Elizabeth, a wistfulness. Six years of marriage, four pregnancies cut short. And now her fifth in progress, a hope as yet barely swelling her belly. She takes his hand now and presses it there, eyes large and worried.

‘My breasts are sore,’ she says. ‘It is hopeful? I cannot remember how it was the other times. That is, I had some soreness, but whether it was of a general kind, or came close to the times I lost them...’ She comes to him alone for medical advice, will have no truck with midwives or apothecaries. ‘I wonder, am I making milk? Or is the child somehow warning me? Sometimes I am so frightened all I can do is sit and listen, trying to hear if it is growing.’

‘Fret not, my lamb. Your humours are perhaps a little damp and cold, with the change in season. We will make you a hot poultice with bread and violet leaves.’ She smiles bravely, pats his hand.

‘Won’t you get up now? Sam is waiting. He did not, he says, want to wake you while you were dreaming. You must have been making a racket. Was it a nice dream?’ She is like this despite her sorrows, always expectant of pleasant events.

‘I don’t remember.’

‘How unlike you. If it does come back to you later you must write it down, for I am sure it will predict a happy future for us. Now, do not tarry long with your sore head, for we must be in Lambeth before noon.’

‘Lambeth? Today?’

‘My love, drink something, be awake. We have been talking of it for a week.’

‘The house. I know.’ Bessie sits on the foot of the bed and he shifts uncomfortably, stewing in his cooling piss.

‘It is fortuitous,’ she says, hand still to her belly. ‘The lease coming up at just the time when we are tiring of London.’ She, raised among the streams and meadows of Blyth Hall, pines for country life, he for the estate he has always dreamed of. Their house on Shire Lane, newly built beyond the city walls after the great fire, already feels cramped and worn. He wants to see Bessie back in a rose garden, raise his sons among orchards and herb beds. And, of course, the other thing. To be so close to his collection he can visit it daily, and remind the widow Tradescant it is his.

‘You are sure we shall not visit her while we are there? When we could be such close neighbours?’

Sweet Bess, who cannot imagine the rancour of years held fast between two old foes. Of Hester Tradescant he has heard precious little in the years since the fire, only that she has more and more shut herself up, that the collection’s visitors have dwindled away to nothing. He has, occasionally, taken his own guests to view it, but she has stayed out of his way. Only the dissipation of the garden’s splendour marks the passing of her time; the rarities, as far as he can tell, have remained well cared for.

‘I would not tire you,’ he says. ‘The journey will be quite enough.’

‘You are right, of course. And she such a strange woman. Perhaps it is better we keep our distance.’

The bed is starting to smell.

‘Send Sam in,’ he says, as casually as possible. ‘I’ll be down directly.’

The final yards of the approach surprise him, for he had not expected sentiment. The familiar frontage of the Tradescant house slips by the carriage, its windows blank, its flowerbeds unremarkable. He sees himself twenty-four years younger, walking up the path with Mary in a blast of June sunshine, the collection waiting for him. And with it the awkward gardener, the handsome son, the watchful wife. Now only he and she are left from that day, and he may at last have a solution.

And then they are pulling in through the next gate, where the larger part of the same building is set back and angled away from the road. The Dutch Ambassador’s lodge, once. Now two houses, two sets of grounds. The agent comes to meet them, spreading his arms wide in welcome.

They begin in the far reaches of the garden and work towards the house. He carries a pencil and paper, noting the works required, filtering the agent’s patter for information. The gardens, somewhat neglected, but ample enough for their needs. A ragged fence runs along the boundary with the Tradescant land, the full shapes of its mature trees magnificent beyond it. He makes a note. Small outbuildings in need of repair, a chicken house, stables, then the main barns set around the central courtyard, more than they need. Another note. The yard itself, somewhat mossed over, where he will need to put a fountain. Then the house, emptied out, a work of plastering and painting and polishing.

But the bones are good, and he hears Bessie's nervous questions settling to a cheerful chatter, the agent laughing, sensing success. Kitchen, scullery, dining room, parlours, bedrooms. More than they could hope to want for themselves. The best bedchamber is nestled into the crook of the wall where the houses join and he leans against it, letting the others go ahead. He cannot have the mad widow's rustlings coming through his bedroom wall. He pauses, listens. Hears nothing.

And then, the attics. Two, large and dry, reached by a short staircase. A further note, underlined.

'Will they serve?' Bess calls up the stairs, put off by tiredness and dust. He scans them again, washing the walls new white, adding shelves, filling the empty space above the beams.

'You have some particular purpose?' asks the agent, brushing cobwebs from his sleeve. Then looks embarrassed, visibly thinking over what he knows. The King's Excise, Astrologer's feasts, the Order of the Garter. What secret purpose might this man of consequence put his attics to?

'My collections,' Elias tell him.

'Ah,' says the agent, nodding, at a loss. Then his face clears. 'Something like the family next door? You know of them?'

'Perhaps. Tell me what you have heard.'

'Well, you'll have no trouble, sir. Only the widow survives, and she as quiet as you could wish for. The family were gardeners, I believe, for the old King, but that's all gone now. Only her husband had this room full of strange things he found on his travels, getting plants, I suppose, in the Indies. Stuffed birds and native artefacts and the like. People used to come and see it, quite the attraction, a day out from the city. That's all finished though, with the passing of the husband. Will you be setting one up yourself?' He is dubious again, thinking of his client.

'Not for public viewing, no.'

'That's best, indeed, a man like yourself, no need to invite half of London down to your private estate, that's what it's for after all, eh? An escape. Me, I like to go out in the city. The fairs, and plays, more action, you know? What's the good of just looking at something that can't do a dance or tell you a story? They're doing *The Tempest* again just now, with that curious creature fellow. A strange fish, ha ha! Have you seen it, sir, *The Tempest*?'

Elias ignores him and crosses the attic to the window. From here he has an almost complete view of the Tradescant garden, its fine proportions, its remembered walks. It is a grey day, mild, with a lively wind that stirs the leaves into silvery waves and moves something else in him too. A sense of calm, an elongation of the spirit, which might be what others call home. And then he sees her, it must be her, moving slowly along the path from the house towards the pond, and draws closer to the window until his breath mists the glass. Broader, slower, more stooped than he remembers, but it is her. Does she know they are there, has she been warned of their purpose? As if she can hear his thoughts she pauses and turns, shielding her eyes, looking up towards the window as he quickly draws back beyond her sightline. But she seems to find nothing to hold her attention and heads onward, toward a youth desultorily engaged in raking the path. He touches his cap to her, in the disaffected way of servants who do not intend to stay long at a house. She gestures, largely, as of things bigger than the garden can hold. Waves her arm towards the boundary fence, which sags sadly where it shows between unkempt shrubberies. The boy looks from his rake to the fence and shrugs. Elias makes a final note.

‘Sir?’ The agent is waiting.

‘No,’ he says. ‘No time for theatre.’ He has left the woman unattended for too long out here, the collection at the mercy of God knows what widow’s whims. Now, perhaps, he can make things right.

Back in Shire Lane he makes his horary calculations on the question. *Whether I should take the house in South Lambeth*. What would he do if the answer was no? Calculate again.

He finishes up, makes his notes, adds the paper to a file. He will organise them all one day, make a fair diary copy, line everything up as it happened.

Bess is waiting for him downstairs. He finds her lying on the daybed, facing the wall, her hair loose, her chest bound up in a mess of hot leaves and crumbs. A tiny stitched bonnet, half-finished, lies forgotten beside her.

‘Bess.’ He touches her shoulder and she turns, wide awake. Searches his face for the answer and he gives it, knowing how much she wants everything to be right. She smiles, slowly, and nods.

‘Well then,’ she says. ‘South Lambeth. At last.’

‘At last.’

He leaves Bess sleeping early and deep, her mind on the child, on Lambeth orchards. He lingers in his study, a different man from the one who woke that morning in a pool of fear. He sketches plans, makes lists, takes down boxes, reminding himself of everything he has gathered to himself, imagines how it will look in its new arrangements. The estate needs work, but they can be in the house next month. There is much to do.

A mousy sound distracts him from his work, a shadow at the door. Alice, the newest maid, hovering nervously outside. She is perhaps sixteen, sent up from some Oxford backwater through a connection he keeps from his student days. Like all her kind when they first reach London Alice is torn between terror and gratitude at her escape, trying as fast as she can to forget her country ways. She has not, as yet, succeeded.

‘Come in.’ He summons her, gently. No need to tell her she will soon be out in South Lambeth, back among chickens and pigs. It is still a far cry from Jericho.

‘Anything else, sir, before I turn in?’ Broad cheeks, freckles. She is too ill at ease to be really pretty, but perhaps in a year or two. She is, he notices, staring fixedly at a point on his desk, then slides her gaze away and a sudden blush, a glorious, undeniable reddening from collarbone to hairline, rises from beneath the high neck of her shift. He looks down to see what has so affected her. Ah.

‘Warm port, Alice, with a spoonful of honey.’

Still blushing, mortified, she nods and goes.

He returns to his papers but his concentration is scattered now, vellum folios transformed into milky freckled skin as hope and habit do a dance with the shadow of that morning’s foreboding.

He puts down his quill, inspects the tray that so troubled Alice. The charms laid out in it wink up at him, their little legs, little wings, curved tails. He picks one up and stands it on the desk, just where Alice will need to put down his glass. Pushes his chair back, smooths down his hair. When she comes back she is perfectly pale again and keeps her eyes on her tray, but at the desk with its mute ornament she is once again undone, her lips parting in silent exclamation. He can smell her nervous sweat. The air thickens.

‘Wh- where would you like it, sir?’

‘Just there, Alice, on the desk. You don’t mind, do you?’ Her eyes dart from tray to amulet and back and he leans forward to help her, picking up the winged priapus and cradling it in his palm. She puts the glass down unsteadily.

‘G- good night, s- sir – ’

‘Don’t you want to know, Alice?’

‘Kn- know what, sir?’

‘What they are.’

‘I – ’

‘Don’t be afraid. It’s an old story, a happy one. Come and see.’ She stands rooted, that heavy blush stealing up her neck again, but does not resist. He holds it out to her, an offering. Its gleam catches the firelight, its little wings almost spanning his palm, its swollen thrust reaching obscenely into the air.

‘It’s very, very old. Made by the Romans when they lived in London, can you believe it?’

‘Romans, sir?’

‘Yes, the great Emperors of old Italy, who made their cities here for a time. They did not stay, but for those who know how to look, they left behind some of their beauty for us to find. This is a *fascinum*, a charm against the evil eye. The Romans would hang them about their necks, and those of their children, as our countrywomen might a rabbit’s foot against the grippe.’

‘Children?’ She laughs suddenly and the Jericho girl is revealed, amused and unafraid. ‘They must have been quite some creatures, these Romans?’

He hurries on before her fear returns. ‘Perhaps the greatest civilisation ever known. They worshipped the power of such a symbol. These charms represent fertility, protection, love. *Fascina*, fascinator.’ He puts it down, the little charm, the cock with wings, with its brethren in the tray. She does not move as he rises and closes the study door.

‘After the great fire,’ he explains, ‘there was a great to-do of delving and building to start repairing the city. Men dug deeper into the London soil than they had for centuries. What an ocean of things they turned up! Probably much of it lost again to theft or ignorance. But a few men, like me, had

agents working to save what they could. So these little treasures came safely here. It is part of my life's work, to preserve such fragments of the past for us to learn from.'

'At home,' she says in a strange, dreamy voice, 'they gather up adder skins to protect our houses. Pin them to the rafters, sew them into their hats.'

'Do they indeed.' He comes closer now, fitting his hands to the thin sapling of her waist. 'But you are not at home now, darling.' He moves her back towards the desk, scattering *fascina* across it like wheat after a wedding.

1674

OCTOBER

The house isn't safe any more. Hester tracks from hiding place to hiding place and at each, wavers.

Should she gather up the pieces she has stolen, slip them back in to the Ark? Or push them deeper into their clefts and crevasses, out of reach, out of rescue?

Even when she knew the far half of the house was up for rent, she did not imagine this. Four and twenty years she has known Elias Ashmole and he has always belonged in London with his velvets and alembics and lawyers in red cloaks. He descends on South Lambeth on a whim, then vanishes back to his laboratories and offices. But now listen. The rarities are all but silenced and she has to strain to catch their chords, their agitation of voices. For such a hammering and sawing and crashing about of labourers is pounding through the walls from next door, so relentlessly does Elias Ashmole announce his coming, that her head rings with it and she cannot rest. She is like a hare, pressed into its shallow form, not knowing which way to run.

Emanuel has come to see her, alerted to the news by his own London circles. He stands now in the summer parlour, trying to read out some document newly arrived for her from the city, but the sound of hammers keeps slugging through his words so that he seems to mouth the lines in silence. She narrows her eyes at him and he has to stop, shake his head in irritation, and start again. But he will not give it up, so she must try and piece the message together. When at last she does she starts to laugh, which makes Emanuel look at her as if she is a worn out hen whose neck needs wringing. To excuse herself she waves her hands about, miming the effect of the hammering on her ears. She leaves the room and leaves him standing there, her unreadable new sentence still open in his hand.

She goes out into the garden but it is the same there, for there are joiners and plumbers and masons and groundsmen at work on the neighbouring plot, hurrying it on for the new master and mistress who, she is told, want to be in residence by spring. The faded old country place they have taken is to be hollowed out and remade: they are stripping the barns, flaying the undergrowth, laying

paths and pipes and burning rubbish. They have disdained the old paling between the two gardens and marked out a new stone wall, because Elias Ashmole wishes to be closer to her than her own thoughts but also to seal himself up out of reach. Hester sent a leadworker to oversee the pacing out of the boundary but heard little of his report – any sign of resistance she makes to Elias Ashmole will be to invite him to cross the threshold into the Ark. She lies low; the very air of South Lambeth is his.

She keeps walking away from the house, searching for a quieter place. On the other side of the boundary, two men are stripping a young ash tree ready for felling. They have propped themselves on the larger branches, are paring it down with billhooks. One of them tips his cap to her, an easy gesture, his other arm around hooked around the slim trunk. *Hold on*, she thinks. *Hold on*. Emanuel catches up with her, still holding his stupid paper.

‘Hester, will you stand and talk to me? You must listen to what the writ says.’

‘I heard it.’

‘Did you? Then what are you doing?’

‘Trying to get some peace.’

‘But this is the execution of the Chancery order. Mr Ashmole’s agents will be here within the month to inspect the collection.’

‘I said I heard you.’

‘And you thought to take the air? The gentleman has lost patience. If there is anything that doesn’t match the list in the catalogue you will be back in court, and it will be worse this time.’

The tree is bare now, from its base to just below the crown, leaving it plucked and ridiculous. The men have taken their saws and billhooks and are clearing the cut branches away, stripping them down further, jointing them for firewood. Bark cracks and splits, and the air smells of stamped leaves and sap.

‘I don’t know what to do.’ The words slip out of her, small and flat.

Emanuel sighs as if he has put down an armful of brambles.

‘You admit it, then.’

But she shakes her head; she does not know what she is admitting to. Her words have a habit of meaning something different once they are in the mouths of men. She knows herself that she does

not know how to stop Elias Ashmole, her hydra heads severed by his coming. He is as good as in her home.

‘Admit that enough is enough. You are making yourself ill over this when he has already won. Give it up, Pox. Please.’ Ah, but not that. Emanuel is like this, always the voice of defeat.

‘How so? The rarities are mine in my lifetime.’

‘Must you be this obstinate? It makes you seem duller than you are. Let me be clear, then – you have been selling rarities to traders. Maybe even keeping some for yourself. Giving them away, I don’t know. You think I can’t see what is happening, don’t know when you are keeping secrets?’

‘And you think you know all of me, because we played as children?’

‘You have contravened the terms of the Chancery ruling. And now Mr Ashmole wishes to know what is in his collection, as is his right, and you will be found out. *His* collection, Hester.’

‘By what rights is it his collection? This place and everything in it was left to me by my husband. Six and thirty years I have been its guardian. No-one has a better right to it than I.’

‘Repeating your grievances does not change the laws of England. For Heaven’s sake, Pox – in Kent or Norfolk they’d brand you a scold, strap a branks to your jaw with a nail in your tongue, heave you into the village pond. I am sorry, but your opinion does not matter. You must submit to the visitation and its consequences, or do as I advised years ago and give it all up.’

The branches trimmed and sawed and piled up, one of the men puts his axe to the body of the ash and starts to swing. The tree shakes with each impact. More of the groundsmen gather around, shouting encouragement. One of them braces against the trunk to direct its fall.

‘So?’ Emanuel prompts. ‘Which is it to be?’

He has run to fat, Hester observes, his hair thinned and greyed.

He notices her noticing and gives her a nursery look.

‘Of course, you could have listened to me when John died, and saved yourself all this. My home is still open to you, Hester. A simple life back in the city, in the company of old friends.’

He is right, of course, in his world. But in between the blows of the axe she can still catch a faint tropical trilling from back at the house, the Ark in song.

‘Manu,’ she says at last. ‘I came here a lifetime ago, when I knew nothing of the world beyond Holborn. In Holborn I lived almost the same lifetime in my father’s house, and it was a lifetime of waiting. Waiting to be noticed, waiting for something to happen that would mean I was no longer something for my parents to worry over. I was no more of use there than I am now to you or Elias Ashmole. But here’ – the sweep of her arm encompasses the orchard, the house with its low annexe, the pond, the distant marsh – ‘this inheritance marks me out from every other woman in England. What you propose is that I go back to waiting – except the only thing I would be waiting for would be to die.’

The tree makes a sound like ice cracking, and the men run backwards to watch it fall. The pitch of their voices follows its path, rising to a whoop as it tips past saving. But there is something wrong, with the wind or the angle of the cut or the judgement of the woodsman, because instead of falling into its own garden the ash wrenches sideways and crashes across the condemned boundary fence, tearing a rent in the screen of wood and shrubs, its uncut topmost branches whipping into the grass a few feet from where Hester and Emanuel stand. They stare at it, at the hole in the sky it has left, at the workmen looking back at them through the gap. For a few shocked heartbeats, there is silence.

Deep into the night; the workmen have gone, the household retired. She is alone again in her own chamber with her own sounds. Listens, unpicking the weft of the Ark’s chatter and threading each sound to its rarity. The flying squirrels give out reedy squeaks like glass being cleaned, the unicorn horn an odd clockish ticking as if the beast is moving hollow branches aside. Antelopes bleat and snort, bears scratch themselves with a sound like leather being tanned. In the centre of it all, the cloak of the King of Virginia set up its own harmony; stitched from deerskins whose long-dead ghosts bark their memories of forest and swamp, sewn with roanoke beads that emit the tiny squelching hum of hundreds of soft sea snail bodies fidgiting in white shells. Over these base chords whisper the sewing hands that made the cloak and used it, and their voices – a language she cannot speak, songs she cannot sing, but marked with joy and pain and work as much as any hymn or prayer or chronicle she knows. In

With the urgency of a secret she goes to work. Quietly out of her chamber and down to the hall, quietly on with her cloak. Quietly back along her private pathways through the house, her map

plotted according to the textures of the walls. Barely breathing she snicks the stolen rarities from their hiding places, slips them into the pockets of her cloak. An ammonite, the skull of a weasel, a Turkish charm against witches, the shell like a woman's breast. Last of all she goes to the rafters of the apple store and withdraws a heavy parcel wrapped in waxed paper. Alex's book, which she holds close to her heart. Then she climbs the stairs from the kitchen and goes out into the moonlight.

The garden is drained of colour, a tarnished silver cast of itself. Leaves are hammered blades, trees are caves in blue hillsides, the moon itself a sharp eye. She in turn is merely an impression left, a space a body once inhabited. She moves weightless across the grass, an absent presence, only corporeal again when she drops down at the far edge of the pond and presses her knees against the outward curve of its mossed rim. From here she scans the black-eyed backs of the two houses, their stone swagged in chainmail vines. Her clothes whisper with small voices, her heart thumps against the book in her arms. The water is dark and light, a silent depth, a place of safety. She puts the book down by her knees and one by one places her wandering objects on the rim of the pond's bowl. They form a jagged line of silhouettes, chirping unconcernedly, an offering. When she slides them off the stone and into the water they slip obediently downward, singing as they go, hidden in a bowl of ink. A great calm comes over her. This was right. At last she takes up the parcel with Alex's book, perhaps a hundred delicate paintings, a thing she has loved for thirty years. The water takes it easily, with a small sigh.

She rises, lighter. Senses a new wind come alive in her so known place, yawning from the hole in the boundary where the ash tree has been cleared away. She feels her way towards the source, treading across ruts and sawdust, alert to shapes that might move or cry out. Through the gap and into the garden beyond, where the landmarks are distorted as if through a crystal ball. When she turns around to face the way she came, her garden has vanished into darkness as surely as if a door had been closed behind her. He will build one, she sees, even if only he and she know it is there – a door between their gardens. He will conjure it up and cast it in steel and on a night like this he will slip through it as she has done, easy as a tree falling. And his desire will be met at last, he will steal through doors and walls and windows and into the belly of the Ark and take it all away to make it sing for him alone.

She is back in her room when the household rises, unsure where the hours have gone, her feet and her skirts still damp and soiled. Goes down to the kitchen to break her fast, where the range fire has been burning for an hour and the two maids Jane and Anne are already at work, the way they talk and move practised, swift. They slide her food to her but leave her be, their strange mistress. She is not of their warmth but it holds her, tells her she is alive.

Harvest is drawing to a close but there is still a fortnight ahead of cleaning and curing, packing and storing. At her elbow is a slippery pile of chestnuts, Jane scoring crosses into them ready for roasting. Their woody cases give off a slight bitterness as Jane slices into them, her hands thin and red. The knife clicks, the fire murmurs, the herbs hanging overhead give off their dry scent. Then the banging from next door starts again, making tiny ripples scud across the surface of Hester's ale. She tries to shut it out but when she closes her eyes she sees the silver outline of a door.

Meg comes in from the store, nods her greeting with pretended calm. Since the news of the Ashmoles' arrival Hester knows she is being watched more closely. If the servants complain of the building noise she does not hear of it, as if through pretence they can keep her safe from what is coming. But now the pounding is so insistent it loosens small fragments of herb that float down and land in her glass.

'That'll be her Thomas,' Meg winks towards Jane with her chestnuts, who blushes to match her red fingers. 'So in love he must needs break down our walls for a sight of her.'

'Tis a fireplace,' Jane answers, then blushes deeper at what her knowledge has revealed. 'Old ones bricked up. They want all the rooms fresh and in use. And new floors.'

'It will be a palace when they're done,' says Meg. 'And money no object.' Mary's money, Hester thinks. 'Do you think your Thomas will have put aside enough by spring to keep you?'

Poor Jane is saved by the yard door swinging inward, a delivery from the village. The grocer lets in cold air and dead leaves, shouldering his way into the room with a keg of wine in his arms. Meg moves quickly to shut the door and have him set down his load, sit at the table, take a mug of ale. William brings the first news of the day, the freshest happenings from South Lambeth. News of escaped livestock and freak weather, of betrothals and price rises and strange visitors, of brawls and floods and children newborn and buried. Today all talk is of wild geese arriving for the winter, covering

the marsh in a honking grey-white cloud. The smith's son fell into a dyke setting a trap for them and put a spike through his foot, is hopping about on a makeshift crutch but can't sit down to rest, too raw from his father's thrashing. But as he talks William flinches and glances up towards the sounds of building and destruction, only marking time until he can get their news in return.

'That's a mighty work they are doing there,' he says at last, jerking his head upward. 'They'll have been round to smooth the way with you?'

'We make the best of it,' says Meg, a warning unheeded. 'It's not forever.'

'They've been around this way for years,' William insists. 'Wasn't there some business with your John?' He reaches out to include Hester, who says nothing, only listens.

'City folk,' Meg says, too quickly. She wants to keep Hester quiet. They all do. 'The wife we knew died a while back. This one is from a big estate up in Nottinghamshire. She'll be expecting things to be a certain way.'

'The new wife, eh? She'll be mighty pleased with this arrangement then, a country place with the city hard by. For as long as that lasts.'

'How do you mean, William?'

'Well, how long will London be London and Lambeth be Lambeth? I tell you, since the fire they are building enough houses for every family England to send a son here, and more from the continent besides. We'll be swallowed up, and South Lambeth just another street of houses.'

'Imagine,' Meg says. But Hester sees it in an instant; doors upon doors upon doors, the earth of her garden trodden over and sown with stones, doors flying open at the touch of men of standing.

'You are right,' she says, her voice unused, strange, too loud. 'There was some business.' The kitchen falls silent and she stumbles over the words, rushing to get them out. 'With John. You remember, William. I had to go to court in London, because this man Elias Ashmole filled John with drink and had him sign the collection over to him. But even the court didn't give him what he wanted, made him wait while I was alive. Now he comes here and threatens me.'

'Now, Mistress,' says Meg, hurried, falsely cheerful. 'That was all settled – '

‘No.’ Hester is calm now, clear. ‘All this building. New court papers. Do you know he has put a door into my garden through that new wall he built? So he can come and go at night and rob me as he pleases?’

‘There’s no door,’ says Meg, as if she knows.

‘There is a door! I have seen it. And Elias Ashmole will have my Ark or cut my throat. I am sure of it.’

Eyes meet each other around the room but none of them seek out hers. She is making herself an outcast, one who speaks out of turn, who people talk around and avoid. She does not care. She has changed something. The air of Lambeth is no longer entirely under Elias Ashmole’s control, and that will not go unremarked.

NOVEMBER

South Lambeth, at last. In the yard of his new house Elias kicks at part of a saw horse that has fallen over and been left abandoned on the frozen ground. It hurts. His feet are tender with the gout, and the sharp pain worsens his mood further. Where are his masons, his carpenters, his plumbers? Through the last weeks of autumn the works came on quickly, but now the weather is colder the men have become sluggish or, as now, merely absent. And yet the day is dry and still, with hours to go until nightfall. Beyond the bare black orchard trees the sky is a heavy flat white, scribbled with dark plumes of smoke and uneven arrowheads of screaming geese. The village is awake and at work, and he is here, expecting to walk the outlines of his new rooms with the master mason, be shown lintels and windows set in their places. Instead his estate feels more like a field after soldiers have camped there, scattered with unaccountable debris and a fugitive but palpable sense of shame. The pain in his toe settles to a dull throbbing and he places his foot down carefully. Well enough. Perhaps he will find the men inside, busied about some detail of construction. He goes carefully into the house and along its gutted corridors, stepping around piles of bricks and offcuts of wood, remarking patches of damp and nests of mice.

In what will be the kitchen he does find someone, a runtlike apprentice stirring a crusted pottage over a small fire. When questioned, the boy churns its way through a mouthful of catarrh to answer. 'Gone for materials,' it says, shrugging its disinterest., Elias leaves it to its disgusting affairs and decides to make his own judgement of the works. Then, he thinks, he will return the next day, and the next, until he tracks down the damned mason or finds another to replace him.

He makes his way through the ground floor rooms one by one. He moves as if one of his legs has been carved for him. He is looking for markers of progress but he knows nothing of building, only that the plastering cannot begin until warmer weather, and there are currently no walls ready to plaster. Rough holes yawn where there should be tiles and fireplaces, damp furrs old stone and tweaks at the

inside of his nose. Something about the state of the works makes him feel as if he is being mocked, but he does not know why, or how to stop it. This unsettling invites shapeless griefs to crowd in on him, demanding his attention, but he pushes them back and keeps going, opening doors, peering, poking. Movement is what he needs, impetus, action.

In the house's upper rooms the work seems further on, or at least there is less rubbish lying about. Here he is calmer, and the looming feeling of unexamined sadness recedes. Even the ache in his toe seems less insistent. Up here it is possible to imagine the walls properly dressed, his furniture in place, and himself leading admiring friends past well-placed artefacts on their way to view his collections. He squints approvingly at a new widow seat, studies a pair of alcoves, places astrolabes glinting within their curves. Onward. At the far end of the upper corridor is the room he has chosen for his study. It is built into an outward curve of the wall, with windows on three sides. From his desk here he will look down on a diverting triptych – the comings and goings of his own yard, his neatly plotted herb garden, and the tranche of the neighbouring Tradescant plot visible over his new garden wall – the pond, and the massed exotic trees beyond it. The panes of glass are smudged and fogged but he peers through at what will be, heartened. The wall is begun, extends almost as far as the place where the tree fell over the boundary last month. Soon the whole line of it will be sealed, the partition properly established. As for the widow, she has given no trouble, excepting the silence regarding the writ of execution. Still, the attics are ready at any time. When he viewed the house he remarked that they only needed painting, so he had that done immediately the lease was signed. The shelves and cabinets will come later, but the space can be pressed into service at any time.

The last room he views is the one that will be Bessie's chamber. He pushes it open, sees a dark fan of wood open up in the dust as the door sweeps across it, and as he makes himself look up to take in the condition of the space his breath seems to get caught beneath his sternum and mass there, a painful pressure. An effect of the dust, no doubt, an imbalance of the humours, the pain of his gout. The room, after all, is empty. The windows are bare of hangings, the leaden white light outside laying pale bars across the floor. He scans cornices, ledges, niches, sees nothing left undone beyond a thorough clean. But then there is something, in the far corner beyond the door, a piece of furniture cast aside by the previous tenant, or which Bessie asked to keep – oh, God. Oh, hellfire and damnation.

A baby's cradle, with half-moon rockers and a carved canopy. Oh, not today. With Bessie still confined to her chamber, her linen soaked with tears as much as the blood that runs away with their latest hopes. He stares at the useless cot a moment, considers crossing the room to it, unsure if he should clutch it to his breast or break it into splinters. But instead he slams the door and hobbles off down the corridor.

He approaches the stairs fast, intending to get away outside, on his horse, across the marsh, over the bridge and back to her, where there is presently no room alongside her grief for his. When she carries to term, he thinks, he'll buy her a new cradle. Carve it with their names, mark out their future in immovable lines. Taking a step too quickly he slips, grabs at a baluster and lands hard on his rear, then thumps on downwards toward the bottom stair where he finally wedges his body against the wall but also cracks his foot on the newel post. The pain explodes up his leg and he stays there whimpering, gripping his thigh with both hands, bright white stars slicing across his vision. When he is able to open them he finds Mary standing in the hallway, watching him.

The vision is brief but certain. The broad body with its shoulders rounded forwards, head craned up between them under a fussily trimmed cap, a waft of ground cloves and storax. Her hands clutched before her on her cane, her skin bunched into pale spotted creases. The exactness of it shocks him, though he has hardly thought of her for years. Her eyes, too, might as well hang in the air of the hallway, their washed-out blue both pleading and disdainful, that look that used to drive him to the edge of savagery. With the vision comes her voice, and he knows exactly what it would say. *My mole. Mine. Taken up with another, now. And none too pleased to see me, eh?* He shakes his head to clear it but he is pinned beneath his pain and the spate of memory. *But of course it was my estates that made you who you are. Your Bessie wouldn't have looked at the lawyer from Lichfield, would she? Not like me. I loved you when all you had was ambition. Well, well. There's no hope for it now. Although you don't seem to be having much more luck with her than with your dear old Mary, do you? Drawn another blank on your family tree. Soft, though. Aren't you a powerful doctor? Advisor to the King? Charmer of elements, knower of stars? A freemason? Don't all your calculations predict lasting greatness, a man of unforgettable legacy? So what are you doing wrong?* Groaning, he longs for his graveyard dreams of Eleanor. *You look old*, her voice runs on. *Oh, not as old as me, I know. But I am dead, and your time will come. Perhaps you'll join me sooner than you know. It won't be long before the pretty thing finds you out. And not*

just her. The King's advisors, the new Royal Society. You've noticed the pauses in their conversation. You're out of step with them now, your occult learning holds less sway than it used to. Really, you should get back to Lichfield, give up this masquerade. Look at this place. All the trappings but none of the horses, eh?

Enough. He shuts his mind to her and heaves himself upright. Steadies himself against the treacherous newel post, the hallway swimming in and out of focus. Then slowly shuffles onward, away from this empire of dust and pain and ghosts.

Elias has his horse's reins in hand and is wincing in anticipation of the mount when he sees the mason at last, standing talking in the road outside the house with the grocer from the village. Neither of them have seen him, and it is clear they are in no hurry to be about their business, deep in conversation. At last, here is the action he needs. Elias returns the reins to their tether and heads across the yard toward the gate, stiff-legged.

'It doesn't seem credible,' he hears from the mason as he approaches. 'The pair are still oblivious to his presence. "To take the same house, almost.'

'Listen,' says the other, the one from the village. 'She hasn't been entirely in her wits since the son died. But there's no question she fears him, and who can blame her? Her left alone to keep him off the thing he's always wanted? If I was her I'd see secret doors in the walls as well.'

'There are none that I'm aware of, or been asked to make,' laughs the mason. 'But if I receive such an instruction, I'll be sensible of it. I wonder how much his little wife knows. She's a comely one, considering –'

'Gentlemen,' he says, breasting the gateway. They start, guilty discovered. But he will deal with them later – it is immediately, wonderfully clear to him where the blame for all his misfortune lies, and it is in the venomous hysteria of Hester Tradescant. He hobbles past the stricken pair and onward to the Tradescant gate, its mottled whale ribs now almost unremarkable, so far have they faded into the surrounding vegetation. Before he makes the front door he catches a movement, a pale shadow, at the window of the annexe. It must be her, lurking in the collection. Before he can react the door opens and she comes a few paces out into the garden to meet him.

He has not seen her close since the Chancery hearing, when she already looked worn. Now her hair is white, the skin not so much lined as stretched across bones that have come to new prominence, the skull reaching for the air. If she fears him she makes no sign of it, but lifts her chin, decided.

‘You,’ she says.

‘Indeed, madame.’

‘Come to visit, at last.’

‘At last?’

‘I’ve been waiting,’ she says, as if it were obvious. Of course you have, he thinks. Waiting for me to hear of your slander. But she heaves the sigh of one who has been wronged and continues, ‘I suppose you want to exercise your writ,’ as if she understood the workings of the law.

‘My agents will be here any day to make their reckoning,’ he says. But perhaps not until spring, despite the wording of the summons. Dugdale is reluctant to make the journey from Nottinghamshire, and instead sends letters wanting Bessie to spend the winter with him. As if Elias was somehow failing her.

‘Before they do,’ the widow says, ‘I want you to agree something.’

‘I, agree?’ He stays his fury out of a peculiar curiosity to see what she might say, knows he will refuse it. Things are not decided by mad widows in gardens.

‘When the Ark is yours,’ she says, ‘promise me you will not sell it.’

‘Sell it?’

‘A private sale would mean it could be broken up, dispersed. But the rarities should stay together, as a whole. You could still give it to a university, one day.’

On top of everything, she tries to make conditions on what has already been agreed in law. He concentrates on his purpose.

‘I will promise no such thing. And you will cease making scandalous insults about me to my neighbours. I know what you’ve been doing, and you invite trouble you have never known.’

Her face changes then, a further tightening, a flattening out, the eyes set and clouded. The old tic is there, the distracted twitching. She has every appearance of a madwoman.

‘I know about the door,’ she says, inexplicably. ‘I know about all of it. Whatever I do, you will find your way in. Where will you stop? Will you cut my throat for my collection?’

And there it is, the hysteria. He can practically hear her womb reaching up inside her body to throttle her, pushing her into the realm of lunacy. But a louder muttering makes him turn his head and see the mason and his friend have brazenly followed him and are now loitering in the Tradescant gate, joined by more passers-by who now form a small crowd, watching. Her maid, too, has appeared in the shadows of the collection and stands within easy reach.

‘There is no door,’ he says. ‘Or any of your other inventions. For heaven’s sake, woman. More than twenty years I have tried to help you. Put my own time and money into the collection when you and your husband would have ruined it. Been forced to the trouble and expense of the law to receive a gift your husband made freely to me. Kept your sordid affairs out of the courts. And now you bring me these accusations and demands? Such ingratitude is bred in a diseased mind. If I was your physician you would be in Bedlam.’

Her skin, now, is white to match her hair. She trembles and twitches and then speaks.

‘Take it.’ She says it quietly, so quietly he must lean in and check he has heard correctly. She seems to draw something up from deep within herself and speaks again, more loudly. ‘Take it. Take it now.’

‘Madame, I hardly think –’

‘Take it.’ She is almost shouting now, and their audience has gone still.

‘Without due process...’

But she is gone, turned on her heel and gone back inside the collection. He follows, warily. Finds her in the middle of the room with her hands over her ears, rocking back and forth on her heels. Her maid makes no attempt to quiet her.

‘Can’t you do something?’ He appeals to her. ‘Your mistress is unwell.’

‘Is she?’ asks the maid, in the face of all evidence. ‘Or has she been hounded beyond all bearing?’ He is saved from responding by the widow, who ceases her rocking and reaches for the nearest table of objects.

Fear touches him then, fear of what she might do to his collection. He approaches her, caution be damned. She turns, a priceless treasure in each hand. A letter-case, a hawk's hood.

'Here,' she says. 'Take them.'

'You must stop this,' he says, repulsed. 'I cannot allow –'

'Oh, stop,' she says. 'Is there anything you will allow? All you have ever wanted is to have what is mine, and now I am giving it to you. Will you not allow that either?'

'Your conduct...' he begins, but gets no further. The hawk's hood catches him in the chest and he only just manages to clasp it there.

'How dare you?'

'I dare,' And lifts her head to throw again. 'I dare!' This time he catches the letter-case cleanly, as if they were children playing some absurd game of catch. 'Take them!' she shouts. 'I want no more of it. Or I will throw them into the street.'

'You leave me no choice, then,' he says at last. Then watches in horror as her face creases into laughter. Holds the hood and the case carefully before him and backs out of the collection. At the door he pauses. She is still laughing, apparently with relief. Her maid has taken her in her arms.

'I'll be back for the rest,' he says. At last, at last, and damn the manner of it. He hurries away, trying to ignore the watching eyes of the crowd at the gate. He is only followed by the sound of her laughter.

1675

AUGUST

Hester leaves the blue shadows of the house for the burn of the afternoon – Sunday, the servants at their rest, the quiet of the parish after prayer. The wall between her garden and the Ashmoles' stands new and bright, its length marred only by a summer's untamed growth of plants and by a mess of rubbish against the secret door she knows is there. Out of habit she cocks her head and listens but only the insects come to meet her, their ceaseless rusty ticking. The wild chorus of the Ark is gone, since December last it has been his, or fallen silent. Only her small thefts sing on, barely audible from the pond's cool clasp.

She squints at the rubbish pile. She has to move it, although it was meant to protect her. But he is saying it makes his garden unsafe. Lengths of old paling, scratchings of earth and leaves, branches and other assortments. How could he be unsafe, who has everything? But of course her garden is not her own and he wants to come and go through his door unhindered. Perhaps even now he is watching from his attic. He will be waiting there among her rarities, becoming angrier with every passing minute that she has resisted him so long. She starts out towards the pile, slowly, testing each step. Everything hurts, Meg does her best but there is no salve for old age. Her head starts to swim but she reaches the pile, shading her eyes. She gave up the Ark but it is not enough for him. The village starts to doubt her. She doubts herself. Back and forth it goes when she lies awake in the night waiting for the sound of him – breaking a window, climbing a vine. Or simply appearing, a conjuror, and advancing on her with harm in his eyes. She has lost so much. Not more than so many. She cannot accept what is good for her. She is frightened. But that is nonsense. But he closes around her like a vice. She is slovenly, irrational, quarrelsome.

A knotted branch extends out towards her from the pile – she sees a wrist, a finger, tendons, as if some full-bodied relic was buried deep inside. She grasps it, skin and bone to skin and bone, and pulls. It comes away easily; too easily, and she trips backwards and falls onto the grass, panting. The

stick is in her hand, the lower half of it damp and speckled with earth. The uselessness of the gesture overwhelms her and she laughs, waving the stick-hand at the heap. Not today, then. It is madness to even try. Is she mad? She does not think so. But they do. They all do.

She closes her eyes and she is back in the church as it was that morning. Early, the square tower rising sunlit above the white mist of river and marsh. It was already time for the service to begin but a handful of people still lingered outside. She went on towards the church door, raised her hand in greeting. But as she passed the centre of the group came into view – Elias and Elizabeth Ashmole. They seemed somehow lighter than the villagers around them, both dressed in dove-grey where everyone else had chosen colours of the earth; rust, sage, charcoal. She kept walking, because what else should she do? But she saw the way her friends and neighbours acted; hands refolded, bonnets lowered, only eyes speaking. At last Martha Sands, who shares her pew, came to meet her. Good Martha's eyes were full of it – pity and scorn. *Hester*, she said, kindly enough. *Your health? Your spirits? Your garden?* And at this last, faltered. She knew something.

It is hot; all shimmering light and hayseed scratch. Hester shuffles back into the shade of the wall and rests there, poking idly at the dirt with her stick-hand. Images start to form. She fashions an elephant, a gryphon, a porcupine, flat shapes with startling protrusions. Scrubs them out again. It is like those drawings she made with Manu a life time ago, on a plastered wall in some neglected passage of her uncle's house, white-painted. The pair of them were young, very young, neither much higher than the nearest door-handle. From somewhere they found the means to draw – as she remembers, charcoal picked from a cold fire. Firm black lines appeared across the wall at child-height. They had seen things, if not understood them; in churches, at St Bartholomew's Fair, in the studio of John de Critz. Carvings, maps, portraits, prints, embroidery, dancing monkeys, jesters, the Bible. They drew hideous faces, invented creatures, teeth and limbs and part-remembered characters in hats. They drew what they knew of London; horses and birds and sheep and carts and loaves of bread. They hungered to leave a record. When they were discovered they are beaten, though perhaps she remembers a half-smile at her uncle's mouth. The next day, all was washed off and painted over.

The sermon was Daniel; Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, the arrogance and punishment of kings. *I saw a dream which made me afraid, and the thoughts upon my bed and the visions of my head troubled me.* She sat in

her place next to Martha Sands and waited. When she was first in Lambeth her place was furthest from the aisle, and she looked across the two blonde heads of the children and past John at high narrow banners of coloured glass. Noah was there, welcoming a dove back to his Ark against the flood in waves of rose pink and lapis blue, shot through with the honeyed yellow of salvation. Invisible were the animals, his sons, their wives, the sweat and stink of weeks at sea and how Noah ended, drunk in a tent and cursing his own son with his arse hanging out. All gone now, the glass smashed in the wars and patched up plainly, herself moved to the end of the pew with a clear view down to the pulpit. She considered whether she could rise and walk away, cover the mile along marsh and river and back home, not be a part of it. But such things are not done. She would be a true pariah then, and her servants would lock the doors with her inside. *His dwelling was with the wild asses: they fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven.*

Nothing moves now in the parched garden, and nor does Hester. Sweat coils along her thighs, her hairline, her collarbone. Before they were old enough for proper beatings, it was her habit with Emanuel to steal into old John de Critz's studio whenever her family visited his. She understood little of what she saw but it lived in her – the half-worked boards and canvases, the curved palettes spread with capricious maps of paint, the smell of linseed oil and turpentine, the names of the colours. She was so sure she would be a painter like her uncle, her cousins. But then they grew past the door-handles and Emanuel was led away, to a schoolroom where he learned to read and write and talk with men. And Hester was given a sampler and a pestle and kept at home, did not see the studio again.

If she had left the church early they would still have spoken of her, and there would have been no defence. So instead she waited, tried to pay attention to the sermon. *Then came in all the king's wise men: but they could not read the writing, nor make known to the king the interpretation thereof.* Her attention strayed – she wandered the landscape of years upon years of sermons, the carvings and columns of St-Mary-at-Lambeth – the plaques in walls and floor, the grain of the pews dappled like a starling's wing. The mark on the wood next to her where Jack used to sit, the beginnings of a J, his young hand hastily slapped away. A chip in the stone of a nearby column made when soldiers crowded in, once in the early days of the wars, and fired a musket so that the congregation cowered in their places. These marks are known only to those who lived them; wise men could no more read the body of her church then they could

the hand of God. Then there was a pressing on her sleeve – Martha Sands, leaning in. Hester looked around, surprised that the sermon was finished. But the priest's voice has not paused, if anything it had gathered strength. *Then came in the magicians, the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers.* The hand pressed still and Martha's eyes met hers, fierce and enquiring. *Hush*, they said. But what sound had she been making?

Before she was born her uncle painted the tomb of the old Queen. It was one of his duties as the court's Serjeant Painter, though not a given – the work was a sign of trust, a gift. All this her mother explained to her as they stood before the effigy, in the Lady Chapel in the Abbey at Westminster, its ceiling like spun sugar at some upside-down banquet. The Queen is indifferent to all that beauty, staring forever upward from stone pillow and filigree ruff towards the underside of the tomb's canopy, which is topped with heraldic shields and fleur-de-lys and tiny gold lions. *Regarde*, whispers her mother's voice, her hand on Hester's shoulder. But it is not the Queen's splendour that so moves Madame Pookes, it is the elevation of their kinsman to the position of Serjeant Painter. Like them, John de Critz is a refugee from the Continent, and now it is his hand on the brush heavy with gold leaf, his name in registers of the Crown. This is what Hester must learn; that her proper place is in the greatest company, and anything less is failure. It takes some time for her to understand that women do not have the merit to make such advancements themselves, that her tool for success is marriage.

Thou hast praised the gods of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know. And yet they spoke to her, the rarities, only to her. She was chosen, she was exceptional, she listened to the truth of their living. She listened even when she understood nothing, and in turn she felt that she was not alone. But somehow all that has gone. From where she sat she could see them, Elias and Elizabeth Ashmole, so firmly installed in the foremost pew, their backs to her. Her neighbours, who should be happy with everything they have but who want more. They have told everyone in the village that thieves can climb up her rubbish pile and rob them. They tell people that they live in fear because of her. And somehow no-one remembers what she has lost. She whose house is swaddled in a new silence must be more silent than ever or she will spend every service like this one, waiting for the whispers to begin. She tries not to point this out, she knows what happens when she does, but her

tongue runs away from her more and more. How to live a thing and not speak of it? If she ever knew she has forgotten.

The sound of sawing insects heightens, roars, blurs and breaks; from beneath it emerges the faint strains of the treasures left to her, hidden deep in the golden-brown pond. Small things, quiet things, slipped from the collection and away from him, muffled under the water. She failed at the task of marriage her mother set her; failed again and again, and it seemed as if she would spend her life alone. But then her cousins brought her a widowed gardener and she took him, her last chance, her best chance, another foreigner in the service of the King. That was one of her reasons, and it was obvious to everyone. What she told no-one was that she saw the dirt of Virgina under his nails, heard tell of his strange collection and hoped for something more, something she could barely put a name to. But then he would hardly look at her, would hardly listen, left her with his children and walked away into his gardens with his ghosts. There was no child of her own, and in the end neither of his, and all she has made to remember them is a tomb. The small voices call to her, soothing. But straight away they are snuffed out again, by the sound of footsteps coming slowly over the grass.

After the service they gathered in the graveyard. She tried to stay apart, to visit the tomb of her making, but Martha took her arm and made her face it. *He cannot sleep*, she said. *His wife is with child*. More of them came to her and said the same things. *But*, she said. *And*. Why would thieves come through her garden, when Elias Ashmole has made a door himself? And why does anyone concern themselves with his rest, when he has stolen her cabinet? She was almost shouting, but Martha shook her head, not listening. Martha has made her mind up, they all have. Their faces all said the same thing, as final as the tolling of a bell. *So sad. So sad, to end like this*. Somehow she, not he, is punished like an arrogant king, is held under siege in her own home. *Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting*. The mad widow takes her revenge through poor housekeeping.

It is Meg who has come out from the house and now stands over her, calling her back to the garden, the heat, the rubbish. The sun's glare makes it hard to see her maid's face but Hester knows how she must appear, half-sitting, half-lying against the boundary wall by a heap of earth with her stick-hand abandoned beside her. Well, Meg need not concern herself. She came out to deliver herself of her neighbour's slander and now she is resting. Is that so wrong?

‘Hester.’ Meg’s voice is not concerned so much as tired and impatient. ‘What are you doing out here in the heat?’

‘It is cooler here, in the shade. I will get up soon.’

‘But why come out at all? There’s nothing to be done in the garden. You are always walking to the pond but it will not cool you.’ She is in one of those moods, then. If Hester does not satisfy her she is likely to empty a bucket of water over her head.

‘I came out to move it. But I can’t.’

‘The rubbish?’

‘Aye.’

‘Well, of course you can’t. It will take three boys to move, and not on a hot Sunday. Come inside and rest. Leave it for the next week.’

‘But the whole village speaks of it. He tells them I let thieves into his garden.’

‘Oh. What did you hear?’

‘All of it. At church. But it is he who makes a secret door in my wall, and looks to come into my house at night.’ She can feel tears rising but Meg only sighs, a sound of great restraint.

‘It is not what you think, Hester. Many put Mr Ashmole in the wrong and it riles him, makes him more apt to slander and criticise. You are right that we should move this mess and keep the peace. But please, let us leave it for another day.’ Meg reaches a hand down to help pull her up, but just as quickly withdraws it. There are noises from beyond the wall. ‘Mistress. He is coming.’

‘Has he seen me?’

‘I am not sure. But you cannot hide there like a child.’

‘Can’t I?’ Their argument is stalled by the sound of Elias Ashmole’s angry voice calling to Meg.

‘You there. I hope you are about to have this moved. Ten times I have told you it must be done, and now I have been robbed of half my henhouse.’

‘Your henhouse, sir? But we have had no thefts here. They must have got in some other way.’

‘What do you know? Your mistress cannot manage her estate, and now she endangers mine. My wife is afraid to fall asleep for fear of being robbed again. Tell your mistress, I will have her back in court.’

‘My mistress is resting, sir. She is sure to have it removed next week.’

‘She is out of her wits, and it has already sat there for a month. I can see it from my study, and her, dancing round her pond like a Bedlamite.’

Hester puts her hand to the stone of the cursed wall and heaves herself painfully to standing, dust and grasses falling from her dress. The heat and light make her vision slip in and out of blindness but she steadies, and turns to face him. He is wigless, his face flushed red, his shorn hair tufted with sweat.

‘You,’ he says with loathing. ‘What are you doing down there, hiding and listening and casting spells? Bringing more disorder on my house? I ought to – ’

‘You ought to what? What else can you do? My maid has told you and I do now, the rubbish will be moved.’

‘Your garden is a disgrace to the parish and to the memory of your husband. What must I do to impress this on you?’

‘Surely you have done enough?’

‘You make a spectacle of yourself at the expense of others.’

‘And you? You have done nothing to me?’ Meg is at her side, her hands raised as if to fend off blows. Hester and allows her to take an elbow. Together they turn and start back for the house, their silent backs their only defence. His voice follows them, louder than insects, louder than song.

‘Order your house, woman! Order your house, or I will order it for you!’

1676

SEPTEMBER

Elias closes the door on the last of his guests, their promises made. In the sudden quiet of his hall he cracks his knuckles one by one. It is done. He now only need compose a document to seal it all in place.

He strides through the finished rooms of his house. Tapestries and delft tiles, portraits and new china. His initials wink from cornices, and above the new fireplace the arms of Ashmole impale those of Dugdale. The stair is lined with Turkish carpet, and on the upper hallway the alcoves hold astrolabes, conch shells, the skulls of unknown birds. He pauses outside his wife's room but does not enter, continues on to his study. Let her rest. This is for her too, for their shared losses. With this act he ensures, he must ensure, peace on their estate.

At his desk with its wide views he takes up quill, paper and ink, and raises his hand to finish Hester Tradescant once and for all. It would be fitting if she was in the garden below, peering into her pond like a deranged heron, but over the wall he can see only her blowsy late summer trees and their reflection in the water. Anyway, he knows where she is, because he has made it so. She is sitting down with her cousin, who is telling her that she will sign a document prepared by Elias Ashmole, admitting her wrongdoings and apologising for them.

He puts his quill to the paper, and the neat scratch of her testimony begins.

Bee it knowne unto all Persons that I Hester Tredescant of South Lambeth in the County of Surrey widow

Between disputatious neighbours, each might dream of a document of submission for the other, but it is rare to achieve a full confession. Such are the complications of silencing a person. But Elias, who has the ear of the King, who has authored volumes on astrology, heraldry and chemistry, who is a prognosticator and alchemist, a Freemason and a Member of the Royal Society, has wrestled with the

somehow more problematical questions of rubbish, chickens and gossip, and won. Won so completely he is writing the confession of his enemy for her to sign.

doe acknowledge & Confess in the presence of Mr: Justice Dawling and other Witnesses hereunder subscribed

A widow has few allies, and in her derangement she has even fewer. The evidence: at a city dinner some months ago it was Emanuel de Critz who came to him, motioned him aside and asked how he fared in his dealings with Hester Tradescant. At that time Elias was so disturbed by the baleful whispers the widow put about he did not fully trust the man; but quickly de Critz showed his sorrow and frustration at his cousin's decline, and her obstinacy. From there an alliance was formed, a consensus between men.

I have very much wronged Elias Ashmole of the same place Esquire by severall false scandalous & defamatory Speeches Reports, & otherwise tending to the diminution and blemishing of his Reputation & good Name, more especially in these particulars following

His lawyer's training holds good. He must show her behaviour to be intolerable – no great trial there, in fact a jury might wonder at his patience. He will begin with her domestic aggravations, both irrational and malicious. Beyond that there is, of course, a higher purpose – he must ensure her confession absolves him in any and all respects that might relate to his estate, both within and beyond South Lambeth. He must have full control over his public standing and his choice of ventures. Any and all future words or actions by Hester Tradescant must be disregarded by whoever encounters them.

First I have reported to several persons that the said Elias Ashmole had made a door out of his Garden by which he might come into my House as soone as the breath was out of my Body, & take away my Goods

There was a tree that fell across the old fence, once, before he and Bess had even spent a night in the place. Perhaps this is where she got the idea but the repetition of it, the insistence that he, a solicitor and member of the Royal court, might ever attempt such a theft or wish to, could only be the product of a diseased mind.

when as in truth there was not, nor yet is any such door made by him.

In fact it is he who should be fearful, that the mere construction of a proper boundary wall should cause so much alarm and complaint. From the beginning she has fought it, has embittered his every attempt to create his longed-for country home. With such a person, the advancement of others is an insult to their own failures. Yet despite her, he has bettered his estate immeasurably. House, courtyard, stables and garden are all elegantly refurbished, and soon – he allows himself a small distraction, to dwell with pleasurable anticipation – will begin the construction of his new dining room. A question of designs and plans that returns him to his task.

Secondly that he has taken away 250 foote of my Ground, when he built his Garden wall; whereas his said Wall was set in the place where an old Pale stood immediately before he built his Wall

More whispers and suggestions from his acquaintances in the village. They thought, perhaps, that they were helping, that he wasn't aware, that the poor old thing next door might be shy of raising the affair with him. Nonsense! And of course it was fantasy – the line measured and agreed upon exactly, and anyway both gardens improved beyond all recognition by the addition of a true wall. She should be thanking him, and not just for his groundworks. But he has her now. Next comes the heart of the thing. He refreshes his quill and addresses the old matter.

Thirdly I have reported to several Persons as well Strangers as others of my Acquaintance, that the said Mr: Ashmole had forced me to deliver up to him my Closet of Rarities, and that if I had not done, he would have cut my throat. And in the presence of divers Neighbours I falsely charged the said Mr: Ashmole; that he had rob'd me of Closet of Rarities, & cheated me of my Estate

Submission is an art, like portraiture. You cannot leave room for doubt. He must include her wild accusations, so that any future ones will be seen as just more spite. Can he recall it all himself, exactly? Does he know himself what is true and what invented? Does it matter? She is all but out of her wits, all

but illiterate and certainly unable to make her own statement. True, the rarities are now safely in his attic, but until her longed-for death their status remains legally unresolved, the Chancery judgement having left them with her during her lifetime. She would hardly be able to mount an official challenge any decision he might make, but he must pre-empt even the thought of it. Certainly he has thought of selling the cabinet, of relieving himself of the trouble. But now, perhaps, he sees another way.

When as in truth I pressed him to receive the said Rarities, & when he intreated me to keepe them, and not only used many Arguments to persuade me to it, but set on my other friends & neighbours to persuade me likewise, I would not hearken to their advice, but forced him to take them away, threatening, that if he did not, I would throw them into the Streete; and he having consented to receive them I voluntarily helped to remove some of them my selfe.

That is the most recent past set to rights. Now to the future. Bessie has lost two more children since they moved to Lambeth; that he is so practiced at this particular pain somehow makes it no less bitter, and at fifty-nine years old he must face the possibility that he might never conceive an heir. How, then, does a man such as he ensure he is remembered? He wants to build a palace of knowledge in his name, to house his collections and advocate for his endeavours as if he were King Solomon, set himself apart from every other learned man of his age and thumb his nose at those who doubt him. Oxford might, just might, consider it. But for some reason that university was also her preference, and if things do progress he cannot have it put about that there was any Tradescant authority at play. For it to work, it must be his gift alone.

Fourthly I reported that I had made him promise me to bestow the said Rarities on the University of Oxford; and that I would force him to send them thither, when I never moved the said Mr: Ashmole to any such thing, either when I delivered them to him, or at any tyme since.

Not just wrong, but madly so. Oxford. He puts his quill down and closes his eyes. He worries that his friends there may try and suppress his ambitions. Anthony Wood has his history of the University,

Robert Plot does his own digging for natural histories and just last year turned up the bones of a giant in the Chiltern hills. John Aubrey potters about scribbling, but you can never quite be sure there isn't genius obscured behind his disorganisation. He has so many pursuits in London himself, can he spare the time and energy? Certainly he expects the University to play its part in acknowledging the honour he does in considering them. Mary shimmers at the edge of his consciousness, though in general he has successfully banished her to times of pain and disorder. *And the honour to you, Elias Ashmole? Are you sure you understand the nature of philanthropy?*

A sound beyond his window interrupts his reflections. Ah, there she is. Shuffling along the path to her pond like some melancholic automaton. And behind her, gesticulating, Emanuel de Critz. Elias grips his quill; the man has mere hours to subdue her and bring her to his parlour before the Justice and witnesses, have her put her mark to the submission he is now preparing. Should he anticipate disaster? No – as he left, de Critz assured him that it would be done. Such trouble and expense of effort for one disobedient old woman! What stratagems she has used against him! He writes again, quickly, more in anger than in thought.

Fifthly that I caused a great heape of Earth & Rubbish, to be layd against his Garden wall, so high, that on the sixt day of August last in the night, by the help thereof it is strongly presumed that Theives got over the same & robd the said Mr: Ashmole of 32 Cocks & Hens; and not withstanding he admonished me to take it away, I told him it should lye there in spight of his Teeth, & soe it continued untaken away above six weekes after he was so robbed, whereby he lay in continuall feare of having his house broken open every night.

Enough; it is time for his final blows, from which there can be no return. A blanket clause to free him of any suspicion past, present or future. A gag.

All which, and like many other false & scandalous Reports & Words, as I have unadvisedly & rashly spoken against

*him without any Provocation of his words or deedes, so I am really and heartily sorry that I have so greatly wronged him
therein*

Out in the garden Emanuel de Critz embraces her, though she tries to struggle free.

*and I have in the presence of the said Mr: Justice Dawling, and the subscribed Witnesses, acknowledged the said Wrongs
and Injuries so done unto the said Mr: Ashmole, and asked him publique forgiveness for the same:*

Her cousin will be explaining all this, that she will listen to her submission read out, so that there can be no doubt her own mind or that of her closest associates what she is agreeing to, and that everything is true and meant. He cannot imply specific judgements if she does speak out again, but her mark on the document will allow him full legal recourse should he need it.

*And doe hereby voluntarily & freely promise the said Mr: Ashmole that noe manner of Rubish or Earth shall be layd
against his said Garden Wall, and that hence forth I will not say or doe anything against him or his wife, that may tend
to the damage reproach or disreputation of them or either of them. In witness thereof I have bereunto set my hand the
first day of September 1676.*

It is done. He reads it back, checks his expression for any error or latitude, is satisfied. He glances up at the garden again, but it is empty, as if she had never been there.

1677

MAY

Somehow Hester is out on the marsh, alone. She finds herself in the act of stooping, her hand stretched towards a riverbank jewelled with water-mint, marigold, meadow vetchling. As if she was collecting. But she does not collect flowers, never flowers. She straightens up, slowly, waiting for an explanation. There is only the wind pressing into the reeds, soft and heavy as calfskin, the distant moan of more to come.

She searches her memory, but the moments before hammer with emptiness. Something flickers, some awareness, some rule she should have followed, but she cannot capture it. *Again*. The word hovers, suggestive.

She knows the path, at least. The single plush hawthorn, the crook of the dyke. Knows all these paths. But she is over a mile from the house, without a companion, without a cloak. If this were a play she might be the subject of a spell, or a shipwreck. Confusion will ensue but all will turn out well, unless you are a monster.

A swan leers at her, moving stately past. She can see its feet clear through the umbrous water, ugly things at work with muscular purpose. What do you see, swan? An old woman standing on the bank, who does not know how she got here. Or perhaps something else, something known only to swans. Tell me, swan, have I purpose in your eyes? The creature slides away, feathers white as angels.

She inspects the riverbank again, more closely. She is sure she out here because she is looking for something. But – she turns her hands over to be sure, front and back – she has not found it.

She should go back. Back to the house. The thought makes her fretful. She is not wanted there, although her husband left it to her and it is her home. But – that flicker again – she has misbehaved,

everyone has agreed. What did she do that was so wrong? It was nothing she was truly sorry for.

Though there is plenty that she does regret.

Come – it is a bright day, a soft wind, good for walking. Warm and grey, a hint of rain. Perhaps, as she walks, she will find what she is looking for. She has learned this, in her latest endeavours. You do not know what you seek until you find it, but when you do, it is easy. A nod of recognition. *Welcome.*

She takes a few steps, but her feet feel as if she has been walking for hours. Wince, wince. She should not be out here alone. That flicker again. Her annoyance. Meg's disapproval. *Am I to be a prisoner in my own house?* Did she say that? *Get your house in order.* No, that was something else. Never mind. Walk. Wince. She will show her sore legs to the doctor, who has enough material now for a catalogue, should he be minded to create one. The list of her ailments includes, variously: clouded eyes, night sweating, sudden headaches, sudden heats; a swimming of the eyes and of head, colic, sciatica and frequent bruising. She has pains in her breast, her back, her joints, her bones, her skin, her heart. Furthermore she suffers from melancholy – silence, disquiet, and a consuming fear of murder by her neighbour.

Mustard, says the physician, and vinegar. Pigeon's blood. Sage, eggs. Mint and cinnamon, wine and pepper. Recipes for forgetfulness and ease.

She walks on, past the hawthorn like a wind-bent smoke-cloud, claggy with scent. They always passed it on the way home from church, the children wild to run on the marshes. On a day just like today, once, she and Frances crowned their heads with it, a rare gesture of peace. *May brides*, said John, while Jack felled rushes with a stick.

Frances. Of course. The sultry air, the stink of blossom. She has led Hester here, the trail still warm.

She turns about, looking for any trace. The wind unrolls a great sough and makes a mallard's back of the reed bed in shafts of white, green, silver. It starts to rain, fat drops spattering her face. Laughter, too, somewhere. *Frances.* Of course she would bring her out here, make a game of it, make her strive a little. Hester smiles into the rain, knowing she is close. That her collection will soon be complete. The girl is still out there somewhere, calling her on.

She walks on, into the wind. A mile to the house, perhaps more. The rain is heavier, more insistent. Great curtains of it swashing across the marsh, weighting her layers of cotton. No matter. It

won't be long now.

Certainty animates her steps even as she draws her arms around herself, lowers her head against the squall. Her endeavours started months ago, after the day of judgement. She remembers now, the room full of eyes. They held her in their anger and pity and made her sign another document written by the neighbour. He always has a document saying how things are, even when they are not so. Why do men build so much with paper, can they not see the world cannot be captured in ink? She stood there surrounded by the eyes and Emanuel was there and they had all decided. She did not think it was fair or right, half of what was said was fabrication. But he always wanted a paper to be sure and she just wanted to leave so she signed it. He kept on talking at her, even then, but she couldn't hear him because the rarities upstairs in his attics started to hum their recognition, after two years she knew every chord but it was different, not a song like it used be but an accusation. She turned on her heel and left them, the eyes and the sounds, and went home where she could be safe. As she left his gate and turned into hers she felt strangely light and warm as if struck by a sudden ray of sun. She looked down and there was Jack.

Of course, it didn't look like Jack, whose bones lie undisturbed in the churchyard at St-Mary-at-Lambeth, whose soul is at peace with God. But there was a blue stone lying in her garden that had no business there, and as she looked at it she knew. *Welcome*. She lifted it and held it close, held him close, felt him close to her as he was the day he died, tense as a drawn arrow. A piece of Jack was returned to her, and at last she knew how to keep him safe.

She has not walked so far, and the rain has settled implacably over the marsh. She takes her cap off and wrings it out like a dishrag. Her jaw jumps against itself and she bites down on her tongue to stop it chattering. *Frances, I'm sorry. I wanted something more beautiful than both us*. Then, looming out of the reeds on the other side of the dyke, the gable end of a ruined, roofless barn. So well known as to be unremarked, until now. She eyes it, squinting, through the hushing rain. Down the bank, across the dyke, a hundred yards beyond.

The water does not trouble her. She enters it almost with relief, her skirts lifted around her waist, momentarily weightless. Her feet meet – what? Soft mud, weeds, stones. Maybe other things kept safe. Things lost or thrown or fallen. In a few paces she reaches the reeds and pull herself through

them, which is harder. Snags, trips, is soaked to her chest. *Well played, Frances.* By the time she makes firmer ground she is smeared all over with mud and weed. *Is this what you want?* The barn seems further away than before, grass and thistles grown up around it. There is no path, so she half-crawls through the sodden vegetation.

At the barn door, an opening in the stone, she waits on her knees, panting. The sound of the rain is woven through with suggestions – a shout, a scream. There are people somewhere – a mile away, beyond this door. She should be frightened, but this is what Frances wants. Hester puts her hands to the stones and pull herself inside.

Three walls, open to the sky. Nettles, stones. A ribcage of fallen beams. The walls are a kind of shelter from the wind. She moves her hands along them as she edges inside, palms flat to the stone, as if she could read some secret message there. Comes to rest in a sheltered corner, drawing the sodden cloth of her gown close. *Well, Frances. Here I am. Now what?* She is shaking as if in a fit. The rain is loud on the stones and the nettles and it silvers them with droplets. It is not a cold day but she is cold, there, waiting. No matter. This is what it takes.

There are marks in the beams, simple patterns of interlinked petals to ward off witches. Now when she thinks of those women in Kent and Norfolk she knows they did not conjure white rabbits and black cats, assorted messengers of the Devil. They were tired and their bodies hurt and they knew they were near the end. It matters less, then, the veil between this world and the others, matters so little you often can't see it at all. Things slip through, but they mean no harm. Who knows what those women saw, or if they knew themselves? They were only trying to understand.

There is something else alive in here with her. *At last.* It appears in flashes, not shy, not indifferent, making its own way. Thin and brown, the length of her hand, with a bright black eye. An upright head which assesses the ground for danger but finds none in her. She watches it come closer, flickering past the raindrops. In the Ark the lizards were dried to twigs, but this one, the vessel of Frances, vibrates with life.

A halloo out there, somewhere on the marsh. *Sshhh.* She could not move now if she wanted to. There is a heaviness to her body, a detached warmth despite the shivering. And she is here now, with Frances. This comes first. She watches the lizard, which vanishes and appears again, still out of reach

of her prone body. Her lids are heavy.

Halloo.

A last flicker in the corner of her vision and she grabs wildly through clouded eyes. Holds something warm and dry, that wriggles. *Hab.*

She squeezes tight, and something cracks. *Welcome.*

Halloo.

~

Hester is under the familiar canopy of her bed, weighted with blankets up to her neck. Is it winter? The fire burns high and scented. She is cold, and hot. There are people in the room and she tries to ask them, but no sound comes from her mouth but a dry croaking. Of course, he silenced her, Elias Ashmole. Or she silenced herself, in the end it wasn't clear, only that they all stood in a room and agreed that she, Hester Tradescant, was wrong. She wrote her name against the neighbours truth, surrounded by their eyes.

Found on the marshes, sheltering in a barn

Is he here? Is he demanding an explanation? There would be no sense in it, but there is something in him that cannot leave her alone. As if he saw in her what he most feared and had to crush it. As if he has to stand ever closer, ever taller, to block out all her light.

Pale and shaking

Are her treasures safe from him? Not the Ark, he took it, but her collection, what she has hidden. The small rarities. The blue stone.

It is a new kind of telling, because once forbidden to speak, you can say anything.

Talking incoherently

Years ago she took things, small things, and hid them. A snuffling hat band made of porcupine quills. The claw of the stuffed dodo which fell off and she took before anyone noticed. The only noise it made was a soft scratching, which on hot days increased to something loud and desperate, the sound of something trying to escape. Alex's book. A shell like a woman's breast. She hid them and their small songs so that he couldn't take everything.

Later she understood that what she kept stopped being part of the Ark, became something else. Her own history.

She says she hears things

What things

It isn't Elias in her room. Meg, and the doctor. She breathes a little easier.

Alex's book is under the water. It has never had a song, but he is in its pages, and sometimes the water dances with the colours of his painted iris, his careful roses.

She found Jack in the blue stone, and she took him out to the pond and put him there, safe with the other things. Out of reach of Elias Ashmole.

She kept collecting. The rest came slowly, but each time she felt the small reaching out of a hand. *Ah*.

A melon glass, John. A piece of coral, Mary. Slowly she gathered all her dead, kept them quietly and safe. Only Frances would not come.

Better not to speak of it. In another parish...

Frances. Following that golden head around the grounds, that child who would always belong here more than she. Her uncle wanted her, and he had her. It was a good decision. They all stood in a room and agreed.

But Frances wasn't happy, and then she died. Died of plague, far off in a city house when she could have been out here in the clean air. And then Hester was the only one left.

The trouble with the neighbour

She caught a sense of her, though, out on the marshes. That's where she walked, towards the end, before her marriage. Hawthorn flowers in her hair. That's where Hester has been seeking her. A flicker among the reeds. A laugh on the wind.

Pharaohs filled their tombs with everything they needed for their next life. Frances told her that, her hand to the dome of the vegetable lamb. A heathen religion. But the children started fighting over what they would take with them to the grave. *What would you want with that?*

Her cousin, really. There's no-one else left

She found her. She was on the marsh and she found her. A bright light like a firefly, dancing just beyond her reach. Drawing towards her, everything burned away but this last spark. Her hand jerks and she feels the moment of capture, the sigh of forgiveness. But what did she do with her? Her arms are heavy, held down by so many blankets.

Lock the door?

She wriggles and frets, trying to free her arm. She can say anything she wants. But who can listen? Not Meg, not Emanuel, not Elias or the doctor. None of them will ever know what waits for her under the water.

Her arm comes free. Her hand is a fist, the knuckles white with holding on. *Move.* Slowly she watches her fingers uncurl. In her palm is the lizard, crooked to the pattern of her grasp. She smiles. *Frances.*

Lock the door

1677

JULY

Elias Ashmole wakes early from a dreamless sleep, sees the hunt in the morning play of light and shadow across his chamber. Chests and chair-legs become brindled dogs, eyes dark with anticipated blood. The draped window-seat, the stag that breaks in a rush and snorts through the trees in panic, falls bellowing to the ground. The silken rope that loops the damask back, the King's pale hand at its throat.

He starts up in his bed and moves like a young man to put on his robe and wake Samuel on his cot.

'Quick, Sam. I cannot miss it.'

'At this hour? Miss what?'

'The King's buck.'

'It's just a deer cart. Do you have to dress for it?'

'It's just the beginning.'

Grumbling, Sam consents to wash and dress him. They squabble again when he props the shaving-glass on a copy of the book so recently completed, *The Institution, Laws and Ceremonies of the Most Noble Order of the Garter*. At the King's behest Elias has written it, years of research, every detail of the most ancient chivalric order in England.

...an Historical account of the Laws and Ceremonies of the said most Noble Order; but more particularly, its Institution, the manner and order observed in Elections, Investitures, and Installations of Knights, the Holding of Chapters, Celebration of Festivals, the Formality of Proceedings, the Magnificence of Embassies sent with the Habit, to Stranger Kings and Princes; in sum, all other things relative to the Order...

So grateful is the King for his work he is sending him one of his own stags from the Royal hunt for a banquet to mark the publication. Tonight, Elias Ashmole celebrates. The book, and perhaps more.

Half an hour later Elias looks out of his study window to see the cart come in at the gate, and hurries down to meet it. In the milky summer morning he signs to the driver to stop, in the courtyard before the house with its finished fountain and sharply trimmed trees. He lowers the tail gate where it stands and inspects the royal gift. The buck lies hidden under sacking, still cool from two days hanging in the King's cellars. Elias turns back the covering – the head and antlers still intact, the King having no need of any trophies – and leans in close to its fine bloodied muzzle, inhales its smell of grass and shit and iron. He lifts its eyelid with his thumb and peers at the dark orb, searching for the imprint of its dying scene. But sees only his own outline reflected.

‘Will it do?’ the driver asks, looking at him doubtfully.

‘Of course.’ He drops the sacking back and nods the cart on to the kitchens, but does not follow it. Instead he goes to his new front gate – imposing, emblazoned – and stares along the London road, willing a rider to appear. Not yet.

When he get to the kitchen all is clatter and hurry, the great range already burning fiercely. The cook has reduced the stag to a clammy length of purple and white flesh laid out on the central table, has his knife raised for the butchering. By the door the creature's devastated remains overspill a basin, the head hanging loose.

‘Haunch?’ the cook says, sawing through the flesh of the shoulders, wiping away hair with a cloth. ‘It's a fine stag. It will be enough for ten men, with all the other dishes.’

‘Juniper,’ nods Elias, secretly regretting that the whole thing would not be spit-roast and served whole, an atavistic banquet fit for honouring the Knights of the Order. ‘Redcurrants.’ He glances again at the lolling head, the snapped legs protruding from the bucket. ‘And have those antlers cleaned and sent up to me. I'll add them to the collection – the head of the King's own stag.’

The cook calls a boy to the task of the antlers and considers Elias, who cannot stop himself from hovering.

‘Go and see,’ he says, jerking his head towards the larder. So Elias enters the cool narrow room with its tightly packed shelves, the makings of the coming dinner – marinating meats, chilled pastry,

sacks of vegetables and fruits, damp baskets of salmon, sole and sturgeon. Chickens, ducks and turkeys hang in dappled fistfuls, waiting to be plucked. Far in the back, the light from the small high window catches the crenellations of the battalia pie that stands foursquare on its board, a castle in pastry. Its rich gravy with lemon and spices enfolds oysters, cockscombs, lamb and veal sweetbreads, pigeons, boiled egg yolks, nuts and vegetables. It could, he thinks, be a cipher for his hopes. He hurries from the kitchen and goes back upstairs, to ensure he is the first to spy any messenger.

Instead, on coming into the main hall he finds Bessie, dressed for travelling. Her dear eyes are tired but cheerful. He takes her hands, presses it to his cheek.

‘Are you sure you won’t stay?’ he asks, because he knows she will not.

‘And do what?’ she laughs. ‘Talk of knights and star charts? I had rather visit my aunt.’

‘When will you be back?’

‘In a day or two. Perhaps by then your head will have stopped aching.’ She taps his chest playfully, kisses him on the mouth, still. He holds on to her hand, draws her closer.

‘Will you tell them?’ she asks in a whisper. Her father is about somewhere, down from Nottinghamshire, one of the guests for the dinner.

‘If it arrives. I cannot spread it around until I have the papers in my hand. It should be today. I anticipate it.’

‘It is right, I think.’

‘Of course,’ he says. Feels her tense, checks himself. In the last year there have been no more pregnancies. ‘You know I would not have thought of it if...’

‘I know. If I had ever had a child.’

‘A house,’ he enthuses. ‘A house in our name, that will stand long after we are gone, and bring knowledge and wonder to thousands we will never know. A centre for education and experiment...’

‘A house in your name.’

‘It is not what we planned together, my love. But this way we leave behind something greater than ourselves. Is that not some comfort?’

Bessie takes her hand from his, smiles through her tears.

‘I never had any doubt, Elias, that you would leave your mark.’

She leaves him then, goes out to the courtyard to meet her carriage. But almost instantly she is back, framed in the doorway by the strengthening summer light.

‘It came,’ she says, holding out a letter heavy with seals. ‘From Oxford.’

~

His ten guests fill the attic room. The space lacks some of the drama of the Tradescant annexe and is smaller, so some things are still packed away, but the impression the collection gives as visitors emerge from the stairwell into the overstuffed space, their heads inches from the clustered birds of paradise, is still more than enough to draw gasps. The men are themselves a carefully selected collection of court associates: they include Sir Joseph Williamson, the Principal Secretary of State; Mr Rustock, the King’s Yeoman of the Robes; his own father-in-law, Sir William Dugdale, now Garter Principal King of Arms after Elias refused the post. Sir Charles Cottrell, Master of the Ceremonies; Mr Odar, formerly Secretary to the Princes Royal. Mr Odar is already drunk; it’s possible he was drunk before he arrived. He still wears the sober black of a schoolmaster, his hair only brushed and tied with a plain ribbon. But his charges are grown, and his back seems prematurely hunched from looking over his own shoulder, knowing his best is behind him.

‘Heavens, Ashmole,’ he says now, too loudly, leering at a set of nun’s penitential girdles. ‘What clutter! And some of it looking a little dusty, don’t you think?’ He runs his finger along the crest of an admittedly withered lizard. ‘Do such things still attract an audience, and so far from the city? People are more likely to see their curios in the company of showmen. Your Royal Society has its own collection. The age does not stand still, there is a new science growing. Men are all for experiments now, less discoursing on oddities.’

‘You are mistaken, Odar,’ Elias smiles. ‘It was the Tradescants who opened their home to paying visitors. While the collection is in my house it is reserved for private study and contemplation. In future, perhaps, it may have a yet higher purpose.’

‘Ah yes,’ smirks Odar. ‘The Tradescants. Is she still alive, the last one standing? Not quite beaten yet?’

Elias smiles again and shows him the display copy of *The Institution, Laws and Ceremonies of the*

Most Noble Order of the Garter. Their jealousy cannot touch him. In his pocket is the letter that will change everything.

William Dugdale, his father-in-law, sidles up to him. At seventy-one he has the energy of a much younger man, though his new role of Garter Principal to the King is a strain on him. Elias, whose refusal of the role obliged Dugdale to take it, banishes guilt; he himself has to use a stick most days, and he has other preoccupations now.

‘Well, my son. Odar is a toad. But he has a point. Now you have the collection, will you expand it? Put it to some other use?’

‘I can only say it is in hand. I will tell more later.’

‘Oho? You went to considerable trouble to claim it.’

‘Which will not be wasted.’

‘What scheme have you now, my son?’

‘Nothing so devious. An opportunity.’

His father-in-law laughs; the edge of sorrow in it unexpected.

‘You think me disingenuous?’

‘I think you masterful. Always have; I knew Bess would be safe with you. Opportunities flock to you; and you, so careful, wink out your light when they do not please you. As I have cause to know,’ he concludes, ruefully.

‘Is the Garter Principal so dissatisfied?’

‘Far from it, dear boy, though his aged knees do sometimes wonder at the ambition of a court occupation. Now, shall we dine? You who dedicated the dining room to his Majesty, and his Majesty gave you a buck. Any other man would rest easy in his magnificence, but you do not, and I must hear of your new plans.’

The banquet unfolds course after course, the room’s new oak panelling lustrously oiled, his and Bessie’s coat of arms carved above the fireplace. They have been eating, talking and drinking for hours – the table is decimated, the battalia pie eviscerated, the King’s buck toasted mightily. They are at the final course, the gooseberries, cherries and apricots, the apples and tarts. They are serious men, but their voices have been raised in song. Elias has a strange sensation he recognises but cannot name. A sort of

fond sadness, he thinks, for the young man that came to London from Lichfield to learnt to be a lawyer, who stoked fires for his host family and flirted with the maids. He steadies himself against the table and clatters his glass, rises for his final speech.

‘My friends. We have toasted the King’ – cheers – ‘the Knights of the Garter, my dining room. As well as our friends, our children, our wives, our mistresses’ – cries of ‘toast again!’ – ‘now join me once more.’

Manfully they make to rise, but he stays them with a hand. This is a toast with a story.

‘Twenty-seven years ago I came here to South Lambeth to see its Ark. The setting recalled my childhood in the countryside around Lichfield, and I felt I could be happy in this place. I also loved it for the great cabinet of curiosities I found here, which I am humbled to have charge of today.

The fate of these rarities has preoccupied me for some years. I had long thought I would leave them to my sons, but this was not in the Lord’s plan. So I considered, should I display them, as was done formerly? Keep them for the personal enjoyment of myself and my friends? Should I sell them, even? Or allow them to be joined with one of the other collections now established in the city?’

His guests are watching him. This is not a topic they were expecting. Something is afoot.

‘Lord Bacon taught us that enlarging our understanding of the world – why things happen, and how, and what definitions we can establish – changes what is possible for human kind. We, men of science and intellect in a world that we shed a little more light on every day, all know this to be true. Action, invention, expansion – these are the principles that advance man’s estate, and to which I have been committed. And in this spirit I have found a resting place for this strange and wonderful Ark, with which I have spent so many happy hours.’

If their attention wandered, it snaps back now. They are, they realise, in the crucible of something far greater than a dining room.

‘The collection,’ he continues, relishing every word, ‘will now form part of an endowment to the University at Oxford. I am happy to tell you that my conditions have been met – that the University has agreed to fund a new building to house it on Broad Street. As well as the collection there will be a dedicated gallery, a laboratory, a lecture hall, and a Keeper to oversee all. And so this Ark sails for new horizons – not precisely those of Ararat, but like those precious creatures after the Flood, the

collection will underpin a new world. A model of experimental natural philosophy. My friends, please drink to the Musaeum Ashmoleanum at Oxford.'

They do, in slightly stunned silence. The room is a degree more sober. Cottrell recovers first.

'This is... unheard of, Ashmole. Even the Society has not managed it. Yet you have just... how did you do it?'

'Oh, a letter here, an old friend there. Anthony Wood has been a great help. There are still many details to discuss. But the proposal is sound, and the University committed.' He looks round at the table, smiling into their faces. Williamson amused, preparing his account for the King; Dugdale benevolent, calculating the benefit to his daughter; Rustock, Odar and the others are trying to hide a lemon twist to their mouths. This private venture should not be at such a scale, he knows; he affects nonchalance as best he can.

'On Broad Street?' asks Dugdale. 'You think to have Wren extend his theatre?'

'Oh no,' he says airily. 'The plot is next door. He may design something, but all is under discussion...'

'God damn it, Ashmole,' cuts in Odar. 'Are his finances quite secure? Elias cannot remember. We are as amazed as you would like us to be. No need for false humility. You seem to be realising Lord Bacon's ideal in Oxford, and in your own name. Such ambition, such success! We salute you.'

And they drink again, and again.

In the night's smallest hours carriages roll from his stables, their drivers woken from the straw. Ten wavering men clamber in, their shouts competing with the owls. Standing on the steps of the house to wave them off, Elias finds himself leaning on Sam's arm, but does not acknowledge it. Gradually the horses make for the gate, and his guests slide away towards the city. Somehow, a voice reaches him from one of the carriages, slipped out from a window between the crunch of wheels and the puck of hooves. He is sure the voice is Odar's.

'You know he even got the old widow to sign a document of submission, releasing him of all wrongdoing? The best part is, she can barely read nor write, so he did it all himself, and made her put her mark where she should agree! Three Tradescants dead – the whole family! – it is a wonder he hasn't finished off the old woman as well before he made this deal with Oxford.'

The words are clear and unmistakable, but Elias gives Sam no sign that he has heard them. Instead he presses his arm, all too willing to guide him inside. This banquet will have them both laid up for a day. But Elias cannot rest; not quite yet.

‘Take me up to my study, Sam,’ he says. And they waver their way by candlelight.

Alone at his desk, Sam gone to bed, Elias peers out into the dark. He hasn’t seen her for months, heard she was confined to her room. He takes up a clean sheaf of paper. He has been meaning to write up his notes for years. A lifetime of observation, a diary of sorts. Record. Organise. Control. A tidying up, with everything set down as it should be. It is important to have all your evidence prepared. You never know when it might be needed.

He starts to write.

I Elias Ashmole, was the son (& only Child) of Simon Ashmole of Lichfield Sadler eldest son to Mr. Thomas Ashmole of the said Citty Sadler, twice cheife Bayliff of that corporation, and of Anne one of the daughters of Anthony Bonyer of the Citty of Coventry draper, & Bridget his wife only daughter to Mr: Fitch of Ansley in the County of Warwick gent...

1678

APRIL

Opportunity comes one Sunday in spring.

The physician visits Hester each week, on his way between the village and the church. In her dim and shadowed chamber he inspects her sores and humours, applies his remedies – tickling dry, then wet, then cold. Smell of blood, smell of feathers, smell of salts. She waits, time now kept by the key in the lock, by servants coming and going, by bowls picked up and put down. But when the sun shines in the right quarter and the reflected water-light of the pond pools and glimmers across her ceiling, she smiles.

Today, when he is done, the lock is forgotten. There are only steps going away along the landing, voices in the hall, the front door opening and closing. And then, nothing. All the house gone to St-Mary-at-Lambeth, and she unsecured and unattended. *At last.*

Finger by finger, she starts to move beneath the covers. Her old bones respond, their ridges and knots, the steady pull of living. Her hand goes sightless to the drawer by her bed, scrabbles it open, and the thing inside rustles with relief. Only then does she turn her head, listen to the expanse of birdsong beyond the window. *Good. Up.*

It is hard at first, harder than she could have imagined. Her breath comes in little shallow gasps and her head swims so wildly she is afraid she will be sick. Her limbs are both heavy and light, their placement unreliable. Sitting up, her bare feet on the wooden floor, she rests. From the drawer she brings out the Frances-lizard, dried to a twist but no matter, an object holds its essence. Against her nightgown the scratchy little body is thin and painful. *My girl. Not long now.*

After some trial and error she finds a way of moving that seems to work. She can slide her feet along the floor without lifting them and keep a hand to the bed frame, then the chair, then the wall, and so keep going. Shoes, clothes, are beside the point. Frances stays in her hand, held tight. At

the door of her chamber, the latch lifts easily and she goes so eagerly along the landing her sliding steps become almost a tumble. *Careful.* At the head of the stairs she stops, panting, leaning against the panelled wall. Listens again, hard. Nothing. Only – church bells, far off. *Come on then, woman.*

Outside it is a pale grey day, warm, soft. She takes up a stick from beside the back door and shuffles on. The garden is wild with new green and the first blossom, the season's great unfolding. She breathes it in – grass, leaves, bark, insects, birdsong. A harsher call from the tulip tree; a magpie, warning of strangers. *Too late.*

At the pond's edge she stops, lowers herself to the stone rim. It is warm, the grain of the stone polished beneath her hand. She breathes slower, her heartbeat settles. The old songs come up to her, and she is content; they have kept safe. The sounds of her rescued curiosities, mingled now with the low voices of the loves whose signs she has hidden there. She is sure of them, though their words are just beyond the edge of hearing. But they are waiting, and she is ready.

She should say something. It is the hour for praying, but instead she chooses her words, plain words, ones that she is leaving in the Lambeth churchyard.

'This monument was erected at the charge of Hester Tradescant,' she says. 'Hester Tradescant,' she says again, louder, commanding the attention of the chattering magpie, starlings chirring like water, sparrows bathing in the dust. 'Relict of John Tradescant, late deceased.' The magpie breaks off – she can see it watching her, head cocked, before turning away and beginning again, full throated, as if her words require a more urgent warning. Alex told her the magpie was the only bird that would not enter Noah's Ark, but stayed prattling outside for forty days and forty nights. She imagines the keepers of that Ark, frantic and seasick in a floating barnyard, listening to the bird's lunatic racket. It must have driven them out of their senses.

She gasps a little as her wintered feet enter the water. A step down, two, and she will move from the known to the imagined, find her place. Here on the lower step she stands, her nightgown darkening about her waist. The songs surround her and she whispers back, understanding. She holds Frances lightly in her hand.

She steps forward. She is weightless, encircled, forgiven.

V

1684-1684

The first foundation was laid on 14 Apr. 1679 and it was happily finished on the 20 March 1683, at which time a rich and noble collection of curiosities was presented to the University by that excellent and public-spirited gentleman, Elias Ashmole, esq., a person so well knowne to the world that he needs no farther *elogium* in this short narrative, and the same day there deposited, and afterwards digested and put into just series and order by the great care and diligence of the learned Robert Plot, LL.D., who at the worthy donor's request is entrusted with the custody of the Musaeum.

Edward Chamberlayne, Angliae Notitia, 1684

MARCH

A heron-grey Lambeth morning, angular, awash. Coming through the new door between the houses Elias finds rain blowing into his crowded hallway, dabbing at the moss-filled crates stacked by the front steps. Moored by his tender feet he shouts for canvas, asks if all about him are witless beyond belief, expects no answer. The movers skulk around to remedy their error and he shouts again for Robert Plot, is answered by a cheerful halloo from the direction of the kitchens. When the learned Doctor appears he has a beef pie in one hand and his lists of curiosities in the other. An idle, self-regarding, fat little man, but also important, so Elias asks as mildly as he can if Robert could keep the weather off the priceless crates as they are loaded, while he searches for what is still missing. Of course, of course, blusters the new Keeper of his Museum, his attention already returning to his pie. Then seems to remember why he is here.

‘Did you find it?’ he asks, his interest barely feigned.

‘It will be here,’ replies Elias, ‘or I will turn her out of her grave to know why not.’

He limps away to search his library. Two years have passed since he took over the lease on the Tradescant half of the house and had the walls between them opened up, returning the old place to one. His books now occupy the room the Tradescants called their winter salon – always a favourite of his, with its view to the front gate, the fires lit against its northerly aspect. It has the quality of a secret place, where matters of note can be conducted safely. Some of the Tradescant family portraits still hang here, though soon they too will be heading to Oxford. Twelve barges are already moored on the Thames by the horse ferry, waiting to transport it all. But today the thought does not cheer him, and he starts fretfully tapping the butt of his cane along the spines, reading off their titles under his breath. He keeps going, spine after spine until the whole is done. Nothing. *Bitch*. He goes to the doorway and shouts for Sam, then begins his tapping a second time.

‘Yes?’ Sam is greyer still than he, and no sweeter of temper these days. But the counting of the books has soothed Elias’s mood. They are the books of a serious man, learned and worthy. No man with such a library can be discounted. Nor will he be bested by a woman found floating face down in her own pond.

‘Sam. I want the house searched.’

‘Which one?’ Sam seems to regard the expanded properties as a personal affront, there being often further to walk.

‘Both of them. All of it. The collection is missing a book.’

‘Important, is it?’ Surrounded by reading matter, Sam seems to imply, Elias might make do with what he has.

‘Utterly unique and very valuable,’ he says, and Sam sighs. ‘No, listen. About forty years ago an artist, Alexander Marshal, stayed here and painted the finest flowers in the garden, a hundred coloured plates. You might even have seen him, later, when he dined in town. I know I have met him. He is very highly regarded. Back then the whole series was bound in vellum, I listed it in the catalogue. Exquisite work, finely detailed. Now I come to pack the collection up for Oxford I find it missing. Either it was overlooked when we first moved it here, or the Tradescant woman did something with it.’

‘It was piecemeal.’

‘What?’

‘Moving it all. From here to there.’

Elias has noticed that Sam turns crablike at the mention of the Tradescants, his claws up. Of course it was always regrettable that the widow made such scenes as she did, that the affair became hurried and somehow furtive. Evidently it meant that things were missed.

‘Which is why we must search everywhere. Such a thing would not have been disposed of lightly or easily. The widow had a fondness for paintings. It would be like her to hide it somewhere.’

‘Well, we will look. I will tell the others.’

Elias ignores the edge of censure that still hangs in the air. What do any of them know of the value of things?

‘And send Dr Plot to me. He has another day to try and make himself useful.’

Left alone, Elias retreats to a chair. The whole business of the Museum has tired him – even after the agreement was signed there were years of negotiations, the University objecting to the cost of the building for so long and so strenuously the entire project was almost abandoned more than once. But he has been steadfast over the value of his endowment, knowing that without him they would never have conceived of such a place. The University capitulated, as they always do, and covered the whole cost. In just a few short weeks it will be open.

‘A trying business.’ Robert wanders in, *sans* overcoat, with the air of a man whose work is done for the day. He sits uninvited in the facing chair and starts filling his pipe. ‘This missing book. I hope you do not judge yourself too harshly – one thinks of Aladdin’s cave, where some small things must have rolled into the corners.’

‘You think it my error?’

‘No error, no, but perhaps one of those unfortunate things...’

Elias watches Robert flounder, then rises to pour a glass of wine. The man’s eyes follow him so avariciously he pours a second without needing to ask.

‘Robert. Let me tell you a story.’

‘I know you believe it to be the fault of the widow, and you may very well be right...’

‘Not that. Or not precisely. Listen – you know of Dr Dee, of course.’ Robert sits back in his chair and lifts his glass, acquiesces. His expression is a humouring one. John Dee, the old Queen’s soothsayer, has fallen out of fashion in some quarters – quarters to which Robert Plot, with his crystallised rocks and his natural histories of Oxfordshire, aspires. But what is fashion, for a man who spoke with angels? While the old Queen was still alive, at the back end of the last century, John Dee retreated to his oratory with his sayer and prayed with such fervent learning, with arts so obscure to the impotent men that have come after him, that he conjured unearthly spirits. For four years he was in a state of acute communication with the divine, and was able to capture their words, the wisdom of Adam. That the likes of Robert Plot look down on him today is a reflection on the age, one which turns away from the powers of the occult in pursuit of the sterility of the instantly knowable. To Elias, sharing the story of his connection with John Dee maintains the thread of pure magic he has followed throughout his life.

‘You already know, perhaps,’ he says, ‘that some years ago I acquired a number of original documents relating to Dr Dee’s divine conversations.’

‘I do,’ says Plot comfortably, drinking his wine. His tongue checks his fat lips for fragments of pastry.

‘What is less commonly known,’ he continues, ‘is how they came into my hands. It was through an acquaintance of mine, a Thomas Wale, then warder at the Tower. Thanks to his position, he was often informed about valuable artefacts – when they have nothing to lose, the imprisoned offer bribes and tell secrets. So naturally when I received a large package from him I was full of curiosity.’

‘What a fortunate connection.’

‘Indeed. But in this case it was something else – there was a note with the package, which said only that he was recently married and that his wife, a widow, had brought some books with her from the house of her previous husband. Neither of them could understand the contents, but knowing my interests he asked my opinion. Inside were five volumes, variously bound, their covers scored and burned.’

The pages were thick and greasy, and lying among their discarded wrappings the books smelled of chemicals and wax and smoke and something else, something sharp and organic. Touching them, even before he knew what was inside, Elias felt a strange sensation run along his forearm and up into his chest, the recognition of a like mind. ‘With some excitement and trepidation I inspected the books. And as you already know, it transpired I was holding in my hands texts long thought lost; the missing record of Dr Dee’s conversations with the angels. Therein transcribed were the notes of his conversation with Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, which no scholar had before seen.’

‘Extraordinary.’

‘It was, it was. To bring such documents out into the light – they are in the Bodleian now, of course – has been one of my most treasured acts. If only they had been complete.’

‘They were not?’ Plot furrows his brow. The little gossip annoyed at his partial knowledge. He knows everyone, is making a name for himself – if Elias had any real respect for his abilities he would have found a way to keep him away from the Museum, but as it is Plot will not interfere more than necessary, being both incapable and distracted by his own self-advancement.

‘I did not wish to advertise the shameful nature of the loss, but as my Keeper you should know, and be able to guard against it in the future.’

‘Of course.’

‘The detail of the story, which I discovered on a later meeting with Thomas Wale and his wife, is this. Mrs Wale was married thirty years before, and when setting up her home with this man, bought a large chest from a shop on Adle Street, where the joiners work. It was a cedar wood chest of rare quality – not new, but the lock and hinges very prettily decorated. The shop owner had got it in a parcel of goods from the estate of a surgeon, John Woodall, whose son become Sergeant Surgeon to the King.’

‘I am glad to know the chest’s genealogy in such intricate detail.’

‘Just wait. They bought the chest, filled it with linen, and thought no more of it until twenty years later when they moved it and heard a rattle, as if something was loose inside. They investigated, and became sure that something was concealed in the right hand end. The husband found a small slit in the base of the chest and used a small piece of iron as a hook, and with it drew open a secret drawer. Inside were sitting those manuscript books and papers, as well as a little box with a chaplet of beads and a cross, all of olive wood. They recognised them as interesting but, not being scholars and much occupied with other things, set them aside. During the great fire the good lady took them with her into Moorfields, and on her return preserved them, through her widowhood until her remarriage, when the good Thomas thought to bring them to me.’

‘So where do the papers go astray? How many?’

‘Perhaps half disappeared after Mrs Wale first discovered them.’

‘But, this long tale of preservation...’

‘It does not account for the actions of her serving maid, who was in the habit of using the pages.’

‘Using them?’

‘In pies.’

‘In pies?’

‘Yes. When she was baking, she looked about the house for something to line the basins, and catch the drips. Happening across the old books and being an illiterate wench of uncommon stupidity, she saw only paper, and burned the words of angels in butter and bacon grease.’

‘Ah.’ Plot does not seem as incensed as he should be, but Elias presses his point.

‘The lesson, Plot, is that even well-intentioned women cannot be trusted with things of scholarly value – at best they do not understand them, and at worst they actively destroy them. So, my concern is not only that the book has been mislaid, but that some accident has befallen it at the hands of its previous owner.’

‘Yes yes. Quite. So what do you imagine the late Mrs Tradescant did with the Marshal book?’

‘I imagine she hid it somewhere, thinking to keep it for her own enjoyment. She was a strange woman. She was related to the de Critz family of court painters, and seemed to believe this gave her some standing in affairs she understood not at all. The book would have appealed to her, apart from it being a record of her husband’s plants, whose brilliance she could not maintain.’

‘It does not sound as if she would have neglected it.’

‘It is here somewhere, I am certain. We need only look closely enough.’

~

It is after dark the following day when the last of the collection reaches the riverside. Not just the complications of packing, the inadequacies of Plot and the porters, the personal checking of every last crate and box; Elias also delayed past the final minute, thinking of new places to look for the missing book of paintings. But at last he had to concede and allow the remaining boxes to be sealed up and carted away. He follows on with Sam, even later, after painfully mounting his horse.

It is still raining in bursts when he arrives at the dock and the scene is biblical, strained figures with flickering flames filling the boats as the waters rise. He peers past the brim of his hat, wishing Bessie would have braved the weather with him. Robert Plot is already – reluctantly – ensconced in the foremost barge as an escort, so Elias signs to Sam to settle their horses and they only watch, surplus to requirements. He follows the progress of each crate across the dock and on to its barge with an anxiety

that makes his mare shift restlessly beneath him. Once, a porter slips, and a crate lands awkwardly on the churned-up bank. Elias makes an involuntary movement of rescue, starting the horse forward.

‘Must we watch until the end?’ asks Sam after a while. The rain has eased, chased away by a cold wind that cuts through their coats to their old men bones.

‘Only until it’s loaded, Sam.’ After that he can do no more. The collection has been in Lambeth over fifty years; now the barges will move by slow stages upstream along the river past Richmond, Hampton Court and Windsor, then on to Henley and Reading, his old lands from his marriage to Mary. Through Wallingford, Shillingford, Abingdon and at last, in a week or so, to Oxford, where they will be unloaded and installed in the new Museum building on Broad Street, hard by the Sheldonian. He has already started composing a letter to Plot, refining their discussions about the arrangement of the rooms. And then there are the laboratories, the lectures, the demonstrations and dissections. There is, still, so much to do. He can only hope to be well enough to travel to see it open.

The last crate is loaded, and he signs to the foreman to carry on and go, it is already so late. And then there is the untying of ropes and the hauling of poles, moving the convoy out into the water. The river in the dark is more beast than water – it has a feral stink, and the lamplit boats seam its long back with lights like constellations.

‘Come, then.’ And he and Sam turn their horses back towards the house.

‘You’ll be more at peace now it’s done,’ says Sam after a moment. ‘Not only the disruption, but...’

‘But?’

‘So much bitterness in the story of its possession. The old owners all dead. It bothered you, I could see it. It is better this way. A new life.’

‘That family brought about its own end. Most particularly the last one.’

The manner of her death is little spoken of, these days, but though she was buried with her family in the Lambeth churchyard he has found new crosses carved into the whale ribs at her former gate, and once a cluster of herbs and twigs, a charm against the devil. South Lambeth remembers her as a suicide, whether they say it aloud or not. He comforts himself with the thought that the name of Tradescant appears nowhere in the museum paperwork – the collection is his, as is the gift, and its

future.

He holds his mare back, briefly, twists around in the saddle to see the barges heading away upstream. They recede, conducted by the shouts of the boatmen, which under the cover of darkness might be the calls of the rarities themselves. Held fast in the gloom of their boxes, not knowing where they will come to rest.

1684

JULY

Oxford on a summer's evening is almost too beautiful to bear. The hour is late, the shadows bruising violet; the city has folded into its attitude of bookish rest and outside the darkness of the alehouses the streets are all but empty. Elias makes his way slowly up Broad Street, sustained by the city's cloistered hush, its palette of milk and honey. Beside him Bessie matches his steps, keeps her arm close by. He places his sticks carefully on the cobbles – he has waited a year to see his completed Museum, was absent from the royal opening and the university reception. Now as they draw closer the clean new stone of his building is almost white in the dusk, a moon or a vial of mercury. Then vertigo assaults him and he has to sit for a while on a low wall outside Trinity. Bessie fusses, but he can only steady himself against an iron railing and wait until the attack passes, resist the thought that one day it might not. Earlier that afternoon, alighting outside the inn on Carfax, he was transfixed by a slender youth strolling past with a folio under his arm, off to some dinner or lecture. He had to restrain himself from calling out, instructing him to be wary, never to grow old.

'Can you go on?' asks his wife, and he nods, hauls himself up, arranges a smile. He is conscious of shouldering the grandeur of his standing in Oxford, whether the occasional passers-by know of it or not. With careful steps he and Bessie continue until they are level with the Museum. It faces the street foursquare, a sober counterpart to the cupola of Wren's theatre next door.

'Handsome,' says Bessie, but she is looking at him. He presses her hand. He bought his own coach and horses to be able to make the journey from Lambeth, but what should have meant comfort felt like a coffin, aggravating his gout and his boils and all the rest. Now, seeing the Museum from the street as any man might, it is an imposing blank, remote from the honour of his gift. But he knows what it has cost, and what it means.

'Come,' he says. 'The entrance is this way.'

Together they mount the steps of the Sheldonian and pass into its cobbled yard. This more intricate face of the Museum is reserved for initiates. Facing the graduation theatre are the recessed

statues, the slender columns, the carved panels of fruit and shells, the balustrades, the great door crowned by the Ashmole shield. Here is the celebration of what he has done.

‘Can we go in?’ asks Bessie.

‘No, my love. It is late, and I do not have a key. Tomorrow.’

‘A pity.’

She peers upwards, and together they admire the fine central arch, the fat winged gryphons, the vast windows on the upper floor, the way the fading light deepens the shadows and picks out new detail in the designs.

‘They quarry the stone up on the hill just beyond,’ he tells her. ‘I have often thought, can it be a mere accident of the earth, that the rock here should give Oxford this strange alchemy? Surely it was always meant.’

She shivers and draws closer, almost as fatigued as he.

‘I always thought it was the colour of old bones,’ she says. ‘They have both done too much today, and he leads her towards supper at the King’s Arms.’

‘Tell me again,’ she says as they turn into Catte Street, ‘how the inside is arranged. The plans I saw seem so long ago.’

And so he indulges them both and tells her of the Musaeum Ashmoleanum. He starts below the ground, where at one point the excavations breached the college sewers but now there is a series of cool stone laboratories, equipped with vessels and instrument for scientific study in glass, tin, copper and iron, provided with furnaces and every convenience for experiment and research in chemistry and natural philosophy. Then he rises, as a visiting scholar might do, from the basement to the great hall on the ground level, where lectures on all scientific subjects are directed by Dr Plot. And of course, through a door to the rear of the lecture hall and up the grand stairway, its window jewelled with his name in stained glass, you climb to the upper floor and the gallery that houses the rarities, where any curious man in England may admire his array of the strange and the rare, his lovingly documented and preserved collection of what is exceptional in nature and created by man. Others have dreamed of something like, he tells his wife and himself again, but none – not the private showmen, not the Royal Society, not Kenelm Digby, not John Tradescant or even Lord Bacon himself – could ever realise it,

could ever match him for audacity and determination. ‘And all was done,’ he says at last, ‘with you at my side.’ She is happy then, and talks no more of bones.

~

Elias rises early, refreshed. He leaves Bessie at her breakfast and hurries to the Museum as soon as it might be open, along the waking streets beneath an Oxford sky of aching blue shot through with swallows. The great doors stand open and he steps at last into the great hall, with its gleaming floor and double line of columns. It is otherwise empty; there is no sign of Plot or any other attendant, though when he pushes open the inner door to the stairwell there are faint sounds from the laboratory in the basement. Very well. Pleased, in fact, to have the building to himself for a while, he slowly mounts the stairs to the upper gallery and pauses to browse the register of visitors that sits outside the double doors. He notes the names of friends and strangers, and also absences he can count as snubs. No Christ Church men, he knows, as they blame him for a reduction in University funds following the completion of the Museum. Such collegiate tantrums do not concern him, happily – he knows the value of what he has done, as does any worthwhile scholar in Europe and beyond.

Inside at last, he walks the length of the gallery he planned, past neat lines of cases and walls hung orderly with familiar pieces. And yet the collection is not the same, not longer the Ark. The bird-festooned ceiling of old has gone; many of the more fragile and damaged pieces were thrown away, and the surviving birds and other things are now lined up in drawers, neatly labelled and classified. This is not a fairground of wonderments, but a space for scientific reflection and study. And, overlooking it all, a magnificent portrait of himself done by John Riley, which he sent to the Museum when it opened. In it he is splendid in a full wig, gold chain and medal and orange velvet, resting his right hand on a copy of *The Order of the Garter*. He is framed by golden swags and flowers made by the country’s foremost master carver, Grinling Gibbons. He is the pole around which all this turns.

The Tradescants are here, too, and he goes to the far corner of the room to inspect them. After the Riley portrait they seem dark and obscure. The elder John Tradescant, the great man, looks watchful and perceptive beneath his black cap, ringed by fruit and flowers and shells. John the younger

is foursquare and dull by comparison. He leans on his spade, stands mournfully by a memento mori for his children. They are here, of course – two portraits that must have been painted around the time their mother died, and they both have what must be her features – heart-shaped faces, butter-blond heads. Hester Tradescant appears among them like some sort of awkward crow with her mournful expression. He meets the eye of her final portrait, painted by her cousin Emanuel de Critz, where she holds a sprig of myrtle out to her husband. De Critz captured her exactly, her air of disappointment. As she must indeed be, he smiles to himself, for there is nothing here to suggest she ever thought of herself as anything but John Tradescant's wife.

The door behind him crashes open, admitting two students – the first visitors of the day. They are talking too loudly and they do not see him, indeed they seem somewhat drunk. Amused, he keeps to his shadow corner and listens.

'Is this it?'

'No, it's your grandmother's bedchamber.'

'Such wit, from one so usually lacking.'

'You cannot deny it is both careworn and lacking useful purpose.'

'You think so? It seems rather diverting.'

'Oh, diverting enough, at a cost of thousands. You know because of this folly the University can't buy books for another four years? It's vainglory.'

'There's the laboratory too. And the lecture hall. Very modern. One could say unique.'

'And all run by the squat and learned Doctor Plot, who spends his time searching for universal theorem in alchemical tomes like the throwback he is. I hear he expected a salary that would keep him, but the endowment has been noticeably lacking in funds to match the University's investment. He threatens he will not lecture unless he is paid. And so it flounders even as it begins.'

'There are some fine things here, don't you think? Look at these Indian artefacts. I have never seen their like.'

'Curios and souvenirs. I have heard it called the knick-knackatory.'

'Oh, yes, very good.'

'Come and look at this.'

Elias flinches away, but the pair still have not seen him and are bending towards a glass-fronted cabinet. In it, he knows, is the complete specimen of *Agnus scythius*, displayed on a bed of moss and sealed in a glass dome.

‘What is that? Some sort of weasel?’

‘You really mustn’t reveal your ignorance so easily. This is what is known as a vegetable lamb.’

‘I have never heard of such a thing.’

‘Then I shall instruct you, and perhaps illustrate a point. The vegetable lamb, of which we have here a fine example, is a plant that produces sheep in the place of flowers. It is found on the plains of Tartary. Here is one of its offspring.’

‘Good Lord. It does have the aspect of animal and vegetable.’

‘My dear boy, it is a sham. Look, you need to see it upside down.’ There is a scuffle as the pair invert their posture like a couple of monkeys, hooting and laughing. ‘So. What do you see?’

‘Less animal. More vegetable.’

‘It is merely the root of a common, hairy plant, inverted. With a fairy story attached. Such are the foundations on which this great collection is laid.’

‘You are too severe. Isn’t the story itself of note? I would happily pass an hour here another day.’

‘I’ll use the laboratory, but the rest of it can gather dust for all I care.’

Elias can take no more and clears his throat. The students start, but happily do not match his face with the portrait on the wall.

‘Your pardon, Sir, we did not see you. We hope you enjoy the remainder of your visit.’ With a bow and another bout of laughter, they are gone.

Winded, he goes to the window and looks down on the Broad, watches the students clatter out laughing into the sunshine. Imbeciles. But his hand still shakes where it rests on his cane, and his heart seems to pound and heave somewhere uncomfortably close to his throat. Vertigo again? He fixes his eyes on his own handsome painted face, and it remains reassuringly steady. But there is something – a twitch in his eye, a thickening quality to the air, a sort of vibration. Alarmed, he is sure he hears something, a sound like a large bird taking flight. The Oxford light that streams so lusciously through

the great windows is glancing off the surfaces, making everything shimmer and glare. Now he hears snatches of song, though the streets are empty of revellers. He thinks of Dr Dee and his divine conversations but he, Elias Ashmole, has conjured no angels, decoded no texts. He is alone in this room that seems suddenly unbearable, his ears bustling with sounds that have no source unless – impossible thought – it is the rarities, answering for themselves.

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