

# ***The Scribbler's Tales***

**and**

## **Scribbling, Talking and Jangling: Ned Ward's *The London Spy* in the Discursive Spaces of Late Seventeenth-Century London**

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## Abstract

The creative component of this thesis is a novel, *The Scribbler's Tales*, set in late seventeenth-century London. My narrator, Nathaniel Spicer, writes from Marshalsea Prison, where he is held for seditious libel. The tales he tells mix history, fiction and myth to narrate London's rise out of the ashes of the Great Fire, as well as Nathaniel's involvement in the rise of professional journalism and partisan politics.

My narrative is inspired by Robert Mayer's argument that: 'in the seventeenth century historical discourse embraced not only "history" in its modern sense, but also fiction, polemic, gossip, and marvels'. *The Scribbler's Tales* experiments with this ambivalent mode of narration, seeking a modern style of storytelling to match the ambiguity that critics such as Kate Loveman have identified in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century fictions.

I refer to these theories in the critical part of my thesis, which examines Ned Ward's periodical *The London Spy* (1698-1700) within the discursive spaces of late seventeenth-century London. Unlike critics who have either dismissed or re-evaluated Ward in relation to aesthetic or social value criteria, I seek to explore, not ignore, his inherent ambivalence. I relate this ambivalence to his identity as a professional writer or 'scribbler', portrayed by contemporaries as a hybrid figure straddling the commercial and literary realms.

To approach Ward's work in a fresh way, I treat him as part of an evolving commercialised literary culture. I place *The London Spy* within the context of the London print trade, and analyse Ward's rhetorical and narrative strategies in relation to satire, the grotesque and the blurring of fiction and fact. I anchor these discussions in my analysis of Ward's representation of discourse – the words spoken, written and performed by his narrator and characters – which he locates in the public spaces of his fictionalised London.

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# *The Scribbler's Tales*

In the seventeenth century historical discourse embraced not only ‘history’ in its modern sense, but also fiction, polemic, gossip, and marvels.

Robert Mayer, *History and the Early English Novel*

Such a culture could be highly creative, with imaginative fictions embedded in partisan polemic, so that the political and the literary were fused.

Mark Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain*

Far more so than today, a reader picking up a novel would not immediately know if the plot was pure invention, refashioned history or thinly veiled contemporary scandal – and writers’ declarations on these matters were notoriously unreliable.

Kate Loveman, *Reading Fictions, 1660-1740*

## THE AUTHOR'S PREFACE, 1687

*I, Nathaniel Spicer, presently of Marshalsea Prison, have written many infamous things. Alehouse news and coffee-house scandal, libellous ballads, political pamphlets, and all manner of hearsay and shams. Yet this is the full and true account of how I came to be here.*

*It was ambition, not apprenticeship, that set me up in the scribbling trade. My ancestors were farmers. They came to London from Holland half a century ago – during Tulip Mania, 1637 – when merchants on the Royal Exchange pushed the price of bulb-stock higher than gold. At that time, tulips were the most exotic novelty that goods or money could buy. My great-grandfather – I'll call him Grandfather Gert – was twenty-nine, my own age now, when he sailed with a shipload of bulbs from his family's farm on the banks of the Rhine. Within weeks of arriving on the Thames bank at Wapping, he'd made a fortune through trade. At the height of the frenzy, he sold one single bulb for*

*seventy barrels of wine*

*two tons of tobacco*

*a cran of herring*

*several large cheeses*

*and a suit of fine woven silk.*

*His mistake was to invest everything back into contracts for more tulip bulbs. When the bubble burst a month later, he lost all his wealth in one day.*

*After he'd sold off his bulbs for a fraction of what they'd been worth, Grandfather Gert set about to recover his fortune with the secret not yet known to English farmers that plants grow five times as plump if fed with human manure. It was this secret that brought success to the market garden he set up in Southwark, close to where I'm locked up now. He shipped turds across the Thames from the sewer that ran out of Fleet Street, then mixed them with ash to grow acres of bright, juicy carrots. By crossing purple and yellow varieties, he invented a carrot in honour of his native House of Orange. Imagine his pride had he known that a few decades later, his breed of carrots would be sprouting all around England and I... But wait! I must not let my pen run away.*

*Prisoners speak fables, I hear you scoff, and perhaps you smell the gin I've spilled on my page. That I've seen better days, I will not deny. That's why you must listen. I have watched this city ruined, rebuilt and brought to the brink of ruin once more.*

*But why – you might ask – out of all the beginnings, did I choose this one with which to begin? Quite simple: my great-grandfather's tale seems to foretell my own rise and fall. Like his carrots, I grew out of London's ashes and waste. Like his tulips, I, too, lost my worth.*

*Those who remember my trial at the Old Bailey will tell you not to give credit to what I write now. They'll say that these pages contain no more truth than the ones that put me in here. Trust me, dear Readers: their words have no value. One day I shall be called to account before God; until then, this is my own reckoning.*

*Why believe me? I cannot tell you, except to point to St Paul's. Burned down during my childhood, begun again when I was a pimpled apprentice, still unfinished now that I'm past my prime. Look – see it there, through my barred window – roofless against the night sky? Dozens of men have died in its making. The walls they built, like my ancestor's carrots, will outlast them for hundreds of years.*

*And me? How can I claim to have shaped our Age, when I founded my fabrications in air? That, good folks, is what I will show you. I'll set down history's hubbub in writing, with all its controversy and false news. I don't want to prove my innocence, but rather my legacy. Ours is the Age of Party, the Age of Untruth. That's the world I helped to make.*



**THE FIRST TALE**

**The Year of the Plagues, 1665**

*I'd intended to start out with something like this: I WAS BORN IN THE YEAR 1658, IN THE CITY OF LONDON, OF A GOOD FAMILY. But that's by the by. There's no delaying the Year of the Plagues. It was the beginning of all my misfortunes and the first of God's efforts to punish the city during my youth.*

*There are two further reasons why the tale is important:*

*1. Like Tulip Mania, it proves the epidemical madness of people.*

*2. It accounts for my flawed character.*

*The second one I'll explain. I am naturally a man of sanguine temperament: merry and ruddy-cheeked. The faults that were my undoing, however, have nothing to do with my usual cheer. Instead I blame these: my occasional recklessness and a fear of being forgotten. These flaws spring from my early experiences during the Year of the Plagues. My recklessness, I'm certain, is the result of the spicy vapours that I breathed in. The melancholic fear came later, moulding my tender mind as imprints are made upon wax.*

*And where were these fateful experiences? There – look! If I stand on tiptoes to peer through the bars, I can see my old home over the rooftops of Southwark: a tiny garret at the top of a house on London's magnificent bridge. Strange, to think how I've changed whilst that cramped little space stayed the same. Beyond, the view from its window has altered as much as I have. The garret still looks outwards, upstream, yet back then it was towards the pinnacles of old Paul's, before all I knew was destroyed.*

*Only the River Thames remains constant, flowing ceaselessly eastwards, below the bridge, out to sea. Just as it flowed two decades ago, one August morning in 1665, when my tale begins.*

## I.

There, or rather *here* I am: balanced on a chair to peer out of the window, my fat fists clutching the sill and my forehead against the cool glass. I am seven years old. Sweat makes my hands slippery. I uncurl one fist from the sill and press my fingers against the pane, leaving five prints that shrink and then disappear. *What if I disappear too?* The white paint is beginning to flake on the frame. I scrape at it with my chewed fingernail, stubbornly making my mark.

I concentrate hard on the paint and the dark wood beneath, but still I can taste my fear. It's like a farthing I once swallowed: brassy; a little like blood. Before now, I can only remember feeling frightened at night, lying awake listening to the waterwheels churn below in the darkness. I've often imagined the river will wash us away – past the docks, far out to sea – our bridge like an unsteady ark.

Now, the churning waterwheels and rush of the river are the only familiar sounds. Aside from them, the city is still. On the south bank I can see the boarded-up taverns of Southwark; on the north bank, the wharves, where grass grows between the piles of timber and corn. There are no boats moored on the bank; no men shouting or whistling as they haul up the goods. Our city, once the centre of everything, is cut off from the world.

I scrape harder at the paint with my fingernail, remembering how I watched the flood of people escaping by boat. When was that? Weeks ago? Months? It was cooler then, and the wind whipped the water to waves. The bridge was blocked with carts and carriages trying to force their way south. Crowds gathered at Old Swan Stairs, waiting for the wherries, whose watermen swore as they rowed back and forth. Some collided with the barges heading upstream, wobbling under the weight of whole households – children, chickens, silverware, servants, pans, pigs and barrels of ale – heading to the fields beyond Westminster. The passengers shouted as bundles sank out of sight. I gasped to see a curly-haired boy – younger than me – tumble into the water, whilst a man in another boat dived in to rescue a brass chamber-pot. My head seemed to float but my legs were horribly heavy. I was used to the river rushing towards me, but now I felt left behind.

'Shan't we go too?' I asked Mother at dinner.

‘If we have any sense.’

Grandfather scowled. ‘What sense is there in leaving? I’m the only apothecary left.’

‘At least let us go,’ Mother said.

‘Your place is here. We’re making good money.’

‘What use will that be when we’re dead?’

I remember the strength with which Mother squeezed my hand as she said this: her quick, angry grip. Holding tight with both hands to the windowsill, I bite my wobbling lip. *Don’t be a baby.* Grandfather’s voice. But then Father’s, gentler. *Be a brave boy for me, Nat.*

‘I *am* being brave,’ I say aloud. In the silence that follows, I hold my breath in hope of hearing an answer from somewhere downstairs.

Since the river fell quiet the hum of the city has faded as well. There are no pigeons now to coo in the eaves, no caw-caw of the rooks. Even the church bells no longer toll for the dead. In this lull, the sounds of pain are frighteningly close: by day, the groans of the sick and the screams of their families locked up with them; by night, the creak of the dead-carts down the dark, empty streets.

Do some of those sounds now come from downstairs? I turn from the window and look at the door on the other side of the room. Behind it is a steep wooden staircase leading down to the rest of the house. Is the groaning coming from there? *Naughty Natty. Don’t look.* I turn back to the window and rub my finger over the wood. My nail is sore where I’ve bitten it back to the skin, but it’s the kind of pain that I can’t help but poke.

It was Mother who made me promise not to go downstairs. ‘Whatever happens,’ she said. Her face was fierce and she made me say the words several times. *I promise. I promise. I promise.* ‘You’ll be safe up here,’ she said. I wanted her to kiss me goodbye, but she’d tied a cloth soaked in vinegar over her mouth. She shut the door behind her and left me up here on my own.

Someone will come: that’s what she said. But what if they’ve forgotten about me by now? It’s been such a long time. I’ve eaten most of the bread and half a jar of pickled lark’s eggs. There’s more piss in my chamber pot than beer left in the flask. Worse: my breath is running out too. A thick heat fills the room, and the walls inch closer each time I turn round.

Yet I daren't open the window for fear of the invisible creatures – insects, serpents, dragons and devils – swarming outside in the air.

I draw my hand back from the window frame. What if I scrape so hard that the creatures creep through the hole? Then I remember. *Stupid boy.* To ward them away, I'm supposed to keep stoking the fire. I lower myself onto my backside, then wriggle forwards on the seat of the chair until my feet reach the floor. Luckily the embers still glow. I dip my fingers into the incense pot and sprinkle powder onto the coals. Three pinches. *One. Two. Three.* It sizzles, the smell worse than the ambergris balls Mother hung by the window and door.

'Ambergris grows in the bellies of whales,' she told me. 'They vomit it up onto land.'

That's why the smell makes me sick. I grip the poker with both hands and clumsily stab at the fire. At least no one's here to make me puff on Grandfather's pipe. The stinking thing still lies on the hearth, stuffed with tobacco and hemp. Mother left me a bottle of vinegar, too, but I haven't touched it since she made me rub it into my hands. *No one's here to make me do anything.* I wipe my nose on my sleeve. It's the smoke making my eyes water. I will not cry anymore.

## II.

Before the plagues came, I loved the smells that filled the apothecary shop on the ground floor of our house. 'Whiffs of other worlds,' Father said, 'of ships from far-away lands.' Cinnamon, nutmeg, tea and vanilla. Cardamom, chocolate, clove. The sweet, peppery sourness of saffron. The warm nip of ginger that tickled my nose.

Father was the son of a grocer and grandson of a carrot-grower: my Dutch ancestor Gert. But when he was twelve he was apprenticed to Grandfather to be an apothecary. That's how he came to marry Mother – his master's daughter – and how they came to make me.

Whenever Grandfather was busy with customers, Father would slip through the curtain that separated the shop from the storeroom, where Mother worked with her mortar and pestle, grinding spices or herbs. He

would scoop me out from the tent of her skirts and lift me high in the air. Those are the things I miss now: the warm, musty world of legs and cotton and dust where I played – Mother laughing – and that sudden swoop up to the ceiling, held tight in Father’s strong hands.

I was there in the storeroom when the first portent appeared at the start of the Year of the Plagues.

It was early evening – I remember the bells of St Magnus ringing north of the river and Mother humming along to the chimes – when Father burst through the curtain. Ginger, the cat we kept to kill mice, darted out of his way.

‘Mary, Nat, come upstairs. There’s a comet over St Paul’s.’

He reached down to lift me and swung me onto his back. I closed my eyes as I rode through the shop, beneath the stuffed crocodile that hung from the ceiling, its teeth too close to my head. Mother followed us upstairs to the parlour, where Grandfather already stood at the window. The comet blazed above the cathedral, the colour of a harvest moon, its tail bright in the darkening sky.

‘The end of the world,’ Grandfather said with triumphant gloom.

Mother reached up to stroke my hair. ‘Don’t listen to him.’

Next morning, Sarah, our maid, bustled back from Billingsgate market, her face as pale as her smock.

‘Heavens, Madam, this comet!’ she gasped. ‘Mrs Hall who sells pickled herrings, her husband gets five almanacs, and between them they bode war, flood, fire and pestilence before the end of the year.’

‘Lord have mercy!’ Mother exclaimed.

Father smiled. ‘Stars don’t move to foretell human fates. That’s like Ginger’s fleas thinking the Earth moves for them.’

Yet as I watched Mother’s face tighten, I feared that Grandfather was right: that the end of the world was nigh.

It was only a few weeks after the comet that more portents appeared. Sarah returned home from market with news that Margaret Kemp, the vinegar-maker’s wife, had dreamt that the ground swallowed her up, whilst Blind Mother Tapper, the pincushion seller, had seen thousands of angels on the head of one of her pins. Father scoffed and gave Sarah spirit of hartshorn to steady her nerves. But soon customers were coming into the shop in search

of similar cures. One man said he'd seen the clouds form into a sword held over the Tower; another heard musket-shots in the air. Grandfather nodded and took their money. Mother and I listened behind the storeroom curtain. Her hand shook as she held mine.

It wasn't long before people were asking what these portents foretold. God was angry, Grandfather said: the King was a tyrant who drank and whored; the city had sunk into sin. Yet Grandfather was not the only doom-sayer. Fortune-tellers began to appear on street corners, and by February the icy city was filled with men in black velvet coats and wise women setting up shop.

Mother began running the sort of errands she would usually ask Sarah to do, and she took me with her to see the magic-folk for ourselves. We pushed our way north, through the tunnel formed by overhanging houses, between the horses, cattle, carts carrying vegetables, velvet-lined carriages and sedan chairs, to the iron palings on the open part of the bridge. From there we could see the City in all its glory, from the pointed spires of St Paul's in the west to the mighty Tower in the east. As soon as we stepped onto the bank, however, the higgledy houses closed in around us again. Boys were busy pasting bills along Fish Street Hill. Mother stopped to read them to me. They advertised ichthyomancers who read the innards of fish, lithomancers who read stones, catoptromancers who read looking-glasses, and sycomancers who read the secrets written in figs.

It was on one of those walks that we spotted a painted comet amongst all the signs for haberdashers and tailors on Threadneedle Street.

'Don't tell your father,' Mother said as she pulled me into the shop. I recognized the wise woman, even beneath her veil: she sold stewed pears near my school. Yet I still shivered as I watched her write out the charm. '*Abracadabra*,' Mother whispered. The woman rolled up the paper and pushed it inside a brass amulet, which Mother hung on a chain round my neck. 'To keep you from harm,' she said as she tucked it out of sight under my collar and kissed the top of my head.

Soon, everyone we passed on our errands seemed to be wearing amulets too, since beneath the usual roar of coaches rumbling, pigs grunting, balladeers singing, hawkers hollering, and the thousand-and-one other sounds of the city, I heard a tinkling like rain.

This mania, known afterwards as the Plague of Portents, was the first of the plagues to afflict London. Another five were to come.

### III.

I reach for the amulet, which still hangs around my neck, polished bright by my touch. I rub it three times between my forefinger and thumb, then three times again: one for each of the plagues.

I look at the door, then quickly away. *What now?* I close my eyes, squeeze my fists and count slowly to ten, mouthing the numbers as I uncurl my fingers one at a time. When I've reached the last finger I open my eyes. I'm still here: I've not disappeared. The door still remains closed.

There's magic in numbers, I discovered this spring, since it was then that the Plague of Reckoning came. It arrived in London sometime in March, when merchants reported that the disease that had killed so many in Naples during the winter had suddenly reached Amsterdam.

The first I heard about it was when Mother took me to Billingsgate to buy sprats. By then, it was reported that dozens of Dutch were dying each day, so all morning the cry *What news?* replaced the crying of wares. Dozens of deaths quickly became hundreds, hundreds became thousands, thousands became millions, until the fishwives no longer cried *Eels!* or *Mack-mack-mackerel!* but *No one alive, alive, oh!* We tarried for several hours: so long the sprats started to stink. Mother read the bills the newsmongers pasted along Fish Street Hill, and we followed the criers ringing their bells. We didn't return home until dinnertime, our shoes caked with fish scales and mud.

It's hard to tell exactly when the Plague of Reckoning took a new turn. At first, it was only Sarah who memorised the weekly Bills of Mortality. Every Thursday, serving up supper, she recited the rising number of deaths in the western parish of St Giles-in-the-Fields: this many of spotted-fever, that many of tooth-ache, or wind, or swooning, until Grandfather harrumphed and told her not to trust what was in print.

'It's quite enough,' he said, 'to read the Book of Nature. See how many ravens there are? According to my reckoning, we're all going to die.'



As April became May, the numbers increased. I tried to keep count of the distant bells, which chimed nine times for a dead man, six for a dead woman, and three for a dead child. But soon bells were ringing across the city, and even though I kept count on my fingers, the numbers jumbled up in my head. At school, I watched the older boys rub their eyes as they read the Bills, trying to tally them with the rumours of how many people were dying in the poorer parishes, beyond the City walls.

Eventually, at the end of May, the Lord Mayor had enough. He ordered the constables to break into houses to count how many bodies there were. And so it was, Sarah told us between sobs, that they'd discovered too late the scale of the sickness and death.

People began leaving the very next day, though Grandfather insisted we stay. Sarah made her escape in the night, taking Mother's silver candlesticks. We never heard from her again. Father had an uncle who grew carrots in Kent, but Grandfather refused to let my parents send me away.

'What will our customers think?' he demanded. 'Who puts their health in the hands of a man whose own family don't trust in him?'

So we stayed whilst the Plague of Pestilence crept towards us, closer and closer each day.

#### IV.

I tuck the amulet under my collar and chew my nail till the pain starts to throb. *I promise, I promise, I promise.* There's a powerful magic in those two words. Like a spell, once said they cannot be broken, else terrible things will happen to me. I mustn't even think about what is happening downstairs. I kick the floor with my toe three times to keep the bad thoughts at bay.

Perhaps, instead, I should pray. Prayers are magical too: they make words find their way up to God. I kneel on the rug and press my hands together like Mother taught me to do. 'Please,' I whisper, but however hard I squeeze my eyes shut, the rest of the words will not come. I search for the sounds to shape my fears into prayer. When that doesn't work, I try to remember what we repeat every Sunday in church – singsong words, like a

nursery rhyme: *I will honour and succour my mother and father* – but all I remember is squirming between my parents on the hard wooden pew.

I turn my thoughts instead to Mother: to the hymns she hummed to her canaries through the bars of their cage.

‘Not one of them is forgotten by God,’ she told me. ‘The very hairs on your head are numbered, Nat. Fear not.’

But this worried me. Sometimes my hairs fell out, so how did God count how many I had? Did he know the number of feathers on all the canaries? What happened if He forgot? Perhaps God’s memory was all that separated the canaries and me from all those for whom the bells tolled.

That was sometime in June. My school had closed and Mother wouldn’t let me play in the storeroom, so I carried Ginger upstairs and he watched the canaries whilst I watched the city below. Whilst Father and Grandfather served in the shop, Mother joined me upstairs in the parlour, making pomanders from scraps of muslin, which she filled with sweet-smelling rose-petals and a bitterness that puckered her mouth. In the afternoons, her brow would furrow as she prepared Grandfather’s New and Improved Elixir of Life. I helped her to stir cardamom into the Thames water to mask its sewagey smell. Customers bought the Elixir in gallons, so I couldn’t understand why none of us tasted a drop. Instead, Father and Grandfather kept well by drinking wine during the day, meaning that they swayed up the stairs and into bed each night drunk.

By then, the Plague of Pestilence had spread so far across the city that no one dared enter the shop. Customers dropped their coins into a pot of vinegar whilst Father passed out the wares on the end of a long wooden pole. Yet the poorer folk who had stayed in the city flocked to the sign of the Crocodile that hung above our front door. They bought cordials, potions, anti-pestilence pills, and things to perfume their homes. Grandfather sold dozens of scented powders and wax, as well as real Venice Treacle, made from vipers, opium, honey, and sixty-one spices and herbs.

This was how the fourth plague – the Plague of Smells – came about. I’d grown up with London’s stench: the yeastiness of the brewers’ yards, the rotting flesh from the tanneries, the soap-boilers’ oily fumes. But those were not nearly as bad as the smoke made to kill the invisible creatures blamed for spreading disease. First, the brewers began burning their hops, creating a

bitter cloud that settled over the city, making everyone cough. Soon, burning pepper was making us sneeze, our eyes were watering from the garlic thrown onto public bonfires, and the eggy stink of sulphur was making us retch. These symptoms were so strong that it was difficult to tell the difference between them and the Plague of Pestilence itself, except that the disease ended – almost always – in death.

## V.

Here in the garret, as I try not to cough, I wonder whether the incense will really protect me, or whether it's like Grandfather's Elixir, which I'm beginning to think is a trick. I straighten my knees, abandoning my half-hearted effort to pray. 'It's not fair,' I tell the smoldering fire. I want to hide in Mother's skirts; to be held in Father's strong hands. *Why haven't they come to get me?* I'll burst from being alone.

On the other side of the garret, under the eaves, is an old truckle bed where Father slept when he was an apprentice. I cross the floor and sit on the lumpy straw mattress. It tickles the underside of my knees. The bed has been empty ever since Father moved downstairs to Mother's room on their wedding night, but lately, during the long summer evenings, Mother and I curled up here together where it was cooler and quiet.

As we lay on Father's old bed, we read the chapbooks he'd bought with his apprentice's pay. They were mostly stories about outlaws and pirates, printed in pamphlets with thin, brown paper and blotches of ink. Mother pointed to the letters whilst I tried to sound them aloud. Before school closed, I'd learned my alphabet but I hadn't learned how to make words.

Now, I reach underneath the bed, amongst the dust and dead flies, to pull out a real book, bound in red leather. THE HISTORY OF THE KINGS OF BRITAIN. Mother smuggled it upstairs from Grandfather's study once we'd read all of Father's books twice. Together, we escaped to the time of the Trojans, who sailed north to an island peopled by giants, where they built London and called it New Troy. We lost ourselves in the tales of Brutus and the kings who came after. Lochrine, who crept each night beneath the city to

visit his wife in an underground chamber. Bladud, who made wings for himself but soared too high and fell, spattering on the roof of the sun god's temple, which stood where Westminster Abbey does now.

It's hard to remember where the words ended and my imagination began. I run my fingers over the wine-coloured leather and the gold letters along the thick spine. I often stroked the soft skin of the book whilst Mother read it to me. When the Plague of Smells became unbearable, I buried my nose in the pages, breathing adventures instead. Now, I open the book on my lap and lower my face to the page. It smells of wormwood and rue, strewn by Grandfather to keep bookworms away. But there's also another, deeper scent: the magic of paper and ink. I sit up again to trace the black marks with my fingernail, enjoying the twinge of pain as I follow the letters that Mother was able to turn into words, sentences, stories: whole worlds that she held in her hands.

Sometimes, when Mother and I were curled up in the garret, a thud interrupted our reading as a sparrow or starling struck the skylight above. The bigger birds had flown away at the start of the Plague of Smells, but the smaller ones struggled to escape through the blanket of smoke. Mother wrapped her arms around me as we watched their broken bodies slide down the glass, leaving behind black streaks from the soot that had weighed down their wings. The fallen birds rotted below, since the red kites that usually feasted on carrion had disappeared, and the constables had poisoned stray dogs and cats on suspicion of spreading disease.

I cried for hours when I discovered that Grandfather had killed Ginger with arsenic mixed in his milk.

'Lord Mayor's orders,' he said, shrugging.

'You needn't have done it so cruelly,' Mother protested.

He slapped her so hard her lip bled.

Later that night, after I'd heard everyone else go to bed, I slipped back into the parlour and pulled Mother's canary cage down from the table, afraid that Grandfather would wring their delicate necks. The cage was twice as wide as I was, so it was with some difficulty that I stumbled over to the window and set it down on the floor. I stood on tiptoes to open the casement. Outside, the night was warm and I could smell the bonfire that burned by St Magnus at the northern end of the bridge.

The canaries chirped as I pulled off the cloth that covered their cage. I unlatched the little hinged door and slipped my hand in to grasp the nearest bird. The others flapped frantically, but the one I held didn't move. I drew it out carefully, then held my breath as I cupped its soft body between my palms. I could feel its tiny, fluttering heartbeat. I wondered how many feathers it had and how God counted them all.

I raised my arms towards the window and slowly opened my hands. The canary twitched its head, its yellow feathers ruffled by the breeze.

'Go,' I whispered, 'fly.' But it just shuddered, dropping a sticky white turd in my hand. 'Urgh!' I tipped it onto the sill, where it chirped and flapped its wings. I wiped my hand on my nightshirt and knelt down again next to the cage.

The next morning, I found five canaries dead outside on the windowsill, their stiff bodies covered in soot. The sixth canary had disappeared, though I would never know whether it fell to its death or escaped.

## VI.

I draw my feet up so that the book rests against my bare knees and rub my eyes with my sleeve. However hard I stare at the letters, I cannot remember their sounds. I wish I could turn them into stories: forget the sickness in my belly when I first saw the dead birds. Forget how my skin prickled when I picked one up and felt its coldness: no fluttering heartbeat inside. For the rest of that day I couldn't meet Mother's eye. But she didn't scold me; it was only her blotched face that told me she'd cried.

'Behold,' Grandfather read aloud from his Bible. 'The Lord maketh the Earth empty, and maketh it waste, and turneth it upside-down.'

He was right. It was around that time that the Plague of Bodies arrived.

The fifth plague began when it was no longer possible to count the number of dead. Across the city the bells fell silent, and we heard only the creak of the dead-carts and the shrieks of those who watched their loved ones thrown on the heap. Even from the bridge, we could smell the stench from

the pit at St. Dunstan's, where men, women and children were tipped, their bodies tangled, Grandfather said, like carcasses in the nearby slaughterhouse.

'The city is left desolation,' he read. 'Thou hast made of a city a heap.'

I was not afraid of dead bodies before then. Many times I'd passed beneath the traitors' heads that topped Stone Gate on the bridge. They looked to me like skewered prunes with their wrinkled, tar-blackened skin. But the Plague of Bodies was different. Even God could not possibly remember where so many lay. When I tried to fall asleep, they appeared to me in the darkness. Nameless, faceless, numberless. Bodies without end.

Unable to sleep, I crept from bed to listen outside my parents' door. Most nights they whispered to remind themselves that what was happening outside was real, but sometimes they clung to each other, moaning and writhing as they tried to forget.

## VII.

A long, loud scream from below makes me clutch the book to my chest. In the silence that follows, I'm aware of every part of my body, as though I'm covered in hundreds of eyes. I dare not move. I dread hearing that scream again, yet I'm waiting for it, holding my breath, keeping everything clenched.

*He who flees from the noise of the fear shall fall into the pit.* Grandfather's Bible words. But then Mother's: *Promise me, Nat. Whatever happens, don't go downstairs.*

I don't want to go anywhere. I want to crawl under the bed and hide; to shut my eyes until it all goes away. But then I think of the canaries, cold and stiff where I left them to fend for themselves. I think of Mother's warm skin and the beat of her heart when she holds me. *I will honour and succour my mother and father.* I imagine her calling for help.

More noises below, though quieter now. I can no longer pretend they come from the houses next-door. I let out my breath and lean forward, swallowing down the sobs that make my throat tighten with pain. I knock

my forehead against my knees. 'I *am* a brave boy,' I say aloud. 'I'm being brave. I *am*.'

If only I knew what to do. I sit up again and stare at the book in hope of an answer, but the marks seem to swim on the page. I throw it across the room.

Another groan comes from downstairs and I scramble onto my feet. I eye the door as I walk towards it, wiping my face with the back of my hand. It doesn't feel like I've made the decision myself. Perhaps it's the spicy smoke making me brave. Remembering Mother's vinegar mask, I pick up the bottle she left by the door. I pull out its stopper and pour the liquid onto my hands. The smell is bitter and burns my nose as well as my skin. When I reach up with both hands to turn the doorknob, they slip and slide on the brass.

Outside, the air at the top of the staircase is cooler: the fire downstairs has gone out. I pause, still half inside the garret. The narrow stairway is dim. There's no sound now but my own breathing as I step out onto the top stair and let the door close behind. In the darkness, I can no longer ignore what I might find below.

It's not just the pestilence that has entered our house: the Plague of Madness has too. This sixth and final plague seems the most frightening of all. I only know what Father whispered to Mother at night. Many people have become lunatics, he told her, like those who throw themselves into the Thames or the burial pits. Others rave and writhe until they fall dead. A woman known as Rum Polly dances naked outside the Flower de Luce, trying to kiss passers-by. Some grow so heavy with sadness that they stop breathing, or so light-headed that they float to death in a dream.

Mother begged the men to stop working, but no one could reason with Grandfather by then. Whether it was the madness of greed or the belief that God would really protect him, either way he kept trading until midday one Tuesday when he collapsed and vomited blood. I watched Mother sit perfectly still in the parlour whilst Father dragged him upstairs.

'Fear, and the pit, and the snare are upon thee,' Grandfather said.

Mother met Father's eye, then put down her needle and thread.

Everything blurred after that, though certain moments sank through the madness into my mind. Father cutting a vein in Grandfather's arm whilst

Mother held the porcelain bowl and I watched the blood splash ruby red. Grandfather moaning and wringing his hands. The hammering below as men boarded up the shop window, warned by a customer who'd fled when Grandfather collapsed. The terrible clunk of the padlock. Mother's wailing as she realised we'd missed our chance to escape. Father's small voice as he admitted to cramps and a pain in his head. The stink of the chamber pot Mother emptied out of the window. The rush of the river below.

Those were the things I left behind when Mother brought me upstairs.

Now, the memories crowd around me as I creep down the staircase, one creaking step at a time.

## VIII.

It's the smell that stops me, despite the vinegar. For several minutes I stand in the parlour and try to swallow the bile in my throat.

Grandfather is thrashing about when I enter his chamber. He's thrown off his blankets and knocked over the basin of blood. It pools dark and sticky on the nightstand around the jars of pills and potions that Mother brought up from the shop. I daren't go near him. His eyes are rolled back, as though they are looking inside, not out. He's shivering; his bedclothes are wet. The thought of touching him makes me feel sick, yet he moans to himself with such misery that I feel my own horror fade.

Slowly, I edge towards the bed to pull his blankets back over him, but as I reach out he grasps my hand. His grip is bony and dry. I want to free myself, but I'm afraid I might hurt him. Instead, with my other hand, I smooth the hair across his hot scalp, trying to soothe the pain that makes him wince as he coughs.

In the end, a moan from the next room makes him flinch, and before he can catch me again I scurry back to the door. I don't look back. I don't want to see the swellings that bloom on his neck.

Back in the parlour, I pause for some time at my parents' door. I can hear Mother whimpering, though there's no sound of Father within. When I finally push open the door, she's kneeling by the side of the bed, her head



bowed over his hand. He isn't moving. From where I stand, I can see that his lips have turned blue. Stiffness has frozen the fear on his face.

I open my mouth to call out to him, but all I can manage is a strangled noise like a cough. Mother turns her head so slowly I wonder whether she's heard. Her eyes are bloodshot with crying. She looks at me as though I'm a long way away. She, too, has red and white swellings that bloom like roses around her neck. Yet it's her twisted mouth that terrifies me: she doesn't look like Mother at all.

'No,' she croaks, her voice as strange as her face. She gathers her strength to shout at me. 'Get out, Nathaniel. GO.'

I run from the room, choking on the sobs that suddenly heave from my chest. In the parlour I run straight into the side of a chair. I lie on the floor gasping for air. As soon as I can breathe again, I crawl to the top of the staircase that leads down to the shop. I have to hold on tight to the banister, half-blinded by my own tears. Twice I slip and twist my arm, but it doesn't hurt as much as the pain inside.

At the bottom I hurl myself at the door, rattling it against the padlock and pounding hard with my fists. I scream but nobody comes. The shop windows are boarded up. If the guard is standing outside, he doesn't answer my cries.

When finally I lose the strength to fight, I turn and lean against the locked door. It's dark inside the shop. I try not to look at the skull in the window. Daylight shines through the gaps in the boards and through the rows of glass jars and pots, making waves across the cedarwood cabinets that run along the back wall. Dozens of drawers hang open; none of their contents could save my family upstairs.

I walk slowly beneath the stuffed crocodile, no longer afraid of its maw.

The storeroom still smells of far-away lands, though that's all that remains of the spices. I let the curtain fall behind me, brushing my hair like a ghost. I know the room well enough to feel my way to the table and crawl underneath. I don't think about all the times I've played here at Mother's feet, how she hummed as she worked, or how Father laughed when he lifted me up in the air. I mustn't think about any of that. I kneel in the dust, close my eyes to shut out the darkness, and try my hardest to pray.

## **THE SECOND TALE**

### **The Great Drought, 1666**

*Indulge me, dear Readers, in a short speculation on the curious motion of time.*

*In this year 1687, twenty-two years since the Year of the Plagues, London is more prosperous than ever before. Europe's largest city; centre of an empire stretching across the known world. Yet many of my fellow, God-fearing felons have predicted doom for this new Babylon. Just last month, they say, a plague of flies descended on Smithfields, the swarm so dense that it blocked out the sun and sparrows fell from the sky. Insects clustered so thick on Long Lane that people left footprints, like walking through ash. These are ominous signs. Yet they speak to me not of ending, but rather beginning again.*

*This is my speculation: that we are coming not to the end of time but around again – as Mr Newton tells us of comets – in an elliptical loop.*

*How can this be – you pish and pshaw – when we are in an enlightened Age, pushing forwards – onwards and upwards – out of the dark of the past? Well, I answer, just think of the circular madness of history: the manias, frenzies, epidemics and fevers that have beset our capital. Think how folly repeats.*

*So perhaps it is fate that I am, at twenty-nine years old, confined again to a single room, as I was as a child. It's not fear that keeps me here now, though again there are padlocks and guards. Again, I hear moans and screams from my neighbours: the poorer prisoners on the Common Side being tortured, beaten and starved. Again, I can smell the stench of sickness, corpses and filth. At least I'm at the top of the prison: as near heaven as I hope to attain. For ten shillings a week I have my own room on the Master's Side. I have my books, my quill, my paper and ink, as well as the view through the bars. London is out there – over the rooftops, beyond the river – stretching away to the north.*

*Sometimes I see the old city again, as though memory slips through time's loop. The old city, whose ruin was also preceded by omens of doom. Back then, God's punishment was visited upon us as the Great Drought. A symptom of London's slow-burning fever, it peaked in September 1666 – when I take up my tale – reducing the city to ash and making the birds fall like flies.*

## I.

Smoke chokes me as I sit on the riverbank. It burns my nostrils, stings my eyes, its bitterness filling my throat. I am eight years old. The heat makes my skin feel too tight. I wonder whether my flesh is smoked too, like a kipper or eel. *What if I cook through?* Sounds fog my ears, making them ring. The howl of the wind, the crackle of flames across the river, the crash of houses as they collapse. Screams that might be people burning to death, or might be the ghosts I watch rise with the smoke. Fear has made my mind numb.

Beside me, Grandfather sleeps with his head on one of our sacks. He drank so much laudanum that even amidst the burning vapours I know its sour almond smell. It is my task to guard the sacks that surround us, our spice chest and the barrel of oysters that are all we have had to eat since we fled. My belly feels like mice are gnawing at it inside. Crowded around us along Southwark bank are men, women and children like me: dazed, hungry, hollow-eyed strangers, watching over our worldly possessions as we stare through the haze over the river to the burning city beyond.

I rub the amulet around my neck and think of Mother and Father roasting in the pit at St Dunstan's. There are no words to mark where they lie. Only Grandfather and I know they are there. *Who'll remember them if we die?*

The fire has raged for three days and three nights. This is night three – I've kept count in the mud by my feet – though day and night merge into one. The dark is outdone by the flames, which rage all the way from Tower Hill to the western bend of the river. *As far as I've ever been.* Even St Paul's is alight. This evening, flames appeared on the cathedral roof and now the whole building's ablaze. Billows of smoke blot out the stars and a strange red glow lights the sky. Now and then someone shrieks as a bird plummets down. Pigeons and rooks, dead from fatigue, confused by the false dawn.

This is what hell looks like in my dreams. The air shimmers like frying oil. Through the smoke, orange fire-drops spit, setting light to the barrels that bob near the bank. I've never seen the river so crowded, not even during the plagues. Watermen ferry families and their bundles to safety, whilst merchants escape in their barges with what they could save from the wharves. Nearby, a group of sooty-faced children cast hooks from the bank,

whooping each time they reel in a prize. *Dirty thieves*. That's what Grandfather would say. I pretend not to watch, though I wish I could join them. The water shines like burnished gold from the reflected glow of the fire.

'When will it end?' I ask the clock-maker beside me.

He waves at his boxes of faces and dials. 'When the Lord has destroyed everything.'

I look up, half afraid I'll see God glaring down, His cheeks puffed out as He blows the gale fanning the flames.

At the far end of the bridge, St Magnus still smokes. I think of the hard wooden pew, on which I wriggled through so many Sundays, turned now to soft ash. *It's my fault*. The guilt stabs like a knife. I shudder to remember how the bats hurled out of the burning belfry. *I wished it to happen. God saw the sin in my heart*.

I look from the ruined church towards home. The buildings at the northern end of the bridge are gone, but those in the middle, including our house, were saved by the open stretch of the street. Still, it would take just one spark in this wind to leap the fire break, or, worse: if the flames spread as far as the stores of gunpowder kept in the Tower, the blast could destroy everything.

I think of the things we've left behind: Father's stories, the book bound in red leather, Mother's shawl that still has her smell. I picture all that's left of my family burning. *Will my memories turn to smoke too?*

The sacks around us contain what little Grandfather saved. The spice chest, heavy with jars and the weights from his scales, bruised my knees as we hauled it over the bridge. I wish I could return to rescue the things that really matter, but Grandfather's words still growl in my head. *Take your eyes off our goods and I'll whip your hide raw*. I wish Grandfather was dead.

## II.

I'll never know why God chose to spare me, yet I understand even less why, of all my family, God spared Grandfather too. This question haunted me

during the forty days and forty nights during which he and I were shut in our house at the end of the Year of the Plagues.

Back then, the heavens opened on the first night, as bearers took Mother and Father away, their bodies wrapped in soiled sheets. The rain didn't stop for some weeks. I listened to it lash down on the river below, imagining the pit at St Dunstan's beginning to flood, bodies floating about in the filth. The bonfire by St Magnus sizzled but no one re-lit it. I wandered from one room to another picking things up and putting them down, stirred only by Grandfather's calls for more laudanum to help his spirits revive.

In the year since then, the empty feeling inside me has grown. The air in the house is thinner without Mother's humming and Father's laughter, the secrets and stories they told. At night I still hear them whispering together, though their voices are ghostly, not warm. In the mornings I don't want to get out of bed. The emptiness makes Grandfather's company more suffocating, like his bitter opiate smell.

At first, I tried talking to him about Mother and Father, but he only wanted to preach. 'Be thankful, boy,' he scolded from bed. 'God saved the righteous.' But I hated God for taking my parents. They were better than Grandfather. When he exploded the spices at the end of our quarantine, I half hoped the fire would set light to him too.

It was last autumn, the day that the constable came to prise the boards from our shop window and cut the padlock from our door. Our guard, Mr Foe, had told us that the contagion was fading with the heat of the summer, and more people were recovering from their symptoms when they fell ill. For weeks, we'd listened to the crackle of gunpowder from around the city as people exploded the bad air from their homes. It was a dangerous cure. A silversmith in Black Raven Alley blew up his whole house, Mr Foe called through the keyhole, whilst several others set fire to their thatch. Yet Grandfather insisted we do it. Death seemed to linger, shut up with us inside the house.

Before the constable came, Grandfather ordered me to sweep up what was left of the spices in his bedchamber and storeroom and pour them into a pan. He still kept to his bed, but he shouted for me to place the pan in the parlour and push open the windows as wide as they'd go. I was afraid at first

of letting in the air from outside in case the creatures still lurked out there, but the wind felt good on my face, like the freshness of earth after rain.

My final task was to make a taper by cutting the wicks from our candles and slowly knotting them together under Grandfather's impatient eye. Only once this was done did he give me the key to his locked chest downstairs. Whilst I fetched the gunpowder, Grandfather heaved himself out of bed. When I returned, he took the powder flask from me without saying a word. I watched from the top of the stairs as he removed the stopper and sprinkled a pinch of the black powder into the pan, then stirred it into the spice. Finally, he laid the taper from the pan towards the open door of his bedchamber and lit a rushlight from the fire.

'Go down to the shop.' He glanced up at me. 'Cover your ears with your hands.'

I was no more than halfway down when I heard a faint sizzle, followed by a singed smell and a sudden blast that made me sneeze so fiercely I feared I would fall. Above, I heard Grandfather stumble into his bedchamber, retching and roaring for help. I didn't reply. I could only gasp for breath, blinking through the spices stinging my eyes. It was the first time in weeks I'd been able to cry.

In those moments, as I sobbed and struggled to breathe, I wished that another blast would rip open the walls. I imagined everything burning: the shop, the bridge, even St Magnus. Why should God's house escape? If He chose to kill my parents, then God was evil, not good. I imagined all the anger and fear inside me, all the hurt still trapped in the house, bursting like gunpowder, destroying the churches, the shops, the houses and schools. Purging the city with fiery spices. Freeing my pain in the flames.

### III.

There's a spice merchant's warehouse opposite on the quayside. It smoulders like incense: a reminder that this is my fault. The other wharves burn with their own smell and hue: the vinegary red of wine, sweet gold of sugar, bitter brown of tobacco, and brimstone black of oil and tar. I can even smell the

charred fish on Fresh Wharf and the beer that still boils in the cellar beneath the Flower de Luce.

‘Sodom and Gomorrah,’ the clock-maker mutters. ‘Now London as well.’

I stare at the flames across the river. *God must have heard my bad thoughts.*

The sign that God’s anger was stronger than mine appeared at dusk on the day that I made my terrible wish. It was after the constable had unlocked our front door and I’d left the house for the first time in months. Even closing the door behind me had made the blood beat in my ears. The tunnel formed by the houses was darker and dirtier than I remembered, and I shivered in the cold air. At first I walked slowly with shaking legs, shying away from the people who passed. The bridge was quiet; above, the street signs creaked in the wind. I ran my hand over the peeling layers of paper that covered the walls, enjoying the feel of them under my fingertips. The words fluttered like rags in the breeze: Bills of Mortality, news-sheets, advertisements for physicians and quacks, and, beneath those layers, a glimpse of ballads from a more innocent age.

As I stepped out onto the open part of the bridge, I gasped to see the grey sky so big. I had to hold onto the iron paling, dizzy with so much space. I didn’t follow the street into the empty heart of the city, but instead turned east along the deserted quayside, following the river that had passed beneath me throughout that strange, shut-up time. I walked further than I’d ever walked before, and many sights filled me with wonder. The Tower without any ravens, only ragged children gathering the celery that grew wild in the moat. Marigolds sprouting in Ratcliffe Highway, the air light with their lemony scent. The forest of masts that stretched all the way from the Pool to the marshes, where ships lay at anchor with hundreds of families on board.

But most strange of all was the sight I saw on my long walk back home. In the west, blazing over the tower of St Paul’s, was a new comet the colour of flame. For some minutes I was too frightened to move. Then I glared at the sky and walked on.



#### IV.

The year that followed began with more portents. Prophets who had fled the plagues returned to the city to preach that 1666 would see the Day of Doom. Not only was 666 the number of the Beast, Grandfather explained, but its square root was 25 – more or less – the same as the number of cardinals and creeds in the corrupt Roman Catholic church. Not only that: the roman numerals placed in order – MDCLXVI – made 1666. ‘Mark my words,’ Grandfather said, ‘that’s an evil sign’. As the new year approached, he sent me out to buy almanacs from the pedlars who’d lately returned to the streets. He marked the dates for the coming eclipses of sun and moon, with all their predicted disasters. I thought of my parents, their faces twisted in death, and wondered what worse was to come.

As it turned out, it was not earthquakes, slaughter, or swarms of beasts that blighted 1666, but rather London’s Great Drought.

First, in January, a sudden frost choked the river. My school had recently reopened in Thames Street, so as I walked over the bridge each morning I watched the blocks of ice knock together, islanding the boats by the wharves. Grandfather was pleased. He’d only just reopened his shop, and was soon selling poultices to customers who’d slipped on the ice, as well as remedies for shivers and snivels, rheumy eyes, ringing ears and chilblained fingers and toes. After school he sent me out to run errands, so I didn’t join my schoolfellows to buy baked pears from the stalls on the Thames. Nor did I go to gape at the eels and dead bodies in the brown ice beneath the white rime. Instead, from the bridge, I watched the surface grow more scratched and dirty each day.

By the end of that month, the surface of the river had softened to slush, and as the weather grew milder the ice in the streets left behind puddles of mud. On the river, fish flapped in the melted pools, tempting many boys – though not me – to make the dangerous journey onto the ice to net them in kitchen sieves. I stood at the parlour window to watch, wondering whether I’d ever laugh like they did again.

I was glad when the ice melted and the flood-waters eased; I didn’t know that for the next nine months, London would see no rain. For the whole of February, not a single cloud appeared in the sky. In March, the pigeons

that had fled the Plague of Smells returned to the bridge, but by the end of that month most were so parched that their purple breast-feathers fell out. I balanced saucers of beer on my windowsill, but the birds fought so fiercely to drink that they knocked them off with their wings. By May, many were dead. That month, a shower of hailstones as large as walnuts cracked the skylight up in the garret and battered Southwark's fields, where the young artichokes withered – my schoolmaster said – and peas shrivelled up in their pods.

After school, I spent hours each day standing in the long queues at the standpipe, since water-carriers charged more for their wares than vintners were charging for wine. Grandfather and I, along with our clothing, missed our once-monthly wash. Yet he was cheerful, despite the stink. Customers bought pomanders and perfumes to mask the curdled smell of hot bodies and the stench of sewage that pooled in the streets without rain to wash it away. Ladies, too, came to buy puppies' urine and other potions to soften their dry, flaky skin.

By June, however, I realised that the drought was affecting Grandfather too. As his thirst for laudanum grew, he drank up more of our money each day. Now, when I came home at midday for dinner, there were only the scraps left from the previous night's pie from the cookshop, since he refused to part with more coins.

During that time, I spent many hours alone. I dawdled in front of the stationer's shop on the bridge, looking at the rows of pamphlets and penny histories. I stood at the parlour window to watch children swim in the shallow river below, or sat at the table with my school primer, trying to sound out the words. It seemed that the drought had dried up my tears, since when I thought about Mother and Father, I found I could no longer cry.

The drought lasted through July into August, made worse by the tropical heat. The sun bounced from the ground and made the air shimmer, so that sometimes I opened my mouth and tried to drink the hot haze. In St Clement's churchyard, orange and lemon trees sprouted from pips blown from the nearby fruit wharves. They were all that grew in the cracked earth. I thought of the swollen graveyards and pits, where the ground bulged with rotting bodies beneath. What if the cracks grew so wide that the sickness broke out? Each day, as I ran my fingers along the timbers that criss-crossed

the houses on Thames Street, the tinder-dry wood hurt my skin. That's how I knew London burned with a fever biding its time to break free.

## V.

Now, as I watch that fever lay waste to the city, it's clear that I am to blame. If I hadn't wished to destroy the city, God would never have sent the comet to infect it with fear, the frost to freeze it, the drought to parch it, nor the wind that now fans these flames.

The wind howls, as though answering my thoughts, lifting sparks higher than the pinnacles of St Paul's. Around me, people wail.

'The watermen say the lead from the cathedral roof melted,' a woman says nearby.

'The tower sucked up the smoke like a chimney,' a man calls from further away.

'It's the stationers' fault,' another man cries. 'They piled all their books into the crypt for safe keeping. The paper is fuelling the flames.'

I gaze at the inky clouds billowing above the cathedral. Each gust seems to lift scraps of burning paper that wheel over the city like birds.

As I watch the wind whip the flames, I remember how the gale began only three nights ago. I knew then that something would change. It was after midnight that the storm woke me as it swept in from the east. I huddled beneath the covers in bed, waiting for a sound I'd almost forgotten: rain on the river below. But no rain fell. Instead, I heard only the wind howl through the houses and eddy under each arch of the bridge.

Each time I fell asleep, I was woken again by the sound of a chimney toppling or a boat being swept downstream. Sometimes there was a splintering sound as the masts of the ships snapped in two. As soon as the sky began to grow light, I crept to the window to see clumps of thatch and tree branches swirling as high as church spires. The river was stained brown by a spilled cargo of tea, but the dawn was surprisingly bright.

It was the pigeons flapping at my windowpane that woke me again after eight. This time, when I went to the window, the river and sky were both red. I stood on tiptoes to inch open the casement. A terrible crackling

came in with the smoke. Not the spiced woodsmoke of the bonfire that had burned by St Magnus the year before, but a thick, choking black plume. The pigeons scabbled with their claws at the sill and beat the glass with their wings. I had to pull the window shut before they forced their way in.

I shouted for Grandfather, then tried to shake him awake where he lay in the parlour, but he merely lashed out in his sleep. ‘Please wake up,’ I whispered, rubbing my wrist where he’d hit me. There was an empty bottle of wine in his lap. He looked very lonely and frail. I placed my hand on his knee and tried once more to rouse him before I gave up and ran down the stairs.

The bridge was already in uproar when I opened the door and stepped out. Families streaked with soot dragged their possessions across to the safety of Southwark, whilst bridge-dwellers pushed in the other direction to see the fire for themselves. I edged north, keeping to the side of the tunnel, which was already filling with smoke. When I reached the crowd on the open part of the bridge, I pushed my way to the palings to see the flames. All of Fish Street Hill was burning, and much of Thames Street too. The heat made my face hurt, though the thrill of excitement that kindled inside me seemed to be stoked by the blaze.

The bells of St Magnus were ringing backwards to call men to action, though not many mustered below. Most householders were too busy dragging out the furniture they’d stored in the church, which was now beginning to burn. Along the wharves, a few dozen men passed buckets of water in a chain from the river. Others passed pails of milk or beer, emptied chamber pots out of windows, or scooped turds from the kennels to throw on the flames. Many more – both merchants and pilferers – tossed barrels of sugar and wine into barges, or tried to roll them away.

I stayed with the jostling crowd for some time, watching the fire and listening to the rumours that swirled as thick as the smoke.

Our neighbour, Mr Toot the tobacconist, announced that the fire had started in Pudding Lane.

‘The King’s baker left his pies in the oven. Plain as my nose, the smoke smelt of bacon.’

‘No,’ said his wife, ‘I smelt cinnamon. Cakes or buns were to blame.’

‘Perhaps the King himself burned the cakes.’

‘Perhaps our Lord Mayor did.’

‘*He* came in the night,’ said a periwigged man. ‘Still in his nightcap and smelling of brandy. He said a woman could piss the fire out.’

‘Really?’ A servant-girl turned to him, wide-eyed.

‘Several ladies of the town tried. The men dropped their breeches to blow the fire out with their farts.’

‘They must have burnt their behinds,’ she protested.

‘And the women their cunts.’

By way of demonstration, he tried to grasp hers. She shrieked and the people around us cursed and shoved as she made her escape. A man fell against me, crushing my arm against the palings. Someone’s elbow hit me in the eye. I ducked and began backing away.

I’d almost reached the entrance to the tunnel when a roar went up behind. When I turned, I realised that the fire had set light to the piles of hemp on the wharves. Bodies pressed in on all sides of me as the crowd was forced back by the heat. The flames seemed to suck the air away and I gasped for breath as I fought against the tide of arms and legs that threatened to pull me under. I remembered my fear of being swept away by the river. This, I thought, was what it would feel like to drown.

As the crowd pressed back into the tunnel and against the houses on either side, I wriggled and weaved through the bodies, looking for gaps to slip through like an eel. Somehow, I managed to stay on my feet, but few were as nimble as me. A woman ahead lost her footing and disappeared under the surge. I stared back as I was swept past, hoping to see her linen cap bob back up, but I was too small to see. Someone behind tripped and grabbed at my shirt, almost pulling me to the ground. I wrenched myself free and elbowed onwards through the skirts and legs, bellies and breasts, not stopping to look back until I’d reached the safety of our shop door.

## VI.

Now, a fearful bursting from the Tower makes me leap to my feet. The ground shakes. Women scream and babies start crying. Grandfather merely stirs in his sleep.

‘They’re firing the cannons,’ a boy shouts behind me.

‘The Dutch are attacking,’ several men cry.

In moments, our riverbank is in as much confusion as the north side. Mothers scoop up their children, dogs bark, cowards gather their bundles, and brave men shout to each other to take up arms and fight. I search for a weapon, but the best I can find is a wooden pestle in one of Grandfather’s sacks.

‘Not much of a club, son,’ a blacksmith says as he hands me his iron tongs.

The clock-maker brandishes a brass cogwheel as he kicks Grandfather awake.

‘Damn you to hell,’ Grandfather growls as he rolls onto his front.

Another burst of fire from the far bank draws our eyes to the west.

‘Good God,’ someone shouts, ‘they’re bombarding St Paul’s.’

‘They’re throwing grenades at the walls.’

‘Arm! Arm! Arm!’

I point my tongs like a sword at the cathedral. Even from here, I can see the stones shatter, scattering into the wind.

*What if a grenade hits me? What will it feel like to burst?*

Just three weeks ago, I watched fireworks light up the city to celebrate the news that our fleet had attacked a Dutch town. *Now they’ll burn us to the ground.*

I lower my tongs, which have started to shake. *Don’t be a baby.* I look around at the men and women waving their weapons – shovels, candlesticks, soup ladles, carving knives – and try to make my face fierce like theirs. Father’s words whisper inside me. *Be a brave boy for me, Nat.*

When Father said that, I *was* just a baby. Now, a year later, I feel almost grown. I stand as high as the chest of the baker beside me, his rolling-pin raised for the fight. As tall as the hairy chin of the fishwife holding her fish-gutting knife.

‘I’ll stop those scoundrels,’ I shout, adding my voice to the din.

Around me, people repeat the rumours that have been spreading along the riverbank since the fire began.

‘A Dutchman was caught throwing fireballs in Cheapside.’

‘A French baker set light to his shop in Westminster.’

‘A Portuguese painter was found with grenades.’

‘Death to foreigners’ shouts a maid holding a fire iron.

‘I’ll thrash those Hogen Mogens,’ yells an old man wielding a cane.

For the first time, I’m glad that Grandfather made me take his name.

‘Your father’s gone,’ he said. ‘Why call yourself Gertszoon? Spicer is a good, English name.’

Now, some are for standing our ground to defend the south bank, others for heading east to defend the dockyards, or for crossing the river in boats. No one can agree how the Dutch fleet got past us, or where they’re attacking from now. All eyes are upriver on the cathedral as its stones burst like pomegranates, sending sparks like seeds into the fire.

*All those words up in smoke.*

I turn my eyes back to our house on the bridge. If the Dutch destroy that, all the stories Father bought as an apprentice, all the words Mother turned into worlds into which we escaped: all those will also be lost. I’ll never learn to read them myself; to bring her voice back to life.

*I have to save something. The fire is my fault.*

I lower my tongs and look for Grandfather. Other people have pressed in between us, trampling over our sacks. I push through them to kneel in the mud and try to shake him awake.

‘I have to save something,’ I shout in his ear.

He twitches and groans in reply. I look up at the legs that surround us. No one is paying attention to anything on this side of the river; our spice chest and barrel of oysters seem safe. Besides, my fear of Grandfather is nothing next to the Dutch. His voice in my head is drowned out by the sound of stones bursting. *Take your eyes off our goods and I’ll... do what?* I could get to the bridge and back again before he’s even awake.

Carefully, I pull the front of his coat out from beneath his body and slip my hand into the pocket inside. The keys are warm from the heat of his breast. I squeeze them tight in my fist.

## VII.

It takes me some time to push my way through the crowd to the southern gate of the bridge. Above, the traitors' heads have shrivelled in the dry heat. No one passes beneath. The other end of the bridge is blocked by fallen timbers and bricks – the only escape from the north bank now is by boat. A few men have climbed the walls of the gatehouse to try to see what's happening upriver, but the bridge-foot on this side is clear.

'Stop,' a shrill voice calls behind me. 'It's not safe on there, child.'

I run through the archway before anyone can catch me, and I continue running through the first tunnel until I reach the opening below Nonsuch House, whose carved front straddles the bridge. Above, the domes and gilt vanes glow red with the reflected light on the river below. I've never seen the bridge empty like this. Only animals cower here now: rats, cats with their fur burned away, fallen birds with burnt wings. The back of my neck prickles with sweat. *Maybe I should go back.* The tunnel beneath Nonsuch House looks darker than the one I've just run through. But then I remember the inky clouds above the cathedral, and how much I've already lost.

The easterly gale nearly knocks me sideways as I cross the open stretch between tunnels. From here, I can see upriver towards Westminster, though there's no sign of any Dutch ships. I push on, squinting into the wind, which tries to blow me over the side of the bridge.

I run again as I enter the tunnel beneath Nonsuch House. Strange shapes scurry in the darkness, and the deserted houses and shops on either side seem unfamiliar now. Even when I reach our shop door, I almost run past. The sign of the Crocodile shrieks overhead in the wind. The crackling is nearer now and seems to surround me inside the tunnel. Dizzy from the heat of the firestorm, I fumble with the keys, expecting to feel the blast of grenades at any moment, then the stones of the bridge crumbling beneath me as I tumble through burning air. My hands shake. *Come on.* I take a deep breath and finally manage to fit the key in the lock.

Inside, the shop is in darkness. I daren't waste time searching for candles, so I let the door close behind me and feel my way to the stairs. As I climb, the red glow from the windows above becomes brighter. The air in the house is hazy with smoke, like when Father toasted bread on a fork over



the fire. I half expect to hear him whistling as I reach the top of the stairs, but the parlour is lifeless. The chairs are empty, the rug faded and worn. The only sounds come from outside.

I hurry into my bedchamber, where Mother's shawl is folded beneath my pillow. I hold its soft weave to my face and breathe in her scent: the faintest hint of rosewater and sweat; so faint, I'm not sure it's there.

Finally, I climb upstairs to the garret, where Father's chapbooks are still stacked beneath his old bed. I pull them out and pile them on top of the book bound in red leather, then place Mother's shawl on top. As I stand, balancing my treasures awkwardly between my chin and arms, I look out at the burning city below. From here, I can see the furthest edge of the fire, which has leapt not only the City walls but the foul ditch of the Fleet. I remember Grandfather's words from the Bible. *Thou hast made of a city a heap.*

## VIII.

Back on the bridge, the smoke makes me cough and the roar of the flames seems even closer. I steady my burden and begin to run as fast I can. My footsteps echo in the empty tunnel. *The fire's chasing me.* I daren't look behind.

As I emerge out from beneath Nonsuch House, I slow down and sink to my knees. Ahead is only one more short tunnel, then the arch of the gatehouse, then I'm safe. But as I gasp to get my breath back, I sense that something has changed. Slowly, I stand and walk across to the palings. On the riverbank, the crowd is no longer looking towards the cathedral, and there's still no sign of Dutch ships. Opposite, the fire seems to be burning less fiercely, and the air seems calmer somehow. Then I realise what is different. The wind has dropped, as suddenly as a long fever might finally break.

Slowly, hardly daring to hope that the worst is over, I walk through the last tunnel with shaking legs. I'm almost halfway when I hear a muffled cry. I flinch, expecting to see an injured animal, but there, in a dark doorway to my left, a skinny boy about my own age stares up at me. He sits hunched

on the step, hugging his knees to his chest. Tears and snot have streaked tracks through the soot on his face.

‘What are you doing?’ My voice comes out hoarse. When he doesn’t answer, I take a step closer. ‘It isn’t safe.’

‘Leave me alone.’

I look ahead to the arch of light at the end of the bridge, then back to him. I hesitate, then set my books on the ground.

‘What’s your name?’ I try to make my voice gentle, like Father’s was when I was scared.

‘Peter,’ he says at last.

‘Why are you here?’

‘I got lost.’ He looks at his knees. ‘We were running away from the fire.’

‘Come with me.’ I hold out my hand.

‘No.’ He curls up even tighter.

‘Come on. Be a brave boy.’ I try to look at him like Mother did when she made me promise. ‘You have to do what I say.’

‘I have to wait here for Father to find me.’

‘He won’t come back to the bridge.’

The boy glares. ‘Go away.’

‘Fine.’ I stand up again. ‘But you’ll burn to death if you stay.’

His dark eyes widen. ‘I won’t.’

‘You will if you don’t come with me.’

He shakes his head. Suddenly, I feel like crying myself.

‘You have to let me save you,’ I shout.

‘I can’t walk. My legs hurt.’

‘Don’t be a baby. You can.’

Still, he sits there hunched up. I look again towards the light at the end of the tunnel. *Maybe I can save the books first. Then I’ll come back for him.*

A loud boom from the east makes us both gasp.

‘Stupid boy.’ Now I’m the one sobbing. ‘You’ll ruin everything.’

I look once more towards the red glow. *Get out, Nathaniel. GO.*

I throw Mother’s shawl around Peter’s thin shoulders, then grasp him around his middle and lift. He’s bony and light when I heave him up and he

doesn't put up a fight. Even so, it takes all my strength to drag him along. I look back at the books I've left on the doorstep. Then we stumble on into the light.

**THE THIRD TALE**

**Out of the Ashes, 1667**

*You folks who grew up in the city that rose like a phoenix after the fire: how can you imagine what stood here before?*

*It's been two decades since I watched London burn. The city I see from this window is not the same city I knew as a child. Look: the past survives only in pieces, like the timber-framed houses that still stand on the bridge. Everything else north of the river – as far as I can see from my window – emerged out of the ash.*

*I have a map – there, tacked to the crumbling plaster of my prison wall – that was printed after the fire. AN EXACT SURVEY OF THE RUINS OF THE CITY OF LONDON, it's titled. Yet most of the map is just a blank space. A margin of houses around the outside, and in the middle: what? Only the outlines of streets, lanes and alleys that no longer existed, and letters – A to Z – to mark the ruins of twenty-six wards.*

*When I saw that map on a second-hand bookstall some years ago, I didn't recognise it at first. In my memory, there was nothing blank about the real area burned. The calcined stones of the collapsed walls were white, but all else was burnt black or grey.*

*And yet there it is: a blank space on the map like a page to be written. A story about to begin.*

*This is the tale of that transforming time – Spring 1667 – when I, like London, spread my wings and began to emerge from the flames.*

## I.

The bells of Southwark begin to chime as I inch open my chamber door. I am nine years old: old enough, on this bright May morning, to run away to sea. I pause on the threshold to peek into the parlour. *Have I left it too late?* Grandfather is asleep in his chair. I can't see his face, though I can hear his snores. *Please don't let him wake.*

I peer at the staircase on the other side of the parlour, which leads down to the shop. *I just have to make it to there.* I push the door wider and trace my route: past the sideboard, around the table and past Grandfather's chair, keeping close to the wall. I watch his feet for signs of movement. The city is already stirring outside. No bells ring on the north bank – they melted like wax in the fire – but I can hear the clang of hammers and chisels as men begin their day's work. Carters clatter over the bridge and watermen call out below. *Hush.* My heart thuds at every sound.

*Now. Before he stirs.* I take my first step, yet it's hard to tiptoe with the weight of the knapsack pulling me backwards. It's the same knapsack with which Father left home to be an apprentice, starting a new life of his own.

Since first light, I've been packing and repacking my parents' possessions – the ones Grandfather hasn't yet sold. In the end, Mother's mortar and pestle were too heavy, so I've settled instead for a yellow feather as well as her shawl. I have the knapsack to remember Father, of course, but also his snuff box. I want nothing to remember Grandfather by. I'm afraid his crabbed face will appear before me when I open the jar of lemons I stole from the larder. When I sip the Oil of Vitriol I've watched him sell to sailors to prevent scurvy. When I eat the salted herrings whose eyes look like his: yellow and goggling, like those of a not-so-fresh fish.

*Good riddance.* I scowl at the back of his head as I edge past the table towards his chair. Most mornings I find him asleep there, having never made it to bed. Most mornings, by now, I'd be downstairs, sweeping the shop and cleaning the hearth before school. *Why should I work whilst he snores?* I hold my breath as I creep behind him, towards the top of the stairs. I daren't make a sound; my backside still stings where he beat me yesterday with the broom.

‘You think you have time to waste reading?’ He growled. ‘You’ll damn well work for your keep.’

*I shan’t.* Peter and I are going to be pirates. We’ve been making plans for some weeks. As I slowly climb down the stairs, I count for the ones that will creak. *One, two, three – step over – five, six – step over – eight...* It was easier when I practised: I didn’t have the knapsack weighing me down. Still, I reach the bottom without Grandfather waking and touch the last stair for luck. *Made it.* I look up at the clock on the wall. The short hand is on the VII and the long hand on the II. I’m meeting Peter in the ruins of Thames Street before St. Saviour’s chimes the half hour. *Time and tide stay for no man.* That’s what Father would say.

I poke out my tongue at the stuffed crocodile as I tiptoe across the shop floor. Upstairs, Grandfather snorts like a dragon guarding its lair. The broom still stands in the corner, propped against the cold hearth. I wish I could chop it up and throw it into the grate. Then I remember: this time tomorrow, I’ll be swabbing the decks of our ship. I grin at the thought of the sun on my back and the world unrolling ahead. I glance back one last time as I unlock the front door, but the shop is dim and the day outside is bright with adventures. I let the latch fall behind me and stride away without turning around.

## II.

The morning is cold. As I reach the open part of the bridge, I shade my eyes to look west. Spring has come late. The river rushes brown below and the sky is eggshell-blue. As far as I can see, all that still stand are ruined towers, chimney stacks, and the broken pinnacles of St Paul’s. Although the cathedral’s roof buckled and its walls cracked, its arches still point upwards to heaven, dark against the pale sky.

It was the heat of the fire that burst the cathedral’s stones like grenades. Our own soldiers blew up houses with gunpowder to save the Tower’s store. We didn’t need a Dutch fleet to destroy us: God’s wrath was enough.

I try to take it in one last time: to imprint on my memory London as it is and once was. All that's left of the streets are twisted metal, melted glass, whitened stone and blackened bricks. Here and there, people have made shelters in the ruins of their old homes with what they could salvage: timbers, tarpaulins, torn sheets.

With so much destroyed, I can see as far as the huge camp at Smithfields: another city made out of cloth. I can even see the tents and windmills on Finsbury Fields, which is being dug up for brick earth. By law, no one should begin rebuilding yet, but the air rings with the clang of tools. Masons, carpenters, bricklayers and glaziers, unwilling to wait for the City's surveyors to finish staking the streets.

*Goodbye city, goodbye river. I'll try not to forget.*

I turn to face where I'm going: east. Tower Wharf is perhaps only half a mile along the riverbank, yet I must clamber over rubble and around ruins, being careful not to fall into a cellar or be crushed by a toppling wall. At least I know the first stretch, through the remains of Thames Street, from visiting Peter in the shelter that his father made from old sails they stole from the wharves. But I've not ventured beyond there, since it means passing the spire-less St Dunstan's and the pit where my parents were tipped. I shiver to think of the stories I've heard of fallen church roofs shattering tombs and bringing bodies to light. *What if I fall into one of those?* For a moment I push away from the palings and half-turn towards home. But then I imagine being far away from all of this, the salt taste of the wind in my face, out on the wide open sea.

There, at the eastern edge of the ruins, are the masts of the ships moored at the Tower. Ships that will set sail for foreign lands, where men are the size of coffee pots, with heads growing under their arms. Where real dragons wait to be slain, and a couple of cabin boys can grow up to be pirates, so famous that balladeers will sing their adventures to boys like Peter and me.

The ships lie at anchor, the whole world before them. *My new life begins there.*



### III.

It was a week after the fire that Peter and I first talked about going to sea.

I was sitting alone in the storeroom grating nutmegs when I heard a knock at the door. At first I ignored it. In the days since the fire, customers had knocked at all hours. At first, they needed treatments for burns and coughs caused by smoke, but soon they were complaining of sleeplessness, nightmares, headaches, palpitations and fits. Some were traders who'd lost everything and whose hair was falling out in clumps, or children who were plagued by a ringing sound in their ears. Others were foreigners with bruises and broken bones from being attacked. In the mornings, Grandfather opened the shop to serve them, but most afternoons, like that one, he'd stumbled upstairs after taking a sniff or sip of whatever he'd sold. I just felt dizzy. I'd not eaten dinner, and my fingers were nicked with cuts where I'd slipped with the grater. I kept forgetting what I was doing and staring at the blank wall.

The knocking came again, so loud that I was afraid Grandfather might hear. I sighed and stood up. I didn't want to talk to anyone, but if I managed to sell something then perhaps I could buy some supper, at least.

When I opened the door, Peter was standing outside with a hangdog expression, one arm behind his back. I recognised his bony frame and fair hair, though his dark eyes were turned to the ground.

'I came –' He glanced up. 'What happened to you?'

'Nothing.' I thrust my cut hands in my pockets. 'Why are you here?'

'Father said I should thank you.' He hesitated. 'The thing is, I didn't need saving. I'm probably braver than you.'

I didn't reply.

'I'm sorry you lost your books though.' He brought his hand out from behind his back and pushed a parcel at me.

'What's that?'

'It's as a reward.'

I took it reluctantly. It was about the size of a chapbook and wrapped in green felt.

'Careful,' he said. 'The edges are sharp.'

I unwrapped the parcel and, one by one, took out five shards of stained glass. Each was almost the size of my palm, the glass so clear that the light spilled out of them onto my skin: wine, violet, emerald, gold and a brilliant, cobalt-bright blue.

‘They belonged to the altar window in our village church,’ Peter said. ‘My great-great-great-grandfather made it. He owned the glazier’s workshop at Salisbury Cathedral. It had as many windows as days of the year.’

‘My great-grandfather invented the carrot.’

‘Really?’ He looked mildly impressed.

‘Why’s the glass broken?’

‘The Puritans smashed it on the day I was born. Father tried to put the pieces back together whilst Mother laboured with me.’

‘Where is she now?’

He looked at his feet. ‘The plague came to our village this summer... So me and Father came here.’

I ran one finger along the edge of the glass, imagining Peter’s father piecing together an angel: a feather, an eye, the edge of a robe. I wanted to tell him about my parents, but the right words wouldn’t come.

My stomach growled. Peter looked up.

‘Are you hungry?’

‘A little.’

‘The Navy is giving out ship’s biscuit at Billingsgate. I’ll take you there if you like. Father’s out fixing cracked windows; I don’t have to be back home for hours.’

‘Where do you live?’

‘In the ruins near our old lodgings. Father made us a tent out of sails.’

‘I’d like to live in a tent.’

‘I hate it. When I’ve saved up enough money, I’m running away to sea.’

‘I hate it here too.’

Peter brightened. ‘Come be a cabin boy, like me. I’ve got an old piece of ship’s rope. After we’ve filled our pockets with biscuits, I’ll show you how to tie knots.’

And so it was that we set off together: the first time since the fire that I’d ventured from the bridge into the ruined city beyond.

#### IV.

Now, as I step again from the bridge-foot towards Billingsgate, I remember that other walk only in pieces, like shards:

Sweating as we picked our  
way through the rubble, the cellars belching out smoke.

The singed, animal  
smell as the ash scorched the leather soles of my shoes.

The remains of  
the cherry tree in the churchyard: hundreds of stones and a caramel crust  
the colour of blood.

The empty windows of St Magnus, where the melted  
glass had made crystals like a hoar frost.

Nothing remains of those crystals as I pass now, nor of the cherry tree. Men chipped out the melted glass to make marbles, and boys collected the cherry stones and lumps of bell metal to keep. Now, the church walls have collapsed into the nave. Broken stones lie in the graveyard, and a headless knight stands over an open tomb. I turn away. They say that some of the bodies uncovered were swollen like boiled brawn, and that among the old skeletons was a mummy with a red beard and leathery skin.

After our first outing, Peter and I often played in the ruins, though we stayed away from the church. Instead, we trailed the men employed by the City and King, competing to see who could ask the most questions before they chased us away. Peter usually won, since he was better at speaking to people than me. I was better at reading, though. Peter hadn't been to school since he left his village. My school had burned down in the fire, but I still read my primer each day.

It was sometime in mid-September that we first played our game. I remember the hiss of the cellar fires as it started to rain, ending nine months of drought. Despite the downpour, we followed the heralds as they clambered importantly through the ruins, flanked by mace-bearers wearing the King's coat of arms. The heralds read aloud the King's proclamation to the people trying to salvage their homes from the ash that was turning to mud. It forbade anyone from rebuilding until they had cleared away the rubble from around their own land.

‘Why?’ Peter asked one of the heralds.

‘So that surveyors can map the foundations.’

‘What are surveyors?’ I asked.

‘They measure the land.’

‘Why?’ we said in unison.

‘Because we’re going to get rid of the old, crooked streets and make a new, straighter city instead.’

‘What if we liked the old streets?’

Peter asked this last question and so was the winner, since the herald shook his fist.

It wasn’t long before we learned for ourselves what surveyors did, since as soon as the mud dried, the ruins filled with men carrying stakes and measuring chains.

‘What’s that?’ Peter asked one of them, pointing to a brass disk with a glass-covered dial.

‘A circumferentor.’

‘A what?’ I asked.

‘It measures angles.’

‘Can we hold it?’ Peter said.

‘No.’

The surveyors, we learned, worked in pairs. One stretched out a brass chain towards a red rod, whilst the other checked its angle with the circumferentor and marked each measure of sixty-six feet. Peter enjoyed sneaking up to peek at their instruments, whilst I preferred throwing an old hoop over the wooden stakes they knocked in.

Peter and I were not the only ones to get in the surveyors’ way as they tried to measure where the old city had been. Soon, they were colliding with men who were drawing where the new city would be. These men, we learned, were a different breed.

‘Amateurs,’ a scowling surveyor said when Peter asked who they were. ‘Rich fops who think they know how to make maps just because they once visited Rome.’

Of course, we began following these map-makers to try to find out more. One said that he was an astrologer, another that he was a philosopher, a third claimed to be Groom of the Stool to the King. If they happened to

meet one another, they each nodded stiffly and hurried away, hiding their plans behind their slide-rules.

‘Why do you hide from each other?’ Peter asked the philosopher, who wore a large, powdered wig.

‘The King has set a competition to design the new city. It would be a great honour to win.’

‘Can we see yours?’ I asked.

‘I suppose you’re not much of a threat.’ He showed us his plan: straight lines making a grid, with squares, circles, triangles, diamonds and stars.

‘It’s very neat,’ Peter said.

‘The new London will be mathematical. A wonder of geometry.’

Peter and I started our own competition to see who could creep up closest to peek at the map-makers’ plans. But when we compared what we had seen, it seemed that they all just drew patterns of straight lines and shapes.

A few weeks later, the map-makers left – gone, we guessed, to present their plans to the King – but the surveyors’ progress was slow. The problem was that the ruins became more confusing with every day that went by.

‘I didn’t spend seven years as an apprentice to heave rocks around,’ one of the surveyors complained.

Peter kicked a stone out the way. ‘I thought the King said people should clear their own land?’

‘Most just squabble over who owns what. Instead of clearing the rubble, they push it onto their neighbours’ plots or further into the street.’

Things became worse as autumn wore on and a plague of forgetfulness spread.

It started when people began to quarrel over the number of dead. The heralds announced that only six people were killed in the fire, yet almost everyone Peter and I met, particularly those who’d lived in the crowded tenements north of Thames Street, knew somebody who’d died. Not only that, Peter’s father knew a workman who’d helped to clear the ruins of Newgate. It was packed, he said, with the blistered remains of prisoners who’d died before their bars melted away. But no Bills of Mortality were

printed for several weeks after the fire, and only six deaths were recorded in the City's accounts.

'But that number's not right,' Peter protested.

The herald whom we were following frowned. 'If they weren't counted, then the dead didn't count.'

I often lay awake at night, wondering whether the ghosts of those uncounted people still wandered the city like souls in limbo, unable to rest in peace. Like my parents, they had no names on gravestones or numbers in books. Nothing to make them real but the memories of loved ones like me. Memories that seemed to lose their colour and become more ghost-like each day.

By the end of October, many people were confusing the names of those friends and relatives for whom they could not account. Mr Horner, the stationer, asked me again if I'd seen his wife Harriet, but I was sure he'd called her Hester last time. It frightened me to think that I might forget Mother and Father's names too. I tried to remember what they called one another – *sweetheart*, Father would whisper, though I couldn't remember his voice. It was around this time that I began to collect their belongings under my bed: Father's snuff-box; Mother's mortar and pestle; a small feather, yellow but greyed at its tip. Each night, as I knelt at my bedside to pray, I reached underneath to touch each token and begged God not to let me forget.

It was some time in November that I realised I could no longer remember the names of the streets. I wasn't the only one. All the alehouses, taverns and street-signs that we'd once found our way with were gone. I often found letters lying abandoned, or met with Londoners who were lost.

'Where's Vintner's Hall?' a young woman begged me. 'It used to be down Garlic Hill, past the sign of the Anchor and over-against St James Garlickhythe. But now it all looks the same.'

I shrugged. The city no longer made sense to me either. I never strayed far from the river, since I was afraid to lose sight of the bridge.

Of course, all this forgetfulness made the surveyors' task twice as hard.

'Why are you back here again?' Peter asked a bear-like man whom we'd seen near his tent the previous week.

The surveyor shook his huge, grizzled head. 'Where's *here*? No one can agree where we are or who used to live on this land.'

When December came, the ash iced over and the surveyors were forced to abandon their plans. They left the ruins to those who had nowhere else to go. At night, shivering in the dark of his tent, Peter heard the screams of women being robbed and men being dragged away by press-gangs.

'Why don't you go to their rescue?' I asked.

'What, and be killed? I hate this place. Let's leave soon as spring comes.'

I, too, counted the days till the long hours of darkness would end. When Grandfather beat me, or shouted, or simply looked through me, I'd wait until evening and steal coins from the till. We'd have to pay for our places as cabin boys, though neither Peter nor I knew how much we would need. Even a smoked eel cost two shillings: double its usual price. Peter earned pennies collecting firewood and selling the wild horseradish we picked, and I hid the coins I stole under my bed.

'Never take more than a shilling at once,' Peter told me. 'Otherwise you could hang.'

Luckily, Grandfather was too fuddled at the end of each day to count his takings. Yet every night I'd wake cold with sweat, fearing that in the morning he'd summon the constable, or that God would strike me down dead.

## V.

Now, the spring we waited so long for is finally here. Between the tumbled, fire-pitted stones, herbs sprout pale yellow flowers. The primroses died beneath the burnt soil, but these tiny stars have bloomed. I stop for a while to put down my knapsack and breathe in their mustardy scent.

I look back at the bridge: its twenty arches spanning the river, its parapets and the tall houses above. I clench my fists to stop myself biting my nails. *Home has always been on the water. It won't be so scary to live on a ship.*

It was two months ago, in March, that Peter and I discovered how to earn the money for our adventures at sea. It was then that the second survey began, this time with the aid of workmen who uncovered the foundations not only of the old city, but of ancient ruins and objects under the earth. Soon, everyone whom Peter and I questioned had something to say. Some said that the buried walls dated from the time of Julius Caesar, others that they were built by giants before the time of the Flood. One man – a naval clerk who'd come to watch the surveyors – claimed it was an enchanted city, since recent digging at one of the wharves had uncovered an orchard of fully-grown trees buried beneath the soft clay.

'I saw them with my own eyes,' he told us. 'Clusters of nuts hung from the branches, but the trees had been turned into stone.'

'He's like the old folk back home,' Peter complained once the clerk had gone. 'They say the circle of stones near our village were giants that Merlin froze.'

'Perhaps they were.'

'No. It's just nature. Magic doesn't exist.'

Enchanted or not, the underground orchard was all that Peter and I talked of that week. Every evening we dug beneath the burnt wharves, hoping to find treetops poking up through the mud.

We only turned our attention to buried treasure when we heard that an antiquarian would pay good money for bits of old statues and pots.

'Clearly he's mad,' Peter scoffed. But soon even the surveyors abandoned their work on the surface, since it paid better to dig downwards instead.

We also joined in the digging, hoping to make enough money to pay for our passage at sea. We began in the grounds of a tea merchant's house that had burned down near Crooked Lane. It stood on the site of an old abbey, and I'd overheard an older boy boast about finding a silver crucifix there. We were not so lucky. After several days of scrabbling about in the dirt, we found only a few bits of altarpiece and several tin medals with pictures of saints.

'Popish trifles,' the antiquarian said when we took them to the stall he'd set up in the ruins on the other side of St Paul's. He returned the medals but squinted at the pieces of stone through his spectacles: roughly-carved



pilgrims with missing limbs and worn-away faces. ‘I’ll give you a shilling for them.’

Determined to do better, we bought a spade with our shilling so that we would no longer have to dig with Mother’s old serving spoons. Our second site was in the ruins of Fishmonger’s Hall. This time, we found real treasure: a long jar with patterns etched into it and a marble statue of a man’s private parts pointing up from a plinth. ‘Roman antiques!’ the mad antiquarian said and gave us a guinea for both. That night, Peter and I took it in turns to hold the gold coin, admiring its weight, its warmth, its glint in the candlelight, and dreaming of how to make more.

## VI.

I smile to remember our excitement as I spy Peter ahead. He sits on a broken wall with his feet up, his arms clasped around his legs. It looks like he’s wearing all the clothes that he owns. Below him is a large bundle wrapped in a sack.

‘I didn’t think you were coming,’ he calls. ‘I was about to go by myself.’

‘I couldn’t walk very fast.’ I heave off my knapsack and drop it next to his bundle. ‘I brought the lemons. Did you get the dried peas?’

He nods. We stare at each other for a moment, our eyes shining. *This is it.* Then Peter looks away, towards Tower Wharf.

*Is he scared?*

I pull myself up onto the wall and shade my eyes to look east. Nearby, two surveyors are staking out the new, wider quayside around Billingsgate. Women walk through the rubble with baskets of fish on their heads.

‘I thought they staked that part yesterday?’

Peter nods. ‘They did.’

‘What happened?’

The straight lines that we watched them mark out are now crooked. The stakes stand higgledy-piggledy, moved to the right or the left.

The nearest surveyor looks up and scratches his beard. ‘The damned rogues crept from their tents and moved them all in the night.’

‘What rogues?’

‘The people who used to live here,’ Peter says.

Bearded man nods. ‘It’s happening all over the city. No man wants less land than his neighbours, so they wage war under cover of darkness, moving the stakes back and forth.’

I peer at the stakes that he’s straightened. ‘But won’t they just move them tonight?’

‘Probably.’ He sighs. ‘But we have to keep to the plan.’

‘We won’t see you again,’ Peter says. ‘We’re sailing to the East Indies.’

‘Aren’t you a bit young to go voyaging?’

‘We’ll be cabin boys until we’re old enough to be pirates,’ he explains.

‘Ah.’ The surveyor raises his brows. ‘Well, young fellows, I wish you luck.’

Peter jumps down from the wall and tugs at my foot. ‘Time we were on our way.’

## VII.

Beyond Billingsgate, we reach the furthest point that I’ve been since the fire. I’m aware of Peter turning to me, but I keep my eyes straight ahead. *Don’t look. Keep walking.* Somewhere to our left, in the ruins of St Dunstan’s, is the pit where my parents lie.

I wonder what’s left of them now. Whether their flesh has become ash. Whether their bones are charcoal-black. Whether, in a few hundred years’ time, if someone were to dig up this part of the city, there would be anything there.

I think of Peter’s pieces of glass. The hands that made them have rotted away. Those shards are all that’s left of somebody’s life.

‘I don’t care about making a fortune,’ I say. ‘I want to make my name.’

‘We’ll do both,’ Peter says, pretending to swish a cutlass. ‘We’ll be more famous than Francis Drake.’

Past St Dunstan's it becomes busier. More people have camped on the edge of the ruins, close to where the houses still stand on Mincing Lane. Newcomers have camped here too, and their tents stretch all the way up Tower Hill. The surveyors have not yet reached this far east, but the air is filled with hammering and sawing as people ignore the commands of the King. I think of the plans that Peter and I peeked at, with their straight lines drawn with slide-rules. Around us, the old, mazy lanes and alleys are being rebuilt. The map-makers have lost their own competition; bricklayers, carpenters, plasterers and masons are the ones remaking the streets.

The yellow flowers grow thicker here. Straw-hatted hawkers trample through them, crying 'Cresses!' and 'Sheep's feet!'. Propped up in the rubble of Harp Lane to our left, signs painted on pieces of timber show harps, flutes, trumpets and horns, each marking the stall of a music-man in the ruins of his old shop. There's even a sign painted with a plum cake to mark the ruins of Baker's Hall. Someone has smeared a turd across it. The fire started at Pudding Lane and stopped at Pie Corner, so everyone knows that gluttony was to blame for angering God.

'Not far to go,' I say. 'Past Water Lane, then Beer Lane, and then we'll be at Tower Dock.' But, all of a sudden, it seems like we're lost.

'Where are we?' Peter says, pointing to a piece of cloth painted with a trio of birds, which hangs from a window-less frame. 'Isn't that the Three Cranes? Father used to go there.'

'And over there.' I point too. 'That looks like the Mermaid, but I'm sure it was near Cornhill.'

Someone stifles a laugh and we turn to see a sign-painter nearby. He's set up his easel against a toppled chimney and is peering around it at us.

'Sir,' Peter asks, 'what street is this?'

'Whichever you want it to be.'

I look around. 'What do you mean?'

The man wipes his forehead with the back of his hand, streaking yellow paint in his grey hair. 'It's all a blank canvas,' he says. 'Bakers can now have their own Bread Streets; dairymaids, Milk Streets; bee-keepers, Honey Streets; fishmongers, Friday Streets; and cobblers their own Shoe Lanes. All it takes is for me to paint them loaves, cows, hives, fish or boots.'

Peter shakes his head. 'That's nonsense.'

‘No,’ he says, ‘it’s the wonder of signs. Mr Greaves, the grocer, used to be on St. Clement’s Lane, which is now in the middle of nowhere. But, thanks to this lemon tree that I’m painting, St. Clement’s Lane has come here.’

‘But the Three Cranes is on Thames Street,’ Peter insists.

‘Not any more. What’s the point of a tavern surrounded by ruins? Most keepers have moved their trade here. Sometimes they invent new names to confuse their creditors, or join together to escape bankruptcy. There’s now a *Parrot and Cheese*, an *Angel with Two Necks*, and *Ye Olde Cheshire Swan*.’

I grin at Peter. He frowns.

‘Look,’ the sign-painter says, ‘what did Adam do when the world was new? He invented a name for each thing. The same when explorers discover new lands. This is our New World, here.’ He disappears behind his easel. ‘Now, be off with you.’

We walk on in silence, scratching our heads.

‘It doesn’t make sense,’ Peter grumbles at last.

‘I think it makes sense to me.’

Ahead, ravens circle the Tower. Children are gathering the yellow flowers. The world is beginning anew.

## VIII.

All is bustle as we stand on the quayside at Tower Wharf, the turreted walls of the Tower behind us and the glittering river ahead. Porters, sailors and women with painted cheeks and gaudy skirts hurry past. Three tall merchant ships lie at anchor, whilst small boats come and go in between. Men shout as they unload crates that smell of overripe fruit. Flags flap, ravens caw in the rigging, and a couple of ship’s cats yowl on the nearest deck. In front of us, a group of sailors inspect the barrels to be loaded into the hold. The wind whistles above, thrumming the ship’s ropes like violin strings. The sound makes my teeth hurt.

‘You talk to them,’ Peter says.

‘You’re better at talking than me.’

Neither of us move. The sailors look very large and rough, with brown, weather-beaten faces. Suddenly, I feel very small.

‘Go on,’ Peter says.

‘No.’

He pokes me and I shove him away. *This is all a mistake.*

‘What are you lads loitering for?’ A burly sailor is looking at us. The others turn around too.

Peter takes a step backwards. Six pairs of eyes are on me.

‘We want to join your crew,’ I say quietly.

The burly sailor snorts. ‘And how old might you be?’

‘We’re ten,’ I lie, adding a year to our age. ‘And we know how to make knots.’

The bastard looks at his fellows and grins. ‘Well, the pair of you look like monkeys. Think you can climb to the top of that mast?’

I look up at the towering fore-mast beside us. ‘Yes,’ I say, meeting his eye.

‘We have money,’ Peter says quickly. ‘We’ll pay to be apprenticed. What we can’t do now, we can learn.’

‘How much money?’

‘One guinea, three shillings and sixpence,’ he says.

The men turn to each other and laugh.

‘And how did you make that fortune?’ A crook-nosed fellow asks.

‘By digging for buried treasure,’ I say. I can feel my face growing hot.

The men laugh harder, though their merriment is interrupted by a surly voice from above.

‘What’s going on down there? Why are you standing around?’

‘These little rascals would like to join our crew, Cap’n,’ the burly sailor calls. ‘They’ll even pay us a guinea for the pleasure of having them on board.’

The captain squints down at us from the deck. He has a hard face beneath his large hat. ‘How generous of you, young gentlemen.’

‘They made their money digging for treasure,’ the crook-nosed sailor calls.

The captain sneers. 'I suppose you want to fight pirates and win pieces of eight? Perhaps you're hoping to see a mermaid? I give it one day before you're crying for mamma. I haven't time for milksops like you.'

'We're not milksops,' I say, my voice wobbling. 'We're both very brave.'

The men guffaw, and I turn away before they see my face crumple. I don't meet Peter's eye.

'Get back to work,' the captain bellows. 'Those barrels won't load themselves.'

'Wait.' A hand touches my sleeve as I push my way back along the quayside. 'Where did you say you found your money?'

'We earned it, Sir.' I turn angrily, taking in the stranger's periwig and blue, embroidered suit.

'How?'

'By digging for treasure and selling it to an antiquarian who lives on Fleet Street.'

The gentleman's eyebrows shoot up. 'What sort of treasure did you find?'

'Pots and statues,' Peter says, coming to stand next to me.

'And why do you wish to set sail?'

'We want to have adventures,' I say.

'Don't you boys have mothers who'll miss you?'

I look at Peter. He looks at the ground.

The gentleman pats my shoulder kindly. 'That's my ship. She's sailing to Java.'

Peter looks up. 'Where's that?'

'The East Indies.'

'That's where we're going,' I say.

The gentleman smiles. 'But why be common sailors when you already show such talent for commerce? The smart men are merchants like me. Look around. Why would you wish to leave London? Here, the world comes to us.'

Peter and I look doubtfully around at the crates of squashed fruit on the quay.

‘See, there?’ The merchant points to a ship in the river, sailing upstream. ‘The Norwegian firs that sagged under snow all winter are finally here. With them, we’ll make scaffolding. And there: see the limestone being unloaded downstream, to be sent to the kilns on Limehouse marsh? Those other ships are sailing in from the quarries of Portland and Bath. That clay is being sent to Moorfields, to be weathered and made into bricks. Soon we’ll build a more glorious city. Don’t you want to be part of that?’

‘But we can’t have adventures here,’ I say.

‘Adventures are for children. *Ventures* are what makes a man.’

Peter takes a step closer. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Let me give an example. You boys have a sum of money. Remind me how much?’

‘One guinea, three shillings and sixpence,’ Peter says.

‘Well, imagine you were to invest that in my voyage. The ship will sail with a cargo of wool, and will return with indigo, pepper and gum. If you went yourselves as cabin boys, you might earn six shillings a year. But if you ventured your money instead of your lives, then you could expect a return of... let’s say two hundred percent. That would earn you a profit of two guineas and seven shillings. Though often the profits are more.’

‘Can we really do that?’ Peter’s eyes have widened.

‘No. I’m giving you an illustration of what you might do one day.’

‘Why can’t we do it now?’ he demands.

‘Well –’ The merchant looks startled. ‘Investments like that require us to draw up contracts. And usually for much larger sums.’

‘Can you draw up a contract for us?’

I kick Peter’s ankle. ‘We’re going to sea.’

‘They laughed in our faces,’ he hisses back.

The merchant studies us both. ‘I suppose I could write you a personal surety...’

Peter nods. ‘Do that.’

‘Very well, young master.’ He chuckles. ‘Let me call for paper and ink.’

I glower at Peter whilst the merchant speaks to his servant.

‘Why are you giving up on our plan?’

‘Don’t you want to be rich?’

Before I can answer, the merchant returns. ‘You, young man, what’s your name?’

‘Peter Stainer.’

‘And you?’

‘Nathaniel Spicer.’

‘My name is Bartholomew Reeve. Nathaniel, would you be so kind as to lend me your back?’

I turn sullenly and the merchant rests a piece of paper between my shoulder blades. *It isn’t fair.* His servant stands next to me, holding the inkhorn. *Why did they have to laugh in our faces?* From the corner of my eye, I see the merchant’s hand dip a quill in the ink. Then, through my coat and the paper, I feel its nib move over my skin.

‘I, Bartholomew Reeve, of Bishopsgate, London,’ the merchant begins, ‘do hereby declare that I have received the sum of one guinea, three shillings and sixpence from Masters Peter Stainer and Nathaniel Spicer, of – where may I find you?’

‘Nat?’ Peter nudges me.

‘The sign of the Crocodile on the Bridge.’

‘Good.’ Mr Reeve resumes: ‘the sign of the Crocodile on the Bridge. I hereby promise that I shall return this sum to them in full upon the safe return of my ship, the Bantam Pink, along with the proportionate profit from this enterprise. Signed, Bartholomew Reeve. Now, Peter, make your mark.’

I feel Peter make a shaky cross on my back, guided by the merchant’s firm hand.

‘Now, Nathaniel, your turn.’

I straighten up and look at the piece of paper, which the merchant now rests on Peter’s back. There, in black ink, are the words that made my skin tingle. *Don’t you want to be rich?* I take the quill and pinch it between my forefinger and thumb.

‘Is that my name?’ I point.

‘Yes,’ the merchant says, ‘but you can make a cross.’

I shake my head. ‘I’m going to write it.’

Carefully, I dip my quill in the ink and let it drip. Then, slowly, with my tongue between my teeth, I scrape the nib over the paper, clumsily copying the shapes. The ink splodges and the letters don’t look like they



should, but still I feel their magic – that thrill I first felt whilst tracing the words Mother read – as I write the word *Nat*.

## **THE FOURTH TALE**

**The Monster-Monger, 1672**

*Perhaps by now, Gentlemen – Ladies as well – you'd hoped to have the measure of me. But which me would you measure, I ask? The child? The youth? The man I became? Or the prisoner writing this now?*

*Measuring a man is like charting the heavens or mapping a city: no man, no city, no single night's sky, may be calculated and fixed. A map is like a story instead. Even as it is being plotted, the city's shape is already changing. A map is fiction, not fact.*

*Look: the maps of London that surround me now – tacked to the damp walls of my room – are fabrications in their own way. Take the EXACT SURVEY printed after the fire, with its white space to show the streets blackened and burned. Or this one, printed ten years later. A LARGE AND ACCURATE MAP, it is titled. Yet it wasn't accurate; it couldn't have been. With every measurement the map-makers made, something else was demolished or built.*

*When I try, now, to remember my youth, I think of the surveyors measuring the streets whilst city-folk shifted their lines back and forth. Likewise, my memories seem imprecise, the days and weeks jumbled up. The truth is, it's only a few, clear memories with which I now plot the key points of my life. The lines in-between I must draw for myself:*

*The Year of the Plagues led to the Drought ——— the Drought led to the fire ——— the fire led to Peter ——— Peter and our plan to be pirates led to Bartholomew Reeve.*

*Was it fate or accident? I don't know. But if we hadn't met Mr Reeve on the wharf that day, then the sequence of events in this next tale – five years later, 1672 – would never have come to pass.*

*For Mr Reeve led to the giant egg*

*———— the giant egg led to the hydra*

*———— the hydra led to the Monster-Monger*

*———— and that's what led me to Nell.*

## I.

The rain begins before I reach Water Lane. Porters curse and run for cover beneath the warehouses on Thames Street, but I bend my head and press on. I am fourteen years old. *Old enough to hang.* I hug the sack of spices to my chest: I'm carrying stolen goods. The February wind blows rain in my eyes as I glance at myself in a shop window. *Can you see the guilt on my face?* The reflection that looks back is pale and pimpled. My curls are plastered to my forehead, the colour of burnt gingerbread.

I've been sneaking down to the docks ever since Peter and I met Mr Reeve. In the years that followed our thwarted adventure, I ran here to see whether his ship – the Bantam Pink – had come in, or followed the news boys to hear their reports of shipwrecks and pirate attacks. Night after night I dreamt of my fortune in pepper, or dreaded catastrophe and so couldn't sleep. Week after week, as we awaited the fate of our venture, I watched cargo arrive at the wharves. Timber, clay, bricks and stone to rebuild London piece by piece.

During those five years, the city and I have both grown taller. The houses that I'm passing now are built of brick and tiles. The timber frames and thatched roofs are gone; so are the storeys that jutted out to meet in the middle, overhanging the street. *We'll build a more glorious city.* That's what Mr Reeve said. Yet many walls are cracked or crooked: signs of the builders' haste.

To my right, the riverfront has changed too. The new Custom House is almost finished; behind the scaffolding I can see its colonnades. The soap-boilers' yards and tanneries have been banished to make way for warehouses storing marble and stone. The stench of boiling fat, piss and rotting hides has gone. Yet the wharves do not follow the straight lines that the surveyors staked. Ramshackled sheds line the quayside, which has still not been levelled or paved.

The smell of the rain now mingles with the scent of oranges in the Portuguese warehouses as I pass by. The wharves throng with merchants and thieves; with clerks from the East India, Royal Africa and Levant Companies; and with treasures from all over the globe. It was near here, on Bear Quay, that I saw my first monster: a porpoise – half fish and half land-

quadruped – which stank like rotten eels. Further on, at Galley Quay, is where I bought my first marvel: a spiral shell turned into stone, like the orchard that Peter and I dug for near here. More recently, I bought an insect imprisoned in amber from a sailor on Summers Quay.

Those treasures are trifles, though, compared to the monster that I now seek.

The Monster-Monger's shop is somewhere between Execution Dock, where the bodies of buccaneers hang for three tides, and Devil's Tavern, which I've heard harbours smugglers and pirates. Not the heroes of the tales I once read, but sea-hardened villains who'll think nothing of sticking a knife between an apprentice boy's shoulders and tossing him into the Thames.

*Don't worry about that yet. One step at a time.*

Before I can pay for my monster, I must sell the stolen spice.

## II.

What led me here, on this rainy winter's afternoon, to risk my life twice: firstly, by stealing; secondly, by setting out alone to such an infamous place? As I walk past the wharves on Thames Street, I remember the spicy smoke that I breathed in during the plagues. Yet this particular recklessness began with Mr Reeve's egg.

It was quiet in the shop on the day that Mr Reeve visited me, just over one year ago. There were no customers, no passers-by staring at the skull in the window, not even children running in to gasp at the stuffed crocodile. Only the slow, maddening tick of the clock and the tap of my finger on the oak countertop. *Rat-a-tat-tat. Do something, Nat.* It was still too early to close.

I rose and began to open drawers at random in the cedarwood cabinets behind. Vapours seeped from beneath the red velvet curtain: the eggy stink of Grandfather's attempts to transform copper into gold. Ever since he'd taken up alchemy, he'd rarely left his crucible in the storeroom. I'd have been glad, if it weren't for the smell. At least whilst he was turning farthings into fumes and a molten mess, I could try to make money with the more reliable method of trade.

*Not that it is reliable.* I banged shut one of the drawers. As much as I hated being an apprentice, as much as I resented being in the shop, I feared our debtors more. *This place is all that I'll have if Grandfather dies.*

'You'll follow your forefathers,' Grandfather said on the day that I left petty school. 'We've belonged to the Grocers Company for generations, and to the Guild of Pepperers prior to that. You and I will both be Spicers until the day that we die.'

That was when I was eleven. Since then, dying is one of many things that Grandfather has neglected to do. Of all the medical secrets he's failed to pass on, the greatest is how he's managed to stay alive for so long. I can only assume that the wine that reddens his nose, the laudanum that yellows his eyes, and the mercury that makes his skin grey, have combined with a lifetime's dusting with spices to preserve him like an Egyptian mummy: fermented, pickled and dried. Either that, or he's made a pact with the Devil. Certainly the sulphurous stink from the storeroom suggests a fiendish accord.

What a rascally rogue of an apprentice, I seem: wishing my master dead. Yet why should I be bound by words to which I signed my name almost as soon as I'd learned to write? THE SAID APPRENTICE SHALL NOT PLAY AT CARDS, DICE OR ANY OTHER UNLAWFUL GAMES. HE SHALL NOT COMMIT FORNICATION, NOR HAUNT PLAY-HOUSES, ALE HOUSES, TAVERNS, BEAR-PITS, BROTHELS, OR ANY OTHER PLACES OF IDLE RESORT. In short, he shall not enjoy life.

Grandfather has not kept his end of the bargain, so why – I reasoned – should I? Has he – SAID MASTER OF THE SAID APPRENTICE – instructed me in his own arts? Only if you count the orders he slurs. Has he provided food, drink, clothing, and other necessities? Not when I must take money from the till to pay for my supper each night. So have I – SAID APPRENTICE TO SAID MASTER – faithfully served him and obeyed his commandments? Not religiously, no.

Those were the thoughts upon which I was brooding when Mr Reeve entered the shop.

'Master Spicer,' his voice said behind me. 'I barely recognise you.'

I turned, catching my shoulder on one of the open drawers. Years had passed since we'd met on Tower Wharf. At first, Peter and I had tried to

waylay him on Bishopsgate Street, hoping for news of his ship. But that was before we began to doubt he was telling the truth.

‘You haven’t changed, Sir.’

He smiled and rubbed his brow beneath his periwig. ‘There are more grey hairs under here.’

His other hand, I realised, was hidden behind him. *Our fortune*. My heart fluttered like a canary held in a fist.

I tried to keep my voice steady. ‘Any news of your ship?’

He peered at me. ‘You’re an apprentice now?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘And your friend, Peter?’

‘He’s apprenticed to a glass-grinder.’

He smiled. ‘I’m glad you’re both doing well.’

‘But your ship, Sir? Has she returned?’

‘I’m afraid not.’ He shifted his feet. ‘She ran aground on a reef in the South China Sea.’

‘It sank?’

‘Dear fellow, don’t look so dismayed. I’ve received a sum from the Company to reflect the trade she established. The crew sailed to Surat with pepper, and from there back to Java with silk.’

‘But is our money lost?’

‘It’s not the profit I promised you, but –’ From his pocket he produced the piece of paper that I’d signed in my child’s shaky scrawl. ‘A man must repay his investors if he hopes to see heaven one day.’

I waited for him to produce a purse in the hand that he held behind his back, but instead, from the same pocket, he drew out a handful of coins. ‘One guinea, nine shillings and sixpence. That’s a profit of three shillings each.’

‘Six shillings? That’s all?’

‘I also have a present for you boys. From Africa. The ship’s cook drilled a hole in its side and made breakfast for two dozen men.’

From behind his back, he brought out a giant egg, larger than his own head.

My surprise was so great that I almost forgot my disappointment. I reached out with both hands to take it. The shell was white and finer than porcelain: so light that I feared it might break.

‘Put it on display,’ he said. ‘It will bring in more trade than that dusty old crocodile or that yellowing skull.’

So that’s what I did. When Mr Reeve left, I removed the skull from the shop window and balanced the astonishing egg in its place. As he’d predicted, that afternoon almost everyone who passed stopped to stare, and many came inside to demand whether or not it was real.

‘It was laid by a griffin in Guinea,’ I said. ‘The emperor’s cook drained it to make breakfast for two hundred men.’

Some believed me, others did not. But almost everyone went away having bought a potion or spice. Within an hour, I’d made more than the six shillings that I let Peter have in exchange for me keeping the egg.

### III.

Now, as I turn from Thames Street onto Seething Lane, I smile to remember that audience. *More will flock to see my monster.* The egg’s novelty is wearing off; I need a new wonder to draw in the crowds. But then I catch sight of Vaughn’s Coffee-House. *What if I get caught?*

Before I can pay the Monster-Monger, I must trick Mr Vaughn into paying me the rest of the money I need. Usually one of his coffee-boys, Dick, collects the spices from our shop on a Tuesday, bringing the gold coins that Grandfather locks in an iron chest instead of the till. Today, however, is Monday. And I have the spices with me.

As I pause outside the coffee-house, I rehearse the tale I must tell.

*We won’t be open tomorrow, Sir, so I brought the spices myself. No, Sir, no trouble at all. You can give the money to me.*

I have my story ready for Grandfather as well. *Mr Vaughn sent word that they don’t need the spices this week.* As for the sack that I’m carrying, I doubt he’ll notice it’s gone. Gold still has the power to hold his attention, but he rarely keeps count of our goods.



*It's not even stealing, I tell myself as I open the coffee-house door. Within a month, the monster will bring in more money than it will cost. It's all for the good of the shop.*

Still, I feel sick as I climb the stairs to the first floor. *Try telling that to Grandfather. Or to a sour old judge.* THE SAID APPRENTICE SHALL NOT STEAL FROM HIS MASTER. I signed my name to that too.

Before I reach the top of the stairs I'm struck by the bitter smell: steam from the boiling coffee, mixed with sawdust, tobacco and coal. I've never been inside a coffee-house before. Peter has: his master meets customers there. I try to remember Peter's boasts. *It's not like the tavern. Coffee is for men of business; no women or boys.* I take a deep breath. *Today, I'm a man of business too.*

The warmth envelops me as I enter the room. I wipe the rain from my face with my sleeve and peer through the thick smoke. The windows are misted, but there are candles on the long, crowded tables where seamen, merchants and clerks talk and drink. The babble quietens as they turn to appraise me, then quickly rises again. *Only an apprentice boy out on errands.* I clutch my damp sack more tightly as I walk across to the bar.

The coffee-woman stands inside the wooden booth, tipping tobacco into papers torn from old ballad sheets.

'Poor love, you're half-drowned!' She reaches out to touch my wet hair and laughs when I draw back. 'What do you have there?'

Blushing, I lift my sack onto the bar and gabble without drawing breath: 'I'm Nat Spicer, I've come from Grandfather, we won't be open tomorrow, our shop, so I brought the spices here.'

'What spices?'

'Ginger and cloves to be added to coffee, rose and violet for flavouring sherbets, and a mixture of cocoa, sugar, vanilla and spearmint, good for the stomach and gout.'

'Mmmm.' She leans forward to sniff the sack. I can see the lines beneath the paint on her face. Her breasts press against the dark wood.

*Don't stare.* I look up at the ceiling. 'Mr Vaughn can give the money to me.'

‘He’s attending to business just now.’ She points to the chairs by the fireplace, where a sizeable man in a gaudy green jacket sits with some sailors. ‘Will you drink a dish whilst you wait?’

I hesitate, stealing another look at her breasts. ‘I don’t have a penny with me.’

Crinkles appear around her eyes as she smiles. She beckons the nearest server. ‘Dick!’

*Why does it have to be him?*

Dick frowns as his gaze lights on me and then shifts to the sack on the bar.

‘I was coming tomorrow.’ He eyes me suspiciously. I can feel my face growing hot.

‘They’re closed tomorrow.’ The coffee-woman places a dish on the bar. ‘Pour for Master Spicer please.’

‘We don’t serve delivery boys.’

She snorts. ‘Well, you do now.’

‘Here, coffee-boy.’ I hold out my dish. He’s at least a year older than me.

He glares as he raises his pot, pouring the liquid from such a height that some of it splashes on me.

‘Careful,’ I say. ‘You don’t want to get any on your best apron.’

‘Piss off.’ He stalks away.

The woman laughs. ‘He’s cross because now he can’t spend tomorrow morning dawdling and whistling at girls. Why don’t you go and sit down?’

I glance at the men talking at the long tables. ‘I’d rather stay here.’

‘Go on. They won’t bite.’

With one last glance at her breasts I drag my feet through the sawdust towards the nearest table, where I manage to slop coffee over my hand as I slide onto the bench. The merchant next to me breaks off what he’s saying. The jowly man opposite smirks.

I wipe my hand on my breeches. *Look like you don’t care.* I’m glad when they return to their conversation. I glance up at the clock. It’s already a quarter past two. *If I don’t leave for Wapping soon, I won’t be back before dark.*

I pat the purse hidden inside my jacket. *What if I'm robbed before I get there?* I wasn't lying when I told the coffee-woman that I don't have a penny: I only have guineas with me. If Mr Vaughn pays me for the spices, I'll finally have what I need.

I pick up my dish in both hands and cautiously take a sip. *God, it's foul.* It takes all my effort to stop my mouth puckering. I glance warily up at the men. *Maybe I can pretend.* I feign disinterest by thumbing the newssheets laid out on the table as I make a show of sipping my drink. But reading is just another pretence. Really, my mind is weighing the coins lying next to my chest. It is mapping the steps I must take to seek out the Monster-Monger in Wapping. And it is tracing the shape of a dragon with seven, serpent-like heads.

#### IV.

I first saw the seven-headed hydra in Watton's alehouse near Billingsgate, nearly six months after Mr Reeve gave me the egg.

THE SAID APPRENTICE SHALL NOT HAUNT ALE HOUSES. Those were the words I pledged. Yet I do not go there, as other apprentices do, to sink myself in ale or in a harlot's embrace. Instead, in the evenings, I earn money scribing for the sailors and fishwives who go there to gossip and sing.

There's no man like a sailor for telling tall tales, and no woman like a fishwife for making up bawdy rhymes. In Watton's, they'll pay a penny a page to have their stories and ballads written in ink to pin on the alehouse walls. Stories of foreign lands and fearful sea creatures, like a monstrous whale that swallowed and spat out a man. Ballads about sailors and their lewd adventures, like the one I was writing that day. This sailor's nose was prodigiously large, but his other organ was too small to dock between his wife's thighs.

I flushed red when I scribbled that line. The woman who was singing noticed and stopped. Her friends pinched me and laughed.

'Look at the poor boy squirm like an eel.'

'He's thinking about his own eel in those breeches.'

'Don't worry, lovely, yours will grow bigger.'

‘You won’t always be small.’

I stared down at the ink that had spluttered around the word ‘thighs’. *What if I don’t grow at all?* As a child, I’d been tall for my age, but in the past year other boys had caught up. Peter was now two inches taller than me, and when we lined up in an alley with other apprentices to see who could piss the highest, he laughed at the size of my tool.

I was glad I’d finished writing that ballad before Peter came in. He didn’t read it; he was too keen to boast about a lens that he was making for his master, the glass-grinder Christopher Cox.

‘It’s going into a telescope,’ he said. ‘A telescope so powerful that we’ll be able to see animals walking about on the moon.’

One of the fishwives nudged her friend. ‘I thought he looked like a fellow with a fine instrument.’

Peter grinned. ‘If you like, you can see for yourself.’

I looked away. How could I tell him that those women reminded me of my mother? Not their coarse faces, language or clothes, but the rhymes they sang, like the rhythm and chime of Mother’s voice when she read stories to me.

That’s why I was making a show of cleaning the nib of my pen when suddenly all chatter stopped.

I looked up. A dark-skinned sailor had entered the alehouse. He held a many-headed creature, about the size of a cat.

Mr Watton himself broke the silence. ‘What in God’s name is that?’

Everyone began talking at once. I dropped my pen and rose to my feet, pushing my way through the crowd. I tried to jostle past Peter, but he stuck out his elbows. I peered over his shoulder instead.

The sailor lifted the monster high above his head. It was a stuffed dragon with scaly wings and seven snaky necks.

‘It’s called a hydra,’ the sailor declared. ‘Its gaze can kill a man just by looking. The knight who slew it cut out its eyes and put in ones made of glass.’

‘Do you think it’s real?’ I whispered to Peter.

‘Don’t be stupid.’

One of the fishwives reached up.

‘No touching,’ the sailor cried.

‘Where did you get it?’ she asked.

‘I bought it from a merchant in Turkey. It once graced the cabinet of King Philip of Spain.’

‘How much?’ Mr Watton demanded.

The people around us clamoured to name the best price.

‘Nine shillings,’ I shouted.

‘A ha’penny,’ Peter called. ‘Or a piece of old boot.’

The sailor waited for quiet.

‘I won’t take less than five guineas for such a rarity. Such marvels cannot be made.’

And yet I would learn that they can.

## V.

It was the philosopher, Mr Hooke, who told me about the Monster-Monger, only a few weeks ago.

I’d often heard about Mr Hooke from Peter, since the philosopher bought his lenses from Mr Cox. He was Curator of Experiments at the Royal Society, and Peter had told me tales of the things he’d invented, dissected, calculated, burnt or blown up; the various metals he’d mixed with wine and swallowed; and his investigations into whether a coach might run on legs rather than wheels.

‘We’re designing him a new microscope,’ Peter said. ‘He wants to see the seed-animals in his own sperm, but the glass creates halos of colour that blur everything.’

‘Either that or he spurts out angels.’

‘Think how often he must be tugging his tool.’ Peter sounded impressed.

It was that story that came to my mind when Mr Hooke entered the shop one Wednesday morning at ten. I recognised him from his work as City Surveyor, but up close he looked even more hunched.

I watched as he examined the egg in the window, then stood beneath the crocodile, sidling slowly around in a circle to examine it from all sides.

‘Skinner?’ His query seemed addressed to the crocodile, since he didn’t alter his gaze.

‘Sir?’

‘I think that’s the name. Curious fellow. I bought an ape from him once.’

‘Skinned?’

‘No, alive. We wanted the ape for a blood transfusion, but the experiment didn’t come off.’

Peter had told me about Mr Hooke’s trials at the Royal Society. The blood of a young dog pumped into the veins of an old one, which afterwards frisked and scampered about. The blood of a sheep transfused into a madman, who was afterwards placid and tame.

‘What became of the ape?’

Mr Hooke took his eyes off the crocodile and fixed them upon me instead. They bulged, as though pushed out by the pressure of his enormous brain.

‘I sold it back to this Mr Skinner. I expect he had it stuffed, or made into some kind of hybridous beast.’ Mr Hooke pointed up at the crocodile. ‘He could change that thing into a dragon. All it needs is a pair of wings.’

‘*That*, Sir, is no ordinary crocodile. It once graced the cabinet of King Philip of Spain.’

Mr Hooke smiled. ‘I see you’re a budding charlatan yourself.’ He twisted his body to look up again. ‘There isn’t a monster that cannot be made by a skilful enough artisan. I’d suggest you visit this Mr Skinner. The sign of the Unicorn, as I recall; past Execution Dock.’

## VI.

Now, as I sit pretending to sip my coffee, I try to imagine what the Monster-Monger is like. *A curious fellow*, Mr Hooke said. But will he be able to make me a hydra? Will he do it for five guineas? And how long will it take?

‘Master Spicer.’ I flinch as a man puts his hand on my shoulder. ‘What news?’

I turn to see Mr Vaughn, the coffee-man, standing behind me. He has bushy brows and a triple chin. I've only met him once before, but he seems to recognise me.

'This, Gentlemen,' Mr Vaughn announces to the table, 'is Master Spicer, apprentice to my apothecary. He can vouch for the medicinal benefits of the marvellous potion you drink.'

The whole room hushes. I look down at my cold coffee. In the stillness I can hear the pot bubbling over the fire.

'Go on, boy,' Mr Vaughn whispers, 'give them your best patter for me.'

I stand up, knocking my thighs on the underside of the table. I grimace, trying to mask the pain with a smile. *Look them in the eye.*

'Coffee –' I manage to squeak before my voice drops into a croak. The jowly man opposite laughs. I glance over at the coffee-woman and she smiles. *Go on.* I clear my throat.

'Coffee is a universal panacea,' I say, my voice more manly this time. 'It has many virtues, the chief being that it prevents drowsiness, promotes farting, and cures dropsy and gout. It is good for the stomach, for the brain and the bowels, and, if you hold your head over your dish, it is useful for steaming the eyes.'

Mr Vaughn squeezes my shoulder. 'There you have it, Sirs. And if you wish to pay just a halfpenny more, you may benefit from a spoonful of the efficacious spices that this young fellow has brought.'

He nods to his customers, ending our performance, and offers his hand to help me over the bench.

'Good show,' he says as I step free of the table. 'You'd make a fine mountebank.'

'Thank you, Sir.'

'Now, I believe I owe you two guineas?'

I nod.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a purse. 'Don't go spending it all in the tavern. I know how you young fellows are.'

My smile wavers as he hands me the coins. *How much does he know?*

'Give my regards to your grandfather.'

'Thank you, Sir. I will.'

My back prickles as I leave the coffee room, as though needled by knowing eyes. I try to walk slowly. I daren't look up in case I see Dick as I slip the coins into my purse. *Pretend you have nothing to hide.*

I don't let myself smile again until I've reached the stairs.

The rain is easing when I leave the coffee-house and turn back down Seething Lane. By the time I reach Tower Wharf it merely hangs in the air. I peer ahead towards Wapping, shrouded in mist, and think of the pirates that Peter and I wanted to be. Ahead, at Execution Dock, the remains of our old heroes swing over the Thames. I think of their eyes plucked out by ravens and their flesh dripping into the tide.

*At least the dead ones can do me no harm.* Without thinking, I pat my hidden purse, then quickly clench my hands at my sides. *Remember. Nothing to hide.* I stride towards the mist-filled street that runs between river and marsh.

## VII.

I'm shivering with cold by the time I've rounded the bend of the river. I can no longer see the bridge, only the long row of taverns and seamen's cottages that curve back into the mist. The scaffold at Execution Dock is still visible, though I try not to look back at the rags and flesh hanging from it. The shops I pass now sell sailors' provisions: ship's biscuit and salted beef. Ahead a string of teeth hangs on a door to advertise a barber, and a brothel is marked by a painting of Venus walking naked out of the sea.

Each time a figure looms from the mist, my body tenses. The women look at me curiously; I avoid the eyes of the men. *Don't let them see fear.* I try to walk deliberately, swinging my arms. But when I see the sign of the Unicorn, creaking in the damp breeze, I almost run to the door underneath.

I fling open the door and dart into the shop, then stop, struck by my change of surroundings: from the dreary, bleary highway of Wapping to the midst of another island, it seems. I stand quite still and let the door slam behind. Crammed into the smoky, low-ceilinged room is an exotic collection of dead birds and beasts. Their glassy eyes glint in the light from the fire. Some dangle from pegs on the walls, some stare from glass cases, others



from shelves. There are bright green parrots, crested lizards, a row of tortoise shells arranged in order of size. Nearby is a pelican, its pouch sagging like a leather bagpipe; beyond that a snarling bear balances on its hind legs. Between these are more marvellous creatures: a unicorn like a small pony, with a horn the length of my hand. A flying-fish with finch's wings. A monstrous, two-headed calf. Staring at each of these wonders in turn, it's some time before I realise that I, too, am the object of somebody's stare.

I start when I see her, not just at finding myself watched, but watched by a girl: a young, plump, nut-coloured girl: almond skin, hazel eyes, hair rich as a chestnut. She seems to be laughing at me.

I look at the floor. I look at the ceiling. I look around at all the glass eyes. Eventually I manage a smile.

'I'm looking for Mr Skinner,' I say, shuffling forward under her gaze.

'My uncle is out.'

'Oh.' I stop. *What now?*

'You can leave a message with me.'

Again, that look of amusement. I walk closer. She's sitting on a stool with some sewing work in her lap. She cuts her thread and places her needle down on the counter. She has dainty hands and a brown birthmark on one of her cheeks, about the size of shilling.

*Say something, fool.*

'Where did they come from?'

'The creatures? All over the world. My uncle knows people: collectors, sailors, keepers at the Tower. Most people want live beasts; they bring them to us when they're dead.'

'I don't think the creature I'm looking for lives.'

'Oh?' She raises her brows.

'I want a hydra to put in my shop.'

'What sort of shop?'

'I'm an apothecary.'

'And what makes you think that my uncle can find this mythical beast?'

'I don't. But I think he can make one for me.'

'We don't *make* things. We preserve the creations of Nature and God.'

‘Then what’s that in your lap?’

She stiffens, then smiles, her dimples deepening. ‘You shouldn’t be sneaking looks at my lap. It’s just a hummingbird. See.’

She holds up the small body that was nestling – I’d happened to notice – in the folds of her skirt above the place where I imagine her thighs meet beneath. The bird is tiny, its breast green and blue like the shimmer of a butterfly’s wing. One of its legs hangs from its body by a loose thread, the same shade as the spool on the countertop. Its beak is surrounded by a thin rim of glue.

‘Uncle tells the sailors to be careful, but when they bring the birds back from their voyages, most are missing their feet. These legs belonged to a wren. Not the right colour, but they’re the smallest I’ve found. The beak is its own, but fell off.’

She picks up her needle and gently begins scraping the glue from its beak.

‘It’s beautiful.’ I wish she’d look up again.

‘Why do you want a hydra anyway?’ She keeps her eyes on the bird.

‘To put in the window to attract customers.’

‘To your shop, or to your master’s?’

I hesitate. ‘To his.’

‘I thought you said *you* were the apothecary?’

‘One day I will be. It’s my grandfather’s shop, but he’s mostly too drunk to care.’

I didn’t mean for those last words to come out so raw. Her eyes meet mine and she tilts her head to one side, weighing me up. Finally, she sighs.

‘My uncle won’t be back.’

‘Why?’

‘They took him to Bedlam last month.’ For a moment, I’m afraid she might cry, but then she looks at me fiercely. ‘If he could make a hydra, so can I.’

‘Really?’ I feel my face brighten. ‘It’s a dragon with seven –’

‘I know what it is. I’ll need to get hold of some adders for heads. And a ray fish to make scaly wings.’

‘How much will it be?’

‘Seven guineas.’

My shoulders slump. 'I only have five.'

'Then you'll have to do something for me.'

'Anything.' I wince at my own eagerness.

'If your grandfather's an apothecary, he must have powdered pearl. I've heard ladies paint their faces with it. Sometimes I make a paste from egg-white, but it cracks whenever I smile.'

'I like your face.'

She rolls her eyes. 'Can you get it or not?'

'I think so.'

'Good. What's your name?'

'Nat.'

'Mine's Nell.'

She smiles and cups the bird in her hands, but I feel like it's my heart.

**THE FIFTH TALE**

**Inside the Telescope, 1676**

*Sirs – Madams – I know what you’re thinking. How artless I was. How full of hope. How – you marvel – did that boy become buried inside the man I am now?*

*Many layers make up a life. Secret strata laid down in years past, like successive scribblings upon an old parchment, each one leaving its imprint beneath the new words. These depths can make us opaque to ourselves, but how little we see of one another but surface: the stories we wear like a mask.*

*If this city teaches us anything, it is to look below the façade.*

*Take St Paul’s: there, beyond my reflected face in the window. I was eight years old when the stones burst like pomegranates; by the time the first stone of the new cathedral was laid, I was nearly eighteen. When Mr Wren’s men were digging the ground, they found seashells and fish skeletons deep in the clay. Relics, they said, from the time of the Flood. Now, Mr Wren has plans to build a huge dome. One day it will rise over London, perhaps plastered with cockle-shell lime. As many yards as they’ll arc in the air, others lie buried beneath the foundations. Just so are we: shells and skeletons; hidden depths and façades.*

*It is impossible to lay bare all the layers of a life. My own tales go forwards, not backwards. I am building up layers, not digging down.*

*When this next tale takes place – 1676 – the cathedral’s walls were beginning to rise. At eighteen, I was a Freeman of the City of London. Yet I didn’t know the heights of my own ambition until I climbed Mr Hooke’s telescope and first saw the edge of the world.*

## I.

The air is cold inside the pillar. Through the oval window cut into the alcove, I watch people pass along Fish Street, some forty feet below. A few stop to look up at the pillar in the fading light of the day. Mr Hooke built it here, close to Pudding Lane, as a monument to the Fire. Not many know that it is also his most ambitious invention: a giant telescope.

I crane my neck to look back at the black marble staircase that coils away in both directions, like my spiral shell made of stone. The stairs jut out into the air, with only an iron rail to separate them from the dizzying central well.

Like my shell, Mr Hooke's telescope is a wonder: a marvel of geometry. Each step is exactly six inches high. There are three hundred and eleven steps to the top. The whole is two hundred and two feet tall. When darkness falls, Mr Hooke will peer up from his cellar laboratory, through the circle of glass in its ceiling, and up the cylinder formed by the stairs. By then, there'll be a circle of sky through the hinged lid of the statue on top of the pillar. Peter is climbing the stairs above me to open that lid and to polish the telescope's lens.

*Lucky devil.* I scowl to think of Peter climbing the giddy heights of the spiral whilst I'm stuck here in the flicker of my rushlight and its stink of sizzling fat.

I listen out for Peter's footsteps, but all I can hear is the wind squall through the narrow windows above. My elbows hurt where I lean against the rough wall. Mr Hooke is directly below me in the laboratory. He is making measurements – something to do with weights and motion – using the plumb line I hold.

'Again. Slowly,' he calls up through the narrow, crescent-shaped shaft down which I dangle the line.

*Who does he think I am: his servant?* I didn't close my shop early today to stand here swinging a rope. But I grit my teeth and obey his instructions, remembering Peter's words. *Come with me and try to impress him. Mr Hooke could help make your name.*

He's certainly helped to make Peter's. My friend climbs the ladder of his own profession as determinedly as he's climbing above me now. I hear

his smug voice: *You can't waste all your time with women. You need to make friends with the people who count.* Friends, he means, like the ones I might make if I became part of Mr Hooke's circle of suppliers and artisans: Royal Society men.

Despite his hunched appearance, Mr Hooke has risen from humble beginnings to fame. As well as an inventor, he's now an architect. He and his astronomer friend, Mr Wren, have built nine churches and laid the first stones for St Paul's. They're like men possessed, Peter says, never sleeping, barely eating, determined to shape a new, modern city. Together, they built the Royal Observatory at Greenwich, including a telescope extending one hundred feet below ground. This one extends twice that distance upwards into the air. With it, Mr Hooke will measure the movements of stars and so prove beyond doubt that the Earth circles the Sun.

And me? What are my lofty ambitions? Whilst Mr Hooke charts the heavens and Peter becomes his chief instrument-maker, what does my future hold? The last four years now seem as narrow as these circular walls. I picture the masons carving each marble stair, stacking each of the pillar's limestone blocks, whilst I worked out my apprenticeship in the shop. *Will I always be stuck at the bottom?* Nothing seems to have changed.

True, I am now a Freeman: free from the strictures of my apprenticeship, free from Grandfather's tyranny, free to trade on my own terms. *Nathaniel Spicer, Freeman of the City of London.* Yet unless I rise above the thousands of other young men in this city – unless I'm remembered – what will I ever be worth?

## II.

When Grandfather died, five months ago, there were reasons enough to be hopeful, it seemed. Not only had I recently been made an apothecary, but suddenly, at the age of eighteen, I was master of my own shop.

The coroner never established exactly how Grandfather died. In fact, he seemed more interested in how the old man had stayed alive for so long. So I came to my own conclusions: that either the Devil had finally appeared to exact his part of their bargain, or Grandfather's skin had become so

silvered with mercury, his breath so laced with laudanum, that one day he leaned too close to his crucible and spontaneously went up in flames. Either way, all that was left of him was a molten mess, like the results of one of his alchemical experiments, and an oily, sulphurous smell.

I paid for a memorable funeral, despite his lack of remains. I made sure it was well attended by sharing my speculations about his fate with our neighbours and waiting a week for the rumours to spread. I hired six men to carry the coffin – of standard size, though held aloft with one finger each – and a herald to marshal the procession from the shop to the nave of St Magnus, recently finished by Mr Wren. Of course, this caused a commotion that was far from melancholy along the length of the bridge. I brought up the rear, handing out trade cards to every gaper we passed. I'd already hired a painter to erase the crocodile on the sign above my shop door. In its place, he painted a phoenix emerging out of the flames.

That evening, when I met Nell in Watton's alehouse, she was sketching a winged beast of her own.

'What is it?' I asked as I sat down opposite.

She took the tankard I offered. 'A basilisk. I'm making it for a merchant in Cornhill. I'll need the head, neck and wings of a cockerel, but a lizard's hindquarters and tail.'

'Perhaps you can make me one too.'

'You spent all your money on the funeral, from what I've heard.'

'Have people been talking about it?'

'You know they have.' She smiled. 'How does it feel to be your own master?'

I took a sip of my ale. How could I tell her that every morning when I descended the stairs to the shop – when I looked around at the same four walls and everything in them, all of it mine – when I breathed the stifling smell of the spices that I must sell – I felt an itch under my skin, as though there was another Nat trying to break out of me?

'It feels strange,' I replied.

She nodded. 'It was like that for me too.'

'Grandfather's creditors won't leave me alone. But I have a plan. Listen to this.' I pulled a piece of paper from my pocket and cleared my throat so that the fishwives beside us might hear. 'Mr Spicer's New and



Improved Elixir of Life: being a most excellent preservative of vigour and youth. More efficacious than any medicine known to man, it brings all humours into balance, expels all noxious substances, and restores all manner of persons, suffering from all manner of ailments, back to perfect health. Formulated from a secret recipe, including aniseed to settle the stomach, cardamom to mask the effects of flatulence, and liquorice to amplify the mind.'

'Perfect for my husband,' one of the fishwives said. 'His arse makes more noise than his brain.'

'I'm not sure about *amplify*,' Nell said. 'Perhaps try *enlarge*.'

'Hmm.' I took out my pen. 'May I use your ink?'

She nodded and watched me make the correction. 'Nat, do you actually have a recipe for this miraculous cure?'

'Of course. I'm going to advertise it all over the city. I'll also sell it in Vaughn's. He asked me to write him a panegyric on coffee under the alias: An Esteemed Physician of London Bridge. In return, he'll sell my elixir in his coffee-house. You can sell it as well.'

'And why would I do that?'

'Because I'm your friend. Because one day we'll marry. Because what's mine will be yours.'

She pursed her lips. 'If you keep that up, I'll leave.'

'Then because I'll include your shop in the advertisement. And because you'll take five per cent.'

'And when are you going to write the advertisement you promised me three weeks ago?'

'I'll begin it now if you like. But I also have a favour to ask. Can you make me a phoenix instead of a dragon?'

'I've already made wings for the crocodile.'

'I know, but I've changed my mind.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Then I'm keeping the dragon. And I'm not making anything else until you keep your promise to me.'

'Watch me. I'm writing it now.'

I picked up my pen, but really it was me who watched her as she resumed drawing her basilisk: the graceful curve of her wrist, the tip of her tongue between her teeth, her scowl when she made a mistake. I thought of

the first time we met, and the hydra she made me. I paid her, then, in powdered pearl, but since then we'd traded our skills.

I reached to dip my quill in the ink and our fingers touched as she reached out too. She quickly drew back her hand as the fishwives smiled and winked.

NELL SKINNER'S MARVELLOUS BEASTS, I wrote, my fingertips tingling still. A STUFFED MENAGERIE.

That night, when I lay alone in bed, I imagined Nell's fingers stroking my chest, the tip of her tongue between my teeth and her body warm against mine.

### III.

I rest my forehead on the cold, rough stone. *Don't imagine it now.* My prick stirs like a dowsing rod. My breeches are itchy and tight.

'Hold it still,' Mr Hooke calls.

I try to focus on the shaft before me rather than the one in my breeches. Below, I feel a tug on the plumb line, and I think of Mr Hooke's efforts to erect his own, private pillar. For all his tugging, he's still not been able to see his seed-animals. However carefully Peter grinds the microscope's lenses, halos appear in the glass.

*At least there's one thing Peter can't do.*

I sigh to think of his boasts of what he's done at Fanny May's on Fenchurch Street. 'You should come with me,' he says, 'not waste your time with a girl who won't so much as show you her ankle. What good will talking do?'

I wonder what Peter would say if he knew that I went to a brothel last week. Not Fanny May's: somewhere he doesn't go. He would have wanted to congratulate me – share tales of our lusty feats – when all I wanted was to get it over with.

I feel sick, now, remembering it. *Thank God he wasn't there.* Perhaps I should have asked the woman her name, but she was older than me and it seemed rather bold. She had chestnut hair, like Nell, and when I buried my face where it curled at her neck, to avoid her eyes as I spurted too early into

her hand, I tried to pretend its tang of sour milk was what Nell's hair would smell like as well.

*What does Peter know about women? Nell's not the same as a whore.*

The only time they've met was in Watton's, on one of the rare occasions that Peter joins me there now. He tried to impress her – of course he did. But no one impresses Nell.

'Did you know that telescopes can be used for spying?' he said, leaning back in his chair.

'I didn't,' she said.

'The King's spies write messages in the sand at Calais, which a soldier standing on the cliffs of Dover can read with a telescope. Microscopes too – spies use them to read messages written inside walnut shells.'

'Really?' Nell raised her brows.

'That's just the beginning. One day we'll make a microscope that can spy inside people's brains. Or a telescope powerful enough to see God's face in the stars.'

Nell glanced at me. I crossed my eyes.

'At the moment,' Peter continued, 'I'm helping to make the largest telescope in the world. Has Nat told you about the Telescope Wars?'

'He hasn't.'

'Well, like our trade wars, the Dutch started it. Two brothers, the Huygens, tried to build a one hundred and twenty-three-foot instrument with which to see Saturn's rings.'

'That's the Dutch for you,' I said. 'Always striving to thrust themselves in.'

Peter ignored me. 'You see, the longer the telescope, the flatter the lenses. The flatter the lenses, the less the glass distorts what we can see. However, the Huygens made their telescope so long that they had to use pulleys and ropes to stop it from –'

'Drooping,' I cut in.

Peter glared at me. 'When that failed, they propped it up with a pole.'

Nell nodded. 'I'm sure that kept it stiff.'

'Tell her about the Polish brewer,' I said.

‘Hevelius. He built a mast from which to suspend a one hundred and fifty-foot telescope, which hung like the yard of a ship. It needed thirty men to haul on the rigging to hold the sections in place.’

Nell’s eyes slid towards mine. ‘And who was next to erect their equipment?’

I grinned. ‘Who do you think? The French.’

‘It was a Frenchman who was most ambitious,’ Peter agreed. ‘After travelling to Italy to compare the apparatus of leading Italian men, he returned to France and began designing a one thousand-foot telescope to penetrate Nature’s innermost secrets.’

‘Heavens!’ Nell said. ‘What a shame that you Englishmen have proved so impotent.’

‘Not at all,’ Peter protested. ‘Mr Hooke plans to build one ten thousand feet long. Mark my words, we’ll beat the Frenchman’s instrument.’

‘But who will climax first?’ I said.

Nell and I both smirked.

#### IV.

I smirk again to remember how Nell’s eyes sparkled as they met mine. *We understand one another.* As I peer down at the street below, I imagine having her all to myself. *If only she wanted the same.*

My thoughts are interrupted by a pitiful cry from above.

‘Nat? Help! Are you there?’

Peter’s voice sounds small inside the pillar. I crane my neck to shout up.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I...’ There’s a silence. ‘I’m stuck.’

‘Wait.’ I hold my rushlight aloft, looking for something to tie the end of the plumb line to, but the walls of the alcove are bare and the stair rail behind me is too far away. I hesitate. *Whatever you do, don’t let go of the line.* Those were Mr Hooke’s instructions. *Try to impress him.* Peter’s words. *Mr Hooke could help make your name.*

‘Nat’ Peter calls again. ‘Help!’

I lean forward to shout down the shaft. ‘Sir, I have to go and save Peter.’ Then I let go of the line.

From below, I hear a howl of protest, but I’ve already stepped out from the alcove onto the stairs.

I climb as fast as I dare, since the black marble treads are newly polished. The iron rail, coiling upwards towards Peter, was recently soldered onto its thin balustrades. I test my weight against it, wondering how easy it would be to tumble over, flailing as I fall through the air, then smashing through the glass into the laboratory below. *Don’t think.* My legs shake and I reach out my left hand – the one holding the rushlight – to steady myself against the stone wall.

*Do it for Peter.* I take another, tentative step and, as I continue to climb, keep my eyes on the spiral above and my right hand on the rail. *So now he needs my help.* I remember the frightened, skinny boy whom I rescued during the fire. In ten years, he’s not only grown taller but more cocksure as well. More cocksure, but still the boy who befriended me when I had nobody else. *What if this time he’s really in danger?* I imagine him falling, or bleeding, or bruised and broken like my parents’ bodies the last time I saw them.

‘I’m coming, Peter,’ I call.

## V.

I’m sweating and out of breath by the time I find him sitting in an alcove about two-thirds of the way up the pillar. He’s made himself small, drawing his knees up under his chin and hugging his legs to his chest. For a moment, the relief at seeing him safe makes my heart pound even more. *Poor Peter.* His rushlight lies burned out at his feet. In the light from mine, he’s so pale that I can see the veins under his skin.

‘Are you hurt?’ I sink down next to him on the alcove.

‘My stomach.’

‘What happened?’

‘I think it’s the mutton pie I ate. My head feels dizzy too.’

‘Dizzy? I thought you’d been up here before?’

He avoids my eye. 'That was Mr Cox, not me.'

'You idiot.' I clench my jaw. 'I dropped the plumb line. I ruined my chances with Mr Hooke and now you tell me you're scared?'

'I'm not scared.'

'What, then? You cried wolf?'

'No. You don't have to shout.'

'I thought you were in danger.'

'I was.' His lip quivers. 'I thought I might fall.'

I turn away until I've brought my anger under control.

'What now? Do you want me to go up instead?'

'You'd like that, wouldn't you?'

'Keep climbing if that's what you want.'

His eyes follow as I gesture upwards. He shudders and presses his palms to the walls of the alcove on either side.

I stand up. 'Give me the keys.'

He looks at me from beneath his brows. 'You won't know what to do.'

'I heard everything Mr Hooke told you. At the first aperture, unlock the door on the right. Go up three spirals. Climb the ship's ladder. Then open the hatch.'

'Be careful. That lens took us six months to make.'

I hold out my hand. Miserably, he reaches into his pocket to pass me the keys and a polishing cloth.

'It's the smaller key.'

'I know. Do you remember how to hold a plumb line?'

He glowers. 'Get out of my way.'

I move back against the railing to hide his view of the drop. Slowly, he slides himself onto the stairs. Neither of us say anything as he begins to descend, hugging the wall on the outside of the staircase, as far as possible from the rail.

I listen to his footsteps fade as he's swallowed by the spiral below. Up here, in the confines of the cylinder, the solitude seems to close in. I'm near the top of the telescope now – I must be, surely – yet the stairs continue to spiral up and up as though they'll never end.

I take my hand off of the rail to shelter my flame as the wind whistles through the slit cut into the alcove. Outside, the sky's blue is deepening fast. I wonder how far down the city looks now.

*Steady.* I grip the rail, suddenly giddy, the toe of my shoe upon the next stair. *Breathe. Don't look down.*

I try counting the stones on the wall, but my eyes keep losing their place. I lower myself to sit on the stairs instead. *One minute. That's all.*

I think of the woman in the brothel: my fear and my failure, the rush of heat and my shame.

I think of Peter creeping downwards, and Mr Hooke cursing below. *At least there's still a way to impress him. I can succeed where Peter has failed.*

I think of Nell: her dimples and birthmark; the brief brush of her hand. The way she rolls her eyes if I try to compliment her. Her delight when I bring her something to draw: my insect in amber, a feather, a shell. The time she took a glug of my ale and grinned, a line of froth on her upper lip. The way my heart tumbled when I put my mouth to the same spot.

*One day I'll win her.* I press my lips together and pull myself up with the rail. My rushlight will not last for very much longer; nor will Mr Hooke's patience below. *Come on, Nat. Be a man.* It's time to get to the top.

## VI.

At the top of the pillar, my heart feels like it might tumble again. I've reached a small platform – no more than two stairs in width – and now, if I hold onto the flat section of rail and peer over, I can no longer see the bottom, only the staircase spiralling down into the darkness. I wonder how I'll describe it to Nell. How can she possibly imagine this reeling, this nausea, this fear that I cannot trust my own limbs, when she's never been in love?

*Don't think* – I grip the rail tighter and push myself backwards, away from the brink. *Later.* There are two doors to choose between now. Above is a wooden ceiling with a hole in its centre: the telescope's first aperture. If I look directly up, I can see the stairs continuing beyond the locked door for three spirals more, then another aperture, and beyond that a narrower shaft.

The door to my right leads up those stairs. To my left is another locked door. I hear Mr Hooke's voice giving Peter instructions. *Don't go out onto the platform. They haven't yet put up the rail.*

I take the keys from my pocket and feel their weight in my palm. In the quiet of the telescope, more voices echo.

Grandfather: *Curiosity is a sin.*

Nell: *How does it feel to be your own master?*

Father: *Be a brave boy.*

I select the larger key: the one that Mr Hooke told Peter not to use.

*Think of the tale I'll tell Nell.*

I have to hold my rushlight to the lock to find the hole with my key. The mechanism is stiff. I leave the key in the lock and step back. There's a holder on the wall to my left, so I place the rushlight in there. Now, with two hands, the lock gives. I leave the rushlight behind. If the platform is as perilous as Mr Hooke says, I'll need both my hands free.

As I step out, the first thing that strikes me is how light it is still. It was dim inside the telescope, but out here the sky is huge. I've never seen the horizon before, only buildings hemming me in. The sky is a lighter blue where it meets the hills far away. *Too far.* It deepens like ink as I quickly look up, the cold wind whipping my hair.

Behind me, the stone walls of the telescope rise another dozen feet, and above them I glimpse the copper statue with its hinged lid. I keep my eyes there, my hands gripping the cold sides of the doorway, since I'm not yet steady enough to look down. I have to do so by inches, moving my eyes downwards over the pitted limestone, counting each block. *Three. Four. Five. Six.* Slowly, I turn my head towards the edge of the platform – just two steps, a single slip away – where the view before me suddenly drops, the whole city spread out below.

*Don't move.* I stand perfectly still for some minutes, waiting for my mind to stop swaying as though I'm stood on the Thames. Waiting for my eyes to settle and see clearly again. When they do, I try to concentrate my scattered thoughts on something I know. The river, its surface smooth and mud-coloured from here. I take my bearings from that. *East, then.* I'm facing towards Wapping. That curve, where the river disappears beyond the Tower, leads to where Nell is now.



I take a step forward, out of the safety of the deep doorway, and immediately the wind pulls at my coat. *Careful*. With my back to the wall I edge around to my right. Scaffolding still circles the pillar, but even if I slipped and managed to catch hold of one of those poles, the thought of clinging to a piece of wood does nothing to reassure me. *Don't look at the edge*. I make sure my heels touch the wall with every step that I take.

Below, lamps are being lit in the houses and along the length of the bridge. I stop to marvel at how small that mighty structure spanning the river appears. It's hard to make out which roof crowns my house. I think of the garret from which I've looked out so many times and felt myself to be high above the rest of the city. Now even that's far below.

Shaky, unsure of my own foundations, I lower myself to the floor.

## VII.

It was Peter who taught me the tricks of perspective. I try to remember that conversation to distract myself as I get my balance back now.

It was the first time I'd visited him at his master's new workshop on Fenchurch Street, more than a year ago. He showed me a microscope made of dark wood, about the length of my arm. The barrel was bound with wine-red leather and tooled with gold like a book.

Whilst I admired the smooth wood and soft leather, Peter lit a small lamp. He smeared a little of the lamp oil onto a piece of paper and placed it between the microscope and the flame.

'Mr Hooke uses a looking glass,' he told me, 'or a fishbowl to filter the light. We'll have to make do with this paper. It takes away the lamp's glare.'

The first image we looked at was a full stop. Peter placed a bible under the microscope and focused the lens by turning a screw. When he was satisfied, he leaned back to let me look. I closed one eye and placed the other to the eyepiece. It took me a few moments to recognise what was there. Inside the microscope, surrounded by light, was an inky blotch as large as the moon. I was expecting to see a perfect circle, but it was mottled, the colour varying from pitch black to light grey.

‘It’s all splotchy,’ I cried.

Peter laughed. ‘Things look different close up. The point of a needle isn’t really sharp. The moon isn’t perfect either. Through a telescope, it’s as pockmarked as your face.’

‘So, like you, things are uglier than they first seem?’

‘Not always. A fly when magnified looks like a monster, but if you look even closer, the pattern in its eyes is as perfect as honeycomb.’

‘So which one is the truth?’

Peter shrugged. ‘Mr Hooke wants to find the true form of things, like holding a mirror up to nature. But sometimes a fly’s eye looks like a lattice, other times it looks like pyramids or cones. An image is never true.’

‘Hmm.’ I squinted again at the full stop: a sphere of illusion in a single drop of ink.

## VIII.

*Things look different close up.* Yet now I know that they look different from far away too. I’ve always thought of the city as something bigger than me. But now I can see its edges, and the horizon and huge world beyond.

I wonder what London might look like if I were to peer at it from the moon? Through a telescope, would it look like a splatch of dirt on the face of the Earth, or would the lens reveal a secret pattern of geometric shapes – like the ones the map-makers drew after the fire – hidden in its higgledy streets?

Just last month a new map was published. It took the surveyors three years to draw. Every time they reached the furthest edge of the city, they had to go back to see what had changed. Eventually, they gave up and printed what they had. On their map, St Paul’s is drawn as it will appear in the future, as are several churches that are still no more than wooden tabernacles, surrounded by streets built of brick.

In the west, the sun has dipped below the horizon, but the sky flames above the far hills. On the other side of the river is a scene from my childhood: the canvas sails of tents glowing red in the dying light of the day. Yet this is no memory. Earlier this year a fire destroyed a huge swathe of

Southwark. Perhaps it will always be like this: an endless cycle of ruin and revival; of phoenixes out of the flames.

*Resurgam.* They say that was the word carved onto the first piece of stone that Mr Wren found in the ruins of St Paul's. *May I rise again.* Four years ago, his men began to break up those ruins. Peter and I watched them teeter on the top of the cracked walls to chip away at the stone, like ropewalkers with pickaxes instead of balancing poles. We counted at least four men fall to their deaths. Eventually, Mr Wren made a battering ram from a ship's mast, which he tipped with an iron spike. It took teams of men two days before the first wall fell.

I watched from the garret on the day that they blew up what remained of the tower. At first, it seemed to float upwards and waver silently in the air. It wasn't until a few seconds later that I heard the gunpowder blast. The stone turned soft before my eyes like clay on a potter's wheel. Then, suddenly, the tower and its surrounding arches collapsed. I felt the bridge shake as waves rose and fell on the Thames. I heard people scream in the streets, fearing an earthquake had struck. Then I smelt the cloud of dust that rose up and covered the sun for three days.

Several years later, men are still carting away the rubble and earth.

*Rise again.* I stand up and slowly edge around the pillar to see what progress they've made. From here, the cathedral's foundations look like an open pit, though I can see the scaffolding like matchsticks and the emerging walls like uneven teeth.

This pillar – both monument and instrument – is a symbol of the new London. That's what Peter would say. And yet, standing here in the growing dusk, I could almost believe that I see the old buildings shimmering like ghosts in the air. What will happen, I wonder, to the things that are neither written in stone nor in ink? Like the names of the people killed in the fire, who because they weren't counted, don't count? Like the workmen crushed as they demolished St Paul's, whose names will never be printed in books, nor inscribed on the cathedral's new walls?

Below, Peter cowers somewhere, Mr Hooke waits in his laboratory, Nell stitches monsters, and I stand here, pockmarked like the moon. None of us are rich or noble. Yet Peter makes lenses to penetrate Nature, Mr Hooke reads it, and Nell transforms it with her bare hands.

Now me: Freeman of the City of London. Why should I stay shut up in a shop? I think of Jesus standing at the top of a pinnacle in the Bible, looking out over the world. A voice tempting him from the wilderness. *All this could be yours.*

## **THE SIXTH TALE**

### **The Pamphlet Wars, 1679**

*Watch, Sirs, as I dip my quill in the inkwell, let it drip, then with stained fingers scribble these words. Can you imagine an alchemy more marvellous than this? See, Madams, how my thoughts form on the page, materializing from paper and ink. Ink made from the galls of an oak tree; paper that was first flax. From these simple beginnings, what worlds may I not make?*

*Take the oak-galls that coloured this ink. Before they were crushed and steeped in wine, they once clustered on oak leaves like nuts. Each gall grew on its leaf like a miniature womb, surrounding a wasp as it formed. Now, I use their pigment to form the word wasp, with its sibilant sound like the buzzing of wings; wine with its mellowness coating my tongue; oak with its crackle like leaves in the wind.*

*Or take this paper, once flowering in a field of flax. Other hands before mine have transformed it, threshing the flax to extract its fibre, then spinning it into thread to weave linen, lace or damask. These textiles were later worn to rags, sold to a mill and pounded to pulp to make the page on which I now write. Perhaps the white space surrounding my words was once a courtesan's petticoat, perhaps an old woman's smock. Come, put your nose to the paper: smell their perfume and sweat.*

*Everything bears the mark of its beginnings: this ink, its bitter colour of oak-galls; this paper, its fibrous softness of flax. Yet we transform these beginnings for our own ends.*

*Likewise, I bear the mark of my origins. As Grandfather said, I'll be a Spicer till the day that I die. Yet when, in the summer of 1679, I took part in the Pamphlet Wars, I transformed myself into a Scribbler too.*

## I.

As soon as I pass through the City walls at Cripplegate, I can hear the sounds of the fair. From here, the medley of shouts, rattles and drums at Smithfield sounds like a far-away fire. *In the midst of all that roar is where I'm meeting Nell.* The thought thrills through me. Yet first I must turn east, away from Bartholomew Fair. I half-close my eyes as I face the glare of the sun. Flies buzz over the filth in the gutter, baked hard by the August heat. Ahead, I can see the grey walls of Bedlam, where Nell's uncle raves in a cell. But I'm not going that far; I take my pomander from my pocket and turn into the squalor of Grub Street instead.

What differences do you notice in me as I pick my way warily over the cobbles, my silver pomander – bought second hand and stuffed with spices – held under my nose? Perhaps you admire my sturdier frame. At twenty-one years old, I am a man entering my prime. My skin is smoother than when we last met, though you'll notice a gingery shadow around my slender jaw. See, too, the coffee-coloured periwig that sits on my now-shaven head. I bought it on credit some weeks ago, and today it is newly curled. My clothes are also newly pressed – my Sunday suit, worn one day early – my blue waistcoat the colour of the strip of sky above the narrow street.

These tall, ramshackled buildings remind me of the city I knew as a child. I peer at the alleys on either side, leading to a maze of tenements and courts. Dirty children stare back at me from the passageways as I pass. Cripples call out from the doorways of dicing houses, bowling alleys and other timber-framed dens. *Don't look at them.* I fix my gaze higher, searching for the sign of the Hand and Pen. A troupe of tag-rag boys follow me through the rotting fish heads and vegetable peel, as persistent as the flies.

'Lord bless you, Master.'

'Sir, are you lost? A penny to tell you the way.'

'Two pennies and we'll tell you the Lord's prayer backwards.'

'Here.' I toss them a halfpenny. 'Go plague somebody else.'

Two men standing outside an alehouse rifle me with their eyes. I return their gaze as steadily as I can. *Perhaps I should have worn my weekday clothes.* Already the dust has dulled the shine on my shoes and my scalp

prickles beneath my hot wig. *But I need to look good for Nell.* Something about the way she's smiled at me lately makes me hope that my long persistence might, perhaps, finally pay off. I imagine her clutching my arm as we ride on the whirligig at the fair, her breathless laugh as I whirl her around in the dancing booth, the way I'll circle her waist in the hot press of bodies, and the taste of her lips when I try to kiss her, sticky-sweet with candied walnuts and wine.

*If only I didn't have to sully myself here first.*

I sigh. Somewhere ahead, at the sign of the Hand and Pen, is the printing house owned by Jem Hobbs, Grub Street's most infamous rogue. In his letter, he asked me to come in person to collect my most recent fee. 'I'd like to discuss your future,' he wrote. *But I haven't done anything wrong.*

'Sir, spare a penny,' a girl begs as she holds her child to a shrunken breast.

'Later,' I say as I pass.

If Jem intends to cut ties with me, this payment might be my last.

## II.

It was the Pamphlet Wars that brought me into Jem Hobbs's employment, yet my first forays into the world of Grub Street began on a smaller scale, through a skirmish of words with a rival apothecary.

It was Nell who showed me the pamphlet entitled DR TUFT'S CURE FOR THE DREADED MARTHAMBLES. I was closing the shop one evening – about a year after Grandfather died – when she burst in brandishing it. 'Look,' she said as she thwacked it down on the counter. 'This quack's stolen one of your lines.'

She was right. There, on the first page, was a line from my most recent testimonial for Mr Spicer's New and Improved Elixir of Life. As I had written, and now read, word for word, in Dr Tuft's claim for his own medicine: NO PANACEA, PURGATIVE, ELECTUARY, ESSENCE, BALM, BOLUS, BITTER OR BALSAM MAY RIVAL THIS MOST REMARKABLE DRAUGHT.

'The scurvy dog!' I exclaimed.

'What's the marthambles?' Nell asked.



‘I doubt it’s even a real disease. I’ve never heard of it before.’

‘You have to reply,’ Nell insisted. ‘People may think you pirated *him*. Your own credit’s at stake.’

Which was how I came to write my pamphlet entitled: A REPLY TO THE PUFFING PRETENSIONS OF DR TUFT, PIRATE AND MOUNTEBANK. In it, I called him a counterfeit quack, a kitchen chemist and a whiffling conjuror. Less than a month later, he published his own reply: DR TUFT’S ANSWER TO THE OUTRAGEOUS SLANDERS OF THE WHIFFLING MOUNTEBANK, MR SPICER, WITH PROOFS THAT HE IS A KITCHEN-CHEMIST-QUACK-CONJUROR.

‘He couldn’t even make up his own insults,’ Nell said with disgust.

But I was delighted. Dr Tuft’s new pamphlet made my own name more widely known. I displayed his pamphlet alongside mine in the shop window, next to my hydra and griffin’s egg. Controversy was as good for trade as monsters and marvels, it seemed.

It was the success of this skirmish that encouraged Mr Vaughn, for whom I’d previously written a panegyric on coffee, to pay me to pen an attack upon it instead. And so, under the alias of the fairer sex, I wrote my WIVES’ PETITION AGAINST THE INJURIOUS EFFECTS OF COFFEE UPON THE MARITAL BED. Nell helped me to find the right tone of female outrage. The argument was thus: that coffee-houses eunuch husbands, rousing their brains through effeminate prattle, rather than rousing the organs with which they might better please their wives.

‘Don’t say *effeminate*,’ Nell said. ‘There’s nothing weak about being a woman. Try *feeble* instead.’

This pamphlet proved so popular that Mr Vaughn’s printer in Grub Street issued a second edition. I swiftly followed it with a rebuttal, again, paid for by Mr Vaughn but written under a new alias: THE HUSBANDS’ DEFENCE OF COFFEE-HOUSES AS A REFUGE FROM THEIR SHREWISH WIVES, AND OF COFFEE AS A LUSTY DRINK WITH WHICH TO TOAST THEIR WH---S.

It was Peter who suggested that, with my newfound success as a writer, I try my luck in Will’s Coffee-House.

‘All the literary men drink there,’ he said. ‘You can’t waste your time scribbling pamphlets. Mr Dryden is the best writer of our age – he could help make your name.’

And so I went to Covent Garden to seek an audience with the famed author in his favourite haunt, already picturing my name on the title page of a book – a real one, bound in red leather. Not AN ESTEEMED PHYSICIAN or another alias. Simply my name – like his, to be read across the world and recorded for posterity.

After I'd made my business known and paid for the privilege, the coffee man escorted me onto the balcony where Mr Dryden held court amongst critics, playwrights, poets and wits.

'Mr Dryden, Sir,' the coffee man murmured, 'may I introduce Mr Spicer?'

The great man raised his eyes, like currants in the pudding of his pale, oval face.

'And what breed of writer are you?'

'I'm an apothecary, Sir. But I write pamphlets and tales.'

'Tales?' He snapped open his snuff box and his circle fell silent. 'The only worthwhile writing is real.'

'But why, when I can invent anything?'

He retracted his dimpled chin. 'Art has rules. That's what distinguishes the great writer from the mere scribbler.' He took a pinch of snuff but did not offer any to me. 'You, Sir, are clearly the latter. Grub Street has coffee-houses, I hear.'

Thus, in less than a minute, I was dismissed from the world of literary worth.

What Mr Dryden didn't realise was that the rules of writing would change.

### III.

It was last spring that the Shamming Mania spread through London. Across the city, in taverns and coffee-houses, at tea parties, picnics and masquerades, the diversion of choice was no longer gossip, music or cards, but lying games. A host of new words were invented to describe this new vogue: sham, ridicule, raillery, balder, banter and joke. In Vaughn's, men competed to tell the tallest tales. A highwayman had kidnapped the King's

favourite spaniel. A piglet had escaped the Tower by scaling its walls and leaping the moat. A gigantic whale had almost swallowed the Isle of Wight.

That last and best one was – naturally – mine. The many sailor’s tales that I’d scribed in the alehouse proved perfect for coffee-house shams.

‘That pompous prig, Dryden, was wrong,’ I told Nell. ‘The most profitable writing is feigned.’

And so I began closing the shop an hour early to join her in Watton’s, where we worked together on a new type of pamphlet: the Full and True Account. I sold these to Mr Vaughn’s printer in Grub Street rather than the press in Southwark that I used for my own trade. He distributed them through hawkers all over the city, under the alias A GENTLEMAN OF REPUTE. Each time one of these True Accounts was decried as false – often by me, under a different alias – the hawkers sold even more.

My finest was A FULL AND TRUE ACCOUNT OF THE CITY RECENTLY FOUND UNDERGROUND. I’d heard enough accounts of strange lands discovered by sailors to know what to include. The trick was to do as Nell does with her beasts: to make the marvellous out of real parts. And so my buried city boasted an orchard of nut trees and a chamber containing the mummified corpse of a queen. Nell drew illustrations of these, and I advertised that certain proofs could be viewed on London Bridge at the sign of the Phoenix and Flames. These proofs, displayed in my shop window next to the pamphlet, included a shell turned to stone by the earth’s pressure; an insect buried in amber; and the queen’s jewels – ruby, violet, emerald and sapphire – melted and turned to shards underground. To accompany them, Nell made a specimen of a newly-discovered subterranean race, with the body of a shaven monkey and the head and claws of a mole.

So you see, even before the Pamphlet Wars began this summer, I was well versed in Grub Street’s tactics of sham and controversy.

#### IV.

I spy the sign of the Hand and Pen halfway along Grub Street. It hangs on the side of a crooked house, whose protruding, many-paned windows remind

me of a fly's eye. *So this is where my words multiply.* I rap my knuckles three times on the cracked wood of the door.

The comely woman who opens it has a child perched on each of her hips and another clutching her skirts.

'Yes?'

'Nathaniel Spicer. Here to see Jem.'

'He's helping our oldest with her spelling. Come through whilst you wait.' She stands aside to let me enter. 'Excuse the mess. My hawkers haven't collected these yet.'

I step carefully between the piles of papers. 'What are they?'

'A Full and True Account of the Plot. Don't ask me which one.'

*Not one of mine. My titles are better than that.* I wait as she locks the door behind me, then follow her as she shepherds her children down the cramped passageway. *What a hovel. Why am I here?*

The printing room is at the back of the house. When Mrs Hobbs waves me inside, I'm struck by how bright it is. Two huge windows fill the far wall, in front of which the compositors work at their stands like painters at easels, carefully arranging the letters in rows. There are three printing presses, manned by sweating pressmen and watched by an idle apprentice fanning himself with a page. To the right, a door is propped open into the courtyard, where sheets of paper hang like washing to dry in the dazzling heat. *Maybe those are my words.* A young girl sits in the doorway, stirring a large tub of ink. Motes of dust float in the shafts of sunlight. The floor is piled with quires of paper; their stale-linen smell mingles with the nutty odour of ink.

Mrs Hobbs surveys the room. 'John, sweep that floor. Judy, come upstairs for your dinner. Mr Spicer, wait here.'

The apprentice boy jumps at his mistress's voice. The girl leaves her tub and skips to her mother. Mrs Hobbs smiles at me and bustles away with all four children in tow.

I grimace. *It's as hot as the devil's cauldron. How long will I have to wait?* The men take no notice of me, so I walk across to the open door and stand there to watch them at work. There are two men at each printing press. One dampens the paper and fixes it in place on the raised wooden lid, whilst the other checks the type and dabs on the ink with a large leather ball. Once

this is done, the first man closes the lid, slides it beneath the pressing mechanism, and pulls the handle to lower the weight. When he slides the bed of the press out again, the cheap paper bears a spotted imprint.

As I watch each page emerge from the press, my frustration slowly ebbs. There's a spell-like simplicity to this process, at once a mechanical labour and art. The men pant as they repeat their movements to the soft slap of leather and ink against metal, the creak and clack of wood against wood. For a moment, I remember Mother's arms around me in the hot garret, the rhythm of her voice as she pointed to each word she read.

*Whole worlds that she held in her hands. The magic of paper and ink.*

## V.

As I wait, watching the men conjure words from their machines, I consider how I came to be here.

It was a plot that sparked the Pamphlet Wars: a plot that began as part of the Shamming Mania that spread through the city last year.

Last autumn, when I first heard the story from Nell, it seemed like just another sham. It had all the ingredients of a tall tale.

'A chemist found a letter hidden behind a wainscot,' Nell said. 'Can you guess what it was? A plot to kill the King!'

'Who are the plotters?'

'Catholics, of course. Part of the secret society behind the Gunpowder Plot. According to the letter, they met in a London tavern. No one knows which, but a pie man told me it was the Hoop and Grapes in Aldgate Street.'

'Balderdash!' I grinned.

Parliament, however, took the sham seriously. In the weeks of investigations and rumours that followed, they uncovered as many plots to kill the King as possible methods: poisoning by his physician, shooting with silver bullets, savaging by an impostor spaniel, and bursting with fireworks.

'That last one might be true,' I told Nell. 'A customer told me that the King's firework-maker – a Frenchman, no less – was found with gunpowder.'

‘That’s nothing,’ she said. ‘I met a waterman who heard sounds of digging when he rowed past the Houses of Parliament. The papists are mining it to blow up the government too.’

I began to open the shop an hour early to cope with the demand for valerian and other cures for sleeplessness and unease. Every morning brought new reports of armies having invaded the Isle of Wight, readying themselves to march on the capital and murder us in our sleep. I remembered how, during the fire, we’d brandished shovels, candlesticks, ladles and tongs to fight the imaginary Dutch. Now, gangs of boys stalked the streets with wooden clubs, gentlemen carried swords instead of their canes, and ladies concealed pistols beneath their petticoats. I gave Nell my pocketknife, though she merely laughed at me.

‘What do you expect me to do with that?’

‘Protect yourself,’ I said.

‘From monsters of our own invention?’

‘It’s the monster-hunters I fear.’

It was all this frenzy that led to the Pamphlet Wars. At the beginning of this year, the King dissolved Parliament when it threatened to bar his Catholic brother – James, Duke of York – from the throne. The newly-elected Parliament lasted merely two months. In that time, they were in such a panic over the plots that they forgot to renew the previous Parliament’s laws. Thus, in May, when the King sent his new ministers packing, the Printing Act lapsed, and – for the first time in my life – England had a free press.

It didn’t take long for the battle of words to begin. Hawkers who the week before had sold herrings or shrimp now bombarded passers-by with cries of ‘Scandal Sheets!’ and ‘Pamphlets of News!’ instead. Nell delighted in reading the scandals, particularly those involving high-born ladies, whose names were replaced with initials and lines. Every evening, after we’d both shut up shop, I scribbled Full and True Accounts of every conceivable plot whilst she sat next to me in Watton’s, chewing the end of her quill and trying to fill in the blanks.

‘This one, Nat,’ she said. ‘Lady H-----. She was caught naked with my Lord Mayor and his wife’s chambermaid. Who on earth could it be?’

I smiled to imagine Nell and I naked. ‘I’m afraid I haven’t a clue.’

Peter, however, was not so amused.

‘Look at this heap of rubbish,’ he said as we sat in the coffee-house early one morning. ‘Every paper contradicts the others. They even contradict what they printed last week. How do I know which is true?’

‘The truth no longer matters,’ I told him. ‘Which do you want to believe?’

It was in June, when the number of weekly Gazettes, Mercuries and Intelligencers outnumbered even the plots, that Jem walked into my shop.

I heard his chuckle before I saw him. He was staring up at the phoenix that hung from the ceiling: a stocky man, around thirty, with a bright yellow waistcoat and hearty red face.

He beamed when he saw me. ‘Nathaniel Spicer? Jeremiah Hobbs. Call me Jem. You won’t mind me calling you Nat?’

‘How may I help you, Sir?’

‘I heard of you from my neighbour in Grub Street. Not *from* him precisely; I read the pamphlets you wrote. A little professional spying, let’s say. You have a quack’s way with words.’

‘I’m not a quack, Sir. My medicines work.’

‘Ah!’ He leant forward like a conspirator. ‘They work upon the body natural, perhaps, in the same way that mine work upon the body politic.’ He winked. ‘The rabble swallow every dose of scandal I give them. Some to quicken their pulses, others to purge their choler or spleen. The effects are real, regardless of whether or not the ingredients are.’

I narrowed my eyes. ‘What is it you want?’

‘I’m starting up a new paper,’ he said. ‘It’s going to be called the *Domestic Intelligence*. I want you to write it for me.’

‘Doesn’t that paper already exist?’

‘Aha! That’s part of the jest. We’ll publish it on the same day each week. The editor, Mr Sweeten, will fume! He’ll publish a special edition to condemn the piracy. You’ll counter it by writing an attack upon him as an outrageous impostor known for such slander. I’ll put advertisements in my other papers to insist that you’re the genuine author. Thus, by the end of the month, our counterfeit pamphlet will sell more copies than his.’

I smiled. ‘How much will you pay?’

‘Come, Sir – men like us don’t do it for money. It’s the pleasure, the power, the gratification. That said, I’ll give you two guineas for every five hundred copies I print.’

I pretended to consider this. ‘When do we begin?’

## VI.

‘Wondrous, isn’t it?’ Jem says loudly, jolting me out of my thoughts. ‘We print words faster than most men can think ‘em. Faster than most of you quacks can talk too.’

I turn towards him. ‘Good day.’

‘It’s not; it’s damnably hot. Have you seen what we’re printing? Go look.’

I walk across to the nearest press to pick up a page. A FULL AND TRUE ACCOUNT OF THE DISCOVERY OF A NEW PLOT TO KILL THE KING. I move to the second press, where the apprentice boy passes me a new title page. A DENIAL OF THE DISCOVERY OF THE PLOT.

‘Would you believe it?’ Jem says. ‘It seems the plot that my first author wrote about was a sham. An attempt to discredit the alleged plotters, who are, in fact, innocent.’

‘Let me guess.’ I point to the third press. ‘The pamphlet they’re printing reveals that this one is, in fact, the true sham: part of a counterplot to discredit the original one?’

‘How did you know?’ Jem grins. ‘Now, come with me; there’s something I want you to see.’

‘I don’t have long – I’m meeting a friend at the fair. What did you want to discuss?’

‘All in good time. I’m sure he’ll wait.’

‘She.’

‘Ah!’ He raises his brows. ‘In that case we shall be quick.’

I follow reluctantly as he ushers me out of the printing room and along a passageway. *Why won’t he say what he wants?* I look around for a clock, but the walls and floorboards are bare. Jem leads the way up a narrow



staircase. As we climb, the air becomes stifling. *I don't want to be late for Nell.*

There's a small landing on the second floor. Jem stops in front of the only door.

'Allow me to introduce my latest venture.' He bows as he turns the handle, gesturing for me to enter before him. 'My Literarium.'

*His what?* I take a few paces into the room. It's huge, stretching all the way from the back of the house, overlooking the courtyard, to the latticed bay windows that bulge at the front. Rows of long tables, like in a coffee-house, fill most of the space. Scribblers sit at them amongst piles of paper, stumps of candles and books. *How many men? Three dozen? More?* The scratch of their quills sounds like scuttling insects. The smell of ink is heady in the hot room.

'You've heard of a Scriptorium?' Jem says. 'Every monastery had one attached to its library, where the monks copied new manuscripts. So, I thought, why not a Literarium to supply a printing press?'

'These fellows all work for you?'

'Yes. I pay them a penny a page.'

'Why not let them write in their garrets?'

'They're more industrious this way.'

Some of the scribblers have put down their quills and are either watching us or looking out of the window, blinking into the light. *Good Lord, there are women here too.*

'My father was in the rag trade,' Jem says. 'He sold cloth to paper mills. These scribblers are like the sorters he paid to comb through the clothes at Rag Fair. They sift through old texts, unpick the seams, and patch them together again.'

'What does this have to do with me? I'm no rag-picker; I spin my own yarns.'

'Exactly! Let me show you around.' Jem leads the way to a table at the back of the room. 'These are my pirates. At that end they translate books from the Continent, which we pass off as our own. At this end they make new translations from English editions by changing some of the words. Then over here are Bridget and Geoff. They do abridgements of English books. What are you working on now?'

‘Milton’s *History of Britain*,’ Geoff says. ‘In fifteen pages.’

‘And I’m doing *Pilgrim’s Progress*,’ Bridget says. ‘But without the tedious bits.’

‘Excellent.’ Jem walks on. ‘Now, these next fellows make existing works longer. Annotations, introductions, prefaces, letters of dedication, et cetera. The more we can bulk out the books, the more people will pay.’

I nod. *Get to the point.*

‘Let’s keep going,’ Jem says. ‘This table is where we compile miscellanies. We take poems from existing collections, change a few lines, jumble them up, then publish them as the definitive work.’

‘Don’t the poets sue?’

‘No; they’re delighted. It gives them an excuse to bring out a new edition, complete with a preface on the Evils of Piracy.’

One of the compilers – a girl with fair hair – flashes me a wry smile.

‘Now,’ Jem says, ‘over here we have the fellows who bring old works back to life. See those yellowing pages? Unsold pamphlets and books. I buy them in Moorfields, then we add a new cover. Often, all they need is a more provocative title, or else we attribute them to famous authors. Tom, here, is putting together a sixth volume of Shakespeare’s plays to add to the five that Mr Benmore published last year.’

‘Won’t people know it’s not real?’

‘Mr Benmore is a respected publisher; I’ll publish it under his name.’ He winks. ‘Come, we’re nearly there. The rest of these fellows compose new works. Pamphlet writers on that table, poets over here. Finally, up by the window, is where the writers of erotic books sit. On the right, the ones who write the stories; on the left, the ones who write the denunciations. Margery, in the middle, illustrates the best bits.’

‘Denunciations?’

‘Yes, denouncing in detail why each work is sinful. To fan the flames of desire.’

I peer at Margery, a matronly woman who is currently drawing a buxom girl with a man’s hand between her bare thighs.

‘Remarkable,’ I murmur. ‘But I still don’t know why I’m here.’

Jem takes my elbow and draws me away from the tables, back towards the door.

‘I have a proposition for you. You’re no ordinary hack like these fellows. You have imagination, like me. I need someone to take charge of the Literarium whilst I expand my printing trade. You have a head for both business and words. Just think what we might achieve.’

I take a step back. ‘But I already have my own shop.’

‘And what will you do with it? Take an apprentice? Sell potions on patent? Open a bigger shop? In twenty years’ time you might be a bit richer, but you’ll be a shopkeeper still. There’s a limit to how much spice you can sell, but where’s the limit on words? The lapse of licensing is just the beginning. There’s a fortune to be made now our presses are free.’

‘That’s a risk I don’t need.’

‘Where’s the glory without risk? Writers and printers are the oppressed. The Stationers Company buy up the copyrights to trade amongst themselves. They raid our presses on the slightest pretence and sell what they confiscate. But now, for the first time, we have a chance to fight back. Together, we could be the greatest literary force in London: the pirates, the Robin Hoods of our trade. Say that you’ll join with me, Nat. Partners in fiction – in subterfuge – against the powers that be.’

I hesitate. ‘Perhaps I will. Since you put like that.’

## VII.

Back on Grub Street, the heat pools like stagnant water. My skin feels clammy but the sounds of the distant fair rouse my blood. *All this could be yours.*

*Which way?* I look back in the direction I came. I can make out the beggar girl hunched on the cobbles, her baby still held to her breast. The other way, further up the street, a pair of chair-men loll in the shade of an alley near their sedan.

*They could get me there quicker. I could even take off my wig.*

I look back at the girl and her baby, then down at my dusty shoes. *Nell is waiting for me.* I turn north, towards the chair.

‘How much to Smithfield?’ I ask the men when I reach them.

The youngest looks me up and down. ‘Bartholomew Fair? That’ll be sixpence. The streets are choked around there.’

‘Four,’ I say. ‘Another two if you get me there quickly.’

He looks at his partner, who grunts.

No sooner have I stepped into the chair and closed the door than they’ve positioned themselves between the poles – the older man in front and the younger behind – and hauled me into the air. I fall back against the seat as they lurch forwards.

‘Careful,’ I call, ‘you’re not carrying a corpse.’

I close the window to shut out the smells and sigh with relief as I pull off my wig. Its curls are limp from the heat. I wipe my bare head with my handkerchief, then polish my shoes with the sweat. *Perhaps next year I’ll be able to ride in a carriage with Nell.*

I remember Jem’s words as the chair-men jog north along Grub Street, jolting me with every step. *In twenty years’ time you might be a bit richer, but you’ll be a shopkeeper still.* I slip my hand into my pocket to feel the weight of my purse. *What if he’s right? What if there is a fortune to be made?* I think of Peter and I, setting off on our quest to be pirates. All those nights that I dreamt of my fortune in pepper, and all those mornings I ran down to the docks to see if Mr Reeve’s ship had returned. I remember, too, the view from the top of the pillar: the city’s edges, the huge sky and horizon. *Just think what we might achieve.*

The men veer left onto Chiswell Street. From here it’s a straight run to the fair. I open the window now we’re free of the squalor. A breeze carries the sickly-sweet smell of harvested hay from the fields to the north. The back of the chair-man’s shirt is wet and I can hear him panting in front.

As we pass the booksellers, traders and inns, I think about my own shop. I remember sitting at Mother’s feet in the storeroom, surrounded by comforting smells. *Cinnamon, nutmeg, tea and vanilla. Cardamom, chocolate, clove.* But then I remember how it feels in the early mornings to sit in my garret and write. The freedom of following my imagination wherever it wishes to go. I think how it feels to leave my writing mid-flow to trudge downstairs to the shop. The slow tick of the clock and the tap of my finger on the oak countertop. *Rat-a-tat-tat. Do something, Nat.* But the question is: what?

*Nell will know.* I imagine her taking my arm and bending her head towards mine as we talk. The sounds of the fair are growing louder: I can hear horns as well as the rattles and drums. The chairmen have slowed to a brisk walk as they lurch between the carriages flowing out of the City onto Barbican Street. Within minutes, we're surrounded by a rabble, jostling and shouting, singing and joking, spilling from the pavement onto the cobbles, heedless of the dangers of wheels and hooves. Men surge from the coffee-houses on either side, heading, like us, to the fair. Whores stagger out of the taverns and hawkers sell nuts to the crowd.

I place my wig back on my head and begin to look out for Nell.

### VIII.

I have to push my way on foot from Cloth Fair to the Hospital Gate, where Nell and I agreed to meet. The crowd is thicker than ever this year. It's the first time that an elephant has performed at Bartholomew Fair. Peter has seen it; he's been here all week, demonstrating optical instruments in Mr Cox's booth. He got close enough to throw an apple core, he boasted, hitting the wooden castle tied to the elephant's back.

I elbow my way through the all people gawping at the tumblers, toyshops and pies. I spot Nell standing by the gate, watching a rope-dancing show. Her lips are parted as she follows the antics of the dancers above on the ropes. I barely glance up at them. She's wearing the green dress that I like: the one she embroidered herself with parrots and pomegranates. Her breasts rise above it, as ripe and round as the fruits.

As I approach, she glances straight at me and smiles like she already knew I was there. Before I can wave, she's weaving her way towards me through the crowd.

'Nathaniel Spicer, you're late.'

'I came from my printer in Grub Street.'

'You look like you're bursting with news.'

'I am. Can you guess what it is?'

'He wants you to start a new paper?'

‘No.’ I raise my voice over the din. ‘He asked me to go into partnership with him.’

‘As a printer?’

‘A writer, in charge his Literarium. It’s a workshop of scribblers, all producing words for his press. He says we could be the greatest literary force in London. Just think of that, Nell!’

‘What about your shop?’

‘I could lease it.’

‘Or you could give it to me.’

I laugh. ‘So you think I should accept his offer?’

‘I think you’ve already decided. All that’s left is to celebrate.’

I want to embrace her. Instead, I grin stupidly at the jumble of stalls.

‘What would you like to see?’

‘Everything. But the elephant most. It’s near Giltspur Street; we can see your friend’s show on the way.’

‘Peter? You’ve seen him?’

‘I passed him coming here. Follow me.’ She turns and leads the way through the crowd before I can offer my arm. She doesn’t look back to check that I’m following.

‘Wait.’ *This is not how it goes.*

Again and again I’ve imagined the envy in Peter’s eyes when I stride up with Nell on my arm. *Later – not now.* I’ve bragged once or twice about liberties that she’s not permitted me yet. I’m not sure what would be worse: Peter realising that this isn’t true or Nell discovering my lies.

*What do I do?* I spy the sign for Mr Cox’s Extraordinary Optical Instruments up ahead on the right. We’re almost level with it before it occurs to me that I could try to kiss Nell now. I reach out for her hand, but she’s already darted off into the crowd.

And so it’s my hapless face that Peter sees first. By the time he sees Nell he’s already holding aloft a large instrument.

‘Gather round, gather round,’ Peter yells. ‘Come see the wonders of the invisible world. Only one penny a look.’

I follow Nell into the press of bodies gathered in front of the booth.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen,’ Peter bellows, watching me as I edge forwards to stand beside Nell, ‘this marvel I hold is the miraculous invention known as the *microscope*.’

A chorus of oohs and aahs from the audience. Nell smiles at me.

‘With this most ingenious device, you, Sir – you, Madam – all of you honest, hard-working people, may see the secrets nature has hidden from us. Like this horrible louse.’ With a flourish, Peter points to a large picture that he’s pinned to one side of the booth. ‘Or this fearsome flea.’ He points to the other side. There’s a commotion as people strain forward to peer at the engravings of these giant insects. I recognise both – he’s torn them from Mr Hooke’s book.

‘You, Sir.’ Peter is pointing at me. ‘Even now, you might be harbouring monsters like these beneath that borrowed wig.’ He winks at me as the crowd roar with laughter. I stick my tongue out at him.

‘But now, my dear Ladies and Gentlemen, we need a beauty to accompany these beasts.’ He makes a show of scanning the faces left and right until his eyes light on Nell. ‘There! I’ve found her: an unparalleled beauty!’ I glower in warning but he just grins. ‘Come closer, dear Mistress; don’t be shy. I’ve heard you like to touch tools.’

*Oh God.*

Nell glances at me before weaving her way to the front. I can feel myself growing hot.

‘Let the lady through, please.’ Peter places the microscope down on the counter. I stand on tiptoes to see. ‘Bend your head,’ Peter commands. Nell does as he says, but before she can place her eye to the microscope there’s a flash of silver and Peter is holding a lock of her hair. A glossy curl of her chestnut-brown tresses between his grubby forefinger and thumb. Nell looks up as the crowd gasps behind her. My hands squeeze hard into fists.

‘Now.’ Peter tucks the scissors back in his pocket and holds Nell’s hair aloft. ‘Shall we see what these silken threads look like under the microscope? Who’ll pay a penny to see beauty close up?’

Several men whistle whilst Peter busies himself placing a hair beneath the microscope. I wish I could see Nell’s face.

‘You, Sir.’ He’s pointing at me. ‘Come take a peek and tell these good folks what you see.’

I shake my head, my teeth clenched so tightly that my entire jaw aches. But then Nell turns around and looks at me expectantly. I push my way through the crowd.

‘Silence please, Ladies and Gentlemen.’

‘Produce those scissors and I’ll stab you with them,’ I hiss as I take hold of the microscope. I’m aware of Nell watching me. I close one eye and squint.

‘What can you see?’ Nell says.

The circle of light is cut in half by the hair, which looks like a snake with jagged brown scales. *The very hairs of your head are numbered.* I try not to recoil.

‘Well?’ Peter says. I look around at everyone gaping. I cannot look Nell in the eye.

‘It looks like coral,’ I say.

Peter smirks. ‘Very poetic.’

Nell moves closer. ‘Can I look now?’

I want to stop her, but I just watch as she bends her beautiful head.

‘Urgh,’ she exclaims loudly as she takes a step back. ‘It looks like the legs of that flea.’

There’s raucous laughter as the people around us begin to surge forwards, holding out pennies for Peter to take. I realise that Nell is laughing as well, not crying as I had feared. Somehow, though, this makes me more angry. I find myself being forced back.

‘Let’s go,’ I call to her through the bodies pushing between us.

‘What’s the matter?’

I wait until she’s caught up with me.

‘Don’t take any notice,’ I blurt out. ‘You’re perfect.’

She rolls her eyes. My face must be a picture of misery, since she pulls it towards her. I almost fall over as she presses her lips against mine. *So soft.* Then she bites my bottom lip hard.

‘No, Nat, I’m not perfect.’

I can feel her laugh as she leans forward again: the taste of my blood in her mouth.



**THE SEVENTH TALE**

**The Great Conjunction, 1682**

*You'll remember, I hope, my speculation concerning the curious motion of time. Namely, that it travels like a comet, in an elliptical loop.*

*Here's my second speculation, linked to the first: that the historian – as a student of time – has much in common with his fellow philosophers who study comets and stars.*

*Let me demonstrate.*

*There are few words worthier of speculation than the word speculation itself. I'll define it like a dictionary-writer, using the following two illustrations: observing the heavens and writing a history like mine.*

*SPECULATION. n. [from speculacioun, the faculty of vision; related to imaginacioun, the power of picturing things.]*

*1. Observation; the action of seeing.*

*As star-gazers look through their telescopes and chroniclers witness events.*

*2. Contemplation; the profound study of a subject.*

*As planet-peepers study celestial causes and writers seek worldlier ones.*

*3. Conjecture; the formation of an opinion through hypothesis.*

*As astronomers reach abstract conclusions and historians delight in hearsay.*

*4. Invention; as opposed to fact.*

*As astrologers forecast the future and I create tales from the past.*

*Granted, you say, but get to the point. I promised to tell tales, so why speculate on philosophical things? The point is, this history of mine is much like a speculum: a lens through which you may peer at the past. Sometimes you see it reflected, clear as a mirror held up to experience; more often you see it obliquely, refracted through memory and words. Occasionally you'll find events magnified, distanced, turned upside-down, or prised into numerous parts.*

*Then there are events that loom out from the lens, larger – more lucid – than life. Events like the tale I’m about to tell now: October 1682, when the Great Conjunction – heralded by an eclipse and two comets – threw London into a panic not seen since the Plague of Portents, and time began to loop back around.*

## I.

My eyes water as I push my way through the rabble on St Benet's Hill towards the unfinished cathedral. Each gust of wind sends sand and rubbish skittering past in the dusk. The pitted street is white with lime from the carts trundling from Paul's Wharf to the works. I walk swiftly with my head bent, avoiding the ruts gouged by the huge blocks of stone that Mr Wren's pulleys have hauled uphill. Work on the cathedral has ceased for today. *Not my own work though.* Ahead, I can see the bookstalls that circle the cathedral yard. Ballad-sellers have hung their wares on the fences that protect piles of timber and lime. *My own words adorning St Paul's.*

The city this October evening is restless. The signs creak back and forth overhead, windows rattle, and the crowds on the streets are beginning to swell. Tonight is the long-awaited conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the sign of Leo: an event, the almanac writers claim, that has happened only six times – each momentous – in the history of the world. Hawkers – mostly old and lame women – weave through the crowd crying 'Prophecies!', 'Almanacs!', 'Remarkable Predictions!' *How many of them are mine?* I peer at the pamphlets; each one declares that the Great Conjunction portends strange and terrible events. Astrologers have set up tents in the street to tell fortunes, and prophets stand on benches to preach. It seems that all the whispers of these last weeks – the hushed rumours and murmured prayers – have whirled together, and now the force of all that breath has become a hurricane.

I try to keep my face unreadable as I push my way through the throng. Later, Nell and I will watch the planets align through a telescope on the roof of Peter's new workshop near the cathedral. But first, under cover of all this excitement, I have an informant to bribe.

*Stay calm.* Even amid all this commotion, there are people who turn to watch as I pass – and why wouldn't they? – resplendent as I am in my blue velvet coat with oak leaves embroidered in gold. At twenty-four years old I am, to all appearances, a fellow in charge of his fortune. No longer a mere apothecary; freed from the burden of keeping a shop; on the cusp of greater things. Only the twitch in my left eyelid hints at my fear.

*For God's sake, don't draw more attention.* I press a fingertip to my eyelid and glance up to see who is near. *How do I know if they're spies?* Above, the balconies are crowded, as is the new tower of St Benet's. Even the cathedral ahead is decked with sky-gazers. In this twilight it looks like a ship in the docks, with men balanced on the rigging and planks of the scaffold, and even hoisted on cranes.

*I'll swing from a scaffold myself if I'm caught.*

Mr Wren's men have finished the cathedral's foundations and built the choir walls. Yet there are no floors inside, only a yawning hole. Across the city, more than half of the churches remain in ruins or under scaffolding, and many of those that have reopened still have no steeple or tower. Such is the price of controversy: the King has dissolved Parliament again, and with all sides spending money on spies, funds for building are scarce. Even Nonsuch House on the bridge is being demolished. The Duchess of Cleveland is selling its carved gables, gilded vanes and cupolas for salvage. The materials are worth more than the cost of repairs.

*How many men built that beautiful mansion, and what will remain of them now?*

'Sir, would you like to hear your fortune?'

'No. Get out of my way.'

The astrologer shrinks back as I stride on.

*It's worth it for Nell. No man may marry without money behind him.*

Ahead, the ropes and scaffold sway precariously in the wind.

## II.

Speculation about the Great Conjunction began nearly two years ago, in the winter of 1680, when the first comet appeared. For Jem and I, this comet was a miracle, not a portent of doom. Some months earlier, the King had outlawed the printing of news, bringing a sudden halt to the lucrative Pamphlet Wars. With the loss of our daily newssheets, weekly gazettes and pamphlets discussing affairs of state, you can imagine the relief with which we embraced the new demand for prophecies. They provided an oblique way

to report upon controversy: much harder to accuse of treason or libel than reports of actual events.

The comet appeared to the naked eye in December, its spectacular tail arcing over Westminster as though it would plunge into the Thames. It grew brighter with each night that passed, so that by Christmas Eve it was visible even at noon. That week, crowds filled the streets until midnight, with hawkers setting figgy puddings on fire and calling them blazing star pies. Nell and I went to see it together. She held the pudding I bought in her hands, the flames lighting her face. We ate it in turns, looking up at the sky. The brandy fumes made me bold, and I let my hand slip below her waist, over the back of her skirt.

She seized it in hers. ‘Your hand’s not a comet, Nat. No downward arc.’

But she skimmed her tongue against mine when I kissed her, her lips warm and sticky with figs.

Aside from that outing, I rarely left the Literarium to return home that week. Even on Christmas Day itself, I ate with Jem’s family on Grub Street, discussing how best to take advantage of the sudden demand for astrological news.

‘The public are sick of plots,’ Jem said. ‘Their appetite’s now for sourer grub: Catastrophes and Evil Effects.’

I took a bite of my suet pudding. ‘So let’s gorge them on it like geese.’

Luckily, we had experience of cooking up such fare. Earlier that year, the famous almanac writer, John Gadbury, had been arrested for his part in the plots. Word was, he’d cast the King’s horoscope to help the plotters determine the hour of his Majesty’s death. Of course, everyone wanted to know what that horoscope said, so I paid an astrologer named Doctor De Pinto to write a counterfeit one. As it turned out, *THE FULL AND TRUE ACCOUNT OF THE KING’S HOUR OF DEATH* was the last pamphlet we printed before the King outlawed all news.

After Christmas, I hired Doctor De Pinto to interpret the comet’s zodiacal route. Meanwhile, I had my scribblers write predictions based upon the latest controversies. Each of our pamphlets foretold different disasters. Some were God-given: floods, famine, tempests and earthquakes. Others were human: rebellions, piracies, villainies and the defeat of the Protestant

faith. Jem's wife, Elizabeth, arranged for one of her mercury-women, Mrs Nutt, to rent my shop, where she sold our pamphlets alongside almanacs, maps of the heavens and charms to protect people from the coming catastrophes.

Even after the comet faded, its influence strengthened rather than waned. In mid-January last year, the day after the comet disappeared, the King dissolved his third Parliament. Ministers had tried to exclude his brother, the Catholic Duke, and recognise the King's bastard son as heir to the throne. Around the same time, astronomers predicted that in the autumn of the following year, Jupiter and Saturn would come into conjunction, spurring our pens to even greater prophetic feats.

'In myth, Jupiter overthrew Saturn,' Doctor De Pinto explained. 'Clearly, it follows that when the planets align, our King will be dethroned.'

By March – when the King both summoned and dissolved his fourth Parliament – I'd organised the entire Literarium towards astrology. I scoured auctions for old prophecies to give new titles, my translators pirated such stuff from the Continent, and my English pirates abridged works by Mr Halley and Mr Hooke. Meanwhile, my miscellany writers put together poems about planets, whilst the writers of erotic literature wrote stories with titles such as *THE AMOROUS CONJUNCTION*, *VENUS IN CLIMAX*, and *THE MAN WITH THE ASTRONOMICAL TOOL*.

Three things happened in April. Firstly, the King appointed a Royal Scribbler, Mr L'Estrange – whom we called Crackfart – to write official news. Secondly, the King flooded the city with spies, arresting and imprisoning all those – including the members of his four Parliaments – who were opposed to the Duke. Thirdly, and not unrelatedly, portents began to appear.

The first portent was an apparition of three suns. A milkmaid in Lambeth was the first to see it as she was going out in the morning to milk. Later, a washer-woman in Clerkenwell and a carter in Spitalfields saw the same thing: three burning disks, side by side in the sky over Whitehall.

'Plainly,' Doctor De Pinto said, 'it foretells a rivalry for the position of heir to the King.'

So that's what we implied in the ballads that Jem and I had on the streets by the end of that week. Two days later, rumours reached us that several travellers near Oxford had seen a vision of ships in the sky.

'Obviously,' Doctor De Pinto said, 'that portends an impending invasion by France.'

Then there were the other apparitions we printed, borrowed not from recent reports but from my own memories. *Just last week* – I wrote – a vinegar-maker's wife had dreamt the ground swallowed her up, whilst an old pincushion seller saw thousands of angels on the head of one of her pins. Doctor De Pinto helped me to write a series of pamphlets upon the arts of prophecy too: ichthyomancy for reading the innards of fish, lithomancy for stones, catoptromancy for looking-glasses, and sycomancy for reading the secrets written in figs.

With so much to do, I had no time to see Nell during the week. Every evening, one of Jem's daughters carried my supper up to the Literarium on a tray so that I needn't stop work until one of his sons hailed a chair to carry me home to bed. Every morning, Jem's apprentice fetched me a pot of coffee, and on wash day Elizabeth took my shirts to launder with the rest of the family's clothes. On Sundays, however, I always visited Nell. When the weather was fine, we took a wherry across the river from Wapping to Bermondsey. There, we walked arm in arm along the promenades of Cherry Gardens and I bought her a bowl of cherries and cream.

'You do know I make my own money?' she said.

'Save it for your dowry linen. If the portents continue, by this time next year I'll have made enough money to marry.'

She ran her finger around the rim of the bowl, then licked it. 'Who knows what next year will bring?'

### III.

As I make my way through the crowd in Paul's Churchyard, more than a year later, I wonder where Nell is now. Perhaps she's already across the yard in Yarwell's workshop, her head bent over one of the microscopes. On Monday evenings, Peter's new employer, Mr Yarwell, meets with other



instrument-makers in a coffee-house near the Exchange. In his absence, Peter lets Nell visit the workshop to draw. She takes along treasures – a butterfly’s wing, a petal, the stone from a peach – to sketch the patterns revealed by the lens.

Peter joined Mr Yarwell last year, when his previous employer, Mr Cox, refused to let Peter marry his only daughter, who had just turned fifteen. Now, Peter has a dancing master and an elocution master in the hope of snaring an even better heiress and setting up his own shop. In the meantime, with his fair hair and newfound grace of movement and speech, he charms less eligible girls. I glance across the cathedral yard. *I should buy Nell her own microscope.*

Reluctantly, I turn away from where I imagine them smile and talk. Paul’s Coffee-House is ahead on the corner of Paternoster Row. I peer up at the coffee room window as I approach, scanning the faces looking out. *Good. There’s no one I know.*

A trio of link-boys stand in the doorway out of the wind, their torches unlit as they wait for dusk to deepen to night. A more ignorant man than me might ignore them, unless he needed a light. But I know each channel of this city’s gossip, and its link-boys hear more than most.

‘Jack.’ I greet the boy I know best: a snub-nosed imp who’s often lit my way home after I’ve met Peter here after work. ‘How many men have you led down dark alleys to the loss of their purses this week?’

‘None, Sir. Though I might find my way up a few ladies’ alleys tonight.’

‘That I very much doubt.’

‘And you, Sir? It’s a good time to be a whore-m – excuse me – *tale-monger* tonight. We’ve heard stories, haven’t we boys?’

The others move closer as Jack drops his voice. I turn my back to the street.

‘Such as?’

Jack holds out his gloveless hand and I drop a coin into his palm.

He grins. ‘Word is, the fiery planets have enflamed the King’s desire to make a legitimate heir. With heaven’s help, he’ll finally sire a prince.’

‘He’d better hurry,’ his pimpled friend says. ‘Or the Duke might murder him first.’

‘Hush.’ The third boy – a tall, pinched fellow – glances over my shoulder.

‘I tell you something, Sir.’ Jack jabs a grubby nail at my chest. ‘No Catholic is going to rule me.’

I nod and toss each boy a penny. ‘Keep your ears cocked tonight.’

Jack holds open the door. ‘As erect as the King’s organ, Sir.’

Inside, I straighten my wig and smile. *They’re like Peter and I used to be.*

Upstairs, the coffee room is quieter than usual. Perhaps two dozen men are crowded at the far end of the room, next to the windows that look out over the yard. Candles are lit on the long tables, making the sky seem darker outside. The men’s faces reflect back at them from the glass. Several turn as they see me behind. I nod to them and try to ignore the twitch in my eyelid as I saunter across to the bar.

‘Abigail. You look radiant this eve.’

The coffee woman puts a hand to her head and pats her golden hair.

‘Mr Spicer. You tell such flattering lies.’

‘I’m the picture of honesty.’ I place my penny on the bar and take a pipe and tobacco from the box. ‘Has anyone asked for me?’

‘No, Sir, though you have a letter.’

She bends down to the shelf behind. I press my fingertip to my eyelid and glance at her ample rear.

‘Here. It came in the five o’clock post.’ Abigail turns and catches me looking. She arches her brows. ‘Careful, Sir. You’ll offend my delicacy.’

‘And *what* a delicacy.’

She giggles. *For a butcher*, I think as I turn away from the bar.

I choose a seat at one of the smaller, more private tables near to the fireplace. I sit with my back to the men at the window and place the letter face down. Abigail leans forward with the pretence of displaying her bosom.

*You don’t fool me, Madam.* She’s almost certainly a spy.

I untwist the paper of tobacco and inhale its bitter smell. The cheap paper is torn from a broadside. I read the ill-printed words:

...SOMETHING IS ROTTEN IN THE STATE OF ENGLAND...

It could be from any number of prophecies, but I recognise my own work.

The coffee boy comes to fill my dish.

‘Would you like a pen and ink, Sir?’

‘Not tonight.’ I wait for him to pour the coffee and light my candle.

I don’t turn over the letter until he’s left. I know who it’s from, since it’s addressed to a MR N. M. SPICER, and I have no middle name. I take my knife from my pocket to open it. Jem’s missive is brief:

OUR FRIEND WILL MEET YOU AT SIX. WRITE TO ME ONCE YOU’VE TALKED.

YOUR DEAREST ABIGAIL

I smile at his choice of alias, then roll up the letter and hold one end to the candle flame. The paper blackens and curls as it burns. The clock on the wall says half past five. *I know our man’s coming at least.*

#### IV.

It was at the beginning of this year that Jem and I began to take greater risks. The truth is, we had little choice. What does a scribbler have to work with, but words? And words had become double-faced.

Even before the first comet appeared, the country had started to split. I’d only worked at the Literarium for five months when Petitioning Fever hit. By then, after eighteen years with no elections, we’d had two in the space of two years. The elections themselves were fought with words – speeches, sermons, pamphlets and oaths – but the petitions outnumbered these.

The first was started by the Earl of Shaftesbury, the former Lord Chancellor, who petitioned the King to allow Parliament to meet. Within weeks, Shaftesbury, with the aid of a group of men who called themselves the Petitioners, had supplied every alehouse, tavern and coffee-house in London with paper and ink. I signed under my own name at Watton’s, and under aliases in half-a-dozen other haunts. I also signed other petitions: for the King to dissolve the same Parliament, to divorce his barren Queen, to hang his brother, and to abdicate. In fact, the fever for signing petitions became so great that I stopped reading what I was signing: the important

thing was to be counted along with the rest. When the Petitioners collected their papers together, they stretched for more than three hundred feet. In jubilation, they paraded the names through the streets, accompanied by men blowing fanfares on inkhorns and women waving quills made from peacock tails.

Not to be outdone, the King's supporters started their own club, the Abhorrrers, to collect the names of those who abhorred petitioning. Instead of collecting signatures, they collected subscriptions – a vastly different practice, since instead of being handwritten, these names were printed, appearing beneath Declarations of Abhorrence in Crackfart's *London Gazette*.

What part did I play in this contest? Only that of a dutiful scribbler, writing what my readers desired. Jem and I printed our own declarations, including a DECLARATION OF ABHORRENCE OF INKHORNS, A DECLARATION OF ABHORRENCE OF DECLARATIONS, and a DECLARATION OF ABHORRENCE OF BEARDS. The last was subscribed, amongst other names, by Cupid and Old Father Time. My scribblers also wrote pamphlets, including A PORTRAIT OF A PETITIONER and AN ANATOMY OF AN ABHORRER, to satirize either side.

When the King outlawed news-writing that spring, the rivalry between Petitioners and Abhorrrers moved from the realm of pens and print to that of coffee-house talk.

Soon, every coffee-house customer was either a Tory or Whig. *Whig* – a word for a Scottish cow-herd – was what Abhorrrers called the Petitioners; *Tory* – a word for an Irish robber – was what Petitioners called them in retort. Over time, each word came to mean the very epitome of both honour and dishonesty.

This was how words became double-faced.

'So, a Tory is a royalist?' Nell said one Sunday as we rowed across the river to Bermondsey.

I nodded. 'A defender of sovereignty. Or, according to Whigs, a bigot who supports tyranny.'

'And a Whig is a republican?'

'More or less. An upholder of liberty. Or, according to Tories, a traitor to Church and King.'

‘Both sides are bastards,’ our waterman said. ‘They never say what they mean.’

He was right. Men had slung words back and forth so often across coffee-house tables that they’d broken loose from their sense. *Liberty*, for a Whig, meant rights, but for a Tory it meant rule by the mob. Other words too – truth, faith, freedom – meant opposite things on each side. These sides we began to call *parties*, and, just as during the Shamming Mania, we invented new words to describe how they talked: *slogan*, *jargon* and *cant*. Not since the months following the Fire – when the names of the dead and the streets disappeared – had words seemed so unreal.

Oh wretched, wonderful, whimsical words! More fickle than the alchemist’s mercury, more malleable than the sword-cutler’s metal, more fiddly than the spangle-maker’s gold thread. Is it any wonder that men like me – honest scribblers, whose craft depends upon them – were forced into raising the stakes?

## V.

Outside the coffee-house, the crowd is impatient. It is six o’clock – almost night – and an ill wind continues to blow. I push my way along the north edge of the yard. The planets are invisible to the naked eye, yet still people crane their necks to look up, children sway upon their fathers’ shoulders, and neighbours shout to each other from the windows above. Individual voices are drowned out by the wind and the din. *No one will hear us talk.*

It was on a night like this, during February’s lunar eclipse, that Jem and I cast our lot. All week, we’d published predictions of what the omen might mean. On the night itself, we walked to Moorfields to see the moon disappear. Along the tree-lined walks, link-boys and prostitutes vied for trade, the former with torches, the latter with fans, each hoping to profit from the dark night.

Jem steered me away from the walk, onto the open field. ‘It’s time to change our tactics,’ he said. ‘We must back either the Tories or Whigs.’

‘Why?’ I stopped walking. ‘We sell more pamphlets if we suggest that the end of the world will be brought about by both sides.’

‘Yes, but the real future will be decided by factions and deals.’ He lowered his voice. ‘I was approached twice last week.’

‘Who by?’

‘First Shaftesbury’s agent, then Crackfart for the King. Each will pay handsomely if we scare the public into supporting their cause.’

‘Can’t we take money from both?’

‘Trust me, I’ve tried.’ He took my arm. ‘Both have men watching us; we’re going to have to decide.’

I looked up at the moon, the edge of which had begun to grow dark. ‘In that case, make it Shaftesbury,’ I said. ‘We have more to gain from the Whigs.’

*And it’s true, I think now as I glance up at the sky, remembering how the moon turned blood-red that night. If the Whigs come to power, they’ll reinstate a free press. Isn’t that worth taking the risk?*

At the corner of Queen’s Head Alley, I spy a man with his back to the wall, watching the people who pass. *Is that him?* He’s younger than me – perhaps twenty – with spectacles and a furrowed brow beneath his mop of dark hair. I’ve never seen him before, but he matches Jem’s description and, as arranged, he’s wearing a waistcoat embroidered with acorns. *No going back now.* I turn into the alley, then sidle up to the end of the wall, my back at a right-angle to his.

‘It’s a fine night for speculation,’ I say.

He flinches, then peers over his shoulder, scrutinising my face and the oak leaves stitched on my coat.

‘Yes.’ He pauses. ‘We’ll not see its like in our lifetimes.’

I nod: it’s the exchange we agreed.

Around us, the crowd ebbs and flows. I lower my voice. ‘Were you followed?’

He looks at me sharply. ‘Were you?’

‘Forgive me. Caution is part of my trade.’

He turns away, flattening his back to the wall. I can’t see his face, so I watch the cathedral’s scaffold sway in the wind. Men cling to it like flies.

‘There’s twenty guineas in this bag,’ I say softly. ‘Another ten next time we meet.’

‘I haven’t yet made up my mind.’

‘If you hadn’t, you wouldn’t be here.’

‘I don’t know if I can get what you want.’

‘Really? The rumours aren’t true?’

He shifts his position. ‘Which rumours?’

‘That the Post Office has a secret room filled with machines for opening letters.’

‘I don’t work in there.’ He hesitates. ‘I’m a copyist. We write out the letters before they’re resealed.’

‘So get me copies of them.’

‘We don’t even see the most secret letters. They’re smuggled in and out of the city in carts.’

I grit my teeth. *The scoundrel wants to be talked into it.*

‘But you must discover information of interest, or else the Post Office wouldn’t employ you. Or, for that matter, the fellows you work with. I’m sure one of them would be happy for me to make them rich in your stead.’

He clears his throat. ‘The letters belong to the King.’

‘They belong to the people to whom they are sent. It’s the Post Office who steals their secrets. Why should only the King benefit from that theft?’

He doesn’t reply. Around us people have begun to whistle and shove.

‘Look,’ I hiss. ‘Knowledge has value. I thought you supported the Whigs?’

‘There are two sides to every argument.’

*So that’s what he wants: a debate.* I lean closer. ‘I’ll have you know that I’ve written several pamphlets in support of the Tories, and I’ve been generous enough to name my opponent, Mr Crackfart, as author on each title page. If my arguments seem to trip themselves up, or to imply the opposite of what’s being said – well then, whatever detriment this might have for the Tories, it’s to the benefit of the public, who learn not to trust what they read.’

‘How does that benefit them?’

‘Come on. Do you really want to return to the past? Look around you. Listen. What would our grandfathers have thought to hear ordinary men disputing affairs of state? That’s why a free press is important: yes, you cannot trust what you read, but at least we provoke you to think.’

‘I think you’re in danger of convincing yourself.’

I push myself away from the wall. ‘Listen, I have somewhere to be. Are you taking my money or not?’

He’s silent a moment, peering ahead. ‘A guinea a letter, ten each time we meet?’

‘As long as the letters you give me have value.’

He thrusts his hand back to take the bag. ‘Oh, I’m certain they will.’

## VI.

I smile as I walk towards Peter’s workshop, lighter without the weight of the purse and my qualms. I compose a letter to Jem in my head:

*HE’S AN OBSTINATE ROGUE, BUT I THINK ALL IS WELL.*

*YOUR DEAREST MARGERY*

The restlessness of the crowd feels like excitement now that I’m free to think about Nell. I remember my words to her last summer. *If the portents continue, by this time next year I’ll have made enough money to marry.*

And the portents have continued, as have the profits I’ve made. After the eclipse in February, a whirlwind tore through Oxford in May. Its dark spout lifted cattle and houses, pulled up trees by their roots and sucked seeds and shoots from the ground. As I wrote in one pamphlet, it was as though the air was stirred by the Finger of God. This, I implied – using words such as WRATH and SCOURGE OF PRIDE – was divine judgment upon the King’s dismissal of his last Parliament at Oxford. In another pamphlet, with the help of Doctor De Pinto, I linked the tempest to the perpendicular rays of the planets, and predicted that with the Great Conjunction just five months away, we would see further catastrophes soon.

I was right. The whirlwind was followed by a summer of rain, hail, thunder and floods. Across London, citizens prepared for disaster by stocking their larders with salt beef, smoked ham and dried fish. Young couples flocked to church or to the warren of marriage houses near the Fleet, to be married either in the eyes of God or by a bribed chaplain in a tavern’s back room. Either way, they celebrated their nuptials by casting off their



fears for the end of the world, along with their clothes, and embracing the delights of the flesh.

It was in this mood that I begged Nell to marry me before the Conjunction came. She took my hand but shook her head.

‘Nat, you don’t even believe the predictions. You invented most yourself.’

‘That doesn’t mean we can’t marry.’

‘It means we don’t have to rush.’

‘Don’t you love me?’

‘You know I do. But I don’t want to be a wife and mother just yet.’

‘What’s wrong with being a wife? I’ll let you do whatever you want.’

She huffed. ‘You don’t need to *let* me do anything.’

When the second comet appeared in August, the mood on the streets turned to dread. Of course, I took advantage of this, using words such as TYRANNY and CATHOLIC THREAT to suggest that it was the fault of the King, the Duke and their Tory supporters. But I couldn’t help but think with foreboding of the stars that blazed over my childhood city before it was ravaged by fire and plague.

*Every hair on a king’s head is anointed.* That’s what Crackfart’s newsletters claimed.

*The very hairs of your head are numbered.* Mother’s voice from the grave.

It was around this time that people began to wear amulets. I felt like I was seven again when I heard their tinkle like rain. In my old shop, Mrs Nutt sold silver charms and sprigs of heather for luck. For my own part, alone in my chamber, I pulled Father’s knapsack from under my bed. It was covered in dust. Inside were the treasures I’d almost forgotten: Peter’s stained glass, Father’s snuffbox, Mother’s shawl, half-eaten by moths. My amulet was in there too, its brass tarnished with age. I held it in my hands for some time, rubbing it between my forefinger and thumb. *Abracadabra*, Mother whispered as she kissed the top of my head.

That Sunday, in a bower in Cherry Gardens, I gave the amulet to Nell.

‘To keep you from harm,’ I said, repeating Mother’s words like a spell.

*I wish Mother could have met Nell.*

Now, as I approach Peter's workshop, I imagine Nell as my wife. She says that she doesn't want to give up her shop, but I'll buy her a microscope and silver thread so that she can sit in our parlour to draw insects or embroider beautiful silks. I picture her dressed in satin and lace, with a ginger cat curled up beside her and canaries chirping above in a cage. I imagine her waiting for me to come home to kiss her neck and lead her by the hand to our chamber. After we've worn ourselves out, we'll whisper together in bed.

Smiling, I imagine myself as a father: a son to play at Nell's feet. I imagine scooping him out from the tent of her skirts and lifting him high in the air.

*A family.*

I look at the unfinished facade of the cathedral, its deep pit hidden inside.

## VII.

I find Peter with Mr Yarwell's apprentice, standing on a bench outside the workshop haranguing passers-by.

'Gather round, gather round,' Peter is yelling. 'Come marvel at the Great Conjunction. A shilling a minute to look.'

'Your price has gone up,' I say as I elbow my way over to him.

'I'm popular,' he says, then, filling his lungs: 'Ladies and Gentlemen, this marvel I hold is the miraculous invention known as the *telescope*.'

'Is Nell inside?'

Steven, the apprentice boy nods.

'With this most ingenious device, you, Sir – you, Madam...'

Peter continues.

I leave him to rouse up the crowd.

I find Nell near the back of the workshop next to the window, holding a prism up to the light. I watch her. Her face is turned away from me, the glass casting its rainbow across the wall.

'You've made your own weather,' I say.

She turns, the prism throwing its colours onto her face.

‘Isn’t it beautiful? Peter bought it from a Venetian. He’s going to make one of his own.’

‘Impossible! Englishmen don’t have the skill.’

‘I do.’

I turn to see Peter leaning against the doorframe behind me. His eyes are on Nell’s lit-up face.

‘I thought you were busy,’ I say.

‘Steven can entertain the rabble. He’s learnt a lot from me.’

‘I’m sure he has.’ I stride across to the window. ‘Let’s see this marvel of yours.’

Nell holds out the prism for me to take, but with my other arm I encircle her waist. Behind me, Peter snorts as I kiss her. Nell stiffens and pulls away.

There’s silence for a few moments. I cradle the glass pyramid.

‘I brought you the telescope,’ Peter says. He walks over to give it to Nell. ‘You’ll get a good view of the planets from up on the roof.’

*Why is he standing so close?*

‘Peter, I almost forgot.’ I enclose the prism’s light in my fist. ‘I’m looking for a new astrologer to join our Literarium. Perhaps you know of someone?’

‘I don’t associate with charlatans,’ he says. ‘Not apart from you.’

‘But you have a throng of star-gazers outside.’

‘Your men created that mob. I’ll take advantage of them, but my real customers are men of science. You do realise that you’re making a mockery of their work with your false prophecies?’

‘The public have had enough of such learning. They want stories, not dull, dusty truth. By the time these planets part, it’s men like me who will rule.’

Peter purses his lips. ‘How fortunate for you.’

‘And for you. One day, I’ll help set you up on your own. You can’t spend your whole life working for somebody else.’

The veins at his temples bulge blue. ‘I’d rather work here than in those traitors’ dens you skulk around. Haven’t you heard coffee eunuchs a man? There’s nothing to harm my virility here.’

I force a laugh and turn away, but I'm aware of Nell watching us both.

## VIII.

The sky is black as Nell and I stand on the open part of the roof, behind the stone balustrades. She holds the telescope to her eye. I watch her brow pucker with concentration, her tongue between her teeth. Below, torches swarm like fire-flies in the yard. I can hear Peter's patter above the noise of the throng.

*What happened to Peter and me?* I remember the first time he showed me a telescope: our foreheads touched as we peered through the lens. *For now we see through a glass, darkly. But then, face to face.*

'Would you like to look?' Nell says.

'Not now. Tell me what you can see.'

'Not much. The planets just look like stars.'

'Here. Let me hold it for you.' I move my body behind hers and reach my arms around her shoulders.

'I can manage,' she says, though she doesn't resist as I place my hands over hers.

'Do you remember how Peter once told us that if we had a lens powerful enough, we'd see God's face in the stars?'

'I remember.'

I lean my face close to the back of her head. Her hair smells like tallow. I feel my prick stir as I press myself against her skirts. *There's nothing to harm my virility here.*

'When will our own conjunction be, Nell?'

'Nat.' She arches away.

Before I can press further, we're interrupted by shouts from below.

She shakes off my embrace and we both move towards the balustrades. Beneath us, in the yard, Peter's audience has parted. An old man is being attacked. In the darkness I can't see his face, though we can hear the attackers' shouts.

'He's a papist.'

‘A foreigner.’

‘Tory scum.’

‘He’s on the side of the Duke.’

Nell leans over the balustrades. ‘Stop!’ she screams. ‘Let him go.’

I pull her back. ‘It’s not safe.’

‘They’re hurting him.’

‘There’s nothing we can do.’ I peer down, looking for Peter, but he seems to have fled. The mob have managed to get a rope around the man’s neck and they’re dragging him towards the scaffolding of St Paul’s.

‘Oh God.’ Nell clutches my arm.

‘Catholic vermin,’ a man shouts below. ‘We’re suffering because of you.’

‘No,’ Nell shouts. ‘It’s not true.’

*I have to save him. This is my fault.*

‘Break his arms.’

‘String him up.’

‘Stone the old devil to death.’

Somehow, I can’t move my feet.

Nell sobs. Around the side of the cathedral I see men in uniform rushing our way. I almost choke with relief.

‘Hush, Nell. The trained band are coming.’

I try to hold her as we watch the officers beat their way through the crowd.

‘He’s safe now,’ I murmur. ‘Everything will be well.’

‘But he isn’t moving.’

‘Don’t look. Come away.’

‘I want to see.’

‘Nell, don’t. Please.’

Below, the man lies face down in the street.

## **THE EIGHTH TALE**

**The Frost Fair, 1684**

*Dear Readers, can you see me clearly? The reflections I see of myself now are dim. Glimpses in my murky green gin bottle, already half empty; in my pewter chamber pot, already half full; in the black window, barred and bare of curtains, as I scribble into the night. The face that looks back is slack, like the skin that forms on top of milk pudding. I don't recognise it as me.*

*At least these reflections show the uncertain surface of things. They remind me of the Thames, where, unseen by me, the city wavers: its stone liquid, illusive, in flux. Below, the river runs cold, dark and deep. Bones – not all of them ancient – are lodged in the riverbed's clay. Offal and sewage, coins and lost treasure. How many layers have formed over the years? How many reflections have wavered above them? And yet it has always been the same river: constant in its own ebb and flow.*

*Even when the river froze, locking up those reflections in ice, the current still flowed beneath. Of course, at the time it seemed solid to me. I even bought a map of the streets set up on the Thames. See there, pinned by my bed? And next to it: see the quarter sheet of coarse paper? It doesn't look much: the yellowed paper is spotted with age and the ink of the border is smudged. But that scrap commemorates the day that everything changed:*

*NATHANIEL SPICER. NELL SKINNER.*

*FEBRUARY 1, 1684*

*AT FREEZELAND STREET ON THE ICE.*

*I paid sixpence to have my name printed with Nell's. At the time, I hoped those words would join us together as firmly as the frozen river bound one bank to the next. I should have known that the ice was only part of the river's unending flux.*

*This is the tale of that day – the first of February, 1684 – when my hopes for the future melted away at the famous Frost Fair on the Thames.*

## I.

As I emerge from the tunnel onto the open part of the bridge, the smoke seems to part on each side. To my right is the ice-choked river. Masts stretch eastwards towards the marshes, the ships surrounded by large blocks of white. The city ahead is obscured, only the towers of Mr Wren's churches piercing up through the pall. Trapped by the icy air above, a thick fog muffles the city. I have memories like this, which I wish to forget. The streets empty and shrouded in smoke. London cut off from the world.

A cart looms through the murk, its clatter of hooves and wheels making me start. I leap back against the palings. Once it has passed, the smoke seems to settle again: colder, quieter. I hunch my shoulders. *Damn this weather.* My wig offers little warmth; the cold creeps beneath it and clenches my skull.

Westwards, the river has frozen over completely. Even the huge waterwheels, whose churning has accompanied all twenty-six years of my life, are now still. The river that has flowed towards and beneath me – forever, it seems – has congealed.

Crowds cross the ice at Old Swan Stairs, like flotsam bobbing and gliding below. Their laughter comes and goes with the wind. *Why do I feel so alone?* In the distance, I can make out the tented fair at Temple, wreathed in clouds where the river curves south. Its revelry sounds like the roar of a distant sea. As a landlocked sailor feels the far-off tide tugging his body and stirring his blood, that sound stirs something in me.

*Half past one at Temple Stairs.* I hear Nell say it in that light tone of hers, but I'm heavy with waiting so long.

The hour rings out across the city: twelve chimes, clarion-clear. With more churches being rebuilt, every year has brought the sound of new bells. I haven't heard so many since I was seven years old, though in my memory the whole city rang in celebration of God. Nowadays, heaven seems more distant. The sun has slipped further away.

This morning I went to church for the first time in years. I begged God not to let me lose Nell. *Much good praying will do.* I went to St Saviour's in Southwark rather than the rebuilt St Magnus, where I once sat between Mother and Father as they prayed on the hard wooden pew. The



parson today read the tale of Babel. *Go, let us build a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name.*

To the west, St Paul's has neither tower, spire nor dome. Its uneven walls are boarded up to protect the stone from cracks caused by ice. The city seems locked in a cycle of building and ruin, ambition and overthrow.

I remember Mother's tale of the king who made wings for himself but soared too high and fell, spattering on the roof of the sun god's temple, which stood where Westminster Abbey does now. I remember the day that I stood at the top of the pillar, the city laid out below. I can still feel its lure. Yet now the horizon is hidden by smoke. For every rise – every attempt to soar in this city – is there not also a fall?

I shiver and step away from the palings. *Keep moving. I only need Nell.*

It's been weeks since I last saw her. All morning I've rehearsed what to say. I've imagined how she'll roll her eyes when I tell her how much I've missed her; how she'll grip my arm as we walk on the ice. I've even imagined letting her slip – just once – so that I can catch her and set her back on her feet.

*All I want is her warmth.*

## II.

The Great Frost began two months ago, back in December, around the time that I last spent a Sunday with Nell. Together, we walked to the bridge foot to see the ice that had gathered around the wooden piers, making them splinter and creak.

'Let's go skating next Sunday,' she said. 'Limehouse Marsh has frozen over. I know a blacksmith who'll make us blades to strap to our boots.'

'I don't think I can see you next Sunday. I'll have to work.'

'Again?'

'There's talk of more arrests; I have to stay ahead.' I took her hand.

'Why don't you stay tonight?'

'How many times do I have to say no?'

‘Say yes to marrying me and you’ll never need to say no again.’

‘You think I won’t say no to a husband who comes home at midnight and rolls on top of me?’

‘When we’re married, I’ll come home early. I promise.’

‘So I can wash your shirts and make your supper?’

‘No. It’ll be like it used to be. We’ll make plans together. We’ll tell stories and plot adventures.’

She looked away, across the river. ‘I can’t remember when I was last part of your plans.’

‘That’s unfair. Everything I do, I do for you.’

‘I didn’t ask for any of this.’

I spent the following week writing forecasts of worse weather to come. The frost, I implied, was God’s retribution for the recent imprisonment and execution of Whigs. Ever since the summer, when the Tories had uncovered a plot to murder the Duke, scores of men had been sentenced to death, as I lamented in numerous tracts.

‘How about this?’ I said to Jem as we sat with his family at dinner.

‘O, the grand old duke of York,  
He killed ten thousand men,  
He hung them up at the top of the hill,  
And he cut them down again.  
And when they were up they were hung,  
And when they were down they were drawn,  
And when they were only cut in half,  
They were cut in halves once more.’

‘That’s treasonous,’ Elizabeth said. ‘My hawkers could end up in gaol.’

‘We can’t afford to be subtle,’ Jem told her. ‘Who’ll pay a penny for a toothless ballad when they can barely afford to buy bread?’

The following week, the weather grew worse. Ice blocked the arches of the bridge and icicles grew from the eaves. When I walked north to Grub Street each morning, I either had to risk being crushed amongst the carriages, or walk at the streets’ sides and risk being impaled. Apprentices leaned out of upstairs windows to knock the icicles off with a broom, hollering ‘Watch-it’ to warn those below. Even so, the danger grew again during the day, and

each time a sign swung in the breeze or a door slammed as someone stepped onto the street, a row of spikes plummeted down.

I often worried about Nell in the damp, dripping alleys of Wapping, though she insisted that she was safer staying there than with me. In fact, I rarely ventured home during the subsequent weeks. With few supplies reaching the city, candles and coal became so scarce that we had to close the Literarium at four o'clock when it became too dark to see. Elizabeth made me a bed in their parlour so that I wouldn't have to go back to my cold, unlit house. The whole family ate supper by the light of one candle. When that burned out, there was nothing to do but go to bed until the following dawn.

And so, wearing fingerless gloves to wield our quills, my scribblers and I spent the short daylight hours penning accounts of portentous events. Of three thousand geese freezing on their walk from Norfolk to London for Christmas dinner, their drover making it as far as Stratford before he, too, perished from cold. Of a barrister dying from shock after the trunk of an oak in Lincoln's Inn Fields split in two with a terrible crack. The cold split ships' masts as well, we wrote, whilst laurels dropped their evergreen leaves. Sprouts froze in the fields of Southwark, and in the new Apothecaries' Garden in Chelsea the rosemary and myrtles snapped at their roots.

Every morning another post-boy rode dead into the city, stiff on the back of his trembling horse. Simon, my spy at the Post Office, copied me the letters prised from these boys' bags, which carried news of cottages buried by snow, their inhabitants burning the furniture to try to melt themselves free. Of Cornishmen unable to free their boats from the harbours to fish. Of Fenlanders lighting fires on the creeks to try to get at the eels.

By late December, the river had iced over at Blackwall, preventing new cargo from reaching the docks. The water in the city's standpipes had frozen, and coal had to be carried into London on sleds. There should have been plenty of meat, since each night cattle dropped dead. Yet their carcasses were so solid that it was impossible to skewer them onto spits, and they took so long to roast that many cookhouses ran out of fuel before the meat was lukewarm. Elizabeth stewed pigeons and rooks that had frozen to death. Others ate dead cats and dogs, even mice and rats. Yet, as the Bills of Mortality recorded each week, many families starved. Gravediggers had to use hammers and chisels to open up the hard earth.

Each morning, when I lit the fire in the Literarium with pages of unsold pamphlets, I found sparrows dead outside on the sill. Sometimes ravens flew into the windows, their black feathers fringed with white rime. I tried to save them, bringing the injured birds inside and feeding them crusts soaked in wine. Yet every one of them died. I dreamt of the winter before the Great Drought, when the tears I'd cried for Mother and Father froze. On those nights, speech seemed to freeze in my throat. At the breakfast table with Jem's family, I sat in silence until all my trapped words thawed at once, tumbling out in a torrent of sound.

On Christmas Day, I went home to my house on the bridge. I ate pigeon pie and sent a barrel of mulled beer to Nell. She'd turned down my invitation to dinner – she was going to visit her aunt in Essex, she wrote. Peter didn't reply, but by then our friendship had for some time lacked the warmth befitting festive cheer.

And all that time – through all the portents and reports of tragedy – the ice thickened each hour on the Thames. So that by New Year's Day, when out-of-work watermen began to set up tipping tents on the river, Londoners were ready to forget their sufferings, throw off their fears, and frolic and booze at Frost Fair.

### III.

From the quayside at Fishmongers' Hall, the sounds of the fair are clearer: the thin strain of fiddles and patter of drums, the hawkers' calls like choral song, the barking of dogs and bellowing of bulls as they're mauled. The back of my neck tingles to imagine the frenzy and blood of the baiting rings. *I've been living locked up for too long.*

At Old Swan Stairs I push my way through the people jostling to get to the pier, where a cook is dishing out broth to the poor. The meaty steam mixes with the sweet, rotting odour of bodies. I pull my cloak over my nose. The smoke is thicker here; it rasps at my nostrils and throat.

Several watermen sit with their legs dangling over the side of the pier, staring down at the ice. Their more enterprising fellows are downriver, dragging coal on sleds over the frozen marshes, or upriver selling brandy and

beer at the fair. Every week, I've reported on the war between the watermen and other traders who've encroached on their territory by setting up tents on the ice. BATTLE OF THE BEER-MONGERS. LANDLUBBERS' LIQUOR LACED WITH LAXATIVES. WATERMEN'S TENTS SET ON FIRE. As though to assert their monopoly now, several watermen circle the foot of the stairs, haranguing each person who dares to descend with offers of tug-boat rides. *Perhaps I'll buy one for Nell.* I watch a boat pull away from the pier: a wherry with skates nailed to its keel. Six watermen tug it along, whilst two more push from the rear. Inside the boat, a child whoops with delight as she clings to her father. *That could be Nell clinging to me.*

I slowly descend the salted stairs and step with care onto the ice. The soles of my shoes slip free from their grip on the earth as I walk upon water, it seems. With my arms outstretched, I veer through the circle of men.

'Watch it, whore-son,' one of them cries.

'Watch it yourself,' I shout back as I break through their ranks.

There are hillocks of ice and holes by the shore-side where ducks swim and children have drowned. My reflection wavers in one of the pools. *Away from there, quick.* I aim my steps towards the middle where it's more even. Around me, skaters shriek as they carve shaky curves on the ice. I cut through them to join the flow of fair-goers heading upstream. They spill out of the fog at each set of stairs – Coleharbour, Steel Yard, Three Cranes, Puddle Dock – joining the river like streams. Yet we all move against the current flowing under our feet.

Ahead, boys play football between two bull-baiting rings. Their shouts mingle with those of the men who urge on the dogs as they snarl and leap. Even from here I can see where the ice is stained dark by days of spilled blood. *Poor beasts.* Grandfather sold pepper to blow up the bulls' snouts to enrage them. He also sold nux vomica to poison the crippled dogs and the ones whose teeth broke when the bulls swung them around. *Thank God I'm not like him.*

I turn away, but not before another mob looms in my mind. It was the first of the Whig executions this summer. I went with Peter and Nell. An old colonel was being hung, drawn and quartered for his supposed part in the plot. As we watched his body writhe on the rope, Nell told us that her earliest

memory was there – at Tyburn – when her uncle took her to see Cromwell’s corpse, which the King’s men had dug up and hung.

‘It looked like rotten pork,’ she said, her eyes on the colonel’s twitching limbs. ‘Its juices dripped down onto a stall selling dried figs to the crowd.’

I put my arm around her shoulders. ‘God forbid we return to those days.’

‘God has nothing to do with it,’ Peter said. ‘It’s rogues like you who’ll stir up a new Civil War.’

‘It’s the Tories,’ I snapped. ‘Not us.’

‘All these lies, this violent language, this hate.’ He gestured to the baying mob all around us. ‘You think you’re not partly to blame?’

*What cant.* I realise I’m clenching my jaw. *I could do with a drink.*

A sledge passes in front of me, the horses’ hooves studded with nails. As I turn to watch it clatter towards Southwark, I spot a smaller baiting ring, this one formed by boys from perhaps ten years old to thirteen. *What are they doing?* When we were their age, Peter and I used to watch older boys taking bets when they set their dogs on a rat. *Surely there are no rats out here?*

As I walk closer, I see that they’re crouching around a young mongrel bitch – a small, scared thing – with a piece of string tied round her neck. A skinny youth holds this leash, whilst one of his fellows holds another string tied to the foot of a duck. As I approach, the mallard tries to launch itself up, flapping its wings frantically. The boys jeer as the pup cowers back. One boy thrashes her rump with a stick to encourage her to attack.

‘Hoy, you little devils,’ I cry. ‘Would you like me to thrash you like that?’

A sour-faced boy jerks the duck back. ‘I’d like to see you try.’

‘Very well.’ I take a step towards him, raising my hand. The imp leaps away, letting go of the string. Immediately, the duck takes off in a bluster of feathers, trailing the string as it hurtles over my head. The boys all leap to their feet.

‘You bastard,’ the boy with the stick cries. ‘That was our supper. Now what will we eat?’

‘Here,’ I reach into my pocket. ‘Buy a roast duck at the fair.’

The skinny youth darts forward to snatch my sixpence. The puppy whimpers as he drags her along.

I look down at the poor creature. She flinches as I bend to fondle her soft, drooping ears. I look up at the boy, already regretting what I will say.

‘Sell me that pup and I’ll give you another sixpence.’

He glances back at his fellows.

‘The bitch is a shilling,’ sour-face says.

‘I’ve already named my price.’

The other boys grumble:

‘I haven’t had a pie this year.’

‘Nor I.’

‘A dinner’s worth more than a dog.’

‘Fine.’ The skinny boy lifts the pup by the scruff of her neck. I give him the sixpence and take her from him. She doesn’t struggle. Her body is light in my arms.

‘Now, be off with you all.’

‘Good riddance,’ sour-face says.

The boys turn at once, whooping as they skate and slide over the ice to the fair.

Alone, I look down at my prize, her dark fur matted with dirt. *She’s too pathetic a present for Nell.* I stroke her small, wrinkled head.

‘What on earth will I do with you?’

She looks up at me with doleful brown eyes. I sigh and open my cloak to button her inside my jacket. Her body trembles against my chest. It’s a long time since I’ve been touched there by something so warm and alive.

#### IV.

I enter the fair at Freezeland Street: the main thoroughfare that stretches from Temple Stairs to the Southwark bank. Tents made of sail-cloth flank either side, their scaffolds made from crossed oars. The sides of the tents billow outwards, then snap back, whilst bright-coloured streamers flap. Beaus in furs greet one other with bows, lawyers and clerks shout like they’re still in their Inns, wives gossip, and stall-holders cry out their wares.

Most stalls sell liquor or trinkets. No plum puddings or gingerbread: the boats carrying sugar and currants cannot land at Custom House. Instead there are baked apples and moorhen pies. The smells make my belly growl, but I have to consider my purse. I want to treat Nell to a roast-beef dinner, and there are amusements to pay for: skittles, cudgels, tug-boat rides. *We have to have a good time.*

As I walk, I look for the perfect present: one that will make her clap her hands with delight. Beaver hats and fox-fur muffs are too lavish. Earthenware, pewter, copper and tin are all too ordinary. Even the choicest sweetmeats and fruits – dates, walnuts, preserved lemons – seem too coarse. I place my hand on my cloak where the pup rests beneath, its breast beating against mine. *These things can't show her my heart.*

It's only when I see the sign for E. FOGG'S ART AND MYSTERY OF PRINTING, with the following notice underneath, that I know I've found the right gift.

6D TO HAVE YOUR NAME PRINTED WITH TODAY'S DATE AND  
THE WONDROUS WORDS: *AT FREEZELAND STREET ON THE ICE.*

I join the long row of people waiting to have their names immortalised. I picture my own name next to Nell's: a remembrance of our day together but also a token that one day our names shall forever be joined.

As the people ahead of me shuffle along, I watch the printer at work. He's a surly-faced man, his hair lank and grey under his cap. He operates the press on his own, setting the metal letters to add each customer's name to the type set, then dabbing on the ink quickly, before it can freeze.

One after another, men, women and children watch their names fixed forever in the meeting of paper and ink. One after another, they part with their sixpences, which the printer stows in an iron-clad chest. I try to calculate what he must make: at this rate – and his swift movements seem ceaseless – it could be as much as five pounds a day. And that's not including his other wares, which flutter on lines hung from the tent. They're mostly ballads about the Great Frost. From the fragments I manage to read whilst I wait, it seems that the fishwives in Watton's could rhyme with more skill and grace.



IF MY INK WERE NOT AS CONGEALED AS IT,  
I'D ON THE SUBJECT OF THIS ICE SHOW A POET'S WIT.

Worse:

MEN DO ON HORSE-BACK RIDE FROM SHORE TO SHORE,  
WHICH FORMERLY IN BOATS WERE WAFTED O'RE.

And worse still:

NO FAIR UNDER THE SKIES,  
CAN OFFER YOU MORE VARIETIES.

I'm still gazing up at this last one when I find myself at the front.

'Yes?' The printer's face is red and sweating. 'Which one do you want?'

'What?'

'Which ballad?'

'None. They're dreadful.'

He gives me a withering stare. 'You can do better, I suppose?'

'I already have.' I clear my throat.

'Where boats did once row,  
Men walk to and fro,  
Before two months are ended, 'twill hardly be so.  
With fear and with care,  
We arrive at the fair,  
Where wenches sell trinkets and cracked earthen-ware.'

The printer narrows his eyes. 'Any more?'

I shrug. 'The fish which abounded,

Though they can't be drowned,  
For lack of their liquor, I fear, are confounded.'

He laughs. 'What do you want?'

'I want my name with my sweetheart's. Nell Skinner. Nathaniel Spicer. Next to each other.'

'Two names will be twelve pence.'

'I'll give you six pence plus those rhymes.'

He moves to the press and begins arranging the letters. 'Write me the entire ballad and I'll give twelve pence to you.'

'I can't. I'm meeting a friend.'

'This friend Nell Skinner? Double n?'

I nod.

‘Trying to tumble her, Nathaniel Spicer? That Spicer with an i or a y?’

‘I.’

‘Good.’ He sets the type and dabs on the ink. I watch him fold down the lid and, with a few fluid motions, join my name forever with Nell’s.

‘Here.’ He passes me the piece of paper, still gleaming with ink. ‘Give me your sixpence. Come back tomorrow if you have more success with your words than your wooing.’

‘I’m sure that won’t be the case.’

I turn away. Behind me, the ballads flap in the breeze. In a few weeks’ time, those pages will be used to wrap up spices or wipe an ale-wife’s arse. Even if my name did appear on their covers, there’d be no copies that last.

*I’ll never be more than ANON.*

I shake my head. *No more of such thoughts.* One day, Nell and I will have children. That’s enough legacy.

The bells on both banks chime one o’clock. I still have time for a drink.

## V.

I warm my insides with brandy in a tent called the Flying Piss Pot, slipping scraps of duck-wing to the pup under my cloak. She licks my fingers daintily.

‘I’ll call you Lady,’ I tell her. ‘Let’s hope you bring me luck.’

From here, I can watch the acts in the theatrical tent opposite. I drink my first brandy whilst watching a rope-dancer teeter above the gapers’ heads.

‘She’s not as graceful as Nell,’ I tell Lady.

‘Another one, Sir?’ the waterman says. I nod to him and watch the amber liquid trickle into my cup.

I drink my second brandy whilst a man, naked except for a loincloth, walks across hot coals on the ice. I wince to imagine his skin singeing like the soles of my shoes after the fire.

‘That’s what hell smells like,’ I tell Lady.

‘Another one, Sir?’

I nod, remembering the animal smell of scorched leather, like catching one's wig in a candle flame, the hairs charred and curling like snakes.

I drink my third brandy whilst a young sword swallower gently eases a long, sharp blade down her throat. I look away as the hilt reaches her lips.

'Another, Sir?'

I shake my head. I'm beginning to feel rather sick.

I stagger from the tent and along Freezeland Street towards Temple Stairs. The brandy has suffused my entire body with warmth, though this sudden heat seems to be melting the ice under my feet. As I stumble along, buoyed by the waves rising and falling beneath me, I spy a portrait-painter's tent.

'Wouldn't that be a thing, Lady: to have him paint Nell!'

She yelps as I pat her too hard.

'Sir, how much for a portrait large enough to hang above my fireplace?'

The painter looks up from his easel, where he's painting the image of a rosy-cheeked child, despite the fact that his young subject's face is set in a scowl.

'Two guineas for a painting twice this size.'

'Two guineas, man? Are you mad?'

'If you'd prefer a miniature, Sir, it will cost you a shilling.'

'I'm offering you the chance to paint the greatest beauty of our Age. *You* should be paying *me*.'

'That's what they all say,' the scoundrel replies.

I stumble on, muttering to Lady. 'When we're married, I'll have a real artist paint Nell. You can sit at her feet like those pugs that fawn on a painted princess.'

'Diamond ring, Sir?'

I'm interrupted by an old man with several gold teeth, who has placed himself in my path.

'Out of my way.'

'Beautiful diamonds, Sir, sparkling as ice.'

I try to sidestep past.

‘Ladies love them. Perfect for wooing. At only six shillings, you’ll love them too.’

I whirl around so sharply that I lose my balance and have to grab hold of his sleeve.

‘How much?’

‘Sir, you’ve literally twisted my arm. For you, I’ll do it for five shillings, sixpence. But that’s my final price.’

I snort. ‘Do I look like a fool?’

‘No, Sir, you don’t.’ He taps a gold tooth. ‘I’ll be honest with you. They fell off the back of a cart.’ He looks over his shoulder, then draws a small leather box from his coat. He opens it to reveal a gold ring with a diamond the size of a hazelnut. He holds the box up to my eye and tilts it so that I can see the light dazzle and dance.

I hold my breath, imagining Nell’s delight. *She’ll melt into my arms.*

‘I’ll take it.’

‘Excellent, Sir.’ The old man plucks out the ring and quickly snaps the box shut. From another pocket, he produces a small packet made of silver paper and slips the ring inside. ‘A little wrapping to make it more special.’ Deftly, he ties a red ribbon around the packet and holds out his other hand. I give him my coins and he hands me the packet.

‘Keep it safe, Sir. There are plenty of rogues hereabouts.’

I nod and tuck it inside my coat pocket with the piece of paper that bears both our names. When I look up, the old man has gone. I stagger onwards, smiling to imagine the ring on Nell’s finger and her lips warm upon mine.

## VI.

When I reach Temple Stairs, out of breath from the effort of trying to keep myself upright, Nell is already there. I spot her sitting on the edge of the quay, swinging her legs to keep warm. The trees behind her are full of children, chattering like monkeys as they peer down at a puppet show on the ice. I watch Nell as she watches the play. She’s swathed herself in a red shawl, her shoulders curved against the cold. Only the dimple in her left

cheek, deepening each time she laughs at the puppets, hints at her plump body beneath. Somehow, she's grown more radiant whilst everyone else has grown thin.

I climb the stairs, hoping to surprise her, but of course she turns and sees me. By the time I've reached the top, she's walking towards me along the edge of the quay.

'What's that you're hiding?' she says.

'What? Oh.' I open my cloak to show her Lady's head. 'I rescued her from a group of rogues. They were beating her with sticks.'

'Poor thing.' Nell strokes Lady's brow.

'You can have her. She'll make a good lapdog.'

She shakes her head quickly. *What's wrong?*

'You're trembling, Nell. Take my cloak.'

'I'm not cold.'

I reach out to take her hand. 'Forgive me. I shouldn't have neglected you, Nell. I've missed you terribly.'

'Nat – ' She looks away, towards the carriages plying the river upstream, then sighs. 'I've missed you too.'

I offer my arm. 'Let's take a stroll. Then we can find somewhere to eat.'

A shudder passes across her face. 'I'm not hungry.'

'Later, then.' Again, I offer my arm. She rests her hand lightly on my sleeve as we descend the river stairs. At the bottom, however, when I step onto the ice and turn to help her, I have to grab hold of her hand to stop myself slipping instead.

'Careful,' she says, pulling her hand from my grip and touching her stomach gingerly as she steps down.

I follow her along Freezeland Street. She looks at the stalls, not at me.

'Brandy?' I say as we pass a tipping tent.

'I don't think that will help with your balance.'

We walk on in silence, the liquor I've drunk – or perhaps something else: a presentiment – suddenly sour in my mouth.

'I bought you a present,' I blurt. 'Two, actually.' *Slow down.* 'I wanted to show you I care.' People push past as I clumsily pull the paper

from out of my pocket. We're standing in the middle of the thoroughfare.  
*Idiot. Why do it here?*

She takes the paper I offer and glances at the people milling around us before she reads it aloud. 'Nathaniel Spicer. Nell Skinner. February the first, 1684. At Freezeland Street on the ice.' She smiles, but with the same tender pity with which she petted Lady's head.

'That's not all.' I draw the ring out from my pocket. Its silver wrapping is wet.

'What is it?'

'Wait.' I untie the ribbon and tear the wet tissue impatiently. I expect Nell to gasp when she sees it, but I'm the one gasping when I see that the diamond has disappeared.

'I don't understand.' Then, suddenly, I do. *Beautiful diamonds, Sir, sparkling as ice.*

I lift the ring and scrape its metal. *You fool.* The gold comes off in flakes.

'Careful.' Nell moves the piece of paper aside. A droplet of my melted diamond has dripped onto the ink. She brushes it away with her finger, smudging the border above her own name.

## VII.

We're almost at Halfway House, the music booth in the middle of the Thames, before I look at her again. The scraping of fiddles and screeching of bagpipes is beginning to make my head sing.

'Let's stop here for a drink.'

She follows me into the Freeze Fare Coffee-House, where I buy a dish of chocolate for her and one of coffee for me. The floor of the tent is lined with rushes and a fire burns at the back where the copper pots bubble and hiss.

Not far from the tent, a mountebank has climbed up on a stool to proclaim his miraculous cures. Nell watches him distractedly, barely sipping her drink.

'That was me once,' I say.

Her eyes seem to search my face. ‘Do you ever wish that you’d stayed an apothecary?’

‘No. I like what I do.’

She nods but says nothing.

‘Why? Do you wish that I had?’

‘At least then you sold something harmless.’

‘My potions were no better than that charlatan’s ar-e.’ I stop myself saying arse.

‘And what about what you write now?’

‘It was you who taught me to make the marvellous out of real parts.’

She shakes her head. ‘The creatures I make fool a few people, but they don’t harm anyone.’

‘Neither does what I write.’

‘You always want to escape into stories, but words can hurt people too.’

‘I haven’t hurt anyone, Nell.’

‘You hurt me.’

She looks down at the table. When the coffee-boy passes she hands him her dish.

Lady stirs against my chest. *Now. You can turn this around.*

‘I can be better,’ I say, grasping her hand.

‘Nat –’

‘I love you.’

‘Please listen.’

‘No. Let me say this. I can give you a home, a future. I’ll be a good husband to you.’

‘Nat, I’m with child.’

I let go of her hand. The bustle of the fair continues around us.

*No.*

‘It’s not possible.’ I feel like I might choke.

Again, she touches her belly. This time, I look properly. It’s rounded beneath her red shawl.

‘Nat, I’m sorry.’

I almost whisper: ‘Is it Peter’s?’

She presses her lips together. 'I didn't mean for this to happen. He's not like you, Nat. He didn't –' She places her hand on my arm. 'You've always been patient with me.'

I shake her off roughly. 'Much good that did.'

'Please –' She continues to speak, but I don't hear her. The pictures crowd in my head. Her and Peter, together. Naked. Her body pressed against his. His pale hands on her freckled breasts. The two of them gasping. Whispering. Laughing. The two of them laughing at me.

I stand up, but before I can speak I hear the terrible sound of a crack. The people passing stand still to listen. The floe is shifting beneath us, but I feel as though the entire city might fall.

'Nat,' Nell says. 'I don't know what to do. Peter won't marry me. They could send me to Bridewell. They could take my child away.'

I step back, knocking over my stool. 'Perhaps that's what you deserve.'

'Don't, Nat. Please, I need your help. Neither of us is what the other one hoped we would be.'

I turn and try to walk away, though I cannot feel my feet. All I can feel is the shock of pain, as though I've plunged through the ice, breathless and numbed by the freezing cold water beneath.



**THE NINTH TALE**

**In the Pillory, 1685**

*Dear Friends, it is nearly dawn. My ink bottle is almost empty; so is my bottle of gin. Soon it will be time for me to put down my pen: my arc is nearly complete. There, against the brightening sky, I imagine its model: the bulging dome of St Paul's. In my mind it swells like a woman's belly – pregnant with the future's promises – flanked by the thrusting ambition of Mr Wren's masculine spires.*

Go, let us build a city; and let us make us a name.

*How long before the cathedral walls are begrimed by sea-coal: the commodity upon whose taxes they were built? How long before its façade is marred by names carved into the stone or scrawled upon it with chalk?*

*I, too, am begrimed by the commodities with which I made my mark. As Nell said, words can harm. It was a scribbler who said that the goose-quill is more to be feared than the sword. Unlike the sword, though, the quill cuts both ways. In the end, it was my own words that authored my fall.*

*My rise out of the ashes and waste of old London – like Grandfather Gert's carrots – was modest compared to the rise of some men. Yet – like his tulips – my worth was overblown. This final tale tells of my fall – February 1685, at Fleet Street – when I was pelted with vegetables, flowers and turds – my name marred as well as my body – as I stood in the pillory.*

## I.

I wait, craning my neck to peer up through the bars, my back against the damp prison wall and my wrists and ankles in chains. I am twenty-seven years old. Fear makes me shiver with sweat. Above, a skein of geese cross the sky, shrieking, then disappear. *If only I could disappear too.* I can smell the dead cats and offal floating nearby in the canal. Such filth will be flung at my face.

*Don't think of that yet.* It's not dead cats, rotten eggs or offal that I most dread, though I've heard that their stench has made more hardened sinners than me swoon or be sick. A crueller missile – a potato or brick – could maim me. I don't want to spend the rest of my life blind, disfigured or lame.

*Wretch. You'll be to blame.*

I peer up, towards Ludgate Hill, but I cannot see the unfinished cathedral. Of all the unholy places that lie in its shadow, Fleet Prison must be the worse. Here, the dark side of the city festers beneath its public face. Yet I'd rather spend the rest of my life alone in this cell than face what's coming today. Even the crowded squalor of Marshalsea Common Side, from where the guards dragged me last night, seems like a haven now. I lift my chained hands to touch my face. *Such weak, bruisable flesh.*

My sentence didn't seem so frightening when the judge pronounced it one month ago. Guilty of seditious libel, not treason, I am to be pilloried. Exposed to public abuse; made a spectacle of; disgraced. Placed on a platform, head and hands locked in a frame and turned around so that the mob on all sides can get a good view and aim.

*And what a mob it will be.* All of London will be out on the streets mourning the death of the King. Only poison – they say – could have caused his sudden decline. A fortnight ago he suffered a fit; two days ago, he died. His doctors – a debtor in Marshalsea told me – were undoubtedly part of the plot. The Duke – a guard whispered on the way here – has still not shown his face.

*Will the rumours help or hinder me today?* On the one hand, my stories seem more believable now. On the other, the grieving rabble might mistake me for one of the plotters. If so, they'll pelt me to death.

*Breathe.* I close my eyes and lean forward. *If I were free, what defence would I write?* These past weeks in Marshalsea, I've written dozens of Full and True Accounts of a Hero Wronged in my head. They helped me to stave off the loneliness when no one visited me. Jem would have come, were he not in hiding. *The other bastards don't care.*

I push away the memory of Crackfart's men overturning the tables in my Literarium and smashing the presses downstairs. Lady's yelps as they kicked her and the cries of my scribblers as they fell under the officers' blows. One of the men seized Margery's drawings and, laughing, grabbed at her breasts. Afterwards, I sent her money, begging her to look after Lady, but I never heard from her again. Perhaps by now my little dog is dead or half-starved on the street.

Who else loves me, other than Lady? Not Nell; she has her baby. *Grace*, she wrote last autumn, *a girl*. As for Peter, even if he'd wanted to visit, it would have been to humiliate me.

I open my eyes and crane my neck again to look up through the bars.  
*I'll show them. I don't need anyone; they'll see.*

## II.

At first, after the Frost Fair ended last February, I chased my childhood dreams. That's the only way I can explain why I searched for an underground orchard as the ice swept out to sea.

The thaw started on the evening that I turned my back on Nell, with the steady drip, drip of the icicles that hung from the arches and eaves. That was when the creaking began, as the ice on the river heaved with the force of the water beneath. All night I was woken by ear-splitting cracks. Afterwards, the shifting floe seemed to shriek.

The next morning, the watermen scrambled to take down their stalls, but by midday large pools had formed and several families had to be rescued by planks laid from the wharves. I watched the panic from my desk in the garret, pen and paper in front of me, though all day I wrote not a word. The people below on the river seemed far away and absurd. I'd sent a message to Jem to say that I was ill with a fever, though in my imagination I roamed

through the city, lashing out at passers-by, smashing shop windows just to hear the glass shatter and shouting my hurt to the world.

By evening, the ice had broken into large blocks that bumped and jostled downstream, knocking the trapped boats keel-up and crushing their timber like teeth. That night, as I lay in bed picturing Peter and Nell – their hands, their heaving bodies, their mouths – the bridge shook, struck by ice and debris. At sunrise, I looked out to see fragments of the fair caught below on each pier: broken oars and waterlogged canvas, hawkers' baskets, barrels of brandy and streamers that waved in the current like weed.

Just as my anger after the plagues had set fire to the city, now it broke up the ice. I remembered how I'd walked eastwards then, when marigolds grew in Ratcliffe Highway and the forest of masts stretched as far as I could see. Once again, it seemed natural to follow the river. For weeks, the world had been frozen, but now everything strained to be free.

Before I left, I pulled Father's knapsack out from under my bed. I took out Peter's fragments of glass, their edges sharp like the shard in my heart. I carried them down to the shop and threw them into a sack. Then, from the shelves and hooks around me, I pulled down Nell's monsters: the hydra and phoenix; a basilisk that she made me one summer; a tiny hummingbird. I stuffed them all in the sack. Lady watched me from where I'd made her a bed by the hearth, her eyes large and afraid.

'Don't cower,' I said as I lifted her up to button her inside my jacket. 'Let's go.'

Outside, I barely saw my surroundings. I was already imagining the underground orchard in which I would bury my feelings for Peter and Nell. I tried to recall where, years ago, the naval clerk had said it was found. Beyond the Isle of Dogs: Blackwall, perhaps, or Bow Creek. As boys, Peter and I had not searched that far east. Now, I imagined climbing down into the pit and stifling my memories in the mud beneath the stone trees.

'Hush, Lady,' I said as she whimpered inside my coat. 'It makes sense to me.'

And so I walked, following the ice that had broken through the arches of the bridge and now drifted east. Beyond the Tower I left the river's course, walking along Ratcliffe Highway to avoid Wapping, trying not to wonder

whether Nell was alone in her shop, whether she was crying, or sick, or afraid.

‘Why should I pity her?’ I asked Lady. ‘What thought did she give to me?’

At the end of the Highway I met the river again as it curved north. Here, the current flowed quicker and blocks of ice swept past on a brown torrent, churning as fast as my thoughts.

On I walked through the village of Limehouse, past the smokeless cottages and the cold, unlit kilns. Watermen passed, pulling sleds filled with coal. They stared at me: a wild-eyed man with a pup’s head poking out from his coat and an old sack stained red with spice. But I merely walked on. The river now looped away to the south, but I kept a straight course through the fields, away from the ropeyards, the sail-makers, mast-makers and chandlers on the Isle of Dogs. On I stomped, over the thawing ground of the causeway, through the open flats of Poplar Marsh, until I reached the river as it looped back around.

There, where a long, black wall fronted the Thames, I stopped, suddenly tired. I gazed at the docks and shipyards clustered around the curved shore, realizing the futility of what I sought. Even if an orchard had once been discovered beneath these mudbanks, it had long been built over, filled in. The enchanted world of my childhood was gone. This was a working port.

‘What a farce,’ I said as I set Lady down on the wall. ‘After all these adventures, there’s just us two: a fool and his mongrel dog.’

What was left but to sit on the wall and watch the ice fracture and melt? To watch the ships, which had for so long been frozen solid, bob and rock in the surge of floodwater. To watch the jagged white blocks as they eddied and tipped on their turbulent way out to sea.

As I watched, I imagined walking to the shore, kneeling to find a stone, slipping it into my pocket, then another, then another, then plunging straight in. The cold would feel like a thousand knives before the shock made me numb. What a relief it would be to be drained of all feeling. To let the current pull me along whilst the stones and the sack dragged me down. To sink into the welcoming dark – empty of all thought, all memory, all pain – beneath the ice, water and mud.

I pushed myself away from the wall; my feet seemed to float as I walked. Behind me, Lady whined. At the water's edge I wavered. It was not just ice that bobbed on the surface, but duck-bones, apple cores, splinters of wood. *Worthless waste.* I took a deep breath. *Why should I sink without trace?* I turned to look at Lady, straining her neck towards me as she barked from the top of the wall. I lifted my arm and with a strangled cry threw the sack into the flood. It splashed and disappeared for a moment, then resurfaced and span. For a fleeting moment my heart buoyed to see it sail. Then it sank and was gone.

### III.

My heart sinks now as I sit in Fleet Prison, waiting to be dragged like a common criminal to stand in the pillory. *Perhaps I should have ended everything then.* What's worse, I wonder, to be forgotten or to be remembered with shame? Not to make a mark at all or to make a notorious name?

It was not to make a name for myself that I plotted my most audacious sham: the one that landed me here. It was for my own, bitter gratification. I wanted to turn the world on its head, to shake history by making it up.

*The only worthwhile writing is real.* That's what Dryden said. But Dryden was one of the rule-making rogues whom I ached to overturn. After the long stagnation of the Great Frost, the Tories had tightened their grip. For the first time in years, the King ruled unopposed. The Earl of Shaftesbury was dead, and those Whigs still alive were either imprisoned or fled. Crackfart wrote unopposed too. With news-printing outlawed, there was only his *London Gazette* to report events at home and abroad. If an account didn't appear in those pages, then it didn't count. Tell a different story and you risked arrest. Yet I had nothing to lose.

That, at least, is what I told myself – and what I told Jem.

'You promised we'd be the greatest literary force in London,' I said as we drank gin in a Grub Street tavern at the beginning of March last year. 'But we're still mere pirates and printers of trash. Something has to change.'

'Things were different when I said that.'

‘So let’s make them different again. If our trade thrives on unrest, why don’t we create it ourselves?’

And so we agreed the first stage of my plan: stirring up rumours and strife.

‘Pay attention,’ I said as I stood on a table in the Literarium to address my scribblers. ‘We need three different kinds of false news. From Claude to Geoff: you’re panegyric. Mark to Bridget: you’re topographical. Charles to Solomon: you’re philosophical. Margery, you’ll do the maps.’

And so we set to work. My panegyric team wrote eulogies to lament the deaths of men who were still alive. I wrote the first one myself, describing how Mr Dryden had suddenly burst into flames, leaving behind only a pile of ash and the smell of his favourite snuff.

My topographical team wrote advertisements to announce that Custom House, Guildhall and various Companies had moved to new premises. They also wrote erroneous guides to London’s sights. Margery left her usual work drawing naked couples to make inaccurate maps. Meanwhile, I wrote pamphlets describing new lands just discovered, and ballads lamenting foreign cities burned to the ground.

The philosophical team were my favourite. They wrote pamphlets describing discoveries made by the Royal Society, such as the fact that Mr Hooke had proven that air changes weight at different heights. Words were found to be weightier when spoken at low altitudes, where they might freeze, and light-hearted when spoken at height, where they might float away. I also wrote a pamphlet describing the invention of a lens so powerful that the King’s men could spy on citizens through their keyholes, and could even penetrate their earholes to read their innermost thoughts.

By the end of April, our efforts were taking effect. Elizabeth’s hawkers reported that people ran up to them in the streets begging for news. No one could agree who was dead or alive. Visitors and citizens alike became lost. People no longer trusted the privacy of their own homes or minds. It was then that I knew that I could begin the next stage of my design.

First, I bribed Simon and three other copyists at the Post Office to alter the letters they wrote.



‘It’s very simple,’ I told them when we met in a boat rowed by a waterman known as Deaf Joe. ‘Put the false letters into the original envelopes to be resealed and sent on their way.’

Simon frowned. ‘People aren’t fools. Our lies won’t last a day.’

‘Choose letters from reliable senders: they’re more likely to be believed. And make sure you include enough real information to make the fictions seem true.’

Alone in my garret early each morning, and in the Literarium late into the night, I plotted the larger story that these letters needed to tell. First, I instructed my copyists to include news of shipwrecks and pirate attacks. We began this during the first week of June, and by Midsummer’s Day not only the merchants who received the false letters, but also their investors and insurers, were thrown into disarray. Every morning, I stopped at the Exchange on my way to Grub Street, where I saw rich men weep in the courtyard and riot in the shops of the goldsmith-bankers, where they begged and jostled for loans.

Soon afterwards, I began the second strand of the story: rumours of Dutch and Portuguese forces having invaded our outposts at Java, St Helena and Hudson’s Bay. Of French and Italian armies amassing troops on their borders. Of mutinies, coups and invasions all across the known world. Now, in the mornings, I strolled along Thames Street to watch naval clerks and Company agents rush to tell their superiors the grave tidings they’d received. Those superiors rushed to inform the Duke and King. My informant at Court told me that during the first week of July, so many messengers arrived and departed by barge and on horseback that Westminster Stairs resembled a dockyard and the Palace itself a stable yard, with dung-heaps half a foot deep.

I began the third strand of the story during the hottest week of the year.

‘This is our climax,’ I told my copyists. ‘The stroke of genius that will take down the Tories. Since they don’t have a real opposition, we’ll create a phantom one.’

And so, as they copied their letters, Simon and his fellows slipped in rumours of invasion plans being hatched by exiled Whigs. Reports of plots that country gentlemen had overheard in inns. The Tories who received this intelligence set about raiding houses and arresting citizens. In trying to

establish the truth of the claims, they therefore merely gave the rumours more force. By August, when the sun beat down so strongly that the haze made the air quiver, the people I passed in the city's streets seemed to walk in a daze.

Now, the time was ripe to begin the final stage of my plan. With so much confusion, the public were desperate for news. Of course, Jem and I could not legally publish sheets or pamphlets of news, though we could, with impunity, publish tracts in support of the King.

'It's perfect,' I told Lady one night in the Literarium, where I'd started to sleep. 'We denounce the plotters, thus conferring credibility upon our own lies. Next, we publish protests against the foreign powers and pirates disrupting our trade. More fictions confirmed! Then, when the rumours of invasions and disasters prove false – as they eventually will – we simply change our tack. How? Lady, that's the best bit! We'll publish pamphlets to denounce the outrageous wiles of the Whigs. Don't you see? It was the Whigs who fabricated the rumours to scare the monarchy. Such callous deception cannot go unpunished, we'll say. Even if there are hundreds of conspirators working to undermine the government – nay, *thousands*, we'll write – they cannot fool us into believing that the realm is divided and weak.'

In the weeks of frenzied scribbling that followed, I barely thought about Nell. I didn't have time for washing either. Elizabeth was too busy for laundry, since she'd devised an elaborate system of false imprints and ways to distribute our pamphlets so that no one would realize our ruse. When my clothes stank I simply sent someone out to buy me a shirt. I also sent Jem's children to the cookhouse each day to fetch my dinner, to the coffee-house to bring back pots of coffee, and to take Lady out to do her business, so that I could get on with mine.

Only at night did I venture outside to find the nearest whore. They, too, were hungry for news, begging me to whisper rumours into their ears before I parted their thighs.

Thus London had become like the city of Babel, confounded by a confusion of language, and I was the vengeful god who looked on, enjoying the chaos I'd made.

#### IV.

The sound of a key in the lock. Boots on the cobblestones outside. Guards grumbling. The cell door grating. My blood churning. *It's time.*

‘Stand up, villain. Let’s go.’

‘I’m no villain,’ I say as I stand.

‘Quiet.’ The guard unlocks the shackles around my wrists. ‘Turn around.’ He wrenches my arms behind my back and manacles me again.

‘I don’t regret what I did. What was my crime? Writing what people wanted to read?’

He grunts.

‘I said: I DON’T REGRET IT.’

The guard twists the chain’s metal into my wrist. ‘I bet you regret getting caught.’

I don’t reply. My mouth is twisted in pain.

He stoops and I imagine kicking his face as he unfastens the chain that fetters my ankles to a ring-bolt in the floor. He’s right: my mistake was to forget how fickle the public can be. Sometimes the people want conflict, sometimes they want certainty. Like a pendulum, it swings back and forth. *Perhaps it was my fault it swung.*

‘Start walking.’ The guard shoves me towards the door. ‘The crowd’s already clamouring for you.’

*My adoring public await.*

#### V.

The mob surrounds me as we reach the bridge and begin to cross the fetid sink of Fleet Ditch. I cannot protect my nose from the stink: my wrists throb behind in the chains. I try to ignore the faces that gape and guffaw on all sides. It’s a cold winter’s morning, yet the shame is making me sweat.

‘Hoy, whoreson, have this.’

A stone strikes me beneath my left ear. I cry out and the crowd push and jeer. A second guard moves to shield my left side. *Don’t show any fear.*

‘Stop stalling, you wretch.’ The guard behind kicks the back of my knee, making me buckle. The guards on either side haul me upwards and on.

Now, as we step onto the bank, we pass the warren of taverns where, in establishments such as The Cock and Hoop or The Lock and Key, the clock hands stand always at nine, so that marriages might be legal at any time. In the lewd alleys outside, marriage-mongers ply for custom, tempting young couples in.

‘Sir, will you be married today?’ One wag cries as I pass. ‘We’ve plenty of brides who’ll kiss a bruised face, so long as your cock is unscathed.’

Even the guard behind hoots with laughter. I bite the inside of my cheek.

All around me, newsboys, children, even beggars crane to see my face. *Do they know who I am?* Many merely seem pleased to see a stranger disgraced.

Even the Fleet Street whores are smiling, peering from the alleys and doorways. Flashes of colour catch my eye: tawdry skirts and silk fans. *Thank God I’m not known to them here.* I lower my head and try to walk faster, though the guard in front is now having to push his way through the crowd.

‘Come here, Sir. I’ll ease your troubles.’

‘I can tie you up if that’s what you like.’

‘I’ll whip you soundly, naughty boy.’

‘Forget yourself in my arms.’

Their voices are coarse but their calls are siren-like. I think of the whores on Grub Street, with their wigs and patches, painted faces and masks. *How many were old enough to be my mother?* Gin both whetted my appetite and dulled my palate. *How many of them did I swive?*

In the months before my arrest, when I was thrusting each night between the legs of women whose names I didn’t want to know, I barely thought about Nell. It was in the mornings that I remembered her, when the sun slanted warm and golden and the bedsheet beside me was cold.

*Where is Nell now?* I glance up, searching the faces around me, but of course she isn’t here. *Why would she be?* I haven’t seen her in over a year. Not even after she wrote last summer to tell me she’d given birth. Not even after she asked me to visit. She said they were doing well.

*Does she still care about me?* She must have known of my trial. Perhaps she bought the *Gazette* to read as she nursed her child. Perhaps she was impressed by the boldness of my failed scheme.

‘Mr Spicer, you can have me for free if your tail is as big as your lies.’

A pretty strumpet blows me a kiss whilst her companions whistle and laugh. I feign a rakish smile and bow.

‘Madam, you don’t know the half.’

## VI.

And so I find myself approaching the pillory. We’ve passed Fetter Lane and now, ahead, I can see the wooden frame erected at Temple Bar. Lawyers lean from the windows above and a crowd surrounds the platform, waiting for me to arrive. *Too many; they’ll pelt me to death.* I look back, but the guard has already lowered his pike.

‘If you bolt, I’ll gore you,’ he says.

I walk on, trying to slow my breath. From Chancery Lane, a large cart trundles into the street, forcing the people ahead to halt as it crosses their path. Their curses are loud, but not as loud as the crash the cart makes as it suddenly tilts, spilling dozens of wicker baskets and blocking the street.

‘What’s going on?’ The guard shouts in front.

‘A wheel’s come off,’ someone yells back. ‘The damn thing’s full of live chicks.’

Now, all five guards are cursing and trying to push their way through the throng. On each side of me, one grabs my shoulder and hauls me along. Ahead, the carthorses whinny and rear. The people around them surge back, whilst others scramble to chase the chicks that have escaped. The carter leaps down and begins waving his arms, making the uproar worse.

‘Calm those horses,’ a guard bellows.

‘Thieves!’ Thieves!’ The carter cries. He glances in my direction. I grin. Beneath his wide-brimmed hat, I recognize Jem. *Trust him to make a scene.*

The guard behind seizes my collar. ‘I’ll hold him,’ he calls to his fellows. ‘Get this bedlam under control.’

The others elbow their way towards the cart as the guard thrusts me along. I try to keep sight of Jem. Beyond the bent heads of the people trying to catch the chicks, I spy a procession emerging from Chancery Lane towards the pillory, their path protected by the overturned cart. The men carry stacks of paper and the women baskets of flowers. I recognise Elizabeth’s hawkers. Irish Jane. Blind Fanny. Old Cassie. Lame Nan. Above the squawking, whinnying and shouting, I can just about make out their cries.

‘Read the truth!’

‘Pilloried for defending the rights of the people!’

‘Primroses!’

‘Bluebells!’

‘Strew the hero with blooms!’

‘This is your doing,’ the guard growls in my ear.

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

*At last! Hero of my own tale.* I crane my neck to watch the hawkers pass behind the cart. Judging by those stacks of paper, Jem has printed thousands of broadsides in my defence. *I hope he gave a good account of me.* With luck, the hawkers will have time to sway the crowd before the guards can get past.

‘For God’s sake, clear the street!’ The guard almost lifts me off my feet as he pulls me forwards. ‘And arrest that damn yokel too.’

But the broad-brimmed hat has disappeared. Two guards struggle to subdue the horses, whilst the other two try to clear a path around the back of the cart.

A bare-headed man bumps into me. I meet his eye for a moment and wink. Jem melts back into the crowd.

## VII.

By the time the guards have jostled me through the overturned crates strewn with feathers, along the last stretch of Fleet Street and up onto the platform, the hawkers have already stirred up the horde surrounding the pillory. Now,

I hear cheering as well as jeers as I look out over the crowd. Some wave broadsheets in the air or hold up fistfuls of flowers. Others brandish the missiles they came with: turnips, cat guts and turds.

*Above, the sky is huge and blue. Lord, please let me live.*

The guards push me roughly towards the wooden frame. They force my head forwards as they unchain my wrists. Everything seems suddenly, unnaturally clear: the dark grain of the wood, the splinters, the dirt. Sounds, though, seem to have dimmed. I hear the shouts around me as though I'm inside a tunnel. My whole world seems to have narrowed, like light that a lens has converged to a focus. Even my breath seems too slow.

*Head up. Look like a hero.* My limbs feel heavy as the guards thrust my hands into place. Finally, they push my head down. I feel them lower and lock the top part of the pillory, imprisoning me in the holes. Instinctively, I struggle. *Get out, Nathaniel. Go.* My wrists thump against the hard wood. The frame presses against my windpipe: it's built for a taller man. I try to stand on the balls of my feet, but it only strains my neck more.

And now, before I can steel myself, the first egg shatters against my cheekbone, making me cry out in pain. A mistake: its mucus drips into my mouth. I cough and spit whilst trying to blink the shards of shell from my eye. Then another missile: something rotten that slaps the side of my jaw. *Stop.* The smell makes me retch. Something harder – a turnip, perhaps – hits my chest. *I can't breathe.* I gasp for air and writhe so violently that I strike the back of my head. The pain bursts like fireworks inside my skull. *I'm going to die.*

*No.* I squeeze my eyes shut. *Breathe. Calm. Keep still.* As I wheeze back my breath, I try to make myself smaller, harder, more closed. On the outside, the blows continue, but I curl up inside myself like a snail. *I'm not here. This isn't real.* I search my mind for somewhere safe. *With Mother, in the tent her skirts made. Telling tales with Nell.*

But instead, my mind goes to Frost Fair and the bull-baiting rings: the baying crowd, the brute yelps, the animal stink of fear. As children, when Peter and I watched the older boys baiting, I wanted the rat to escape. *Now, I'm that trapped beast.* It was Peter who always backed the dogs, his hand on my shoulder as he urged them on. *I bet the bastard's here.*

I open my eyes and look straight at him. For a moment, the shock of betrayal knocks the breath from me again. He's pushed his way to the front. In one fist he clutches a bunch of limp bluebells, his other is holding a stone. His mouth is tight as he looks up at me. He has the same, frightened glint in his eye that he had the day I broke his jaw.

I close my eyes and try to tilt my chin upwards. *For Christ's sake, look brave.*

Now, as the filth continues to hit my face, shoulders, back and limbs, I feel like each blow is his fists. *It's his fault that I'm here.* I know it was Peter who betrayed me to Crackfart. *Who else would it be?* It wasn't enough for him to take Nell. He had to destroy everything else for me too.

He showed his true self the day I went to confront him. He was always a coward, from the first time we met. I should have left him back then on the bridge.

I hold my anger tight: it will make me harder. I force myself to remember the last time that we last met. It was after the ice melt. *When?* I forget. I know I took Lady and walked to Paul's Yard. The cathedral was still boarded up. Peter was alone in the workshop. When he saw me he leapt to his feet.

'Nat.'

I can still see the guilt on his face.

'Why did you do it?'

He backed away. 'Calm down.'

Lady whined as I dragged her towards him. I dropped her leash and she scurried beneath a bench. Peter knocked over his stool.

'You know I love Nell. You knew she was mine.'

He held up his hands. 'I can't help *her* wanting me.'

'You treacherous son of a whore.'

Lady yelped as I overturned one of the benches. Peter grabbed a glass prism and threw it at me. It flew past my face and smashed on the floor.

'Stay back.' He tried to lift a chair up between us, but I was already on him, pummelling his shoulders and chest. Lady was barking. 'Stop,' Peter screamed. He barely put up a fight.

'You were my friend.' My voice broke as I said it. I felt my resolve collapse.



The moment I turned away, Peter reached for a hammer and swung it into my ribs. I fell to the floor, and only then did he find the courage to fight. He threw the hammer from him and hit me again and again. His fists were as merciless as the blows I feel now. Then, suddenly, they stopped as he shrieked.

‘Get it off me. I’ll kill it.’ Lady had sunk her teeth into his ankle. He tried to kick her away.

I mustered all my strength and swung my fist upwards into his jaw. It made a terrible crack as it broke, throwing him flat on the floor.

Now, I open my eyes again to see Peter raising his arm. It’s the hand holding the stone. He’s crying: his face is distorted with fear, not anger. I close my eyes and brace myself for the blow. When it comes, the whole world turns white. This time, the terrible crack is my teeth. A sickening, shattering crack as the bright pain turns into black.

## VIII.

I drift up and down on the waves of agony, sometimes awake, sometimes asleep. Each time I sink, my lungs fill with fire. Then I struggle again to the surface, heaving for breath whilst I spit blood and teeth.

My blood tastes like a farthing I once swallowed: brassy; a lot like fear. Like all the times I lay awake as a child, listening to the waterwheels churning below, afraid I’d be swept out to sea.

The salt taste of blood. Rotting smell of dead fish. *Perhaps I’m inside a whale.* I feel like I’ve been swallowed: my whole body is pulpy and bruised. I struggle against the impulse to open my eyes. *I’ll suffocate if I can see.*

Again, I sink down into darkness. Again, I struggle to breathe. The smells overwhelm me. Not just fish guts, but reeking entrails. Mud and slime scooped from the Fleet. And beneath those – like the sickly gloss of a whore’s perfume – the fragrance of flowers and split fruit.

The smells unlock memories long buried inside me. The tang of Grandfather’s blood that pooled in the basin. The stink of the chamber pot

Mother emptied out of the window. The sour reek of Father's sweat. I smell, again, the sharpness of vinegar. The bittersweet burning of spice.

I hear, again, the sounds of retching, of crying, of gasping for breath.

*Mine or theirs?*

Their voices again:

*Promise me. Whatever happens.*

*The very hairs of your head are numbered.*

*Be a brave boy for me, Nat.*

'I promise,' I whisper through my torn lips and crushed teeth.

## IX.

I sputter once more through the sea of pain, but this time the water is real. A cold wave slaps into me. I wake as it drips from my face.

'More?'

'No. He's coming around.'

*Come round.* I try to open my eyes, but they're bleary. I hear someone set down the pail. It sloshes. I feel rough hands on my arms. The pillory creaks as men unlock and lift it. I fall backwards into their grasp.

'Stand up, rogue.'

*Stand up.* I try to stay on my feet as they haul me towards the edge of the platform, strewn with eggshells and flowers. The crowd is moving away, trampling blooms in the dirt.

'You were lucky,' a guard says. 'It could have been worse.'

Hands reach up to help me as the guards set me down on the edge.

'Here, Sir. He's all yours.'

A stranger peers up at me.

'Who?' The word hurts my mouth.

'I'm a surgeon.'

'I don't have money.'

'Your friend already paid.'

I look around for Jem, but a woman's face swims into view.

'Mother?'

‘No, Nat. It’s Nell.’ She touches my cheek and I wince. ‘My God. Look what they did.’

Her voice shakes as she leans closer. Her smell is milky and strange.

‘The baby?’ I murmur.

‘Grace is at home. I hired a woman to help me. Marianne. We’re doing well on our own.’

‘Peter was here.’

‘I know.’

The surgeon tilts my chin towards him. I push him away.

‘Let him help, Nat. The guards won’t let us stay long.’

‘You hired him?’

‘Jem did. I bribed the guards.’

I close my eyes. ‘Sit with me awhile. Like we used to do.’

She touches one of my hands. ‘Then you’ll let him examine you?’

Pain shoots through my head as I nod.

I feel her sit down on the platform beside me. Every part of my body hurts. The world is moving as though I’m at sea. I can’t seem to keep my mind on one thing.

‘Steady.’ The surgeon holds up my head.

*Steady.* The world lurches upwards and I grasp hold of Nell’s skirt.

‘Nat?’ Her voice is so soft I could weep.

‘Don’t leave me.’

‘You know I can’t stay.’

‘I know. But I’m glad that you’re here.’

*It was me who disappointed her.* Yet I’m too tired to think of that now. I lean forward to see my reflection in the half-empty pail below. I raise my hand to my swollen face, since the one that looks back isn’t mine.

*Neither is the face that looks back from the barred window above, though the hand that writes these words is the same.*

*Outside, the sun rises over the city. The sky is white: a blank page.*

**Scribbling, Talking and Jangling:**  
**Ned Ward's *The London Spy* in the Discursive**  
**Spaces of Late Seventeenth-Century London**

## Introduction

Of Ned Ward's prolific output in verse, prose and dialogue, it is for *The London Spy*, a monthly periodical published between 1698 and 1700, that he is best known today. His biographer, Howard William Troyer, laments that despite Ward's commercial success during his lifetime (1667-1731), his name is now 'chiefly indigenous to indices and footnotes'.<sup>1</sup> Yet *The London Spy* endures because of its unique portrait of London. A mixture of travel writing, journalism, satire and picaresque narrative, it has been 'quarried by historians' for the vivid detail with which it brings to life the capital at the end of the seventeenth and turn of the eighteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> Ward's periodical is distinctive for its social and topographic specificity, but it is also a portrait of a city alive with language: words spoken, written and performed by Ward's narrator and the characters who people the public spaces of his fictionalised London. These layers of discourse – from the street cries of hawkers to the tall tales of tavern-drinkers and coffee-house charlatans – are anchored in the topography of *The London Spy*. In this thesis, I will explore how Ward represents such discursive spaces, and how these representations are influenced by the discourses within which his periodical was placed.

In Ward's descriptions of London, language is prominent. Richard Kroll's description of the 'palpable quality of words' approximating 'something of the palpable quality of the discourse of manners executed in three-dimensional social spaces' is apt for *The London Spy*.<sup>3</sup> In Ward's first portrait of a coffee-house in Part 1, for example, he describes how:

A parcel of Muddling Muck-worms were as busie as so many Rats in an old Cheese-loft; Some Going, some Coming, some Scribbling, some Talking, some Drinking, some Smoking, others Jangling<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Howard William Troyer, *Ned Ward of Grub Street* (London: Frank Cass, 1968), p.3. Ward's success is attested by the fact that *The London Spy* was reprinted five times during his life. See Troyer, Appendix A, pp.251-52.

<sup>2</sup> James Sambrook, 'Ward, Edward [Ned] (1667–1731)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter *ODNB*), (Oxford University Press, 2004) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/28682>> [accessed 16 September 2016].

<sup>3</sup> Richard W. F. Kroll, *The Material Word: Literate Culture in the Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1991), p.4.

<sup>4</sup> Ned Ward, *The London Spy* (London: J. How, Part 1, November 1698), Gale Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO) Print Editions, p.8. Hereafter, page references to *The London Spy* shall appear in the text.

The activity of the coffee-house, including the use of language – ‘Scribbling’, ‘Talking’ and ‘Jangling’ – is portrayed as grotesquely promiscuous. ‘Jangling’, in particular, suggests confusion: a ‘dissonant or discordant din of voices’.<sup>5</sup> Like worms in muck or rats at cheese, the inhabitants consume and create voraciously, suggesting that the discourse produced – both spoken and scribbled – is irrational and of low value. Yet it is exactly this discourse – the palpable quality of words and manners in three-dimensional social spaces – that I will argue is central to Ward’s creation of the world of *The London Spy*.

Ward’s ambivalence towards such discourse and towards his own engagement in the activity of scribbling is apparent in the framing device that he uses for his periodical. In the opening to Part 1, published as a sixteen-page folio in November 1698, Ward sets up his fictional frame. His narrator – the Spy of the title<sup>6</sup> – is a country scholar who, having an ‘Itching Inclination’ to visit London, determines to write ‘this Monthly Journal’ in which to record his experiences (3). Several aspects of this frame are noteworthy. Firstly, the importance of place is foregrounded by the Spy’s journey from country to city. After years of obscurity as a writer, Ward had enjoyed his first commercial success only months previously with his pamphlet *A Trip to Jamaica*, suggesting that *The London Spy* was an attempt to exploit the popularity of travel writing for the more familiar setting of London.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, the Spy’s journey represents a new departure in his ‘search after Knowledge’: he abandons the book-based learning of the Ancients – ‘with a Fart for Virgil’ – and instead determines to ‘look before me’ to gain knowledge from ‘Observation and Intelligence’ (3-4). Thirdly, this conceit of visiting London to gain knowledge is made possible by its literary transcription: the Spy will justify his trip to his ‘Sober Country Friends’ by writing a journal for their ‘Satisfaction’, with the professed

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<sup>5</sup> ‘jangling, n.’, *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Online* <<http://www.oed.com.ueaezproxy.uea.ac.uk:2048/view/Entry/100734>> [accessed 25 November 2016].

<sup>6</sup> In using this name for Ward’s narrator, I follow Peter M. Briggs in ‘Satiric Strategy in Ned Ward’s London Writings’, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 35.2 (2011), 76-101 (p.80) <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/431013>> [accessed 12 March 2015].

<sup>7</sup> We may date Ward’s beginnings as a London scribbler to his publication of *A Poet’s Ramble after Riches* in 1691. Between that and *A Trip to Jamaica* in 1698, he wrote anonymous verse and dialogues, such as the works advertised in How’s editions of *The London Spy*, which I discuss in Chapter 1.

purpose of exposing ‘the Vanities and Vices of the Town’. This moral purpose seems to place the journal within a respectable frame of discourse, even as the Spy’s irreverent tone and scatological language – ‘and a T--d for Descartes’ – undermine any such claim (3-4).

Unlike his narrator, of course, Ward was not a scholar but a professional writer: part of a group referred to by contemporaries as ‘scribblers’ and ‘hacks’. Moreover, he was addressing his monthly journal not to a privileged circle of country friends but to a popular London audience, and writing not for a moral purpose – or even as the ‘Diversion’ of a leisured gentleman, as the Spy purports to be – but for money (3). Thus, his claim to impart knowledge gained by ‘Observation and Intelligence’ – what he sees and hears – is shrewd. As Troyer points out, Ward was limited by his lack of classical learning, and so ‘turned to the only available source of material – his own contemporary world’, including its discourse: ‘the political hearsay and rumour, the diverting tales told over the punchbowl, the small talk and malicious gossip of the idle’.<sup>8</sup>

The difference between Ward’s own situation and his chosen narrative frame reveals the ambivalent status of his writing. The original monthly issues of *The London Spy* were published anonymously: Parts 1 to 12 were advertised as ‘By the Author of the Trip to Jamaica’; for Parts 1 to 6 of the second volume, the periodical’s reputation was such that it sold on its title alone. With Ward’s identity obscured, the framing of his narrator as a country scholar placed the Spy outside Ward’s own milieu, which was disparaged by more elite writers as the low world of Grub Street. This double speaking position allowed Ward to describe a London familiar to himself and his readers – entertaining them with scurrilous accounts of the city’s vices – whilst maintaining the distancing mask of the Spy.

In the chapters that follow, I explore the role of Ward’s ambivalence in relation to his representation of discursive spaces in *The London Spy*. In Chapter 1, I place Ward’s periodical within the social, cultural and topographical context of the London print trade, and relate this to the value judgments of both Ward’s contemporaries and modern critics. In Chapter 2, I analyse the importance of Ward’s rhetorical position, particularly with

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<sup>8</sup> Troyer, *Ned Ward*, p.8.

relation to the tensions inherent in his use of satire. In Chapter 3, I consider his use of the grotesque as a mode of representation. And in Chapter 4, I look at the interaction between London's topography and Ward's blurring of fact and fiction in the numerous stories told by the Spy and the people he meets. Throughout, I aim to show that what links these topics – the print trade, satire, the grotesque and fictionalisation – is an ambivalence towards certain types of discourse, which Ward locates in the public spaces of London, and in which he himself is implicated as a scribbler engaged in a distinctively commercialised literary culture.



## Chapter 1: Ned Ward and the London Marketplace for Print

From Dusty Shops neglected Authors come,  
Martyrs of Pies, and Reliques of the Bum.<sup>9</sup>

So wrote John Dryden in *Mac Flecknoe* (1682), vividly linking commercial writers with consumables and excrement: their works as disposable as the paper on which they were printed. In this chapter, I explore late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century attitudes towards authorship, and how contemporaries such as Dryden and Alexander Pope constructed a dichotomy of ‘high’ and ‘low’ writing. I consider how such value judgements have influenced critical assessments of Ward’s work, and situate my own critical approach in relation to these. I then turn to the material contexts of the discourse in which Ward was engaged. Literature and commerce were not opposed but entangled during this period; as Michael F. Suarez argues: ‘the book trade was not merely a servant, but a critical and creative agent in the production, distribution and consumption of English Literature.’<sup>10</sup> I therefore consider where *The London Spy* was situated within this marketplace for print. Finally, I argue that instead of accepting the high/low model constructed by Ward’s contemporaries, we may more usefully examine *The London Spy* as part of a commercialized literary culture.

### Grub Street Scribblers

The term ‘scribbler’ – used both by Ward and of him – emphasised the low status of professional writers and their assumed lack of skill. The scribbler was a metropolitan figure: Pope condemned the ‘hacknied Town scribbler’, and Daniel Defoe opposed himself to ‘Street-Scriblers’, as though their topographical ties were enough to discredit them.<sup>11</sup> This association with

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<sup>9</sup> Dryden, *Mac Flecknoe; or, A Satyr Upon the True-Blew-Protestant Poet* (London: Green, 1682), p.8.

<sup>10</sup> Michael F. Suarez, ‘The Business of Literature: The Book Trade in England from Milton to Blake’, in *A Companion to Literature from Milton to Blake*, ed. by David Womersley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp.131-147 (p.146).

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad in Four Books* (1742), ed. by Valerie Rumbold (Harlow: Longman, 2009), p.103, remark to Book 1, line 37. Daniel Defoe, the first issue of the *Review*, February 1704, quoted by J.A. Downie, ‘Stating Facts Right About Defoe’s

London's streets, particularly Grub Street, positioned the scribbler within the vulgar sphere. Allison Muri describes the figurative meaning of this locale: 'Grub Street [...] represented base commercialization, hack writing, and the prostitution of literary ideals'.<sup>12</sup> Later, Samuel Johnson would define 'Grubstreet' both in terms of its geographical location and its literary output: 'Originally the name of a street in Moorfields in London, much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems'.<sup>13</sup> A scribbler was, in Johnson's words: 'A petty author; a writer without worth'.<sup>14</sup> The word 'worth' is significant. The scribbler wrote for worldly gain, yet through such prostitution to the market, his or her writing was not deemed to be 'worth' much in either aesthetic or monetary terms. This was as true in Ward's time as Johnson's, as indicated by the quotation that Johnson includes from George Granville's play *The She-Gallants* (1696): 'The scribbler, pinch'd with hunger, writes to dine'.<sup>15</sup>

The importance of money is clear in Ward's own account of his early career. Troyer cautions that what we know of Ward includes 'a not inconsiderable amount of half-truth and myth', yet critics follow him in assuming that Ward had moved to London from Oxfordshire by 1691, since that was the year Ward published his apparently autobiographical pamphlet, *A Poet's Ramble After Riches*.<sup>16</sup> In this poem, Ward describes his impoverished existence as a 'Thread-bare' poet in a London garret, and his disappointment at being denied the inheritance that would have allowed him to lead a leisurely life.<sup>17</sup> Later, in *A Trip to Jamaica*, he compared the 'condition of an Author' to that of a 'Strumpet': both 'Whoring' and 'Pamphleteering' are professions undertaken because 'the unhappy circumstances of a Narrow Fortune, hath forc'd us to do that for our

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Review', in *Telling People What to Think: Early Eighteenth-Century Periodicals*, ed. by J.A. Downie and Thomas N. Corns (London: Frank Cass, 1993), pp.8-22 (p.10).

<sup>12</sup> Allison Muri, 'Topographies of Literature and Culture in Eighteenth-Century London', *The Grub Street Project* (University of Saskatchewan Digital Resource Centre) <<http://grubstreetproject.net>> [accessed 25 November 2016].

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language: In which the Words Are Deduced from their Originals*, 2 vols (London: Knapton and others, 1755-56) I (1755), p.990.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (London: Knapton and others, 1755-56) II (1756), p.609.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Johnson quotes George Granville's 'Epilogue' to *The She-Gallants: A Comedy* (London: Playford, 1696).

<sup>16</sup> Troyer, *Ned Ward*, p.3.

<sup>17</sup> Ward, *A Poet's Ramble After Riches* (London: Millet, 1691), p.4.

Subsistence, which we are much ashamed of.’<sup>18</sup> Here, of course, Ward is not merely complaining. He makes capital (and copy) out of his ambivalent status, satirising the very act of scribbling in which he was engaged.

Ward’s writing career was thus part of a wider social and cultural trend, since he was one of a new breed of professional writers who depended upon the earning power of their pens rather than upon patronage. Paula McDowell explains that after 1678, the shift from ‘courtly, manuscript literary culture to the print-based, market-centred system’ gave ‘rise to a recognizably modern literary marketplace, and to the emerging professional literary subculture’ which was ‘popularly referred to as “Grub Street”’.<sup>19</sup> This increasing professionalisation was reflected in changing conceptions of authorship and copyright. For example, the first extant contract between a writer and printer – for Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in 1667 – signified that the author had ownership of his work until he sold its copyright.<sup>20</sup> By 1702, this market-based system was well established, with Defoe being paid two guineas for every 500 sixpenny pamphlets his printer produced.<sup>21</sup> James Raven argues that this structural transformation led to ‘finer distinctions between popular, polite and elite forms of literature’, since what developed was ‘a highly stratified market’ with ‘an enormous differentiation in the price and quality of products’.<sup>22</sup> Brean S. Hammond uses a similar image of strata to describe the resulting hierarchy, in which texts and genres were: ‘stratified by profound changes in the underlying geology of authorship’.<sup>23</sup>

It is to the lower layers of this market that Dryden alludes in his image of authors as ‘Martyrs of Pies, and Reliques of the Bum’. Images of consumption and waste were familiar tropes to describe Grub Street, its name derived from ‘grube’, or ditch.<sup>24</sup> Yet Ward inverts this image-system in his poem ‘The Miracles Performed by Money’ (1692). Ward alludes to Dryden’s line, but applies it to gentlemen who write ‘for Pleasure, not for Bread’:

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<sup>18</sup> Ward, ‘To the Reader’, *A Trip to Jamaica* (London: [n. pub.], 1698), p.3.

<sup>19</sup> Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678-1730* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), p.5.

<sup>20</sup> Nick Groom, ‘Forgery and Plagiarism’, in *A Companion to Literature from Milton to Blake*, ed. by Womersley, pp.94-113 (p.98).

<sup>21</sup> Brean S. Hammond, *Professional Imaginative Writing in England 1670-1740: ‘Hackney for Bread’* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), p.74.

<sup>22</sup> James Raven, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), p.84; p.307.

<sup>23</sup> Hammond, *Professional Imaginative Writing*, pp.5-6.

<sup>24</sup> Pat Rogers, *Grub Street: Studies in a Subculture* (London: Methuen, 1972), p.24.

Tho after all it is these Scriblers fate [...]
To have their very Works [...] at last condemn'd,
To wrap up Spice, Tobacco, Soap and Plumbs,
Under Pyes put, or wipe the Readers B—s'<sup>25</sup>

Here, Ward appropriates Dryden's imagery to lower the culturally elevated figure of the gentleman writer to the material realm. 'Scribbler' was a term usually applied to commercial writers, yet Ward writes of the 'Scribling Monied Fop' who has an 'Itch for Scribling', as though literary creation, other than for money, must be explained as an unpleasant bodily urge. Ward thus playfully inverts the prevailing tropes that cast professional writers such as himself at the lower end of the hierarchy. This shows that Ward was not just subject to, but part of a cultural discourse concerning the nature of authorship.

Ward's participation in this debate may also be seen in his responses to Pope's *Dunciad*, in which he is included in the cast of dunces. Ward retaliated with two prose pamphlets, both published in 1729.<sup>26</sup> In *Durgen; or A Plain Satyr upon a Pompous Satyrist*, Ward inverts Pope's high/low dichotomy by portraying Homer as a 'starving' poet, and in *Apollo's Maggot in his Cups*, he portrays Pope as a mere hack, famous for 'Cooking Homer to our English tast'.<sup>27</sup> Ward thus responds in kind to Pope's use of material details to undermine his social and literary status. For example, in Book 1 of the *Dunciad*, Pope's mock-hero attempts to burn his books rather than have them 'wrap up Oranges' or 'sail, with Ward, to Ape-and-monkey climes/ Where vile Mundungus trucks for viler rhymes'.<sup>28</sup> This reference to Ward's pamphlet *A Trip to Jamaica* puns on 'mundungus' as both offal and poor-quality tobacco, which Pope suggests might be traded for Ward's works in the colonies. The image of oranges also equates Ward's books with mere commodities.

<sup>25</sup> Ward, *The Miracles Performed by Money: A Poem* (London: [n. pub.], 1692), p.6; p.8.

<sup>26</sup> Briggs, 'Satiric Strategy', p.99.

<sup>27</sup> Ward, *Durgen; or A Plain Satyr upon a Pompous Satyrist* (London: Warner, 1729), p.46. *Apollo's Maggot in his Cups; or, The Whimsical Creation of a Little Satyrical Poet* (London, [n. pub.], 1729), p.47.

<sup>28</sup> Pope, *The Dunciad in Four Books*, p.129, Book 1, lines 236 and 233-34.

Pope uses Scriblerus's remarks to these lines to ironically misquote Giles Jacob's account of Ward in *The Poetical Register* (1719). Jacob's original words were:

A Very voluminous Poet [...] Of late Years he has kept a publick House in the City (but in a genteel way) and with his Wit, Humour, and good Liquor has afforded his Guests a pleasurable Entertainment [...] But the Author is best known by his *London Spy*, a famous Piece in Prose.<sup>29</sup>

This was the first of many biographical summaries to emphasise Ward's career after 1712 as the keeper of an alehouse, tavern and coffee-house.<sup>30</sup> As Troyer notes, the association between 'publican and poet [...] seems to please the editors', despite the fact that Ward was 'rarely engaged in both activities at the same time'.<sup>31</sup> For Pope, the association was not merely pleasing. In the *Dunciad*, Scriblerus adds to Jacob's mention of 'good liquor' the disparaging qualifier '(Ale)'.<sup>32</sup> James McLaverty explains how, with this one word, Pope 'displays for criticism the fake gentility of Jacob's account'.<sup>33</sup> Scriblerus also remarks that Ward 'declared [Jacob's] account to be a great falsity, protesting that his public house was not in the *City*, but in *Moorfields*.'<sup>34</sup> Again, this qualifier lowers Ward, since Moorfields, close to Grub Street, was associated with cheap book stalls and other second-hand shops.<sup>35</sup>

Pope's use of 'Moorfields' to undermine Ward shows how closely 'low' discourse was linked to place; as Joad Raymond points out, the semantics of Grub Street were 'anchored in metropolitan geography' as well as in 'popular fears of [...] the decline of intellectual culture'.<sup>36</sup> Pat Rogers has shown that sites such as Moorfields and Bedlam, associated with

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<sup>29</sup> Giles Jacob, *The Poetical Register; or, the Lives and Characters of the English Dramatick Poets. With an Account of Their Writings*, 2 vols (London: Bettesworth and others, 1723; first published 1719), II, pp.225-26.

<sup>30</sup> In 1712 Ward opened an alehouse near Clerkenwell Green, in 1717 he took over the Bacchus tavern in Moorfields, and from 1729 to 1730 he ran the British Coffee-House in Fullwood's Rents. See Troyer, *Ned Ward*, p.6.

<sup>31</sup> Troyer, *Ned Ward*, pp.4-5.

<sup>32</sup> Pope, *The Dunciad in Four Books*, p.129; remark to Book 1, line 233.

<sup>33</sup> James McLaverty, *Pope, Print and Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.98.

<sup>34</sup> Pope, *The Dunciad in Four Books*, p.129; remark to Book 1, line 233. In addition to this example, Pope also describes Ward in the index as: 'a Poet and Alehouse-keeper in *Moorfields*', p.408.

<sup>35</sup> Rogers, *Grub Street*, pp.50-51; Raven, *The Business of Books*, p.106.

<sup>36</sup> Joad Raymond, 'Pamphlets and News', in *A Companion to Literature from Milton to Blake*, ed. by Womersley, pp.483-496 (p.484).

immorality and madness respectively, added to the metaphorical force that Grub Street gained from its ‘geographical environs’ and social conditions.<sup>37</sup> Ward’s own sequence of addresses – Gray’s Inn, Clerkenwell, Moorfields and Fuller’s Rents – tells a tale of moderate social rise on the outskirts of the commercial City, never far from Grub Street.<sup>38</sup> Most scribblers lived outside the city walls in such liminal spaces, ‘twilight areas’ plagued by poverty.<sup>39</sup>

Pope makes a connection between poverty, topography and particular forms of discourse when, in Book 1 of the *Dunciad*, he names the ‘Cave of Poverty and Poetry’ as the source of ‘Miscellanies [...] Journals, Medleys, Merc’ries, Magazines’ and ‘all the Grub-street race’. The note to these lines in the Remarks is that ‘Dullness appears in a thousand shapes [...] thrown out weekly and monthly by every miserable scribler’.<sup>40</sup> The burgeoning periodic literature of which *The London Spy* was an early example, is thus placed by Pope within a world of social misery and ephemerality. The currency of such discourse depended upon its timely consumption; as Rogers writes: ‘Cheap literature was a commodity [...] like so much greengrocery’.<sup>41</sup> Such transience distinguished the low value of Grub Street wares from the high value of canonical works such as Pope’s translations of Homer and Dryden’s of Virgil. This is apparent when Pope calls his dunces ‘momentary monsters’,<sup>42</sup> just as Johnson defined ‘Grubstreet’ poems as ‘temporary’, and Dryden imagined such works as lost to pies and bums. Arguably, Ward suffered the same fate as Dryden’s ‘neglected authors’ and his own ‘Scribling Monied Fop’: his works were ‘at last condem’d’ to decay like ‘Plumbs’ – perishable goods – since few are read today.

### **Critical (Re)Evaluations**

Inevitably, critical assessments of Ward have been influenced by Pope’s attacks. Hammond describes the *Dunciad* as: ‘an attempt to influence public taste in a particular, anti-professional direction. It was an act of canon

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<sup>37</sup> Rogers, *Grub Street*, p.1.

<sup>38</sup> Troyer, *Ned Ward*, p.6; Sambrook, *ODNB*.

<sup>39</sup> Rogers, *Grub Street*, p.20; p.75.

<sup>40</sup> Pope, *The Dunciad in Four Books*, pp. 102-04, Book 1, lines 34-44 and remark, line 42.

<sup>41</sup> Rogers, *Grub Street*, p.50.

<sup>42</sup> Pope, *The Dunciad in Four Books*, p.108, Book 1, line 83.

formation.<sup>43</sup> And it worked. As Troyer observes, Ward is mostly confined to footnotes and indices.<sup>44</sup> J. P. Kenyon has described him as an ‘unbalanced Grub Street Hack’, and Charles Whibley calls him a ‘pedestrian jogtrot writer’, one of a group of ‘lettered vagabonds’ who ‘dragged their muse [...] down to the level of sawdust and spilled wine’, vividly evoking the trope of commercial writing as low.<sup>45</sup> In Hammond’s words, these critics accept ‘the series of cultural *coupures* by means of which Pope endeavoured to construct a canon of British worthies from which writers of a professional orientation would be excluded.’<sup>46</sup>

Yet several critics have attempted to re-evaluate Ward. Re-evaluation implies a search for alternative value or worth. For Ralph Straus, writing in the early twentieth century, this value was historical, residing in the ‘general accuracy’ of *The London Spy* in representing ‘the life and manners of [Ward’s] time’.<sup>47</sup> Justifying his decision to produce a new edition of *The London Spy Compleat*, Straus argues that:

social historians are constantly drawing upon it; its pages teem with valuable and most interesting information not to be found elsewhere; and it paints a picture – ugly, if you like, tough, biased, in places unpleasant – of metropolitan life at the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>48</sup>

Straus’s argument is echoed by James Sambrook’s comment that *The London Spy* has been ‘quarried by historians’ to give life to their descriptions.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, in our own century, it has been used as a source in popular histories such as Peter Ackroyd’s *London: The Biography*, as well as more academic works, such as Emily Cockayne’s *Hubbub: Filth, Noise*

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<sup>43</sup> Hammond, *Professional Imaginative Writing*, p.196.

<sup>44</sup> Troyer, *Ned Ward*, p.3.

<sup>45</sup> J.P. Kenyon, *Revolution Principles: The Politics of Party, 1689-1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.77. Whibley, Charles, ‘Writers of Burlesque and Translators’, in *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*, ed. by A.W. Ward and others, 18 vols (New York: Putnam, 1907-21), IX (1912), Chapter 10, Section 1 <<http://www.bartleby.com/219/1001.html>> [accessed 12 June 2015].

<sup>46</sup> Hammond, *Professional Imaginative Writing*, p.2.

<sup>47</sup> Ralph Straus, ‘Preface’ to *The London-Spy Compleat [...] With an Introduction by Ralph Straus* (London: Casanova Society, 1924), pp.i-xx (p.x; p.ii).

<sup>48</sup> Straus, ‘Preface’ to *The London-Spy Compleat*, p.i.

<sup>49</sup> Sambrook, *ODNB*.

and Stench in England.<sup>50</sup> Yet Straus's claim for the historical accuracy of Ward's periodical is undermined by his own admission above that: 'it paints a picture'. *The London Spy* is a fictionalised account of Ward's contemporary world. Valerie Rumbold describes Ward's 'scatological extremism' and 'deliberate revelling in "low" colloquialisms and preposterously accumulated similes'.<sup>51</sup> These examples of the 'ugly' and 'biased' elements that Straus alludes to are not merely a reflection of the 'unpleasant' reality of Ward's world, but rather an exaggerated portrayal.

An alternative to Straus's approach is to see *The London Spy* as valuable to historians through its *construction* of reality, and the way in which this construction sheds light on its cultural context. Such an approach is taken by Rogers in *Grub Street: Studies in a Subculture*, in which he adopts 'the Dunces' eye view'.<sup>52</sup> This view, Rogers contends, is profitable because: 'by studying the victim in his natural habitat, we do gain considerable insight into the procedures and motivation of the satirist'.<sup>53</sup> However, Rogers's language here implies that he sees the Grub Street writer primarily as a victim of satire rather than as a potential satirist himself. For Troyer, on the other hand, Ward's value lies in the fact that he is representative of a 'host of hack writers, journalists, and literary innovators' who shaped print culture, and therefore, by examining his life and work, we gain an 'awareness of the forces that controlled and evolved much of the periodic literature of the day'.<sup>54</sup> For Troyer, the Dunces' eye view is trained on the procedures and motivations of the scribblers themselves:

We know the history of eighteenth-century periodical literature largely in terms of the writings of its major figures; it is equally conducive to an understanding of the period to grasp the point of view and understand the problems of the minor writer.<sup>55</sup>

Troyer's contention is that by understanding writers such as Ward, we better understand the larger picture of the changing culture of which both he and

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<sup>50</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (London: Vintage, 2001), pp.147-8; p.360. Emily Cockayne, *Hubbub: Filth, Noise and Stench in England* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), p.4 onwards.

<sup>51</sup> Valerie Rumbold, ed., note to Pope's *The Dunciad in Four Books*, p.129.

<sup>52</sup> Rogers, *Grub Street*, p.3.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>54</sup> Troyer, *Ned Ward*, p.6-7.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.



Pope were part. As Mark Knights points out: ‘the minor works are only minor if one is interested in exploring canonical writers or assumes that it is the latter that are the main motors of linguistic and conceptual change.’<sup>56</sup> As a professional writer, Ward was both a ‘victim’ of satirists like Pope and an author who made a living from manipulating the language and concepts of the satirical discourse of his age.

Troyer does not challenge Pope’s high/low dichotomy; nor does he claim a place for Ward in the literary canon on the basis of aesthetic or social value. For him, Ward remains a minor writer. Yet Peter M. Briggs does make these claims in his attempt to ‘update Troyer’s evaluation’.<sup>57</sup> Briggs argues that Troyer does not take Ward seriously, having ‘ultimately dismissed him with faint praise’ and consigned him to ‘subliterary London’.<sup>58</sup> The first step of re-evaluation, Briggs argues, is to ‘untie the bundle fashioned by Pope: the habit of treating Grub Street writers collectively and dismissing them en masse’. The second step is to accept that ‘it is not necessary to justify all of Ward’s works in order to appreciate some’. He may not have shone as a poet, but his best prose works show that there is ‘room to appreciate Ward as a working craftsman’: a ‘vivid stylist’, with a ‘reporter’s eye’ and the ability to ‘add colour, energy, and urgency to received formulas and to adapt them flexibly toward his own writerly ends’.<sup>59</sup> The language Briggs uses – ‘craftsman’, ‘stylist’, ‘writerly’ – suggests that he sees Ward as a practitioner engaged in the everyday craft of working with words, rather than as the more cerebral ‘author’ traditionally discussed in literary criticism.

Having established an alternative set of aesthetic criteria with which to judge Ward, Briggs suggests a further approach: to see Ward as socially progressive. He observes that the status of ‘gritty realism’ in relation to ‘gentlemanly refinement’ has shifted in recent decades:

The parameters of literary interest and worth have also become broader and more inclusive over time [...] That Ward wrote with an eye to popular tastes and the changing literary marketplace now seems progressive, as does the breadth of his social vision and his

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<sup>56</sup> Mark Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain: Partisanship and Political Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.50.

<sup>57</sup> Briggs, ‘Satiric Strategy’, p.77.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.76-78.

concern for people at the margins of society, the poor, the mad, the helpless.<sup>60</sup>

Again, the word ‘worth’ is key: literary worth, Briggs suggests, has come to encompass writing aimed at ‘popular tastes’. Briggs links Ward’s understanding of his popular audience to his concern for social ills. This in itself is not a new insight. Straus argued that Ward ‘belonged to the people’ and that an examination of his works shows ‘that for all the mud with which they are so freely besprinkled, he felt very deeply on certain matters of great social importance’.<sup>61</sup> Yet Straus’s image of mud suggests that the more earthy elements of Ward’s writing might be wiped away to reveal its underlying importance, whereas Briggs implies that it was precisely through his ‘gritty’ style that Ward addressed both the tastes and concerns of his readership.

Briggs’s argument is strongest in his focus upon Ward as a practitioner who adapted his writing to both suit and to shape the demands of the market. However, in his attempt to show that Ward’s work ‘deserve[s] readers’ today, Briggs seeks worth using aesthetic and social value criteria: the same categories that Pope used to dismiss Ward.<sup>62</sup> Their criteria may be different, but both approaches obscure the variable quality of Ward’s output and his moral ambivalence. Alongside evidence of ‘concern for people at the margins of society’, *The London Spy* contains evidence of misogyny and xenophobia that is difficult to excuse as ‘gritty realism’. Whether or not we agree with Rumbold’s description of *The London Spy* as a ‘partisan, xenophobic, elitist and misogynistic nightmare vision of London life’, parts undoubtedly create an uncomfortable experience for the modern reader.<sup>63</sup> Yet we should explore, not ignore, this ambivalence. McDowell argues that by ‘pursuing that which makes us uncomfortable in early modern print culture’ we may better understand the ‘original socio-cultural functions’ of our own ‘literary values and agendas’.<sup>64</sup> This approach requires us to find a middle way between dismissing Ward as worthless and claiming for him a worth that matches our modern agendas.

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<sup>60</sup> Briggs, ‘Satiric Strategy’, pp.77-78.

<sup>61</sup> Ralph Straus, ‘Preface’ to *The London-Spy Compleat*, pp.i-ii.

<sup>62</sup> Briggs, ‘Satiric Strategy’, p.78.

<sup>63</sup> Rumbold, note to Pope’s *The Dunciad in Four Books*, p.129.

<sup>64</sup> McDowell, *Women of Grub Street*, p.16.

In seeking this middle way, I will ask what Ward can tell us about the ambivalent socio-cultural conversation of which he was a part. In doing so, I am guided by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's argument that: 'Discursive space is never completely independent of social place [...] Each 'site of assembly' constitutes a nucleus of material and cultural conditions'.<sup>65</sup> It is to this relationship between discourse and context that I turn next. Thus far, I have concentrated upon attitudes towards authorship and the marketplace. Now, I shall consider the material and cultural conditions of that market, and where *The London Spy* was positioned within it. In doing so, I hope to show the complexity that is obscured by confining Ward to a high/low dichotomy of writing, rather than seeing him as part of the changing discursive space of print.

### **Literature, Commerce and *The London Spy***

*The London Spy* was a commercial venture. It was aimed at the 'mass market for literature' that had emerged by the 1690s, and was a product of the 'newly energized press' that had diversified after the end of pre-publication censorship in 1695.<sup>66</sup> It is in this context that Troyer sites Ward:

Recurrently, weekly and even daily, new copy littered the bookstalls and coffee-house tables. To fill four, or eight, or sixteen folio pages became the daily or weekly stint of the writer; to cater to the whims and prejudices of his readers, to keep them supplied with the current political gossip, or to divert them with the novel and salacious became his opportunity.<sup>67</sup>

Troyer stresses the materiality of such writing: the author's aim was to fill folio pages, the printed copies of which 'littered' the public spaces of London. This recalls Pope's image of such writing as ephemeral waste, 'thrown out weekly and monthly'. Yet, as Raymond points out: 'Poet's descriptions, however hostile, can evoke a sense of the dynamism of the eighteenth-century news media, and the excitement they elicited'.<sup>68</sup> Troyer

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<sup>65</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), p.80.

<sup>66</sup> Hammond, *Professional Imaginative Writing*, p.32. McDowell, *Women of Grub Street*, p.30.

<sup>67</sup> Troyer, *Ned Ward*, p.8.

<sup>68</sup> Raymond, 'Pamphlets and News', p.492.

also alludes to the ‘opportunity’ that this media and their market presented: the innovation inspired by the demands of a mass readership for ever-new information and entertainment.

That Ward himself was responding to the opportunities of the market is clear from his preface, ‘To the Reader’, at the beginning of Part 2 of *The London Spy*. In it, Ward breaks frame, stepping outside the narrative persona of the Spy as a country gentleman, to speak as a writer acutely aware of his urban audience:

The first part of this Undertaking I pop’d into the cautious World, as a Skillful Angler does among wary Fish, who have oft been prick’d in their Nibbling; and finding the Publick Snapping at it with as much Greediness as a News-monger at a Gazett, or a City Politician at a new Proclamation, makes me propose to continue it Monthly, as long as we shall find Encouragement.

Here, Ward reveals the importance of novelty to the success of his undertaking. He compares his readers to greedy city consumers of newspapers and proclamations. These formats allowed the dissemination of knowledge, suggesting that Ward was positioning his periodical within an ongoing public discourse. His proposal to publish monthly, in response to ‘Encouragement’, implies a conversation with his readers. Periodicity allowed for what Lennard J. Davis calls a ‘journalistic sense of time’: ‘The reader is brought within the frame of the discourse both spatially and temporally’, since it is the reader’s immediate world that is represented.<sup>69</sup> That Ward was responsive to this readership is conveyed by his comical image of himself as an angler, testing out what new temptation might make his audience bite and buy.

In this respect, *The London Spy* shared with other periodical ventures the advantages of novelty, immediacy and adaptability. It differed from other works on the market in terms of the type of knowledge that it presented. Raymond argues that it lacks the ‘miscellaneousness’ of both ‘news and non-news related items’ that he identifies as a characteristic of periodicals.<sup>70</sup> It also lacks the didactic frame of John Dunton’s *Athenian Mercury* (1691-97),

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<sup>69</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp.72-74.

<sup>70</sup> Raymond, ‘Pamphlets and News’, p.486.

the most famous of the early periodicals, which self-consciously created a discursive space in print through its question and answer format, offering to ‘satisfie all ingenious and curious Enquirers into Speculations, Divine, Moral and Natural’.<sup>71</sup> Briggs argues that the *Athenian Mercury* sought to be ‘authoritative’ by ‘measuring out spaces where intelligent public conversation and debate could occur’.<sup>72</sup> Such discursive spaces might be three-dimensional, such as the coffee-house, or two-dimensional, such as the periodical.<sup>73</sup> Dunton sought to influence both, anticipating Joseph Addison and Richard Steele’s *Spectator* (1711-1712), which archly claimed to promote polite, public discourse by bringing ‘Philosophy [...] to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables and in Coffee-Houses’.<sup>74</sup> Such discourse seems a far cry from Ward’s picture of his readership ‘Nibbling’ and ‘Snapping’ at each new issue of *The London Spy*.

Ward used the periodical format to represent a series of impolite discursive spaces. In Part 1 alone, the Spy visits a tavern where the diners become so drunk that their ‘Engines of Verbosity [...] coin’d Nonsense’ (5). There, he meets a ‘Tongue-pad’, whose talent in talking is such that he ‘can out-Flatter a Poet, out-Huff a Bully, out-wrangle a Lawyer, out-Cant a Puritan [...] out-Face Truth, and out-Lye the Devil’ (8). The Spy and his friend then proceed to the coffee-house where ‘Muddling Muck-worms’ scribble, talk and jangle. They leave to visit another tavern, where the company drunkenly read, write and improvise poetry, until they can ‘scarce speak without Rhyme’, and ‘weak Reason’ has been driven from their brains (13, 16). Finally, they stagger outside to ‘Ramble in the Streets’ with the aim of ‘prying into the dark Intrigues of the Town’ (16). This last ramble has more in common with searches for carnal knowledge, such as John Wilmot’s *A Ramble in St. James’s Park* (1680), than the enquiries of the *Athenian*

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<sup>71</sup> John Dunton, *The Athenian Gazette; or, Casuistical Mercury: Resolving all the Most Nice and Curious Questions Proposed by the Ingenious*, 5 vols (London: Dunton, 1691-96) I (1691), No.1, 17th March 1691.

<sup>72</sup> Briggs, ‘The Hesitant Modernity of John Dunton’, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 40.2 (2016), 119-135 (p.126) <<http://ecl.dukejournals.org/content/40/2/119>> [accessed 26 September 2016]

<sup>73</sup> Hammond, *Professional Imaginative Writing*, p.150.

<sup>74</sup> Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, No.10, March 12, 1711, in Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator: In Four Volumes*, ed. by Gregory Smith (London: Dent, 1907; repr. 1961), I (No. 1, 1 March 1711 – no. 169, 13 Sept. 1711), p.32.

*Mercury*.<sup>75</sup> The picaresque nature of Ward's narrative is also closer in style to Dunton's periodical *The Night-Walker, Or Evening Rambles in Search After Lewd Women* (1696-97), in which Dunton published accounts of his conversations with prostitutes, ostensibly with the moral purpose of exposing vice, though with the added marketable value of its voyeuristic thrill.<sup>76</sup> Dunton, of course, denies this voyeurism in the 'Preface' to his periodical, protesting that his 'Design' is not 'to minster Fuel to Wanton Thoughts, or to please the prophane Pallats of the Beaus and Sparks of the Town, but to display Monthly their Abominable Practices in lively Colours [...] to frighten or shame them'.<sup>77</sup> However, it is hard to imagine Dunton's readers spending their money upon his 'lively' encounters merely to fuel frightened and shameful thoughts.

Ward's innovation was to marry the thrill of such picaresque rambles with the popularity of travel writing. The title of his periodical was inspired by Giovanni Paolo Marana's *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*, which was first translated into English in 1687 and printed in eight volumes from 1691-94.<sup>78</sup> The *Turkish Spy* purported to be a collection of letters to Constantinople, revealing the transactions and intrigues of the European courts. Marano's strategy of using the narrative persona of a spy to present to readers a picture of their own culture from the viewpoint of an outsider is echoed by Ward's own narrative frame. Tom Brown, in turn, adapted this strategy for his *Amusements Serious and Comical, Calculated for the Meridian of London* (1700), in which, inspired by the success of Ward's periodical, he imagines 'what an Indian would think of' London and sets out to 'examine with a traveller's eye all the remarkable things of this mighty city'.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, Ward's innovation was so often imitated that Jonathan Swift would later complain about the 'monstrous Productions, which under the names of *Trips*,

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<sup>75</sup> John Wilmot, *A Ramble in St. James's Park*, in *The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. by David M. Vieth (London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp.40-46

<sup>76</sup> John Dunton, *The Night-Walker, Or Evening Rambles in Search After Lewd Women* (1696-97), in *Marriage, Sex, and the Family in England, 1660-1800*, 44 vols (London: Garland, 1985) XIX.

<sup>77</sup> Dunton, 'Preface' to Part 1 of *The Night Walker*, September 1696.

<sup>78</sup> Marana, Giovanni Paolo, *The Eight Volumes of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy [...] Written Originally in Arabick, Translated into Italian, from thence into English* (London: Rhodes, 1694).

<sup>79</sup> Brown, Tom, *Amusements Serious and Comical, Calculated for the Meridian of London* (1700), in *Amusements Serious and Comical, and Other Works*, ed. by Arthur L. Hayward (London: Routledge, 1927), p.10, Amusement III.

*Spies, Amusements*, and other conceited Appellations, have over-run us for some Years past'.<sup>80</sup>

Ward was thus inspired by, and in turn inspired, experiments with the possibilities of popular print. But who was the 'we' in his promise in 'To the Reader' in Part 2 to continue *The London Spy* 'as long as we shall find Encouragement'? Here, he hints at the collaborative nature of the marketplace. As Urmi Bhowmik writes: 'To enter the world of the print trade in the seventeenth century is to forgo [...] The conception of the author as the only begetter of his work'.<sup>81</sup> Often booksellers and printers played an important role in literary innovation. Dunton, for example, was a bookseller as well as an author, giving him a clear commercial interest in experimenting with different formats and ways of marketing literary works. Ward, too, depended upon the workings of the print trade to further his writing career. Interestingly, the high/low dichotomy constructed by Pope becomes blurred when we explore the complex workings of that world.

To examine the imprints of the folio editions of *The London Spy* seems to be to encounter what Michael Treadwell has described as the 'smokescreen of false/ misleading imprints' of this era.<sup>82</sup> For example, the set published by ECCO Print Editions consists of a mixture of first editions of Parts 1 to 6, 'printed for J. Nutt' monthly during 1698 and 1699; reissues of these, 'Printed and Sold by J. How' in 1699; first editions of Parts 7 to 12 and of Volume 2, Parts 1 to 6, 'Printed and Sold by J. How' monthly between 1699 and 1700; and second and third editions of these, reissued by How between 1701 and 1702.<sup>83</sup> Troyer makes sense of this muddle by explaining that John Nutt was the original publisher of the series, but that: 'Beginning with the seventh number [...] Nutt's printer, J[ohn] How, set up as a

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<sup>80</sup> Jonathan Swift, *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712), in *Parodies, Hoaxes, Mock-Treatises: Polite Conversation, Directions to Servants, and Other Works*, ed. by Valerie Rumbold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.142.

<sup>81</sup> Urmi Bhowmik, 'Facts and Norms in the Marketplace of Print: John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury*', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 36.3 (2003), 345-365 (p.348) <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/41296>> [accessed 26 September 2016].

<sup>82</sup> Michael Treadwell, 'On False and Misleading Imprints in the London Book Trade 1660 - 1750', in *Fakes and Frauds: Varieties of Deception in Print and Manuscript*, ed. by Robin Myers and Michael Harris (Winchester: St. Paul's Bibliographies, 1989), pp.29-48 (pp.29-30).

<sup>83</sup> This jumble of editions was the one hurriedly put together by How to form his 1702 folio edition of *The London Spy Compleat* (290 pages). This preceded his reformatted, 435-page edition of *London Spy Compleat*, which he published in octavo in 1703.

bookseller and took over *The London Spy* for the remaining numbers'.<sup>84</sup> Yet this explanation masks an intriguing system of relationships that operated within the print trade, particularly the trade in periodicals.

John Nutt operated between 1698 and 1706 as what contemporaries called a 'publisher', but modern scholars call a 'trade publisher': one of 'a small group of specialists who, for a fee, would put their names to and handle the sale and distribution of printed works'.<sup>85</sup> He was an ambiguous figure, responsible for distributing a vast quantity of cheap pamphlets, as well as more 'literary' material such as Swift's earliest works. Raven calls him: 'the innovative and enterprising Nutt', and John D. Gordon argues that he was 'significant as a pioneer of serial publications'.<sup>86</sup> Trade publishers often handled periodicals and other works requiring fast and wide distribution.<sup>87</sup> David Foxon explains that they served two purposes within the trade: to provide anonymity for a controversial work, and to manage the ephemeral nature of works sold through pamphlet shops, mercuries and hawkers.<sup>88</sup> It was in the former capacity that Nutt put his name to Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*, his imprint protecting the identities of the author and copyright holder, but it is more likely that it was in the latter capacity that he published *The London Spy*.

Nutt had access to the distribution network of his wife Elizabeth, who was 'in her own right a "mercury" and retailer of books and newspapers'.<sup>89</sup> Mercuries were often the wives or daughters of printers; they kept stalls or pamphlet shops, and sold works such as periodicals wholesale to hawkers.<sup>90</sup> In her study of the women of Grub Street, McDowell describes Elizabeth Nutt as 'one of the most influential mercury-women in this period' and also highlights the role of printers' wives such as 'Mrs How(e)', who was a 'printing-house mistress' from whom hawkers could collect papers.<sup>91</sup> Mrs How would have been invaluable to her husband, John How, when he took

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<sup>84</sup> Troyer, *Ned Ward*, p.227.

<sup>85</sup> Treadwell, 'On False and Misleading Imprints', pp.33-34.

<sup>86</sup> Raven, *The Business of Books*, p.161. John D. Gordon, 'John Nutt: Trade Publisher and Printer "In the Savoy"', *Library*, 15.3 (2014), 243-260 (p.243) <<http://library.oxfordjournals.org/content/15/3/243>> [accessed 16 September 2016].

<sup>87</sup> Suarez, 'The Business of Literature', p.139.

<sup>88</sup> David Foxon, *Pope and the Early Eighteenth-Century Book Trade*, rev. and ed. by James McLaverty (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp.2-6.

<sup>89</sup> Gordon, 'John Nutt: Trade Publisher and Printer', p.258.

<sup>90</sup> Foxon, *Pope and the Book Trade*, pp.7-8. Raven, *The Business of Books*, p.96.

<sup>91</sup> McDowell, *Women of Grub Street*, p.26; p.60.



over the distribution of *The London Spy* from Nutt in 1699. How was part of a group that Michael Harris describes as ‘outsiders’ involved in ‘an alternative book trade’.<sup>92</sup> Printers were shut out of the booksellers’ trade in copyrights, so were forced to invest in ‘small, topical, and fast-selling works’.<sup>93</sup> A periodical like *The London Spy* would therefore have been an ideal investment for How as he set himself up in business at the Ram-Head-Inn-Yard in Fenchurch Street, the address given in his imprints for the folio editions. Indeed, Troyer infers that How’s involvement with *The London Spy* gave him a higher standing within the trade, since he: ‘rose to prosperity and prominence as a bookseller through the success of Ward’s writings.’<sup>94</sup>

The relationship between Ward and How was mutually beneficial. This is apparent from How’s inclusion of advertisements for Ward’s other works, ‘All Written by the same Author’, on the second page of each monthly issue of *The London Spy*. These works are advertised as ‘Books Sold by J. How’ as well as his associates ‘J. Weld’ in Fleet Street and ‘Mrs. Fabian’ in Cheapside. By comparing the adverts, it becomes clear that Ward was writing to a market that both he and How were shaping through the format, style and marketing strategies of *The London Spy*. For example, Ward’s earlier works, including *A Poet’s Ramble After Riches* and *A Trip to Jamaica*, were advertised for sale in Part 8 of the periodical (for June 1699). By Part 9 (July 1699), a new pamphlet, *A Walk to Islington*, had appeared on the list, capitalising on the popularity of Ward’s travel writing. By Part 10 (August 1699), How was also advertising Ward’s dialogue comedy, *The Humours of a Coffee-House*, presumably inspired by the success of Ward’s repeated representation of the coffee-house as a discursive space in *The London Spy*.<sup>95</sup>

It is intriguing to see how quickly Ward was writing new material, and how he moulded this material in response to the market. But who were Ward’s readers? We know from the importance of Nutt and How’s

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<sup>92</sup> Michael Harris, ‘Paper pirates: the alternative book trade in mid-eighteenth-century London’, in *Fakes and Frauds*, ed. by Myers and Harris, pp.47-70 (p.49).

<sup>93</sup> Treadwell, Michael, ‘London Trade Publishers, 1675–1750’, *Library*, 6th ser., 4.2 (1982), 99-134 (pp.120-22) <<http://library.oxfordjournals.org/content/s6-IV/2/99>> [accessed 16 September 2016].

<sup>94</sup> Troyer, *Ned Ward*, p.227.

<sup>95</sup> The coffee-house features in seven parts of the periodical: the coffee-house in Aldgate, Part 1; the Widow’s Coffee-House, Part 2; the Beaus’ Coffee-House, Part 9; the Wits’ Coffee-House, Part 10; the Aldersgate and Temple Coffee-Houses, Part 12; the Little Devil Coffee-House, Part 14; and Jonathan’s Coffee-House, Part 16.

distribution networks, as well as the evidence of How's repeated re-issues, that *The London Spy* was being sold to a mass market. The imprints also offer another clue: price. Ashley Marshall's analysis of wages and print prices for this period is useful in gauging Ward's readership. The 16-page folio editions were all sold for 6d, as were Ward's pamphlet works advertised by How. Marshall argues that 6d was 'hardly out of reach for most potential buyers', though 'for someone grossing less than £50 per annum' (less than 3s a day), which included servants and those in the building and manufacturing trades, '6d would not have been a trivial sum'. As for the 5s price of the octavo edition of *The London Spy Compleat*, which Marshall estimates as the equivalent of £50-75 in today's prices, this was 'a hefty sum' and 'was probably going to be limited to the relatively elite'.<sup>96</sup> Clearly, then, *The London Spy* did not only sell to the lower end of the market.<sup>97</sup> This contradicts Sambrook's assertion that Ward's 'readership were vulgar'.<sup>98</sup> Instead, it supports Raymond's argument that periodicals spoke to 'middling' people.<sup>99</sup> This new book-buying public included merchants, tradesmen, members of the new professions and their families, and it was they, Hammond argues, who now set the 'literary agenda', since they wanted to read about their own world.<sup>100</sup>

This analysis of the material context in which Ward was writing indicates that he was part of a highly commercialised literary culture. It is therefore more accurate to view him as a 'middling' figure, like his readers, than to dismiss him as 'low'. Troyer argues that modern editors too often associate Ward's 'low tastes' with assumptions about his social and cultural status. He suggests that Ward's ambiguous background suited him to his particular style of periodical writing.<sup>101</sup> Likewise, John Brewer's description of a group he terms 'cultural middlemen' seems fitting for Ward, Nutt and How:

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<sup>96</sup> Ashley Marshall, *The Practice of Satire in England, 1658-1770* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 2013), pp.22-26.

<sup>97</sup> Price was determined more by the number of printed sheets than by literary value. Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*, for example, sold for 4s in 1704 (334 pages in octavo), at the same time as *The London Spy Compleat* was selling for 5s (435 pages in octavo). See Marshall, *The Practice of Satire*, Appendix, p.306.

<sup>98</sup> Sambrook, *ODNB*.

<sup>99</sup> Raymond, 'Pamphlets and News', p.491.

<sup>100</sup> Hammond, *Professional Imaginative Writing*, p.54; p.190.

<sup>101</sup> Troyer, *Ned Ward*, p.4.

These impresarios were responsible for the dissemination of new literary and aesthetic forms [...] Their aim was to appeal to the appetite, to cater to changing taste, and to satisfy an audience keen to enjoy novelty and variety.<sup>102</sup>

The characteristics that Brewer describes – dissemination, innovation, catering to the appetites and tastes of readers – are all aspects that I have highlighted as important to the success of *The London Spy*. It is in this context that we can re-evaluate Ward, gaining insight into his world by examining how *The London Spy* both shaped and was shaped by the commercialised culture of which it was a part.

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<sup>102</sup> John Brewer, ““The most polite age and the most vicious””: Attitudes Towards Culture as a Commodity, 1660-1800, in *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text*, ed. by Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), pp.341-61 (p.346).

## Chapter 2: Ambivalence and Satire in *The London Spy*

In the previous chapter I argued that as a professional writer, Ward was influenced by the material and cultural conditions of authorship and the marketplace for print. It is to the ambivalence of this commercialised culture, and of Ward's rhetorical position in relation to it, that I turn now.

Ambivalence was not regarded as a positive quality at the time Ward was writing. Barbara Maria Stafford writes that: 'If we want to know what the eighteenth century most profoundly valued or despised in all aspects of culture, then we must examine its fearful disdain of mixtures.'<sup>103</sup> Yet there was a tension between cultural ideals that privileged hierarchy and taxonomy, and the realities of commercialised culture. This culture, Brewer argues, was characterised by an 'apparent absence of discrimination between popular forms that we would consider "low" [...] and those that we would view as [...] highbrow.' Periodicals, he writes, were an important site of such 'culturally heterogeneous' discourse.<sup>104</sup>

In this chapter, I consider how attitudes towards commercialised culture influenced Ward's ambivalent representation of discursive spaces in *The London Spy*. Firstly, I argue that contemporaries like Pope constructed a high/ low dichotomy in response to fears about social, cultural and topographical hybridity. I link this to Stallybrass and White's argument that the scribbler was not simply a low figure for Pope, but was rather a 'hybrid' occupying the 'space *between* [...] high and low culture'.<sup>105</sup> I then examine Ward's rhetorical position in light of this inbetweenness, particularly the tensions inherent in his use of satire in *The London Spy*.

### Cultural Politics

In Part 10 of *The London Spy*, the narrator and his friend visit the 'Wits Coffee-house': a satirical portrait of Dryden's favourite haunt, Will's. Due to its reputation for learned literary discussion, they hope that 'the Powerful Eloquence' of the company 'might inspire us' (3). Yet they are disappointed:

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<sup>103</sup> Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1991), p.221.

<sup>104</sup> Brewer, 'Attitudes Towards Culture as a Commodity', p.348.

<sup>105</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, pp.113-14.

the Spy describes the activity of ‘criticks’ at one table ‘perverting’ the works of existing authors, whilst at another table ‘a parcel of Young, Raw, Second-Rate Beaus’ read their poetry aloud (3, 6). The Spy evokes the world of commerce to portray these writers as second-rate:

if they had but once the Honour to dip a Finger and Thumb into Mr. D-----’s Snuff-box, it was enough to inspire ’em with a true Genius of Poetry, and make ’em write Verse, as fast as a Taylor takes his Stitches. (6)

Not only are the poets likened to tailors in the execution of their craft, but the source of their genius, Ward jokes, is not their intellectual internalisation of Dryden’s poetry but their bodily intake of his snuff. Their resulting poems are comically materialistic: ‘a Panegyric upon Orange-flower-water’, a ‘Lampoon upon nasty Tobacco-Smokers’ and ‘a Poem in praise of short Puff-Wigs’ (6). Like Ward’s inversion of the high/low dichotomy in his image of the ‘Monied’ scribbler whose pages wrap up pies and plums, the wits are lowered through their association with commodities. Yet instead of being ridiculed because they belong like tailors to the ‘low’ world of trade, they are satirised for their status as consumers, emulating the ‘high’ world of fashion. Their cultural efforts do not represent the ‘inner life of true literature’ described by Rogers, but rather the ‘visible, external substance’ usually associated with Grub Street wares.<sup>106</sup> Despite their fashionable ways, the Wits’ materialism thus makes them as contemptible as the ‘Muddling Muckworms’ who scribble, talk and jangle in the coffee-house in Part 1.

Both of these episodes challenge Jürgen Habermas’s model of the coffee-house as a space of rational discourse. Habermas argues that the public sphere emerged in the late seventeenth century from a “bourgeois” group that ‘from the outset was a reading public’, and that it became embodied in a number of public forums, including the coffee-house and the periodical.<sup>107</sup> The coffee-house was an important space for both verbal and textual communication, since men of all social classes could sit together to read and talk. As Markman Ellis explains: ‘the coffee-house transformed the

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<sup>106</sup> Rogers, *Grub Street*, p.50.

<sup>107</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), pp.23-25.

social organisation of the city, bringing with it a new principle of convivial sociability based on conversation and discussion.’<sup>108</sup> Stallybrass and White emphasise the importance of this as a ‘*de-libidinized*’ discursive space, ‘free from the “grotesque” bodies of the alehouse’.<sup>109</sup> Yet they do recognise the coffee-house as an ‘ambiguous site’ in terms of its social mix and its links to the literary marketplace, since ‘critical factions’ could introduce discord, just as Ward’s ‘criticks’ do by ‘perverting’ meaning in the Wit’s Coffee-House.<sup>110</sup>

Hammond argues that ‘the most important aspect of the bourgeois public sphere [...] is the new discursive formations to which it gave rise’.<sup>111</sup> Yet several critics have questioned the legitimacy of Habermas’s model. Erin Mackie challenges Habermas’s idealisation of the coffee-house as a cerebral space, pointing to the coffee-houses in *The London Spy* as being: ‘full of bodies, their needs, their smells, their palpable physicality’, recalling Kroll’s description of ‘palpable’ words and manners in social spaces.<sup>112</sup> This is true, whether it be the ‘stinking Breaths’ of the ‘Muckworms’ talking and jangling, or the fragrant airs of the ‘Wits’. Ellis shows that contemporary satires often emphasised the ‘heterodox’ nature of coffee-house conversation, with discourse ‘disrupted by destructive and uncongenial tendencies’.<sup>113</sup> Mark Knights also highlights this disruptive potential, arguing that rather than a ‘public sphere of reasoned discourse’, partisan writers represented ‘sites of irrationality, incivility [...] or at least titillated shocked readers with such representations.’<sup>114</sup> In Chapter 1, I argued that *The London Spy* differs from *The Athenian Mercury* and the *Spectator* by representing impolite discursive spaces. Knights’s reference to titillation recalls the voyeuristic thrill of alternative models such as Dunton’s *The Night-Walker*, in which boundaries of civility are blurred by the narrator’s ramble through a distinctly *libidinized* city. In *The London Spy*, it is the

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<sup>108</sup> Markman Ellis, *The Coffee-House: A Cultural History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004), p.150.

<sup>109</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p.97; p.95.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p.100; p.97.

<sup>111</sup> Hammond, *Professional Imaginative Writing*, p.149.

<sup>112</sup> Erin Mackie, ‘Being Too Positive About the Public Sphere’, in *The Spectator: Emerging Discourses*, ed. by Donald J. Newman (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), pp.81-104 (p.86). Kroll, *The Material Word*, p.4.

<sup>113</sup> Ellis, *The Coffee-House*, p.62.

<sup>114</sup> Knights, *Representation*, pp.248-49; p.255.

materiality of both bodies and commerce that creates this ambivalence, so that neither the coffee-house nor any other public space is demarcated by clear boundaries of high and low.

It was the fear of such ambivalence that inspired Pope to construct his high/low dichotomy in *The Dunciad*. The symbolic threat of dunce-hood is the spread of commercial culture into the higher cultural sphere. This is why binaries of high and low, polite and popular, perform a central role in Pope's portrayal of Dullness, which he roots in London's topography. McLaverty suggests that Pope's desire to create such binaries stemmed from his ambiguous position on 'the margins of his society'.<sup>115</sup> His topographical concentration of Dullness is thus part of his attempt to demarcate what he wished to exclude from the literary canon and from his own cultural milieu. For Hammond, this opposition to 'the transgressions created by the promiscuous mingling of high and low' constitutes Pope's 'cultural politics'. Yet by satirising Grub Street writers, Pope is implicated in transgressions of his own:

This cultural politics issues in the deployment of parodic literary forms – mock forms, hybrid forms – the common achievement of which is to borrow energy from the sincere forms they wish to explode, and recycle that energy in subversion.<sup>116</sup>

Here, Hammond reveals the ambivalence inherent in Pope's project. By parodying the 'low' forms that he wished to exclude, Pope borrowed their energy to create a subversive form of literary hybridity.

Pope seems to be engaged in the complex process described by Stallybrass and White, whereby the binary categories of high and low structure hierarchies through a paradoxical psychic response: 'Again and again, we find a striking ambivalence to the representations of the lower strata (of the body, of literature, of society, of place) in which they are both reviled and desired.' This double response, they argue, is intrinsic to 'the ideological construction of the low-Other', which is both socially marginalised as an object of disgust and made imaginatively central as an object of desire.<sup>117</sup> The lower bodily strata, 'low' forms of art and literature,

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<sup>115</sup> McLaverty, *Pope, Print and Meaning*, p.12.

<sup>116</sup> Hammond, *Professional Imaginative Writing*, p.11; p.239.

<sup>117</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, pp. 4-6; p.20.

‘low’ social groups and the places where such ‘low life’ resort, are all therefore crucial to how a society classifies what is valuable in relation to its inverse.<sup>118</sup> The irony is that this inverse – deemed to be of low value by the official culture, which uses such classification systems to maintain stability through exclusion – gains a transgressive symbolic power from the desire that is thereby both constructed and suppressed.

The figure of the scribbler is an example of this ambivalent ‘low-Other’. Stallybrass and White argue that Pope was threatened by professional writers because they occupied ‘a taboo-laden space *between* the topographical boundaries which mark off the discrete sites of high and low culture’.<sup>119</sup> This inbetweenness was taboo because it transgressed the classificatory system that determined literary value. As a result, the scribbler becomes, in the world of *The Dunciad*: ‘a grotesque hybrid right at the social threshold, a neither/nor creature [...] which repels and fascinates Pope’.<sup>120</sup> To suppress this ambivalent response to the figure of the scribbler, elite writers constructed for themselves the figure of the civilised author as ‘an aloof spectator’, distanced from the commercial ““common” place of the market’.<sup>121</sup> By distancing themselves from this space, writers like Pope might achieve the ‘*separation* of the two cultural spheres’ that was threatened by their own straddling of the commercial and literary realms.<sup>122</sup>

Yet it was not only elite writers who constructed themselves as aloof spectators in relation to the marketplace. Ward sets himself up as an aloof spectator in his narrative frame, since the Spy – his name stressing his role in gaining knowledge through ‘Observation and Intelligence’ – is, as a country gentleman, distanced both socially and topographically from the marketplace for print. This distance is also established by the satirical position that he takes in relation to the ‘Muckworms’ who scribble in the coffee-house and the ‘Wits’ who write second-rate verse. In the next sections, I will consider the implications of Ward’s decision to adopt this rhetorical position.

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<sup>118</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p.20.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p.113.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p.77.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p.112.



## The Spy, Spectating and Satire

Ward's narrator is socially fluid, moving between different spaces without ever fully identifying with the people and scenes he describes. He adopts the scathing distance of the satirist, amused as well as aloof. Charles A. Knight describes the satirist as 'a sceptical and bemused observer', whose 'mode of both observation and attack is representation'.<sup>123</sup> This attack involves an 'element of play', which both sharpens the blow for the victim, who is 'mocked', and softens it for the audience, since it makes 'the attack more tolerable by making it entertaining'. The audience is also appeased by the fact that the 'traditional justification for satire's uncomfortable attacks lies in their moral utility'.<sup>124</sup> These strategies of sceptical observation, entertaining attack and professed moral purpose are all present in Ward's rhetorical position in *The London Spy*.

In Part 2, for example, the Spy and his friend encounter a 'Young Crew of deminutive Vagabonds' on one of their rambles through the streets at night. The gang declare they are 'the City Black-Guard' and offer, in return for a penny, to 'say the Lord's-Prayer Backwards; Swear the Compass round; give a new Curse to every Step in the Monument; [and] call a Whore by as many proper Names as a Peer has Titles' (11). The linguistic inversion that they offer is clearly transgressive, since it will lower the 'high' pillars of official society: religion, the Monument as a literal and symbolic pillar of the City, and the social institution of peerage. Moreover, they offer this transgression as part of a commercial transaction. The Spy declines their offer but gives them a penny. His position towards them is one of sceptical observation – they look like they are 'advancing in order to attack a Birdsnest' – and entertaining attack: he calls them 'a parcel of hopeful Sprouts [...] train'd up in Vilany, Ignorance, Laziness, Prophaness, and Infidelity' (11). Yet the Spy's moral protest is strongest in his attack upon the society that has both produced and marginalised them: he laments it as a 'shame' that 'such an infamous brood of Vagabonds' should be bred 'in such a well Govern'd Christian City as this, where are so many grave Magistrates

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<sup>123</sup> Charles A. Knight, *The Literature of Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.3.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3; p.30.

and Parish Officers, whose Care it ought to be to prevent such growing Evils' (11).

This episode might be used as evidence for the concern for social ills that Briggs identifies in his re-evaluation of Ward, discussed in Chapter 1. Yet despite the Spy's concern for the 'Miserable condition of these unhappy Wretches', he attacks the 'Evils' of their behaviour as well as those of the officials who have failed in their duty of care (11). His distance thus extends downwards to those at the bottom of the social hierarchy as well as to those at the top. In fact, Briggs's analysis of Ward's satiric strategy in *The London Spy* seems to undermine his assertion that Ward was socially progressive. The transgressive potential of satire, Briggs posits, resides in the satirist's 'act of standing up' to the vices of 'Wrongheaded authority'. However, 'it is one of the great ironies of *The London Spy*' that this strategy is not consistent or unified: 'London seems to present no overall structure of cultural values to respond to, so [Ward's] satire proceeds piecemeal [...] substituting irreverence and cynicism for any program of positive values.'<sup>125</sup> Indeed, this does seem to be the case in Ward's portrayal of the City Black-Guard, since despite his cynical comments about the 'well Govern'd Christian City', he does not allow the gang's linguistic inversion to offer a positive set of values to challenge the corrupt authority of religion, the City and law.

The Spy's professed moral purpose therefore appears to be less a progressive stance than a pose. In Part 1, he declares that he will 'expose the Vanities and Vices of the Town', recalling Dryden's declaration that: 'The true end of Satyre, is the amendment of Vices by correction'.<sup>126</sup> However, as Marshall cautions, 'a lot of satirists loudly broadcast valorous intentions, and precious few mean a word of it'.<sup>127</sup> For Troyer, Ward fits into this category, his adoption of the guise of the satirist proving disingenuous: 'The exposition of villainy and the expunging of vice was a convenient and fashionable label, under the cover of which one might indulge in the obscene and the salacious'.<sup>128</sup> This is an inherent tension of satire: by exposing vice, the satirist allows readers to enjoy such transgressions voyeuristically. Through adopting the rhetorical mask of the Spy, Ward creates a moral distance

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<sup>125</sup> Briggs, 'Satiric Strategy', p.83.

<sup>126</sup> Dryden, *Absalom and Achitophel: A Poem* (London: Tonson, 1681), 'To the Reader'.

<sup>127</sup> Marshall, *The Practice of Satire*, pp.40-41.

<sup>128</sup> Troyer, *Ned Ward*, p.206-07.

between himself and the salacious scenes he describes, whilst allowing his readers the titillation of encountering taboo subjects – such as the vagabonds’ proffered blasphemies and profanities – in print.

Marshall’s analysis of Ward’s satiric strategy furthers this view. She describes satire as ‘Ward’s trade’; he ‘is not a moral, socio-political, or defamatory satirist but a commercial one’. Ward ‘occasionally raises serious issues in passing, but [...] they are not the point. They serve to locate the satire, to make the story all the more relevant to English readers of the 1690s’. For Marshall, Ward is representative of a distinct type of satire that emerged at the end of the seventeenth century, examples of which are ‘best understood as experimental responses to a changing world’. This period of social and cultural flux, Marshall contends, influenced the satiric mode as well as the subject-matter chosen by writers like Ward, resulting in an unprecedentedly ‘generalized satire’, aimed at general vices and abstractions – such as the Blackguard’s ‘Vilany, Ignorance, Laziness, Prophaness, and Infidelity’ – and designed to entertain.<sup>129</sup>

Ward’s representation of the transgressive speech of the ‘City-Blackguard’ also supports Knight’s model of satire as displaying the difference between appearances, ideas and discourse. Knight argues that when ‘satire imitates speech genres, it characteristically makes them ironic’, so that they become ‘both objects and instruments of satiric attack’.<sup>130</sup> In the case of the City Black-Guard, their ‘Prophaness’ is an object of the Spy’s moral disapproval, and yet it is also an instrument of his satiric attack, since their linguistic inversion mirrors the hypocritical gap that the Spy reveals between representation and reality in the ‘well Govern’d Christian City’. This makes the Spy’s relationship to the vagabonds one of resemblance as well as difference: like them, he challenges official discourse. Such ambivalence recalls Stallybrass and White’s theory that the ‘low-Other’ – in this case the linguistically transgressive Black-Guard – gains symbolic power by being socially marginalised as an object of disgust whilst becoming imaginatively central as an object of desire.

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<sup>129</sup> Marshall, *The Practice of Satire*, pp.138-39; p.36.

<sup>130</sup> Knight, *The Literature of Satire*, pp.3-4.

## Satiric Doubleness

The ambivalent relationship of resemblance and difference between the Spy and the Black-Guard is also evident in the Spy's position towards the inmates of Bedlam, whom he encounters in Part 3. The Spy and his friend join other spectators to view what he derisively refers to as a 'Crack-brain'd Society', 'Lunatick Family' and 'Shatter-brain'd Fraternity' (10-11). By emphasizing the collective identity of the patients, like members of a club ('Society', 'Family', 'Fraternity'), the Spy sets them at a distance. His relationship to them is that of a curious outsider: 'my Friend and I, with others, stood listening'; 'We then mov'd on till we found another remarkable Figure worth our observing' (11). Yet the Spy is not just an auditor and spectator; he is also a participant in the discourse. First, he questions a 'whimsie-headed Wretch': 'If you are Prince of the Air, said I, why don't you command the Man in the Moon to give you some [claret]?' Later, his friend attempts to engage a melancholic scholar in conversation: 'My Friend walk'd up to him, and introduc'd some talk, to divert himself with a few of his Frensical Extravagancies' (11). In both cases, the conversation is unequal: the Spy and his friend are humouring the madmen, setting them up as objects of ridicule for their own, and the reader's, amusement. Yet this balance of power shifts when they meet 'Another', who challenges their notions of what can and cannot be said:

Prithee come and live here, and you may talk what you will, and nobody will call you to Question for it: Truth is persecuted every where abroad, and flies hither for Sanctuary [...] I can Tell Great Men such Bold Truths as they don't love to hear (12)

This figure is like the Shakespearean Fool, whose license allows him to speak the truths that no one else dares. The Spy does not comment, yet shortly afterwards he encounters a 'Madwoman', whose truth-telling shames a 'foolish girl' and 'a Beauish Blade'. These spectators now become objects of ridicule, with the madwoman taking on the role of satirist, exposing vanity and inequality: the Beau, she mocks, 'has got more Flower in his Wig, than my Poor Mother has in her Meal-Tub' (12). After this, the Spy declares

himself 'tir'd' by the 'Mad-folks' and turns his satirical attention to the 'Spectators' instead, distancing himself and his friend from their ranks (13).

It is telling that the Spy stands aloof from the other spectators after these scenes have implied an equivalence between himself and the truth-telling inmates. The purpose of the Bedlam episode initially seems to be to expose madness to ridicule, but ultimately it is the vanities of the Beau and the vices of the 'Whores' and 'Leachers' in the audience that are exposed. Whilst the Spy turns his gaze upon the spectators, the mad-folk hold up a mirror to the society from which they have been excluded. Both employ the rhetorical distance of outsiders to expose hypocrisy.

This relationship of resemblance and difference between the satirist and those whom he represents complicates the double speaking position of aloof spectator/ voyeur. Fredric V. Bogel's model of satire offers an explanatory framework for this ambivalence. Bogel argues that the function of satire is to carry out 'boundary-policing' by producing difference in the face of insufficient differentiation. In this model, satire has a 'double structure': 'satiric doubleness' arises from the relation of the satirist to the satiric object as one of both opposition and problematic identity.<sup>131</sup> The movement, Bogel explains, is one of 'externalization': 'from differences within to differences between', a movement that denies 'internal division by converting it into a difference between inside and outside'.<sup>132</sup> According to this interpretation, Ward's satiric attacks on external targets imply an internal ambivalence towards that which he sets out to mock.

Bogel's theory of satiric doubleness draws upon Stallybrass and White's argument that 'the ideological construction of the low-Other' stems from a paradoxical response of denial and desire. Bogel also draws upon Michael McKeon's argument that a 'major cultural crisis' occurred during the Augustan Age. For McKeon, this crisis was signalled by the attempts of writers to counter it, since their 'invocation of stability' implies 'an effort to rectify a felt condition of instability': 'only a profound apprehension of disorder could have occasioned these remarkable exercises in defensive

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<sup>131</sup> Fredric V. Bogel, *The Difference Satire Makes: Rhetoric and Reading from Jonson to Byron* (London: Cornell University Press, 2001), p.12; p.42; p.67.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p.49; p.71.

reinforcement'.<sup>133</sup> One such defensive exercise, McKeon argues, was the adoption of the satiric persona or mask, which ostensibly distanced the author from 'disturbing material' in the text, even as the author and 'Other' were 'on the verge of collapsing into sameness'.<sup>134</sup>

If this is the case, then we might conclude that the Other against which Ward was defending himself was his own status as scribbler: 'a grotesque hybrid right at the social threshold', to repeat Stallybrass and White's phrase.<sup>135</sup> The relationship of resemblance and difference between the Spy and the 'Mad-folk' supports this theory, since Bedlam was one of the sites that Rogers identifies as adding to the metaphorical force that Grub Street gained from its geographical and social environs. Pope would later evoke the image of 'journals, odes' and other Grub Street wares as 'dirty leaves' that 'Be-fringe the rails of Bedlam'.<sup>136</sup> As discursive spaces, they were uncomfortably close, suggesting that Ward's satirical distance was an attempt to separate them. By satirising impolite and irrational discourse, Ward thus reveals his internal ambivalence. In the next chapter, I shall explore how this double structure of satire and its simultaneous embodiment and denial of hybridity influences Ward's use of the grotesque.

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<sup>133</sup> Michael McKeon, 'Cultural Crisis and Dialectical Method: Destabilizing Augustan Literature', in *The Profession of Eighteenth-Century Literature: Reflections on an Institution*, ed. by Leo Damrosch (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), pp.42-61 (p.46; p.48).

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50.

<sup>135</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p.113.

<sup>136</sup> Pope, *The First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace Imitated* (1737), in *Alexander Pope: The Major Works*, ed. by Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.372-84 (p. 384), lines 415-19.

### Chapter 3: The Grotesque: Language, Bodies and Place

The grotesque plays an important role in Stallybrass and White's theory of satire and the double psychic response of denial and desire. They describe the scribbler as a 'grotesque' figure, but what did this word signify for Ward's contemporaries?<sup>137</sup> During the late seventeenth century, the semantics of 'grotesque' changed under the influence of neoclassical aesthetics, as it developed from a technical term for a style of decorative art using hybrid forms, into a wider, pejorative term to indicate absurdity. At the time Ward was writing, 'grotesque' had also begun to refer to artistic and literary styles such as caricature and burlesque, characterised by comic exaggeration.<sup>138</sup> These styles were considered to be a 'low' form of art, bearing the taint of commercialised culture. I begin this chapter by comparing Dryden's critique of such styles to Ward's ambivalent representation of a Bartholomew Fair farce in Part 10 of *The London Spy*.

Our modern understanding of the grotesque is much wider than Dryden's. When Rumbold writes that Ward 'specialised in grotesque evocations of contemporary life', she employs the term in a more generalised sense that encompasses what Mikhail Bakhtin calls 'an immense world of grotesque imagery' linked to the 'bodily lower stratum'.<sup>139</sup> It is in this Bakhtinian tradition that Stallybrass and White write about the grotesque as a 'discursive body' opposed to the classical.<sup>140</sup> In this chapter, I use their theories to analyse Ward's representation of Billingsgate language as an example of the grotesque discursive body, and ask how this is linked to place in *The London Spy*.

#### A Bartholomew-Fair Farce

In his essay 'A Parallel of Poetry and Painting' (1694), Dryden insists that the main purpose of both art forms 'is to Please [...] and as they are Arts,

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<sup>137</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p.4; p.20; p.113.

<sup>138</sup> Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.10; p.6.

<sup>139</sup> Valerie Rumbold, ed., Jonathan Swift's *Parodies, Hoaxes, Mock-Treatises*, p.292, note 143. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), p.32; p.20.

<sup>140</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p.105.

they must have Rules'.<sup>141</sup> He outlines permitted modes of representation: the writer or artist may 'form to himself an Idea of perfect Nature', thus 'correcting Nature from what actually she is [...] to what she ought to be'; he may also draw 'inferior Persons, and low Subjects' with a 'Likeness to the deficient faulty Nature'.<sup>142</sup> Both are types of imitation, requiring the artist or writer to study ideals and realities. Yet the grotesque does not abide by these rules:

There is yet a lower sort of poetry and painting, which is out of nature; for a farce is that in poetry, which grotesque is in a picture. The persons and action of a farce are all unnatural, and the manners false [...] Grotesque painting is the just resemblance of this; and Horace begins his 'Art of Poetry' by describing such a figure, with [...] parts of different species jumbled together, according to the mad Imagination of the dauber; and the end of all this, as he tells you afterward, is to cause laughter; a very monster in a Bartholomew-fair, for the Mob to gape at for their Two-pence. Laughter is [...] a kind of Bastard-pleasure too, taken in at the Eyes of the vulgar Gazers, and at the Ears of the beastly Audience<sup>143</sup>

Here, Dryden emphasises the unnaturalness of grotesque painting and poetic farce by equating them with two images of monstrous bodies. The first is a painted monster borrowed from Horace's *Ars Poetica*; the second is his own image of its physical equivalent: 'a very monster in a Bartholomew-fair'. This latter image is particularly appropriate because the theatrical farces that Dryden attacks had a close association with the popular performances shown alongside 'monsters' at London's Bartholomew Fair. Dryden suggests that the laughter provoked by these dramatic and bodily spectacles is a shameful pleasure. He portrays it as debasing because it is consumed bodily: visually and aurally, 'taken in at the Eyes [...] and at the Ears'.

Dryden's language hints at a fear of social hybridity in his efforts to distinguish and thus distance the 'lower sort of poetry and painting' enjoyed by a 'Mob' of 'vulgar' and 'beastly' consumers. His derogative use of the term 'dauber' (and later 'farce-Scribblers') to refer to the producers of such art also suggests a fear of cultural hybridity: the low artist and mob audience

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<sup>141</sup> John Dryden, 'A Parallel of Poetry and Painting' (1694), preface to *The Art of Painting* by C. A. Du Fresnoy, trans. by John Dryden, (London: Taylor, 1716), pp.i-lxvii (p.xxx).

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.xvi-xvii.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.xxviii-xxix.



threaten to carry their popular, commercialised cultural forms into the ‘high’ realm of the arts. Dryden’s imagery also reveals another implicit anxiety: the separation of the self and Other. As the mob ‘gape’ at the ‘Monster’, they imaginatively consume it, becoming ‘beastly’ themselves. Dryden’s implication is that artists and writers must resist integrating the monstrous Other against which they define themselves.

Dryden’s images of monsters evoke the etymological origin of ‘grotesque’. From the Italian for ‘*grotta*’, or ‘cave’, ‘*grottesca*’, was the name given to the murals of Nero’s *Domus Aurea*, built after 64 CE and excavated in the late fifteenth century. These murals depicted chimerical creatures merging into ornate foliage. Their rediscovery inspired a new, fanciful decorative genre that became popular during the sixteenth century, most famously adopted by Raphael in his Vatican murals.<sup>144</sup> The diarist John Evelyn referred to these in 1645, describing ‘the foliage & Grotesque’ in the Vatican as ‘admirable’.<sup>145</sup> This is one of the first recorded uses of the word ‘grotesque’ in English, revealing its origin as a technical term denoting a style of decorative art.<sup>146</sup> Yet during the second half of the seventeenth century, the characteristics of grotesque art – in particular its fantastic, hybrid forms – became ‘the object of ridicule and disapproval’ under the influence of neoclassical aesthetics.<sup>147</sup> This disapproval is evident in Dryden’s argument that grotesque painting and poetic farce are ‘unnatural’ and ‘false’. The ideals to which Dryden contrasts them are those of truth and beauty: poetry and painting should be ‘not only true Imitations of Nature, but of the best Nature [...] without its Deformities or Faults’.<sup>148</sup> Grotesque figures, originally valued for their fanciful recombination of natural forms, thus came to symbolise deformity in a wider, more figurative sense.

Dryden’s parallel between grotesque art and poetic farce indicates the second semantic change that the word ‘grotesque’ underwent during the late

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<sup>144</sup> Clayborough, *The Grotesque*, pp.1-2; Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, pp.31-32.

<sup>145</sup> John Evelyn, diary entry from 18 January 1645, in *The Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. by E.S. de Beer, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), II: *Kalendarium, 1620-1649*, p.295.

<sup>146</sup> Clayborough estimates this at ‘about 1640’ in *The Grotesque*, p.2. The *OED Online*’s earliest citations of the English spelling ‘grotesque’ are from Thomas Browne’s *Religio Medici*, 1643, and John Evelyn’s diary, 1645 <<http://www.oed.com.ueaezproxy.uea.ac.uk:2048/view/Entry/81794>> [accessed 25 November 2016].

<sup>147</sup> Clayborough, *The Grotesque*, p.6.

<sup>148</sup> Dryden, ‘A Parallel between Poetry and Painting’, p.xxxvi.

seventeenth century. This change seems both an extension of the generalised meaning of ‘fantastically extravagant’, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us came to be transferred to ‘immaterial things, especially of literary style’, and an extension of the original technical term to other modes of representation.<sup>149</sup> Arthur Clayborough argues that although these artistic and literary styles were ‘considered to be a low form of art’, the word ‘grotesque’ was used in a descriptive rather than a pejorative sense:

It is the nature of caricature to be grotesque, as it is also the nature of farce like the *Commedia dell’Arte*, or burlesque, like ‘Mac Flecknoe’ or the ‘Dunciad’; one cannot rebuke a clown by describing his antics as ridiculous.<sup>150</sup>

The examples that Clayborough cites encompass popular performances as well as poetry by the more culturally elite Dryden and Pope. So what makes it in ‘the nature’ of these different styles to be grotesque? Caricature is an artistic or literary portrait ‘which ridicules a person by exaggerating and distorting his most prominent features and characteristics’; farce shares these qualities of ‘exaggeration and absurdity’ in its dramatic techniques of clowning and buffoonery; whilst burlesque is an ‘exaggerated “sending up”’ of a literary mode.<sup>151</sup> Thus, whilst Clayborough stresses that we cannot call these styles ‘ridiculous’, all nevertheless employ exaggeration for the purposes of ridicule. Their relationship to the original meaning of ‘grotesque’ lies in this flouting of the conventions of what is real or natural. Such artistic licence was transgressive at a time when, as Nick Groom writes, literary theories were ‘insisting that imitation is an idealistic activity whereas creative fabrication is somehow dangerous.’<sup>152</sup> Yet Clayborough argues that these grotesque styles provided ‘writers of the Neoclassical period with a socially acceptable outlet for fantasy’, suggesting that the transgression was both enacted and contained.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> ‘grotesque, n. and adj.’, *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com.ueaezproxy.uea.ac.uk:2048/view/Entry/81794>> [accessed 25 November 2016].

<sup>150</sup> Clayborough, *The Grotesque*, p.10.

<sup>151</sup> *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, ed. by J.A. Cuddon, 4th edn, rev. by C.E. Preston (London: Penguin, 1999), p.110; pp.307-10; pp.99-100.

<sup>152</sup> Nick Groom, ‘Forgery and Plagiarism’, p.107.

<sup>153</sup> Clayborough, *The Grotesque*, p.10.

The idea that the grotesque held negative connotations of absurdity and deformity and yet functioned as a 'socially acceptable outlet' for such characteristics is important in light of Ward's ambivalence towards it in *The London Spy*. Ward's satiric strategy employs a grotesque style, including comic exaggeration and caricature, and yet he attacks these characteristics when he encounters them in the discursive spaces of London. This is most striking in Part 10, when the Spy recounts his first visit to Bartholomew Fair. Initially, he and his companion try to see a play, but when they reach the theatre they discover that 'the Wiser part of the Family of *Tom Fools* had translated themselves to Bartholomew Fair' (10). Actors often moved between the cultural spheres of theatre and fair, linking popular spectacle to the dramatic-poetical farces that Dryden associates with the grotesque. The language Dryden uses above suggests that he saw this hybridity as a threat, yet the Spy offers a different view. Although the actors' decision privileges 'Profit' over 'Pride', he insists that both roles are equally 'reputable': 'there's no more distinction between a Kings-House-Player and a Countrey-Stroler [...] for if the Means to Live be the same, it signifies little to his Credit in what Place they are put in Practice' (10). Ward's satire lies in the figurative language that he uses to embellish this argument, comparing the actors to bull-dogs and mountebanks. His implication is that wherever they are located, the first are still beastly and the second still knaves, so that the 'Credit' and 'reputable[ness]' of the actors is minimal either way. Thus he blurs the distinctions between high and low culture whilst remaining ambivalent towards both.

When the Spy and his friend arrive to 'take a Survey of the Fair', its theatricality is apparent in the emphasis upon spectacle (10). They see rope-dancers and a sword dancer, waxworks, a fat lady and a 'Dwarf Comedy', which the Spy observes is 'as wonderful a Monster as any's to be seen in the Fair' (14-15). Dryden's description of the 'vulgar gazers' who 'gape' at the monster is recalled in the Spy's description of 'the Innumerable Throng' whose 'Impatient Desires' to see and hear a clown's performance lead them:

Auncle-deep into Filth and Nastiness, crowded as close as a Barrel of Figs, or Candles in a Tallow-Chandlers Basket, Sweating and Melting, with the heat of their own [...] uncleanly Hides' (11)

Not only do the crowd become ‘beastly’, like cattle, in their desire for Dryden’s ‘Bastard-pleasure’ of laughter, but in consuming this pleasure visually and aurally they become akin to commodities themselves: candles or figs. This consumption becomes more vulgar when another clown entertains the open-eyed and mouthed ‘Gazers’ and ‘Gaping Crow’d’ by ‘blowing his Nose upon the People, who were mightily Pleas’d, and Laugh’d heartily at the Jest’. The clown’s bodily ejection has its figurative counterpart in the language that he and his fellow actor then ‘Spew’d out amongst the Rabble’, including ‘Nonsense’ and ‘a Tale of a Tub’ (11-12). Proverbially, ‘a tale of a tub’ meant ‘an apocryphal tale’, employing the image of a ‘clumsy ship’ to suggest spuriousness.<sup>154</sup> The clowns’ discourse is thus contemptible both by being physically disgusting and linguistically transgressive, distorting sense and truth.

In his account of the dwarf comedy, the Spy emphasises the elements of distortion, exaggeration and unnaturalness that characterise grotesque styles of caricature and farce. The actors’ performance is done to ‘a Perfection of Uncoothness’ and the Spy laughs ‘heartily at their awkward and ridiculous Imitations’. Dryden complained that: ‘The persons and action of a farce are all unnatural, and the manners false’, yet for the Spy the conventions of representation are delightfully overturned. He finds himself ‘wonderfully pleas’d’ by the actors’ comic failure at imitation, since each one looked ‘like what he really was, and not like what he represented’. Not only do they appear like unnatural ‘Puppits’, but to the Spy their performance seems to carry the taint of commerce in the very language they speak, since their low status has ‘begot in their Speeches such unalterable Tones’ that ‘I fancy’d all the while they were Playing, I heard some of ‘em Crying *Flag-Broomes*, some *Knives to Grind*, and others *Chimney-Sweep*’. The actors thus become indistinguishable from the hawkers outside, whose ‘shrill Cries of Nuts and Damsons’ had originally forced the Spy to take ‘Sanctuary’ in the theatrical booth (14-15).

The Spy’s conclusion is that ‘The whole Entertainment was the strangest Hodg-Podg that ever was Jumbled together; and is an excellent

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<sup>154</sup> ‘a tale of a tub’, *OED Online*  
<<http://www.oed.com.ueaezproxy.uea.ac.uk:2048/view/Entry/207129>> [accessed 25 November 2016].

Farce to please an Audience of such Fools' (15). The farce is grotesque, then, not just for its distorted style, but also its formal hybridity: it resembles Dryden's description of grotesque art as forms 'jumbled together, according to the mad Imagination of the dauber'. This aspect of combination or medley is one that Brewer identifies as characteristic of commercialised culture, in which 'different genres and forms' were 'jumbled in together'.<sup>155</sup> I have already observed that in Dryden's censure of formal hybridity, his language hints at a fear of social and cultural hybridity. The Spy also makes efforts in his account to distinguish and thus distance himself from the 'Audience of such Fools' who are pleased by the farce. He may have declared himself 'wonderfully pleas'd', but his pleasure, we are to understand, is not Dryden's 'Bastard-pleasure' of unthinking laughter, but rather the satirical laughter of one who recognises the absurdity of the spectacle and ridicules it along with the spectators, whom he represents as Other to himself. Thus, the Spy formulates himself as Stallybrass and White's aloof spectator, for whom: 'At the fair the subordinate classes became the object of a gaze constituting itself as respectable and superior by substituting observation for participation'.<sup>156</sup>

In his descriptions of the fair, the Spy thus maintains a satirical distance. Yet his lively account of Bartholomew Fair – extended into Part 11 of the periodical – seems motivated more by a spirit of diversion than of censoriousness. Indeed, a significant part of the entertaining nature of this account is the grotesqueness of Ward's satirical style: the very elements of distortion and exaggeration that he ridicules. This style of writing was commercially marketable; Troyer argues that contemporary readers were delighted by: 'the comic possibilities in subjecting their everyday world to the caricature and burlesque of Ward's impudent and racy [style]'.<sup>157</sup> The crowd melting with sweat, the clown blowing his nose and spewing out words, the actors who seem to cry 'Chimney Sweep': these are just some of the comically exaggerated details of the fair's 'Nastiness'. An ambivalence of resemblance and difference thus exists between the Spy and the performers of the farce. Likewise, whilst his account might allow his readers to 'see the Vices of the Town', it is not so easy to distinguish these

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<sup>155</sup> Brewer, 'Attitudes Towards Culture as a Commodity', p.345; p.348.

<sup>156</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p.42.

<sup>157</sup> Troyer, *Ned Ward*, p.31; p.35.

voyeuristic readers from the gazers who laugh at the dwarf play. All are implicated in the grotesque that Ward both writes and defines himself against.

### **The Grotesque Body and Discourse**

Dryden's other image of monstrosity reveals the classical tradition behind his aversion to grotesque painting and farce. The passage in Horace's *Ars Poetica* (c.19 BCE) to which Dryden refers was translated by his friend John Oldham in 1681 as follows:

Should some ill Painter, in a wild Design,  
To a Man's Head a Horse's Shoulders join,  
Or Fish's Tail to a Fair Woman's Waist,  
Or Draw the Limbs of many a different Beast,  
Ill-match'd, and with as motley Feathers dress'd!  
[...]  
Credit me, Sir, that Book is quite as bad,  
As worthy Laughter, as throughout is fill'd  
With monstrous Inconsistences, more vain and wild,  
Than sick Men's Dreams, whose neither Head nor Tail,  
Nor any parts in due Proportion fall.<sup>158</sup>

Like the *grottesca*, this monster is a chimerical creature, combining four bodily forms (human, horse, fish and bird), yet its figurative nature is also quadruple: it is 1) a textual image of 2) a hypothetical painting of 3) a fantastic body, which 4) stands as an analogy for poetic incongruity. Horace's criticism lies in the consequences of uncontrolled poetic licence: the hybrid bodily form of the monster symbolises a lack of unity in aesthetic form. This draws upon a classical trope about discourse. Horace's mockery of a book that has 'neither Head nor Tail' echoes Plato's statement that: 'It is necessary for every speech to cohere like a living thing having its own body so that nothing is lacking in head or foot'.<sup>159</sup> Horace's image of 'Ill-

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<sup>158</sup> John Oldham, *Horace's Art of Poetry: Imitated in English* (1681), in *The Compositions in Prose and Verse of Mr. John Oldham*, ed. by Edward Thompson, 2 vols (London: Flexney, 1770), II, pp.1-2.

<sup>159</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, (c.370 BCE), quoted by George A. Kennedy, 'The Evolution of a Theory of Artistic Prose', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. by H.B. Nisbet and Claud Rawson, 9 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989- ), I: *Classical Criticism*, ed. by George A. Kennedy (1993), pp.184-99 (p.189).

match'd' limbs also echoes the Roman orator Cicero, who wrote that discourse should be harmoniously made up of *membra*, or limbs.<sup>160</sup>

These precepts apply foremost to structural form – the coherence of a *corpus*, or body, of writing – yet such images also suggest an attitude towards verisimilitude: imitation of the perceived unity of natural bodies. This quality of verisimilitude is foremost in the Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius's dismissive attitude towards the fantastic style to which the later-named *grotesca* belonged, since he complained that: 'our contemporary artists decorate the walls with monstrous forms rather than reproducing clear images of the familiar world'.<sup>161</sup> Vitruvius's belief that art should be a reflection of nature, like Horace's criticism of hybrid form, is one of the ideals whose influence upon neoclassical aesthetics may be seen in Dryden's dismissal of grotesque art and poetic farce as 'unnatural'. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that it was during the neoclassical period that the grotesque became associated with wider semantics of absurdity and monstrosity.

For Bakhtin, neoclassicism was incompatible with the grotesque. Writing in the twentieth century, he viewed the seventeenth century's 'official culture' of 'Rationalism and classicism' as part of a historical movement 'toward the stability and completion of being, toward one single meaning', in which the 'ambivalence of the grotesque can no longer be admitted'.<sup>162</sup> Yet Bakhtin saw the grotesque as surviving, albeit in a compromised form, in the 'lower canonical genres', such as satire, and 'non-canonical genres', such as burlesque:

All these genres had a more or less oppositional character that permitted the grotesque to enter their sphere, while still remaining within the limits of official culture; therefore the nature of laughter and of the grotesque was transformed and degraded.<sup>163</sup>

Whilst Clayborough interpreted these genres as having provided writers with a 'socially acceptable outlet for fantasy', Bakhtin sees the incorporation of

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<sup>160</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Orator* (46 BCE), quoted in John Richard Duggan, *Making a New Man: Ciceronian Self-Fashioning in the Rhetorical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.274.

<sup>161</sup> Marcus Vitruvius, *De Architectura* (30-20 BCE), quoted in Philip J. Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), p.12.

<sup>162</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p.101.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.101-02.

the grotesque into their 'limits' as degrading. This is because, for Bakhtin, the grotesque opposes 'official culture' – embodied by Dryden's neoclassical 'Rules' – and instead privileges freedom, incompleteness and instability.

Much of the imagery that I examined in Ward's account of Bartholomew Fair – of bodily consumption through gaping mouths and of the bodily ejection of sweat, snot and vomit – evokes the lowness of folk humour as defined by Bakhtin. This lowness does not suggest inferior cultural status in Bakhtin's theory, but rather a festive lowering of things 'to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body'.<sup>164</sup> The grotesque body is always open, gaping to consume food and drink whilst ejecting waste from every orifice, because it 'transgresses its own limits'.<sup>165</sup> Mary J. Russo explains how this bodily aesthetics relates to the larger ideological opposition between the grotesque and the (neo)classical:

The classical body is transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek; it is identified with [...] the rationalism, individualism, and normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie. The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identical with non-official "low" culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation.<sup>166</sup>

Russo's descriptions highlight the social and spatial distinctions within Bakhtin's theory. The grotesque body and its aesthetic are part of a 'carnavalesque' folk culture associated with 'low', non-official spheres such as the marketplace and fair.

Grotesque bodies abound in *The London Spy*, and are often linked to ambivalent spaces and transgressive language, such as the discourse 'Spew'd out' by the clown at Bartholomew Fair. In Part 7, the Spy and his companion enter another liminal discursive space when they take a wherry on the Thames. There, they encounter an 'Academy of ill Language' in the exchanges between their own waterman and 'a scoundrel crew of Lambeth Gardeners'. The 'Verbal Engagement' begins when the gardeners attack the Spy's boat with 'such a Volley of saucy Nonsense, that it made my Eyes stare, my Head ake, my Tongue run, and my Ears tingle' (4-5). This language

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<sup>164</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p.19.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>166</sup> Mary J. Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.8.



has an exaggerated physical effect; it has become palpable. Like Dryden's grotesque laughter, 'taken in at the Eyes [...] and at the Ears', it bombards the bodily openings of eyes, ears and mouth. The gardeners' insults, such as their claim that the Spy and his companions were 'spew'd up, and not Born', do not just evoke the grotesque body, therefore, but attack its openness. The waterman responds to this assault by disparaging his opponents' livelihood along with their language when he retorts: 'Hold your Tongues, you Knitty Radishmongers, or I'll whet my Needle upon mine A—s and sew your Lips together' (4).

Kroll argues that during this period, writers were 'fascinated by the phenomenon by which words occur as the physiognomic manoeuvrings of the mouth, tongue, palate and lips', and that 'discourse about bodies' became a means to 'insist that language, like bodies, must perform within social spaces'.<sup>167</sup> Undoubtedly, in this episode, Ward's representation of the palpability of language draws upon the semantics of social and topographical space. London watermen were infamous for their elaborate insults, aligning them with the style of expression known in English as 'billingsgate' after Billingsgate fish market, another notorious London 'Academy of ill Language'. For Bakhtin, this is a 'marketplace style of expression', linked to a symbolic discursive space, and draws upon the material bodily stratum as well as the commercial sphere.<sup>168</sup> He argues that its images form part of a genre of forms that 'bring down to earth, turn their subjects into flesh' and in doing so enact a form of renewal even as they deride.<sup>169</sup> The waterman's imagery certainly lowers himself and the gardeners to the material level of earth and flesh, which for Bakhtin is a fertile, generative realm. Perhaps this is why both parties display such enjoyment of their scatological verbal invention. In their exchanges, the grotesque discursive body shares the characteristics symbolised by Horace's monster – incongruity, disproportion and exaggeration – yet these characteristics prove creatively fertile, provoking laughter, rather than being merely laughable.

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<sup>167</sup> Kroll, *The Material Word*, pp.14-15.

<sup>168</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p.10.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.19-21.

## Marketplace Expression

The prurient and scatological images that characterise Ward's writing have played an important part in his critical neglect by editors whom Troyer argues dismiss him for his 'low tastes' and depictions of the 'low life' of London.<sup>170</sup> Even when defending Ward from such charges, Straus accepts their premise when he argues that Ward 'can hardly be blamed for using a language which [his readers] understood and appreciated.'<sup>171</sup> Yet the question remains as to whether Ward's *use* of this language retains the transgressive spirit of the grotesque described by Bakhtin. The verbal exchanges on the Thames are framed by the rhetorical distance of the Spy: their grotesqueness is thus incorporated into the limits of satire. The Spy's enjoyment of their scurrility seems to be the vicarious pleasure of a spectator, more akin to Stallybrass and White's aloof spectator than to Bakhtin's statement that: 'Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it'.<sup>172</sup> Explicitly, the Spy signals his disapproval of the 'Academy of ill Language', observing that it is a great 'Penance for a Modest Man to go a Mile upon the River' (5). This observation is in keeping with the censorious spirit of satire, undermining the episode's transgressive potential.

According to Bakhtin's model, the grotesque resides in the waterman's and gardeners' subversive language rather than in the socially acceptable satirist looking down on them. The transgressive potential of such speech is also stressed by Stallybrass and White:

The 'coarse' and familiar speech of the fair and the marketplace provided a complex vital repertoire of speech patterns excluded from official discourse which could be used for parody, subversive humour and inversion.<sup>173</sup>

The topographical placing of this speech is significant. The fair and marketplace are, for Stallybrass and White, hybrid spaces, where 'commerce and festivity, high and low' mingle.<sup>174</sup> These spaces, like the city streets,

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<sup>170</sup> Troyer, *Ned Ward*, p.4.

<sup>171</sup> Straus, 'Preface' to *The London-Spy Compleat*, p.i.

<sup>172</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p.7.

<sup>173</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p.8.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27.

taverns and coffee-houses in *The London Spy*, give Ward's London its materiality and his Londoners their fleshiness. However, Stallybrass and White argue that it was 'over against' such 'domains of discourse' that the 'symbolic domain of "authorship"' was produced.<sup>175</sup> This created a conflict for writers who, for the purposes of satire, employed 'speech patterns' belonging to the discursive domains from which they attempted to distance themselves. Thus, Stallybrass and White argue, writers like Dryden and Pope, 'who were the great champions of the classical discursive body' spent a great deal of time 'writing the grotesque': 'satire was the generic form which enabled writers to express and negate the grotesque simultaneously'.<sup>176</sup>

The imaginative power of this ambivalence is revealed by Bogel's discussion of satiric doubleness, which he illustrates using the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas. Bogel describes satire as a 'ritual of separation', drawing upon Douglas's analysis of rituals designed to restore cultural classifications when they are 'challenged by anomalous or ambiguous entities', such as monstrous births. These entities are seen as polluting, since their hybridity undermines the 'system of differences' with which a culture defines itself.<sup>177</sup> Yet Bogel also discusses Douglas's work on rituals of consumption, in which the opposite occurs: the threat is incorporated or internalized into the self. Bogel quotes Douglas as follows:

Threateningly anomalous or ambiguous figures are dangerous, but they are also locations of power, and if a cultural system is to be vital as well as perspicuous it must incorporate some of that power and use it as an engine for change.<sup>178</sup>

Creativity, transformation, 'the vitality of cultural life': these, Douglas suggests, depend upon a controlled participation in Otherness. Bogel likens the 'ritual space' in which this occurs to 'generic [...] spaces' such as irony and parody, and argues that within these literary frames, satire is able to explore 'marginal or liminal spaces and the power and danger they hold'.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p.61.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.105-06.

<sup>177</sup> Bogel, *The Difference Satire Makes*, p.43.

<sup>178</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (1966), quoted by Bogel in *The Difference Satire Makes*, p.72.

<sup>179</sup> Bogel, *The Difference Satire Makes*, p.73; p.78.

This is the opposite of Bakhtin's argument that the grotesque was 'degraded' by genres that 'permitted the grotesque to enter their sphere'.<sup>180</sup> Bogel's argument suggests that the grotesque was incorporated into such literary frames precisely in order to renew official culture through its transgressive and transformative power.

An example of such incorporation occurs in Part 4 of Volume 2 of *The London Spy*, when Ward's narrator declares that he has finally learned the 'strange Conversation' of London: 'I could call a careless Drawer Block-head, Kick a Sawcy Tapster on the Breech, Swear Z---ds at a Hackney-Coach-man, or sit down amongst Aldermen in a Coffee-house without plucking off my Hat' (3). It is telling that by gaining knowledge of London, the Spy has internalised its transgressive discourse, using language to insult, abuse, curse and do away with the social distinctions that are not needed in spaces such as the coffee-house. As I argued in Chapter 2, Ward's representation of such discursive spaces creates an ambivalent portrait of a city in which there are no clear boundaries of high and low. The result is a vivid and lively picture of London life.

Ward's example therefore suggests that the incorporation of the grotesque into satire made it socially acceptable without fully undermining its creative potential as a transgressive mode. As I have shown, Ward's satiric strategy employs a grotesque style to attack the elements of distortion, exaggeration and unnaturalness that characterise caricature and farce. In his account of Bartholomew Fair, his satirical distance is thus undermined by an ambivalence of resemblance and difference between himself and the performers of the farce, and between his voyeuristic readers and the spectators who laugh at the 'low' comedy. The same ambivalence exists in his representation of Billingsgate language, which is characterised by a Bakhtinian spirit of transgressive invention, and yet is framed by the censoriousness of the Spy. In both cases, Ward seems to both desire and deny the Other that he sets out to satirise: his use of the grotesque both renews and derides.

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<sup>180</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p.102.

## Chapter 4: Telling Tales: Fact, Fiction and Fakery

In the last chapter I discussed Bakhtin's argument that grotesque imagery renews as well as derides, and Douglas's argument that cultures incorporate ambiguous figures in order to harness their symbolic power. In this chapter, I will explore this creative ambivalence further by looking at Ward's portrayal of storytelling in *The London Spy*, and how the many narratives told or reported by his narrator blur fiction and fact.

I begin by examining Ward's representation of 'cant' as language linked to fiction and fakery, and consider whether Ward was implicated in the culture of charlatanism that he satirises. Next, I turn to Ward's representation of 'Rarities' and 'Romances', linking them to the contemporary preoccupation with illusion and delusion, credulity and pretence. Finally, I consider Ward's use of the satiric strategy of the 'sham', linked to ludic lying in the coffee-house. Throughout, I explore Ward's ambivalence towards fictional discourse, and how this shapes his depiction of London as a narrative space.

### Charlatans and Cant

In Part 6 of Ward's periodical, the Spy reports the 'Oration' of a mountebank, who pushes his way into the midst of a crowd at Fleet Bridge and 'plucks out a Pacquet of Universal Hodg-Podg' before beginning his harangue. The mountebank's language is as jumbled and false as his packet of quack medicines. He mangles Latin and Greek and quotes as his authority 'Doctor Honorificabilitudinitatibusque' (6). Despite his rhetorical assurances – 'it's well known', 'I do assure you Gentlemen', 'I would have you to know' – his extravagant puffing of his wares creates a comic effect. One medicine will 'continue its Vertue beyond Credit'; another – 'the most useful Medicine prepar'd throughout the whole Universe' – is as efficacious in expelling poison, he claims, as 'the Unicorns-Horn' (7-8). The mountebank's exaggerated performance thus undermines the credit of his own discourse. Yet the crowd are still fooled: 'This piece of Impudence so tickled the Ears of the Brainless multitude, that they began with as much eagerness to untie their purses' (8). Once again, language takes on material agency, not only

tickling the listeners' ears but working upon their fingers as well. The Spy, of course, distances himself from this 'multitude', portraying them as beastly: a 'Listening Herd' (6). Yet Ward does show social concern. The Spy's friend declares it a 'Shame' that 'Innocent Wretches' should be swindled out of money that they need to 'purchase Bread and other Necessaries'. Moreover, he expresses disgust at the 'Hodg-Podg' nature of the quack medicines in terms that recall Dryden's criticism of the grotesque: they are 'made from a parcel of perish'd Drugs, ground promiscuously together, without Art or Rule, and so made up into sundry sorts of species' (8). This grotesque hybridity, with its implications of miscegenation, also finds expression in the subsequent poem, 'A Character of a Quack': 'Born of some Common Monstrous God-knows-what: / Into the World no Woman sure could bring / So vile a Birth, such an Unman-like thing' (9).

The mountebank's monstrosity, Ward implies, lies in his ability to transgress the 'Art and Rules' of both nature and truth. Language plays an important role in this transgression. The mountebank will 'drain the Pockets of the Poor by preposterous Lies jumbled into a Senseless Cant', displaying the lack of verisimilitude and the structural deformity symbolised by Horace's monster (8). Roy Porter uses this quotation in his historical study of quacks to describe them as: 'spouters of what Ned Ward called "senseless cant"'.<sup>181</sup> Quacks, Porter argues, were part of 'a crazy fantasy world of false appearances', in which 'the forces of fiction and trumpery, illusion and delusion' were personified in a cast of professional charlatans, including 'projectors, jobbers, bubblers, speculators, prophets', and to which we might add scribblers and members of the book trade.<sup>182</sup> Many of these figures, in fact, appear as 'Characters' in the second volume of *The London Spy*, in Part 3 of which Ward changed his style to 'Treat more upon Men and Manners', exposing 'the Frauds and Deceits practicable on many Trades' (3, 8). These figures also appear in Ward's dialogue comedy, *The Humours of a Coffee-House* (1699), whose characters include 'Scribble, a News-Writer', 'Whim, a Projector' and 'Plush, a Quack'.<sup>183</sup> Porter argues that such stock targets of

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<sup>181</sup> Roy Porter, *Quacks: Fakers and Charlatans in English Medicine* (Stroud: Tempus, 2000), p.18.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>183</sup> Ward, *The Humours of a Coffee-House: A Comedy* (originally *The Weekly Comedy*, published as a periodical in 1699), in *A Collection of the Writings of Mr Edward Ward*, 5th

satire were transgressive because they were guilty of ‘that offence so scandalous to the Augustan mind: fraud’.<sup>184</sup> However, Porter identifies this attitude as part of a contemporary scepticism towards ‘professions in general’, and questions whether such figures were victims of the ‘stereotyping’ process by which society ‘defines and defends itself by conjuring up wild images of [...] monsters?’<sup>185</sup>

Porter’s speculation that images of monsters were part of a mechanism by which society ‘defines and defends itself’ recalls McKeon’s theory of ‘defensive reinforcement’ and Bogel’s theory of satire as a ‘double structure’ of identification and differentiation.<sup>186</sup> This line of thinking suggests that satirists who conjured up images of monstrosity were themselves performing acts of charlatanism. The semantics of the word ‘charlatan’ unite language, commerce and deceit; the *OED* traces it to Latinate words meaning to ‘babble’, ‘patter’ and ‘chat’, and defines a charlatan as ‘an empty pretender’, ‘One who puffs his wares’.<sup>187</sup> A similar analogy is used by Stallybrass and White in their suggestion that Ben Jonson, writing a century before Ward, ‘pursue[d] the perennial techniques of the mountebank who decried the deceptions and the false wares of others the more easily to practice his own deceptions’. Jonson’s duplicity, Stallybrass and White argue, arose from internal ambivalence: ‘disgust bears the impress of desire, and Jonson found in the image of the huckster [...] an image of his own precarious and importuning craft’.<sup>188</sup> If we apply this argument to Ward, it follows that the figure of the mountebank who spouts ‘Senseless Cant’ is not merely the object of Ward’s satire, but is also a kind of objective correlative for his own manipulation of language and truth.

The idea that Ward’s relationship to the mountebank is one of resemblance as well as difference is further supported by Simon During’s argument that literary production was ‘charlatanised’ during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both materially through connections

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edn, 2 vols (London: Bettesworth, 1717; ECCO Print Editions, 2010), II, pp.274-344 (p.274).

<sup>184</sup> Porter, *Quacks*, p.24.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.23-24.

<sup>186</sup> McKeon, ‘Cultural Crisis’, pp.46-47; Bogel, *The Difference Satire Makes*, p.67.

<sup>187</sup> ‘charlatan, n. and adj.’, *OED Online*

<<http://www.oed.com.ueaezproxy.uea.ac.uk:2048/view/Entry/30743>> [accessed 25 November 2016].

<sup>188</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p.77.

between the book and patent medicine trades, and figuratively through ‘acts of charlatanism’ such as ‘titulary puffing’, bogus advertisements and ‘false paper wars’.<sup>189</sup> This use of ‘fraud and hype’ as a kind of commercial performance feeds into During’s definition of a charlatan as: ‘any self-advertiser pretending to more knowledge or power than they possessed’.<sup>190</sup> Indeed, those involved in the literary marketplace used pretence for commercial ends: Dunton’s *Athenian Mercury*, for example, was founded upon the fictional existence of a learned society, whilst Ward’s periodical uses the rhetorical authority of the Spy. Moreover, During argues that ‘denunciatory satire’ was itself ‘entangled in charlatanism [...] within a commercialised [...] field’.<sup>191</sup> Satirists themselves were engaged in practices of pretence, and so their relationship to the figure of the charlatan was one of problematic identification.

During’s contention that satirists were engaged in a culture of charlatanism is further supported by Mark Knights’s argument that the prevalence of ‘cant and jargon’ during the later Stuart period led to a ‘fictional mentality’, particularly within the political sphere.<sup>192</sup> Ward himself makes this political analogy in his portrait of the mountebank, since the Spy declares that the quack’s ‘industrious Lies’ work ‘as well with the Mob, as a Treasonable Ballad or a disgusted Statesmans Pamphlet, upon the turn of a Government’ (8). This parallel between the verbal deceit of the mountebank and the literary products of a popularly contested political culture emphasises the role of writers in misrepresentation. Knights shows that ‘slander, political lying, and partisan fictions’ became part of the discursive culture of this period, as did the abusive rhetoric of ‘what contemporaries called “Billingsgate language”’.<sup>193</sup> Yet, crucially, he argues that the resultant climate of ‘epistemological uncertainty’ stimulated inventiveness, since it fostered ‘a sense of ambiguity, relativity, dissimulation, and fiction’.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Simon During, ‘Charlatanism and Resentment in London’s Eighteenth-Century Literary Marketplace’, in *Bookish Histories: Books, Literature, and Commercial Modernity, 1700-1900*, ed. by Ina Ferris and Paul Keen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp.253-71 (p.253; p.259).

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p.260; p.254.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.261-62.

<sup>192</sup> Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, p.6; pp.62-63.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3; p.247.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p.63; p.29.



Ward's preoccupation with verbal fictions may thus be seen as part of a wider culture of misrepresentation within the literary marketplace.

### **Rarities and Romances**

As in his portrait of the mountebank, who performs his oration by Fleet Bridge with a 'Pacquet' of 'Hodg-Podg', Ward contextualizes charlatanism elsewhere in *The London Spy*. For example, the Spy describes the coffee-house in Part 1 as being decorated with framed advertisements for such an 'abundance of Rarities, viz. Nectar and Ambrosia, May Dew, Golden Elixirs, Popular Pills' that it looks like 'a Quacks-Hall, or the Parlour of some Eminent Mounte-bank' (8-9). Having established this context of commercial quackery, Ward then has the Spy's friend recount the contents of a 'Closet of Curiosities' belonging to one of the coffee-house customers: a consummate virtuoso, since he is an inventor, alchemist, antiquarian and member of the Royal Society:

He tells ye, that he has the Tooth-picker of Epicurus [...] made of the Claws of an American Humming-Bird [...] He says he has some of Heraclitus's Tears [...] Frozen into Christal [...] He pretends to have one of Judas' Thirty Pence [...] A mighty Collection of these sort of Trinkets, he tells the World he's Master of, and some give Credit to his Ridiculous Romances. (9-10)

This collection of hybrid objects – a toothpick that is both a natural and artificial creation; tears that have metamorphosed from a liquid to a solid state – are accompanied by equally marvellous tales, such as the claim that anyone who looks upon Heraclitus's tears 'cannot forbear Weeping' (9). The friend's language emphasises the importance of the virtuoso's verbal performance – 'He tells [...] He says [...] He pretends' – whilst signalling his own scepticism, since he withholds his 'Credit' from such 'Romances': a word that evokes a literary tradition of mythical narrative.

The connection between mythical narratives and 'Rarities' – physical objects also known as curiosities, marvels and monsters – had a long tradition in popular print. Davis argues that during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, a mode of representation that he calls 'the news/novels discourse' emerged in a group of printed texts including journalistic

ballads and news-books, which might report upon ‘wars, murders, freaks of nature, and supernatural happenings’.<sup>195</sup> These narratives were characterised by ‘ambivalence’ and ‘an inherent doubleness’ in their ‘disinclination to distinguish between fiction and fact’.<sup>196</sup> Katharine Park and Lorraine J. Daston also describe the rise of ‘a large and heterogeneous body of literature’ during the same period, which they call ‘wonder books’ and link to ‘popular forms of escapist literature: travel books and chivalric romance’.<sup>197</sup> Park and Daston credit such texts with a cultural shift away from understanding monsters and marvels as divine prodigies, towards understanding them as ‘jokes or “sports” (*lusus*) of a personified nature’.<sup>198</sup> Robert Mayer also uses the concept of *lusus* in his discussion of the ‘strangeness’ of history during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, in which historians were ‘drawn to the marvellous and the monstrous’, incorporating ‘fiction, polemic, gossip, and marvels’ into their narratives.<sup>199</sup> Mayer argues that this use of fabulous material ‘might well have been conditioned’ by the concept of *lusus naturae*. Both fables and natural wonders were ‘material presented as matters of fact and simultaneously acknowledged to be at least arguably fictive’.<sup>200</sup>

Paula Findlen distinguishes between the *lusus naturae* as a ‘joke of nature’ and *lusus scientiae* as a ‘joke of knowledge’.<sup>201</sup> The first was used of natural wonders like fossils, and operated as a ‘flexible category’ allowing ‘paradoxes of classification’ to be incorporated into scientific taxonomies.<sup>202</sup> The second, *lusus scientiae*, were the sportive creations of artisans and virtuosi. Findlen describes such objects, which included dragons, hydra and other taxidermied hybrids, as natural ‘fabrications’.<sup>203</sup> The ambivalent

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<sup>195</sup> Davis, *Factual Fictions*, pp.46-47.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70; p.51.

<sup>197</sup> Katharine Park and Lorraine J. Daston, ‘Unnatural Conceptions: The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England’, *Past & Present*, 92 (1981), 20-54 (p.35; p.37) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/650748>> [accessed 14 November 2013].

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p.43.

<sup>199</sup> Robert Mayer, *History and the Early English Novel: Matters of Fact from Bacon to Defoe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.114-115; p.118.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, p.127.

<sup>201</sup> Paula Findlen, ‘Jokes of Nature and Jokes of Knowledge: The Playfulness of Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Europe’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 43 (1990), 292-331 (p.292).

<sup>202</sup> Findlen, ‘Jokes of Nature’, p.302.

<sup>203</sup> Findlen, ‘Inventing Nature: Commerce, Art, and Science in the Early Modern Cabinet of Curiosities’, in *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Pamela Smith and Paula Findlen (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.297-323 (p.307).

products of both nature and art, they populated ‘the museums and scientific texts of the period’ as aesthetic jokes.<sup>204</sup> They imply the skilful workmanship of an artist as well as the deceptive implications of commercial artifice, since connoisseurs relied upon ‘mountebanks and charlatans’ to make and acquire such objects within a ‘marketplace of marvels’.<sup>205</sup> These connoisseurs, Findlen argues, evaded the issue of an object’s authenticity or artifice, instead admiring ‘the artistry involved in making monsters’.<sup>206</sup> Taxidermied chimeras such as the hydra, stitched together from rays and other real creatures, ‘invited the viewer either to participate in the joke [...] or to be deceived by it and, in a sense, to become the joke himself’.<sup>207</sup> The reception of *lusus* was therefore profoundly ambivalent.

The Spy and his friend are not deceived: they interpret the objects in the virtuosi’s collection as fabricated and his stories as fabrications. Yet they do not display pleasure in ‘reading’ this joke, nor do they admire the artistry of such objects and tales. Rather, Ward constructs the joke through his satirical distance from the objects he ridicules. This is also the case in Part 3, when the Spy and his friend visit Gresham College to view the Royal Society’s own collection of ‘Wonders’ and ‘Rarities’, including an array of ‘Pincushion Monsters’: taxidermied reptiles and birds, most notably ‘a Bird of Paradise’ (9). The Spy reports two fabulous narratives concerning this creature: firstly, that when it was alive it fed ‘upon nothing but Air’, and secondly, that its feathers are ‘an infallible security against all Evil Temptation’, making it both *lusus naturae* and mystical beast. The collection also contains *lusus scientiae*, such as ‘that wonderful Curiosity the Unicorn’s Horn; made as I suppose, by an Ingenious Turner, of the Tuskes of an Elephant’ (9). This deceptive object – attributed by the Spy to an ‘Ingenious’ artisan – is also accompanied by a fabulous fiction: that it will expel poison. The artistry of the turner who made it is therefore linked to the artifice of charlatans like the mountebank in Part 6, who makes the same medical claim for unicorn horn.

The Spy further undermines the credibility of such narratives by linking the Royal Society’s ‘Rarities’ to the carnivalesque, commercialised

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<sup>204</sup> Findlen, ‘Jokes of Nature’, p.292.

<sup>205</sup> Findlen, ‘Inventing Nature’, p.302.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, p.308; p.310.

<sup>207</sup> Findlen, ‘Inventing Nature’, pp.308-09; ‘Jokes of Nature’, p.319.

realm of the fair: he describes the ‘Elaboratory-keeper’ as a ‘Raree-show Interpreter’, portraying him as a showman and the objects as a collection of freaks (9). Yet there is an inherent irony in this rhetorical distance, since the ‘Rarities’, ‘Wonders’ and ‘Monsters’ that Ward describes in these parts of his periodical, themselves form part of a textual catalogue of curiosities within *The London Spy*. Later, in Part 16, the Spy reflects back upon his trips around London, recounting how his friend ‘shew’d me the Tombs at Westminster, the Lions in the Tower, the Rogues in Newgate, the Mad people in Bedlam [...] with the rest of the Town-Rarities’ (3). As he was ‘shew’d’ them, the Spy has, in turn, presented these ‘Town-Rarities’ to his readers through his own literary performance. This makes him a kind of ‘Raree-show Interpreter’ himself, implicated in a form of fictional showmanship.

This irony is also evident in Part 13 of the periodical, in which the Spy visits the Tower menagerie. He precedes his account by mocking the ‘wonderful Tales’ he’d previously heard of the ‘Enticing Rarities’, ‘surprizing Curiosities’ and ‘Forreign Monsters’ to be seen at the Tower, ‘which I had received from the Magnifying Mouth of some Boobily Bumpkins’ (3). Having ridiculed such narratives, he then relates his own visit, which is itself magnified by tales he repeats for his readers’ enjoyment: the ‘remarkable stories’ told by the lion-keeper; the tour guide’s claim that Henry VIII’s codpiece will increase fertility if used as a pincushion; and an account of hyenas imitating humans, the ‘Truth or Fiction’ of which the Spy cannot determine (6,13,8). These tales become so much a part of the Spy’s experience at the Tower, that he and his friend decide to accept an ‘account’ of the crown jewels from ‘the Mouth of our Guide, as if our own Eyes were Witnesses’, rather than see for themselves (13). The sights and places that Ward presents to his readers are therefore exaggerated through the layers of an ambivalent verbal and textual retelling.

### **Coffee-House Tales**

One of the most important episodes of storytelling in *The London Spy* appears in Part 2, when the Spy and his friend enter a Billingsgate ‘Boozing-ken’, where they encounter ‘as much Mirth’ as at a ‘Bartholomew-Fair

Popet-show' (13-14). Much of this mirth is created by the drunken antics of two sailors, who cruelly string up a 'crooked Fidler', causing him to soil his breeches in fright and the 'Spectators' to break out in 'an extravagant fit of Laughter': Dryden's 'Bastard-pleasure' indeed (14-15). Once this spectacle is over, the sailors entertain themselves and the company by competing to tell travellers' tales. The first recounts a voyage to Guinea, where it was so hot that he and his fellow sailors could 'Bake, Broil, Fry, or Stew' their beef upon deck. The second tells an even taller tale:

I have been so many degrees to the Northward where it has been so Cold, it has Frozen our Words in our Mouths, that we could not hear one another speak, till we came into a warmer Latitude to Thaw 'em; and then all our Discourse broke out together like a Clap of Thunder (15)

Here, the recurring trope of the palpability of language is made literal as words take on physical properties. Shortly afterwards, an acquaintance of the Spy's friend arrives, whose exaggerated language becomes a figurative inversion of the sailor's story: 'All he talk'd was lowd Nonsense; and the heat of his Brain setting Fire to his Tongue, made every thing he said so wonderfully hot, it made the Ears of all People glow that heard 'em' (15). In the sailor's story, words became so cold that they froze in the speakers' mouths, but this braggart's words have the power to heat listeners' ears.

The second sailor's story bears a strong resemblance to one that Kate Loveman recounts from William Hicks's *Coffee-House Jest*s (1677), in which men calling across a cold river in Germany find their words frozen, taking nine days to thaw. Hicks plagiarised this tale from an earlier collection, *The Book of Bulls* (1636).<sup>208</sup> Whichever source Ward took it from, part of the story's playfulness lies in this literary theft. Loveman explains that jest books became popular during the Restoration period as part of a vogue for 'ludic lying' games, in which men competed in the social space of the coffee-house to tell the 'most extravagant lie' in a 'calculated transgression of the rules of civil conduct'.<sup>209</sup> The figure of the sailor was often associated with coffee-house lying, and Loveman cites the example of

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<sup>208</sup> Kate Loveman, *Reading Fictions, 1660-1740: Deception in English Literary and Political Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p.67.

<sup>209</sup>Ibid., p.61; p.67-68.

Ward's *The Humours of a Coffee-House*, which he wrote at the same time as *The London Spy*.<sup>210</sup> Indeed, tall tales feature prominently in Ward's dialogue comedy. Scribble, the news-writer, reports that sailors have discovered an island where men are 'the height of a large Coffee-Pot', whilst another character recalls a voyage during which he was swallowed by a 'monstrous Whale'.<sup>211</sup> The same dynamic of competitive dialogue is evident in the episode from Part 2 above. The first sailor responds to his companion's story: 'That's very strange, but I have known stranger things to be true' (15). Their desire to tell strange things recalls Mayer's argument about the 'strangeness' of history in the seventeenth century, in which gossip, marvels and other fictional elements were incorporated in a spirit of playful invention.

The *Spy* refers to the sailors' tale-telling as 'Romancing', recalling his description of the virtuoso's 'Ridiculous Romances' in Part 1, yet, unlike that earlier episode, the *Spy* seems to enjoy the sailors' ludic tales (15). Findlen's figure of the connoisseur who appreciated the artifice of the *lusus* is mirrored in Loveman's description of the 'sceptical reader' who assessed the 'truth-claims' of a verbal or textual narrative whilst also 'adopt[ing] a pose of credulity to continue the enjoyable pretence and further the sociable pleasures of fiction'.<sup>212</sup> The *Spy* and his friend adopt such a pose in response to the sailor's tales. Despite the 'considerable Business' they have the next day, they find it hard to tear themselves away, since 'the Pleasures of the Night were so engaging [...] That a Mountebank [...] could not give more Content to a croud of Country Spectators, than the lively Action of what is here reported did afford us' (16).

Loveman argues that sceptical reading was particularly necessary during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries because contemporaries were exposed to 'fiction masquerading as fact' in a range of narrative situations, including political and religious polemic, the ambiguous productions of the book trade, and ludic lying games.<sup>213</sup> She traces a 'host of new terms in the semantic fields of wit and deception' that became 'central to critical discourse' during this period, including raillery (meaning genteel wit and the 'creation of playful fictions'), banter (a verbal fiction designed

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<sup>210</sup> Loveman, *Reading Fictions*, p.71.

<sup>211</sup> Ward, *The Humours of a Coffee-House*, p.275, p.314.

<sup>212</sup> Loveman, *Reading Fictions*, p.20; p.82.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.2-3; p.61; p.68.

to bamboozle), and sham (suggesting both the wittiness of a hoax and the shame of being deceived).<sup>214</sup> Literary innovations, Loveman argues, including the rise of the novel, were part of this wider trend for a playful ambivalence towards fiction and fact. A similar doubleness is described by Davis in his account of the news/novels discourse. This discourse created an ‘ambivalent reaction – an uncertainty as to the factual or fictional reality of the work’, which, Davis argues, was ‘one of the major components in the phenomenology of reading during the early eighteenth century’. For Davis, this ambivalence also influenced the development of the novel, since ‘the butt of the major fabrication is the reader him- or herself, who is involved in the con game ostensibly perpetrated by the author who maintains that the novel is not fiction but fact’.<sup>215</sup> Defoe’s ‘Preface’ to *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), for example, makes the claim that ‘the wonders of [Crusoe’s] life’ are ‘a just history of fact’.<sup>216</sup>

Whilst Ward’s speaking position is not as complex as the later, novelistic first-person narrator, he nevertheless blurs fiction and fact, perpetuating his own con game through the figure of the Spy. Furthermore, this ambivalence is foregrounded whenever the Spy recounts stories that draw attention to their own fictiveness. In Part 8, for example, the Spy’s friend recounts the ‘conjecture’ of ‘some People’ as to why the roof of Westminster Hall is free of cobwebs: ‘it is built with Irish Oak, to which is ascrib’d this Miraculous Virtue, viz. That no Spiders, or any such sort of Nauseous, or Offensive Insect, will ever breed or hang about it.’ The Spy scoffs and asks whether his friend gives ‘Credit’ to this story, to which he replies: ‘I am apt to believe all such notions to be Vain and Fabulous’ (11). Instead, the friend offers an alternative explanation: that since lawyers ‘often require the use of Mercury to Repair their Members, some subtle particles of which being emitted with their Breath’, the poison ascends to the ceiling, killing the insects. The Spy jokes that this story is worthy of a surgeon, ‘for men of your Profession may take the Liberty of talking like Apothecaries’, again connecting deceptive discourse and medical charlatans (12). Yet the

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<sup>214</sup> Loveman, *Reading Fictions*, p.2; pp.10-11.

<sup>215</sup> Davis, *Factual Fictions*, p.24; p.21.

<sup>216</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (London: Penguin, 1985; first published 1719), p.25.

friend's story, told tongue-in-cheek, also provides a satiric reflection upon Ward's description two pages earlier of the lawyers at Westminster Hall having 'Silver Tongues and Gilded Palms' (10). Their tongues, Ward implies, are not only silvered as a result of the deceptive language they use for monetary gain, but also as a result of taking mercury to treat the pox.

This episode is an example of Loveman's description of the 'sham' as a form of satire that used internal strategies to influence readers' interpretations, including denouncing 'other shams in a slightly overzealous fashion', which 'placated the more credulous of their readers and intimated to the more wary, that they were writing in the same vein'.<sup>217</sup> The Spy's friend denounces the first tale as 'Vain and Fabulous', giving ironic credit to his second, equally fabulous tale. This recalls Stallybrass and White's description of 'the perennial techniques of the mountebank who decried the deceptions and the false wares of others the more easily to practice his own'.<sup>218</sup> Whilst Ward portrays men who manipulate language and truth as charlatans, the pretence he decries is not dissimilar to his own use of fiction for commercial ends. To repeat Loveman's words, he was 'writing in the same vein'.

Ward's ambivalence towards fictional discourse thus shapes his depiction of London as a narrative space. His narrator presents the sights of London to his readers as 'Town-Rarities'; the charlatans who people these places, telling their tales, are targets of Ward's satire, but they are also stand-ins for his own literary showmanship. Like his relationship to the 'Muddling Muck-worms' and 'Mad-folk' of Bedlam, his relationships to the mountebank and 'Raree-show Interpreter' are ones of resemblance as well as difference. Ward was part of what During describes as a 'charlatanised' literary culture, and this culture finds expression in *The London Spy's* fictionalised city, peopled by 'Frauds and Deceits'.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Loveman, *Reading Fictions*, pp.78-79.

<sup>218</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p.77.

<sup>219</sup> During, 'Charlatanism and Resentment', p.259; Ward, *The London Spy*, Volume 2, Part 3, p.3.



## Conclusion

This thesis began with a paradox: that Ward represents popular discourse – ‘Scribbling’, ‘Talking’ and ‘Jangling’ – as being of low value. And yet this same discourse – the words written, spoken and performed by his narrator and characters – is central to his creation of the entertaining and often uncomfortable world of *The London Spy*. In the pages of Ward’s periodical, the language of London comes alive: scribbled, spoken, jangled, spewed, narrated, puffed and sworn. To the modern reader, the value of this discourse is in what it embodies; as Stallybrass and White argue: ‘Discursive space is never completely independent of social place’ nor of ‘material and cultural conditions’.<sup>220</sup> In *The London Spy*, discourse – both the ‘palpable quality of words’ and ‘of manners’ – evokes the social spaces of London at the end of the seventeenth and turn of the eighteenth centuries.<sup>221</sup> It also gives expression to the material and cultural conditions of that world, and of the discursive context and print culture within which Ward wrote and marketed his periodical.

Of course, the world that Ward represents is valuable to us as a construction of reality rather than as a reflection of actual historical conditions. This construction sheds light on Ward’s cultural context. *The London Spy* may be peripheral in relation to the canonical works of the period, yet I have shown that Ward was actively engaged in contemporary conversations about authorship and representation. His status as a professional writer, responding to the demands of the market and his readership, and his relationship to commercialised literary culture, influenced his satiric, stylistic, linguistic and narrative strategies. Whether we examine Ward’s narrative frame for *The London Spy*, his rhetorical position, his use of the grotesque, or his blurring of fiction and fact, his writing reveals an ambivalence that speaks to the central anxieties and creative strategies of his age. It is in this respect that the hope Ward expresses for his periodical may be realised: that readers ‘will find it a Useful, as well as Diverting History’.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p.80.

<sup>221</sup> Kroll, *The Material Word*, p.4.

<sup>222</sup> Ward, *The London Spy*, ‘To the Reader’, Part 2, p.4.

The value of reading *The London Spy* today is that the ambivalences at work in Ward's writing provide an insight into anxieties and creative strategies that were both constructed and suppressed during this period. As I have demonstrated, these anxieties included a fear of hybridity as symbolic of social and cultural contamination, particularly in response to historical changes such as the spread of commercialised culture. Such anxieties are symptomatic of the 'major cultural crisis' that McKeon argues occurred during the Augustan Age, signalled by the attempts of writers to counter it through 'defensive reinforcement'.<sup>223</sup> Ward was implicated in this ambivalence through his use of the 'double structure' of satire, revealing a relationship of identification and differentiation between himself as a writer and his satiric targets.<sup>224</sup>

However, as Douglas's work on rituals suggests, cultural anxieties concerning contamination are linked to creative strategies of cultural transformation.<sup>225</sup> In this thesis I have examined several creative strategies at work in *The London Spy* that were both socially marginalised and imaginatively central to Ward's culture. These include his innovations in the format, style and marketing of popular print, which formed part of the evolution of the periodic press. Ward's use of the double speaking position of spectator and voyeur, and his incorporation of the transgressive mode of the grotesque into the socially acceptable frame of satire, also show how he harnessed the inventiveness of taboo discourse. Likewise, his inclusion of fabulous narratives, which draw attention to their own fictiveness, gives *The London Spy* an imaginative energy that spills out of the narrative frame that purports to contain it. Like the grotesque body, Ward's periodical thus 'transgresses its own limits', blurring boundaries between high and low, literary and commercial, sameness and difference, fiction and fact.<sup>226</sup> It is the product of a culture not merely in crisis, but in creative renewal.

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<sup>223</sup> McKeon, 'Cultural Crisis', p46; p.48.

<sup>224</sup> Bogel, *The Difference Satire Makes*, p.67.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p.43; pp.72-73.

<sup>226</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p.26.

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