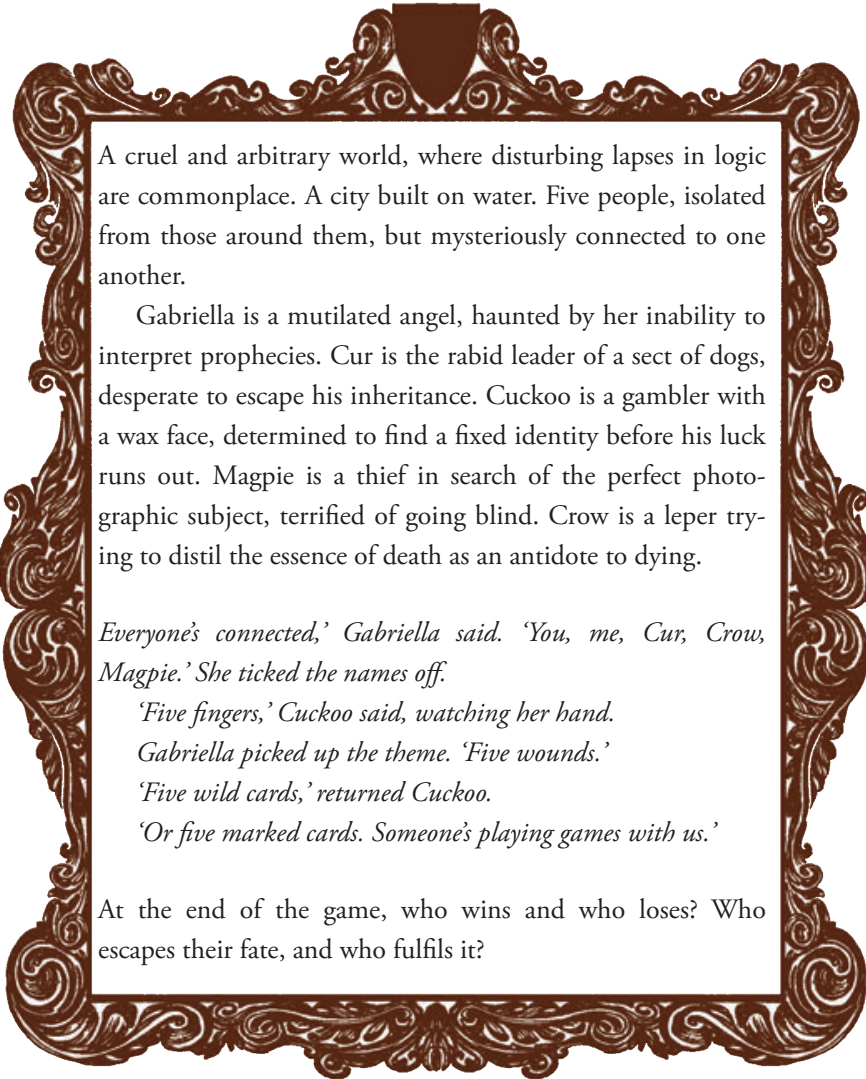




*Five Wounds*

Jonathan Walker  
& Dan Hallett

*Surreal, darkly beautiful, and unsettling, this richly illustrated novel is by turns hilarious and horrific, grotesque and tender.*



A cruel and arbitrary world, where disturbing lapses in logic are commonplace. A city built on water. Five people, isolated from those around them, but mysteriously connected to one another.

Gabriella is a mutilated angel, haunted by her inability to interpret prophecies. Cur is the rabid leader of a sect of dogs, desperate to escape his inheritance. Cuckoo is a gambler with a wax face, determined to find a fixed identity before his luck runs out. Magpie is a thief in search of the perfect photographic subject, terrified of going blind. Crow is a leper trying to distil the essence of death as an antidote to dying.

*Everyone's connected,' Gabriella said. 'You, me, Cur, Crow, Magpie.' She ticked the names off.*

*'Five fingers,' Cuckoo said, watching her hand.*

*Gabriella picked up the theme. 'Five wounds.'*

*'Five wild cards,' returned Cuckoo.*

*'Or five marked cards. Someone's playing games with us.'*

At the end of the game, who wins and who loses? Who escapes their fate, and who fulfils it?

*Five Wounds ... is like Christmas for book nerds. It's like Christmas in July and regular Christmas combined, that's how good it is. —Dave Drayton, Vibewire*

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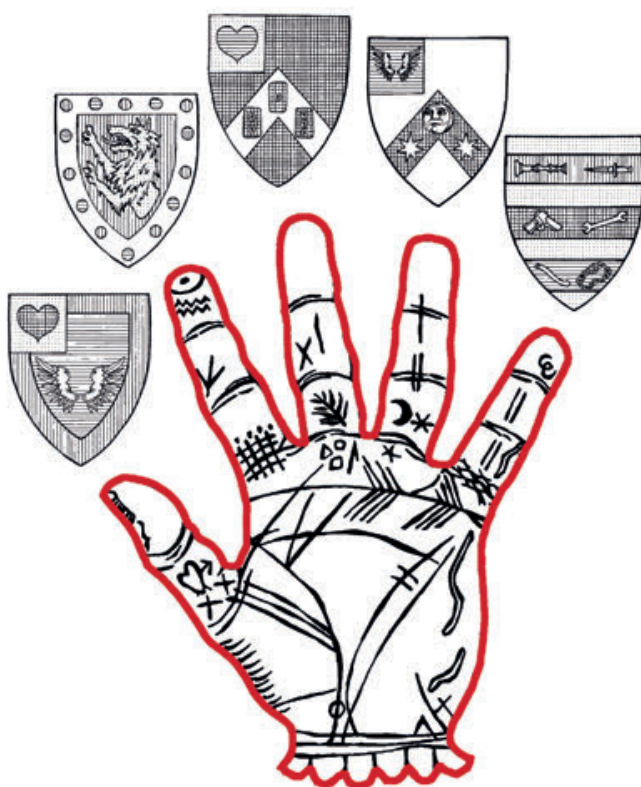
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## *Five Wounds*

Written by Jonathan Walker

Illustrated by Dan Hallett



636 Press



*To whom it may concern*

MOST PEOPLE GO THROUGH LIFE DREADING THAT THEY ARE GOING  
TO HAVE A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE. FREAKS WERE BORN WITH THEIR  
TRAUMA. THEY'VE ALREADY PASSED THEIR TEST IN LIFE. THEY'RE  
ARISTOCRATS.

—Diane Arbus

ALL LEGENDS AND SONGS ORIGINATING IN THIS CITY ARE FILLED  
WITH NOSTALGIA FOR A PROPHESED DAY WHEN THE CITY WOULD BE  
SMASHED TO BITS BY FIVE BLOWS IN RAPID SUCCESSION FROM A  
GIGANTIC FIST.

—Franz Kafka, *The City Coat of Arms*



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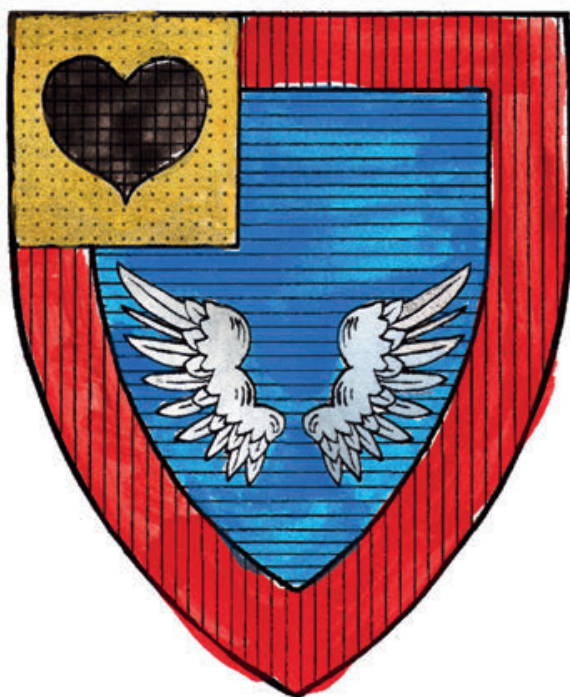
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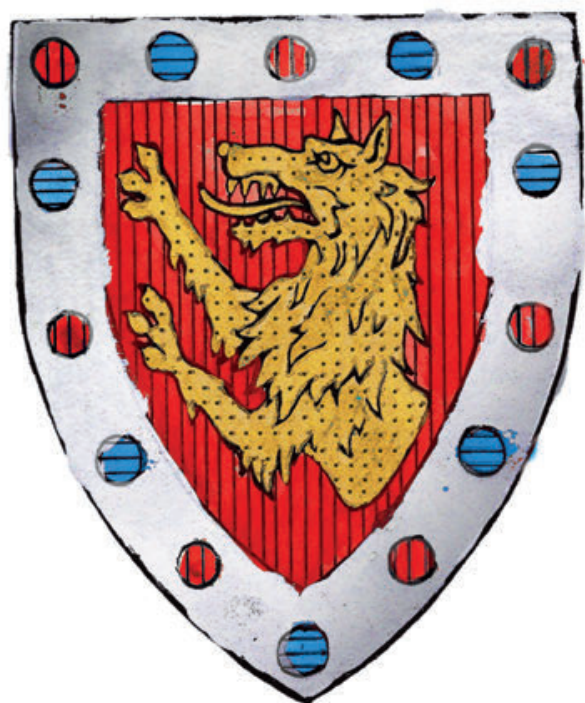


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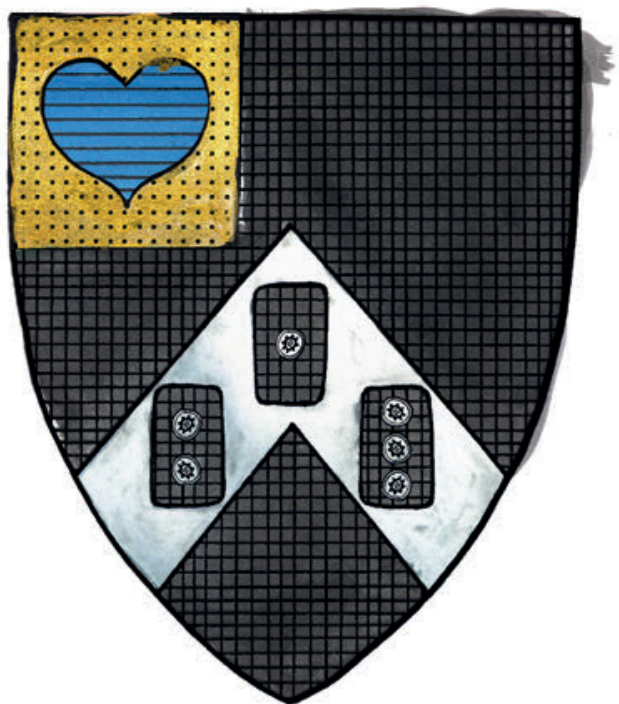
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*Gabriella*



*Cur*

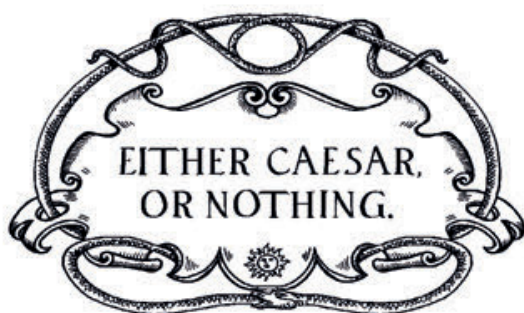
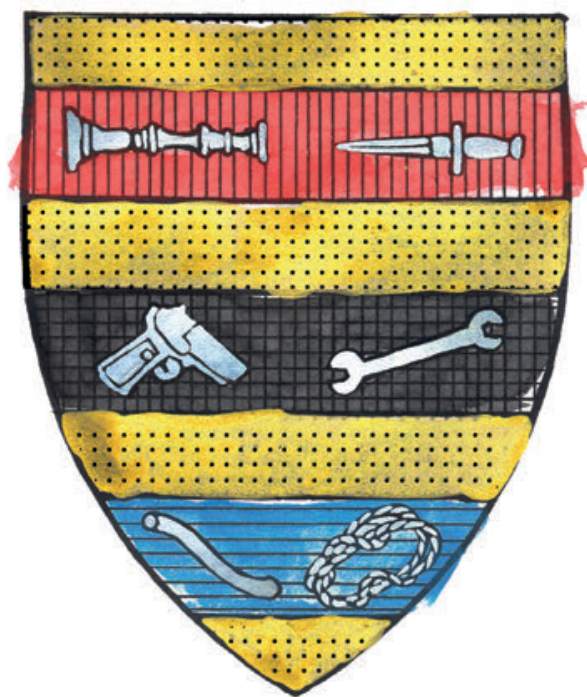


*Cuckoo*





*Magpie*



*Crow*











## *Cur's Dream*

**1** CUR could smell the piss soaked into his doorpost, layer upon layer, leaching up into the rotten wood and down into the damp, sulphurous soil.

**2** He could distinguish each individual author. Their odours as thick and distinct as layers of peeling paint to the touch.

**3** The hairs in his nose tingled with ammonia.

**4** He recognised the scents of many dogs he knew by name or sight. One in particular, over and over again, layer after layer, sandwiched between and bookending the others.

**5** The black dog.

**6** Cur sat on a wooden chair, leaning forward with his face between his hands. He could smell the film of sweat on his palms, and the anxiety that flavoured it.

**7** He knew exactly who he was. He understood the role that had been waiting for him since he was a baby, but he felt possessed and weakened by it as if by a fever.

**8** 'Sit up now, please, straight,' Magpie said.

**2** CUR looked up, but Magpie had disappeared under the black cloth draped over the back of the camera.

**2** Magpie was here to take Cur's portrait.

**3** Cur decided to ignore him: a small act of defiance against this superfluous commemoration.

**4** He would obey Magpie's instructions, but in a trance. He would try not to be present, so that Magpie could take nothing from him.

**5** He tried to remember his parents, or rather to will memories to constitute themselves out of the alien materials available to him.

**6** Words, stories, rituals: articles of faith, to which he was obliged to subscribe publicly, but which he interpreted privately according to his own heretical notions.

## FIVE WOUNDS

7 'Not like that,' Magpie said. 'Pull your chin up. I need to get at your neck.'

**3** THE tale of Cur's kidnapping was well known in the streets around the Ghetto. Old women whispered it behind his back when he walked by.

**2** Lips close to ears. Hands covering mouths. Eyes averted.

**3** On an unnaturally dark night, an unnaturally black dog took a baby from its cradle. Behave, child, or the same might happen to you!

**4** The father tried to intervene, but the black dog bit three fingers off his left hand. Ouch!

**5** The black dog left claw marks in the dust outside the front door of the baby's house, in intricate and deliberate patterns.

**6** Dark deeds; devilish even. Portentous certainly.

**7** When the black dog left with its wriggling prize, the wailing of the baby's parents was drowned out by the barking of many other dogs, coming from all around.

**8** Awoo! Awoo!

**9** More urgent whispers here, but no identifiable words.

**10** 'You're out of frame,' Magpie said. 'I can't see you properly.'

**4** THE dogs howled so loud that the sound seemed to get inside one's

head (or so the story went), but no one could see them.

**2** The following morning, there was piss on every doorpost, and blood and feathers all around. Every chicken in the village had been decapitated, and a mess of drizzled trails led to a pile of flyblown bodies.

**3** Snickering behind Cur's back.

**4** At this point, the story passed from the stationary huddles of old women, hidden in shade under awnings, sitting on stools just inside doorways, speaking in low tones (but clearly audible to Cur), and from them it spilled out into the street, where children picked it up and ran with it, singing, 'O LORD! A HEN FOR EVERY SINNER!, AND FOR ME, SINNER OF SINNERS, A HEN AND SEVERAL ROOSTERS!'

**5** Then they would scatter like a flock of birds, giggling and skipping. Sometimes they ran towards Cur, darting away at the last second. The more daring would pinch his sleeve and wait to see what he would do in response.

**6** Cur did nothing. He accepted his fate passively, like a scarecrow.

**7** 'That's better,' Magpie said. 'Look straight at the camera please.'

**5** THE people who lived around the Ghetto were weirdly proud of its inhabitants.

**2** Part of their delight in Cur's story was its contrivance. In the village, they as-

sumed, the events of that night had been terrifying beyond understanding.

3 In the city, it was a Punch and Judy show, full of nudges, winks and obviously choreographed pratfalls.

4 In the city, where audiences were more sophisticated, the dogs would not have been allowed to get away with such outrageous behaviour.

5 In the city, it would have met with a punitive response from the government, who could not afford to be seen to be favouring them.

6 In the city, the dogs behaved themselves, except when the government asked them not to.

7 'Keep still,' Magpie said.

6 CUR had been told a version of what happened after his kidnapping, but this was not like the public tale, passed backwards and forwards in the street, available to anyone who cared to participate in its telling.

2 This was shared only between him and the dogs, but the knowledge was not alive in his body; rather, it was trapped in the theatre of his head.

3 He rehearsed new meanings in this theatre, meanings he was not yet ready to release upon the world because they could not be articulated in the language of the senses.

4 'Now, wait,' Magpie said. 'I have to ad-

just the neck brace before I make the exposure.'

7 THE black dog had run all the way to the water and jumped in, his companions unseen in the night, but panting alongside him in a tribal rhythm.

2 The black dog began to swim, with the swaddled baby dangling from its mouth.

3 Cur began to cry, salt water splashing over him as salt water ran down his cheeks. Saliva from the black dog's mouth spilled and spun in the moonlight, blowing like threads of glass into Cur's mouth and nose, slicking back his thick baby hair, forming a film that kept him warm.

4 It began to dry into a crust by the time the black dog reached the islands of the city. Cur lay inside this musky cocoon, his wails frozen in surprise, and his breath whistling like a flat flute through bubbles of spit.

5 All of this was meant to be, including the unorthodox baptism. It was the first stage.

8 THE dogs took Cur to the Ghetto, slipping past the sleeping sentry one by one as the sun came up.

2 Then they cracked the cocoon, or rather a man did it at the black dog's direction: Mr X.



## FIVE WOUNDS



**3** Then the dogs fed Cur with the milk from one of their bitches. Her own children had been killed to make a place for him. She was honoured to be chosen.

**4** All the dogs sat in a circle around the baby, who lay on his back, kicking.

**9** THERE was a solitary dog outside the circle, tied to a strut of the one of the skeletal cranes dotted around the Ghetto.

**2** All the other dogs were still and silent, but this one strained at the end of its rope, scoring out a half-circle at the rope's limit. Its eyes rolled back in its head as it whimpered and whined.

**3** It was too tired to bark anymore. Its mouth was sticky with dried blood and foam. It was rabid, and had been for days.

**4** At a signal from the black dog, six of its fellows from the circle approached the

outcast and, taking folds of its skin carefully between their teeth, pulled it down to the ground. Its chest heaved as if it had been shot.

**5** Mr X scraped some of the foam from its mouth. Then the black dog nipped at the skin on Cur's neck.

**6** 'This might pinch,' Magpie said. 'The hinge on the brace is stiff.'

**10** CUR had begun to cry again. Mr X rubbed the foam and the liver-coloured dried blood into the brighter spots now welling up on Cur's neck. He went to wash his hands in the nearest canal. Then he left the Ghetto.

**2** The six dogs re-joined the circle around Cur. When he cried even louder, the dogs began to whine and howl, echoing his every sound.

**3** 'Can you smile?' Magpie said. 'Most of my customers seem to like that pose.'

## KEELHAULED

**11** CUR had a recurring dream that must have been a memory of his initiation.

**2** He was drowning, adrift on an endless ocean of his own thinned salt blood, flecked with rabid foam. It was dark, apart from a faint blue glimmer at the horizon where the sun had disappeared.

**3** It was raining, great gobs of rain that smacked his face and upper body. He could feel the bruises spreading under his skin like spilled wine, and he knew he was disfigured from the hits.

**4** There were mouths snapping at his ankles under the surface of the watery blood.

**5** But the really frightening thing about the dream was that it carried on beyond the point where nightmares are supposed to stop.

**6** ‘Don’t squirm,’ Magpie said. ‘You’ll only get scratched.’

**12** CUR expected to wake with a jolt at the shock of the wine-dark sea entering his mouth and lungs, but he did not.

**2** He expected to wake when he sank beneath the surface and the teeth bit deep into his face and thighs and groin, but he did not.

**3** He expected to wake as he began to lose consciousness within the dream itself, his vision blackening as he sank

deeper, with fingers of fluid gouging his eyes and ears, but he did not.

**4** Cur died over and over again in the dream, and he bumped blindly along its underside like a keelhauled sailor before he broke the surface of sleep, his pillow wet from the foam leaking from his mouth and nose and ears.

**5** He blamed the black dog for this dream, but at the beginning, before the dream, was the sickness.

**13** THE initiation that the black dog had so carefully coordinated took twelve hours, during which Cur’s tiniest movements and sounds were amplified by the dogs, and his fevered mind was filled with visions of water.

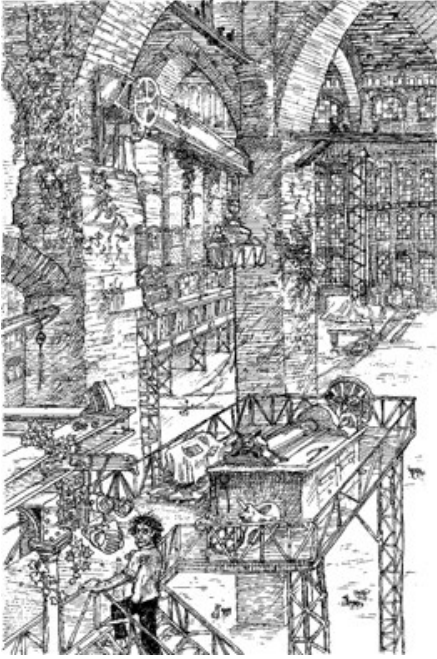
**2** The death that Cur dreamed of was real. The dogs killed part of his future manhood that day, and made him one of them.

**3** ‘Are you feeling all right?’ Magpie asked. ‘You look queasy.’

**14** THE only human that Cur saw throughout his childhood was Mr X, who visited the Ghetto two or three times a week to teach Cur how to speak.

**2** Mr X had permanent stubble along his jaw and a sandpapery tonsure around his bald spot. He wore dusty, flapping robes like a schoolteacher, but their shape was never clear because the complicated folds

## FIVE WOUNDS



seemed to have got tangled up at some point, like uncombed hair.

3 Cur did not enjoy his talks with Mr X, who tormented him with the idea that his parents were dead, and that the dogs had eaten them.

4 One day, Mr X looked around with a cunning expression, as if about to share a secret, and opened a small bag that he carried at his waist.

5 Cur leaned over and peered inside, expecting to see a totem, but saw only three wizened and blackened fingers.

15 MR X shook the bag, so the fingers jiggled about in a semblance of life, then he adopted a solemn expression. 'I

FOUND THE BODY,' he confided. 'I SAW THAT ONE LEG WAS BARE ABOVE THE ANKLE.'

2 He picked one of the fingers out and gave it a sniff, then held it out to Cur, who shook his head in disgust. Then Mr X continued, 'I TOUCHED IT WITH MY HAND AND FOUND THAT IT WAS COLD. I FELT VERY SHAKY.'

3 Mr X raised the hand in question, which trembled anew at the memory as he covered his eyes.

4 'Pretend you're dead if you like,' Magpie said. 'That sometimes helps people stay still.'

16 THE place the government had allotted to the dogs had once been a foundry.

2 The site was made up of vast brick buildings with high ceilings. Their cavernous interiors were full of machinery surrounded by railings and metal staircases.

3 The debris of work lay everywhere: wrenches, hammers, pliers, chisels, tongs, abandoned piles of ore and pallets of bricks. Everything was preserved in a sticky grease coat, to which dust stuck and was fruitful and multiplied.

4 The uneven concrete floor was encrusted with ridges of once-molten metals and alloys, with oil and with pigeon droppings, which fanned out in pale, luminous layers under the places where the

## SOFT, DIFFUSE

pigeons squatted in the roof, their sounds magnified to confusion before they reached Cur below.

5 'The light in here's nice,' Magpie said. 'Soft, diffuse.'

17 AS he grew up in these massive enclosed spaces, Cur rose from the floor onto gantries that had once moved over mysterious pits.

2 Long-dead jokes and insults were scratched on walls and pinned to bits of paper in the rest quarters. Cur read them with curiosity, and began to feel nostalgia for a life he had never known.

3 His favourite place was in what had once been a control booth for one of the gantries. It had scratched windows and a cracked leather seat in front of a row of now-rigid levers.

4 Underneath the windows, every inch of wall space was covered in yellowed pages torn from books: crude outlines of naked women in grotesque poses. Cur shifted the focus of his eyes, so that he could sit in a blurred circle of relative innocence.

5 He came here because it was the only place he could be alone, but it did not occur to him to take the pictures down. Images on paper did not move him to desire.

6 'Have you ever seen a daguerreotype before?' Magpie asked.

18 PARTS of the Ghetto were in the open air. In the summer, swallows reeled in the sky, flowing together and apart. Dozens of them landed at the same time on a tall crane.

2 When he approached, nearly deafened by birdsong, he could just make out a soft pitter-patter underneath, like rain falling into water.

3 He rubbed his eyes and squinted into the twilight: a scattered rain of cream-white and bitumen-black bird droppings hitting the ground with soft, plosive smacks.

4 He could never escape from reality, even out here. His childhood world was bounded by bird shit and dog piss.

5 'Don't mind the smell,' Magpie said. 'It's just the chemicals.'

19 CUR knew the sickness that they had given to him, but normally it killed, as it had killed the dog from which he had caught it.

2 Something had been done to the sickness itself as well as to Cur, and there had been some unusual and permanent side effects. Cur measured his distinctiveness against his growing awareness of Mr X's limitations.

3 Cur was painfully sensitive to the simple pressure of the air moving in and out of his lungs, laden with pollen and

## FIVE WOUNDS



dust, whose gross components he could clearly distinguish.

4 Certain smells flooded into his body until he began to snarl and whine in unison with the other dogs: the odour of raw meat for example, or a bitch in heat.

5 At such times, the ocean of blood in which he drowned in his dreams was inside him, flowing hot and tender in a film just under the surface of his self, spreading like the bruises he felt flowering on his face in the dream.

6 The blood beat in his temples and fingertips, and its force was his own.

7 His mouth filled over and over again with spit, his breathing was tight, and his throat locked as he tried to swallow. His fear of water, which never left him, was at its strongest during these episodes. The mere sight of it could lock his limbs into seizure.

8 He lay blindfolded in a darkened

room, trying not to move, but he could not escape the sound of lapping water.

20 THE sound of water was everywhere in the city, because the city was built on water. Canals cut its streets up. Bridges cut across the canals. There were no coaches, only boats.

2 There was only one bridge into the Ghetto, whose boundaries coincided with those of an isolated group of islands in the north-west part of the city.

3 Cur did not cross this bridge until he was fifteen. When he did so, dogs nipped at his heels, and Mr X pulled him forward by a leash around his neck.

4 They dragged him forwards and backwards, over and over again, on his hands and knees. At the sight of the water, his eyes rolled up and his head flopped over the edge of the collar.

5 The black dog decided it was time to

## THE SOUND OF WATER

speed the process up. So they tied him to a chair under a broken gutter, and the water dripped down onto his head all night.

6 During this ordeal, they fixed a cord in his mouth over his tongue, to stop him biting or swallowing it. He would be no good to the black dog if he could not speak.

7 The next time he passed over the bridge, the water did not bother him so much.

21 'CHEESE,' Magpie said. Cur bared his teeth. 'Yes, good, hold that,' Magpie said, and then counted off. 'One, two, three, four, five.' He put the cap back over the camera lens. 'Do you want to tell me about the sickness now?'

2 'What sickness?'

3 'Come on,' Magpie said. 'You can't fool me. I can see it in your face.'

4 Cur licked his lips.





## *Initiation*



## *Paradise*

**1** A few months earlier, Mr X had taken Cur out of the Ghetto for the first time.

**2** Outside, it was a riot, a chaos – meat: oozing, seared; skin: begrimed, caked with powder; hair: frizzed and puffed like dandelion seeds, heavy and helmeted with pomade; sweat: hot, beaming energy, cold in crusted layers. Perfume over sweat, flies over dirt, dried animal blood over cobbles, sewage, dog from himself and his clothes, soap scum, fresh fruit and vegetables (and some not so fresh), burning wood and coal flavouring everything with smoke. Odours mushed together like pap.

**3** The smells burned like mustard. They centred somewhere near the bridge of his nose, but spread far beyond, so that his eyes watered, his ears hummed and his tongue felt numb.

**4** The space around him was articulated and defined by canals. The city was a

spider's web of water within which he was trapped, and his awareness of that water distorted everything else. Water was white noise that left drier sounds and smells dull and tasteless.

**5** Cur followed Mr X, who yanked occasionally on the jingling chain attached to his collar. Cur kept his eyes down. Then, suddenly, metal, leather and foul breath: an armed guard, blocking his way.

**2** CUR and Mr X had arrived at what appeared to be a solid canopy of light pink stone suspended on top of insubstantial branching columns of honey-combed grey.

**2** Cur could smell the sand and wet wood of the building's foundations, which shifted imperceptibly, with infinite slowness and patience.

**3** Behind the stone, hidden in its shade, cool and slightly damp, was another smell: part animal skin and part pulped



## FIVE WOUNDS

cloth. Parchment and paper, and over it, like glistening trails left by snails, ink from hundreds of pens.

**3** MR X had taught Cur to read by drawing letters and words in the dust on the ground.

**2** Consequently, he did not think of written words as permanent things. They were marks that could be wiped out by a motion of the body – a sweep of the hand or foot – or in a spatter of water that turned them to mud.

**3** Ghosts of the things they described, weak and powerless.

**4** ‘THIS is the government palace,’ Mr X said, and then to the guard, who stared past them. ‘We’re here on business.’

**2** The guard measured out a single step to one side, and Mr X and Cur entered the palace by the back door.

**3** They walked through corridors, cramped and enclosed, although Cur could sense larger rooms nearby. At the edges of these rooms, pigments and resins; leather, canvas and gilding. Paintings.

**4** Mr X had showed him one once: a group portrait of the dogs, with a larval version of his infant self in front, commissioned to commemorate his abduction.

**5** Cur was unimpressed. Geometry and tricks of perspective meant nothing to

him. In the end, a painting was just another surface.

**6** Space was defined by the circulation of air, and Cur mapped the relations between odours and sounds, which interpenetrated one another in a cat’s cradle of threads.

**7** He walked down the dingy corridors of the palace with his eyes closed, listening to the blood pound in his ears. It dissolved other sounds into its rhythm: lapping liquid, swords shifting in the sheaths of sentries, pens scratching, and – somewhere up near the top of the building – a bloody scream.

**8** He soaked up everything, and he managed to lose himself until the voice of Mr X found his ears.

**5** ‘KEEP your mouth shut,’ Mr X said, bringing them both to a halt in front of an imposing door with studs and crossbeams. ‘But listen.’

**2** Mr X knocked on the door, which bore the title ‘Committee for Public Health’ in a flowery script on a yellow and curled paper label.

**3** ‘You’ll learn something about what the dogs do for this city,’ Mr X said, as an invisible someone inside opened the door.

**6** CUR stepped into the room. At its far end sat three old men, even older than Mr X, who bowed towards them,

## SPECTACLES, EAR TRUMPET, SMALLPOX

pulling Cur down with him as he did so.

2 The two visitors sat down in chairs that had been placed ready for them. The chair legs had been sawn off half-way up, so that the seats were uncomfortably low.

3 The three old men sat in high-backed chairs on a dais, lit by a candelabra on the large table in front of them. Their fingers smelled of copper, and their skin was dry and tight and coarse: a paper smell rather than a parchment one. Their sweat was confident and neutral, with none of the acid of burnt muscle.

4 The red silk of their robes rippled and flashed in the light from the candles, like the crests of the waves on the lagoon in sunlight.

5 'The job'll take you over the border,' said the man in the middle, who had pink, inflamed eyes – or maybe it was just the effect of the tinted lenses in his spectacles.

6 'We don't normally do that,' Mr X said. 'It's not part of our contract.'

7 'It's important!' the man on the right said, with unnecessary emphasis. He had a large ear trumpet, the curve of which rested on the desk so that the opening pointed towards Mr X.

8 'It's political,' added the man on the left, whose skin had the lunar texture of smallpox scars.

9 'He'll have bodyguards!' shouted Ear-trumpet.

10 'We need all the extras,' said Spectacles.

11 'All the dogs must be black. Howl around his camp for a couple of nights,' said Smallpox.

12 'Follow him, at a distance! In the open! Make sure you're seen!' Ear-trumpet said. 'Do it in shifts!'

13 'Take him in a group, soundless,' Smallpox said.

14 'No growling,' Spectacles added, 'no warning; pull his guts out; eat his brains; mess the body up. We don't want a tomb, so don't leave enough to bury.'

15 'We'll pay the bounty of a man! For any dog killed! Can't say fairer!'

16 'Who is he?' Mr X asked. 'The target, I mean.'

17 'A man we've used before, but he's become an embarrassment.' Spectacles passed a note with a name written on it over the table. Mr X stood up to retrieve it.

18 'I know him,' Mr X said, after glancing at the name on the paper.

19 'He shouldn't be difficult to find,' Smallpox said. 'You'll get the price on his head beside what's agreed here.'

20 Mr X popped the note into his mouth and began to chew.

21 Spectacles smiled weakly. 'Of course, we'll need a limb or something as proof of execution. A hand or foot will do.'

22 The only sound in the room for a

## FIVE WOUNDS



minute was Mr X chewing and swallowing paper while the candles guttered. But eventually he finished and he then began to discuss another piece of business with the committee members.

**23** The government was planning a controlled outbreak of plague to keep population levels at manageable levels in the south part of the city. Again, they wanted a black dog, who was to wander around pissing on selected doorposts as a portent of doom.

**7** CUR was appalled. Was this where the dogs went when they left the Ghetto?

**2** At all the talk of flesh, his mouth had

begun to water. He was particularly aware of a half-eaten salami sandwich lying on a pewter plate in front of Smallpox.

**3** Pig. Just pig. But what had the pig been eating before it found its way into the sandwich?

**8** CUR and Mr X left with a kerchief, which would enable the dogs to pick up the victim's scent. On the way out, Mr X complained there was always more work for black dogs than for any other kind. They sometimes had to resort to dye if demand was particularly heavy.

**2** 'Don't get the wrong idea,' Mr X said. Not all of the work the dogs did was so distasteful. They still got private requests for holy greyhounds and that sort of thing.

**3** Only last month they had staged a rescue of a baby from some wolves also hired for the happy occasion. Mr X did not seem to realise that this particular example was not likely to impress Cur with the dogs' integrity, given the circumstances of his own abduction.

**9** THE rescue was commissioned by a noble, who was keen to impress his retainers with appropriate examples of loyalty and vigilance. The chaplain had preached a fine sermon on the event the following Sunday, or so Mr X had heard.

**2** Mr X sighed before going on to suggest

## PIG. JUST PIG

that the exceptional nature of this contract was sadly apparent in the logistical disasters that accompanied its execution.

3 The company did not have an all-white dog right now – and this had been specifically requested – so they had to sub-contract.

4 Their usual stand-in had cancelled at the last minute, so they had to hire a dog with a grey foot, who had insisted on double pay. As a result, they actually lost money on the deal.

5 The customer even complained about the grey foot and threatened to withhold payment, so a couple of dogs had to loiter suggestively when the baby came out to play to ensure prompt settlement of the bill.

6 ‘No,’ Mr X concluded, ‘white-dog work just isn’t worth the bother.’

10 MR X was oblivious to Cur’s distress. As they passed through crowds, Cur could smell the savoury folds squeezed and strained inside cloth.

2 The people around him were just so many walking sausages. He didn’t actually want to eat them. It was just that he was conscious of them as meat.

3 As he passed food stalls, he could feel spots of fat popping as they fell from steaks as if his own skin had been peppered. The sound of sizzling meat even caused him to forget the sound of water.

4 Mr X prattled on about a famous poet who had hired a greyhound many years before to act as an allegory of the Emperor or something equally improbable. Maybe it was a leopard and not a greyhound. Mr X could not remember now.

11 CUR felt a snarl rise in his throat. He was conscious of his teeth, grinding, and his throat, swallowing. He was conscious of the oyster muscle of his tongue.

2 ‘Get me meat,’ he said. He had to kill this appetite or he would kill something else. The sea of blood inside him was churning into rabid foam in his ears. Riding its swell, he felt profoundly nauseous, a sensation that did not seem to affect his hunger.

3 Mr X looked outraged at Cur’s peremptory demand, but knew better than to argue with his face. He went quickly to a food stall.

4 ‘Raw,’ Cur added. He could only calm the blood in his head with blood on his tongue.

5 Mr X came back with a swollen piece of liver, which Cur attacked so violently that his own hands were bleeding by the time he got it down. He sucked his fingers and began to shake and weep. Then he fell to his knees and gagged and vomited.

6 People stared. Mr X pulled him away.

**12** WHEN they had returned to the Ghetto, Cur locked himself in a hut and ate only bread and water for a day. **2** Contained in a glass, the clear liquid soothed rather than terrified him. He pressed its coolness against his forehead. He moved to the door of his room and let his eyes follow the black dog around the Ghetto.

**3** The air between them lay thick with hatred. It hung like tobacco smoke, contaminating Cur's clothes, his bedding, his hair, his skin. Hatred stained his fingertips and teeth yellow.

**13** ONE day the black dog sent Mr X to Cur. He squatted on the ground where Cur was tracing letters with his finger.

**2** 'It's time for you to earn your keep,' Mr X said, placing a key in the lock that held Cur's collar. 'You've got to understand what you are. That's the only way to be free.' Mr X removed the collar.

**3** 'I know what I am.'

**4** 'No.' Mr X grinned. 'You only suspect. You're infected. You're contagious. But you're safe because you're under our protection: the nation of dogs, the greatest such nation in this land.'

**5** 'You're in the duke's kennel, and you're grateful for the scraps from his table. You hunger for his enemies' blood. You long for his hand to touch you.'



**6** 'When his enemies are butchered by the executioner, you get the choicest parts of the body as prize. You snap spines in the hunt. You bite women, and they howl for you.'

**7** 'You enact violence on the bodies of others, because otherwise it will eat your guts like powdered glass.'

**8** 'I want no part of you,' Cur said.

**9** 'You can deny me,' Mr X replied. 'You can't deny yourself. And you can't survive outside. If you leave, you're not a dog. You're a wolf. Anyone can kill you, rob you, insult you. You don't exist.'

**10** 'And you know you can't leave the city. You can't cross water. So your only choice is dog or wolf. You can't be a man.'

**11** 'Kneel. Acknowledge your place.'

**12** Cur knew that Mr X was right. By a

## WORSHIP: TO KISS, AS A DOG LICKING HIS MASTER'S HAND

considerable effort of will he could cross bridges, because they were still connected directly to the land, but he could not enter a boat, not even the ferries that crossed the Great Canal.

**14** MR X threw a piece of cloth at Cur's feet. 'This belongs to a counterfeiter,' he said. 'Easy job. He's hiding among the fishermen in the south-west, waiting to escape to the pirates down the coast.

**2** 'The body doesn't need to be disfigured. But we do need to blood you in the hunt, so get on with it.' Mr X stood up. 'You've got twenty-four hours to do it and get back here. Don't worry about curfew. You've got a dispensation.'

**3** Cur picked up the piece of cloth and sniffed it. He slunk along a wall, his face flooding with the blood of shame, not the mad blood of anger.

**4** The black dog watched him leave the Ghetto with such intensity that the space between them felt charged, as if lightning was about to split them apart.

**15** CUR did not go immediately to the south-west. Instead, he went to an inn and drank wine, letting it spill down his shirt.

**2** He dipped the cloth from the man he had to kill into his glass and sucked the wine out from it. Drunk on the taste of

his victim. He wept into his wine and drank his own tears. He was ashamed at his sentimentality.

**3** When he was drunk enough, he walked towards his destination down tight little alleys that blocked out the light of the stars. He did not watch where he was going, but let the scent carry him, only becoming fully conscious of the weight of his task when he lost the trail and had to make an effort to correct his path.

**16** HE reached a tenement house. The man he sought was somewhere under the roof. He slipped inside. He removed his shoes and placed them near the front door, so that they were not obviously in view.

**2** Then he padded up the stairs, loping two at a time, always landing on the forefoot. When he neared the top, a door opened on the floor below, spilling out light and sound. Cooked fat, nappies, beer.

**3** Someone ran down the stairs below him. The bottom one creaked. He would have to watch out for it on the way down.

**17** CUR rose to the top of the house as silently as wood-smoke and walked along a corridor of derelict rooms, FULL OF RUBBLE AND DEAD THINGS.

**2** The smell of pigeons nearby was as acrid as burning hair, mingling with the

## FIVE WOUNDS

fear of the man he had come to find, a fear now softened with sleep.

3 Cur pushed open the door of the room he was looking for and walked over to the bed where he knew without looking that the man was sleeping.

4 He closed his eyes and breathed in. A woman was here recently, but no musk of sex: maybe his sister or mother. She would probably discover the body. Cur was sorry for it.

5 He waited for the mad blood to rise and it did not come. His mouth remained dry and his skin clammy. Alcohol leaked from his pores.

6 As sometimes happened, the smell of the man was in his mouth, triggering his sense of taste.

18 SO Mr X was wrong. Tonight Cur could not kill as a dog. Tonight he had to kill as a man, in the full knowledge of his deed.

2 He placed his hand on the man's mouth and bit into his neck by the vein, twisting the skin, as he had been taught. He placed his other hand on the man's chest, as if to contain the sudden jump of the heart.

3 The man's fear rushed into Cur's mouth with the blood, nearly causing him to stagger as it redoubled the effects of the wine.

4 He felt no pity. He could not allow himself such hypocrisy. Pity would be a denial of his responsibility for what was happening under his hands. He did not have the courage to look in the dead man's face before he left.

19 CUR left a line of dark prints down the stairs, where the blood had dripped from his right trouser leg. He moved flat-footed now, and the prints were crescent-shaped, a curve between the ball and the heel.

2 He had wiped his hands on the shirt of the man on the bed, so they were clean enough, even if the rest of him was not. Only traces of red remained under his nails and in tiny coagulated drops attached to the hairs on the back of his hand.

3 Copper fingers, like the government men.

4 He lathered the hairs on his hand with spit, slicing them off with the edges of his teeth and then picking them from the wet tip of his tongue with his finger.

5 With his shoes hanging around his neck, Cur made his way home. He passed no one but two bravoes waiting to rob stragglers from wine shops. They left him alone when he grinned at them with caked teeth. Tonight they were his brothers.

6 As he entered the Ghetto, the mad





blood washed into him at last in anger at the black dog, but he could do nothing with it and it left his muscles aching and his head swollen.

**20** THE next day the dogs left him alone, but Mr X came in the early evening and told him that they must go to collect the reward.

**2** So they returned to the palace, with Cur in a change of clothes but unwashed, so that the hairs on his lower right leg remained rigid with blood, like the spiny hair on the back of a pig.

**3** CUR CARRIED THE MAN'S DEATH AROUND ON HIS SKIN.

**4** The same three men were waiting for them inside the palace, although they had swapped seats. Cur imagined them as bottles on a wall – smooth, indifferent, interchangeable. He imagined knocking

the bottles off one by one, and the broken glass cutting the feet of the black dog.

**5** 'We're pleased with your performance,' said Smallpox.

**6** 'Good,' Cur said. He bit the inside of his cheek and spat blood onto the floor.

**7** Spectacles flinched. Ear-trumpet yawned. Smallpox drummed his fingers on the table.

**8** Mr X cleared his throat. 'We'd be grateful for any token of appreciation.'

**9** Ear-trumpet threw a die. 'Three!' he said. He conferred briefly with his colleagues, and pushed a pack of cards towards Mr X.

**10** Cur smelled no water in the wood of the table, just a film of soap and polish. The wood was packed down, tense as the muscle on the back of a bull. The cards slid on the soap, filthy and curled at the edges.

**11** Mr X walked to the table and cut the



## FIVE WOUNDS

deck. He showed the card he had turned over. 'Knave of Coins. Eleven.'

12 'How appropriate,' said Spectacles, who counted coins and placed them in a bag, which he threw onto the table. 'Even by three is thirty-three.'

13 'Three hundred and thirty,' Mr X said. He picked up the bag.

14 'Next time! Come by yourself!' said Ear-trumpet, looking at Cur.

21 CUR did not want to return to the Ghetto, not yet, so Mr X went on without him. Listening to Mr X's departing footfalls and the creak of cooling wood, Cur rested his head against mottled plaster.

2 Something burned. The pain in his sinuses was so intense that he lifted his hand to his nostrils, convinced that there would be a trickle of blood issuing from them.

3 He lifted his head off the wall and his foot seemed to slip away from the floor. The air was thick with pulped colour, and the wall looked like skin, with watermarks like the liver spots on the hands of the men who paid him.

4 Something to do with the smell of burning candles? But there was more in the air than that. He had noticed on the way in, but it had worked on him since then.

5 He tried to absorb it by holding his breath, but that only made his heart beat faster, so that the echo inside his head felt cavernous and distorted.

22 FLECKS of scent drifted on the air like ash, stinging his skin, glowing and spinning on random gusts. Woody, earthy, metallic, acidic. Stripping out the membrane in his nose, eating in, rushing out.

2 It burnt his stomach and thinned his thought until it became clear, but not like water. He moved through it and he was not afraid.

3 He passed under it, or it rose above him. It hung boiling over his head with wisps of mist that curled between his legs.

23 HE had come down the stairs from the third floor, and the smell sucked at him like mud sucks at a shoe. He sank into it. It slid over his edges.

2 He moved in the direction of the Great Council hall. The spaces around him were elastic, swelling with air like a lung.

24 CUR entered the hall, which flickered with gaslight even though it was bright outside. The hall was empty except for one man, who was looking at one of the many paintings covering the walls. The painting glistened like a wet stone, but it was not smooth.

2 The man was wearing a frock coat and a long cloak with a high collar: not unlike Mr X's robes, but looser, billowing and settling as he moved to study different sections on the surface of the painting.

3 A *Paradise*, although Cur could make no

## A DARK CONFUSION

sense of it beyond that. It was enormous, covering the entirety of one side of the hall.

4 The paint lay in turgid layers, congealing like brawn and fat, or vegetable-pap. The subject was a dark confusion. It made Cur sick to look at the elongated, suspended figures.

5 There was too little illumination in and around the picture, but all of the heads glowed as if pale light shone behind them.

6 Cur plunged into the picture space and fell, down, down. The figures began to spin around the axis of Christ and his mother.

7 All this was because of a stupid painting?

25 THE man spoke, and Cur clung to the sound of his words – if not to their sense – as to an anchor.

2 ‘The light in the haloes doesn’t come from the figures: it casts a shadow round their heads. Ghostly, like St Elmo’s Fire. The body covers the soul, as the moon may eclipse the sun.

3 ‘He hurries, this painter, as if he’s scared his subjects will decay before he finishes. He knows that flesh doesn’t last, so he doesn’t waste time on anything not informed by the soul.

4 ‘The face and the hands. Everything else covered, denied, dismissed; left to the workshop. And the flesh burns. It’s phosphorescent.’

5 The spinning sensation slowed down. ‘What can I smell?’ Cur said.

6 ‘You can smell wet varnish, binders,

oils,’ the man replied. ‘If you’ve got a really sharp nose’ – he glanced at Cur as he said this – ‘then canvas, wood, maybe glue.’

7 ‘Explain it.’ Cur’s head was pumped with blood as if he was upside-down. He felt his eyes might pop out if he held them open too long. A mad blood, but not mad with anger.

26 THE man turned to face Cur. His own flesh was waxy. ‘The varnish is over there’ – he pointed – ‘in a pot. Dead trees. Imagine fluid seeping from a wound.’

2 Cur noticed the canvas bubbling, as spit bubbled at the corners of his lips when he was thirsty, but he was not convinced it was really happening. He stared at the surface of the painting until it settled.

3 He could not identify the scents of the colours suspended on the canvas, drying and hardening to the texture of cured meat. The paint looked to him like coagulating blood, and he wondered if it would blacken and crack and flake as it dried, as the blood on his leg had done.

4 ‘The pigments need a binder so you can spread them on the canvas,’ the man continued. ‘Linseed oil. And the colours, well, the green is Verdigris, from winegrowers. Or you can make it by nailing copper to wood. Stick the copper in acid, seal it in shit, and you get a green crust.

5 ‘The blue’s azurite. Good for skies, but there’s no sky in this painting. The back-

## FIVE WOUNDS



ground's all saints, swarming like flies. This other blue, smalt. That's the new thing. Easier to get too. From glass-makers, here in the city.'

**6** Cur's eyes followed the man's pointing hand.

**7** 'The red is carmine. From insects. Women rub it in their cheeks. I don't suppose they know where it's from. The bodies are crushed. The insects, I mean, not the women.

**8** Vermilion's a better red – mineral, not animal: mercury and sulphur. Here. You can see the difference.

**9** 'The best blacks come from charred bone. Powdered mummy works too. Cheapskates use soot.

**10** 'Whites are lead or ground eggshell. Silver is just silver, but there's a cheap version of gold leaf called king's yellow, which comes from arsenic. You can mix it with ground glass to make it dry faster.'

**11** The man smiled for the first time. 'You can kill a man quicker with king's yellow than any other pigment. True gold revivifies; false gold kills.'

**12** 'What about purple?' Cur asked.

**13** 'Purple? There's no true purple anymore.'

**27** CUR felt the scents resolve as they were identified. They oxidised and stabilised.

**2** Language was a chemical process. Scents could be traced because they were named. It stopped them spilling and smoking into each other.

**3** The clearest resolution was in the colours that the man spoke of at a given moment.

**4** Outside the moment of speech, the scents flowed back into one another.

**5** The words kept them apart as the word of Moses kept the waters of the Red Sea apart for the Israelites to cross.



**28** CUR tasted the sounds as he repeated them to himself. ‘Verdigris,’ he said, and felt vinegar in his teeth and tongue.

**2** His head was cooling and hardening. As it did so, traces of the individual scents remained in a dry, levigated form. He felt he might scrape them off his furred tongue with the edge of a knife, like grating orange peel.

**3** The scents no longer sat like wine in his mouth, but like spices: linseed oil as sunflower seeds; smalt as rock-salt; verdigris as cloves; carmine as brittle and crunchy as caramelised sugar; vermilion hot like paprika and ginger.

**29** BUT the sensation did not last, and then there was a bitter residue and a foul metallic aftertaste.

**2** Cur swallowed dryly. His head ached. He felt desiccated, the bottom part of his

mouth full of the waste products of the refining process, a filth that coated his teeth. ‘Do you have water?’ he asked.

**3** ‘Wine,’ the pale man answered.

**4** Sediment stirred in Cur’s mouth as he swallowed a mouthful from the man’s flask. ‘How do you know all this?’ He spoke quietly so as not to disturb the thump in his head.

**5** ‘He bought the paints from me,’ the pale man said. ‘An unimaginative artist. Only took the colours he was used to.’

**6** ‘Was?’

**7** ‘He’s dead. The son finished the picture.’ The pale man turned towards Cur. ‘My name’s Crow,’ he said, too loudly, so that the words reverberated in the enclosed space.

**8** ‘Cur.’

**9** Crow’s back stiffened. ‘I know,’ he said. ‘I know you. It’s my business to know you.’

## FIVE WOUNDS

**10** Crow clearly expected Cur to leave first, and for some reason Cur felt inclined to comply with this unspoken request. He turned and walked towards the door, still a little unsteady.

**30** WHEN he had left the room, Crow spoke into the empty space. 'I could try to cure you,' he said. 'I could try.'

**2** He listened to his own echo and watched the dust motes move in the air.

**31** OUTSIDE, it was almost dark, and Cur hurried to reach the Ghetto before curfew.

**2** When he was almost there, and he was able to anticipate his final, familiar steps through the entrance as a set sequence already completed, his passage was blocked by a young woman, who brought him back into the moment.

**3** Having escaped temporarily into a pleasant reverie, even if only through the artificial and meaningless abstraction of repetition, his self was once more imprisoned in his senses, in the present, where all animals are confined as if in a cage.

**4** No future, no past. No anticipation, no regret. No choices or alternatives. He was who he was.

**32** CUR studied the woman. A little wild, her hair loose and be-

draggled, her bare, pale arms hugging her body as if to separate herself from her surroundings.

**2** Oh God, was this the sister of the man he had killed, come to denounce him? No, her scent was unfamiliar.

**3** A hunchback, or at least some hidden deformity around her shoulder blades under her plain smock.

**4** 'THEY SHALL DRIVE THEE FROM MEN,' she said, 'AND THY DWELLING SHALL BE WITH THE BEASTS OF THE FIELD.' She spoke without grace and without introduction. 'You have a dream,' she added.

**5** She cast her eyes about, as if scared they would be overheard. 'You're drowning. You need to stay in it longer.'

**6** 'What?' Cur was pushed once more out of the present, this time into the indistinct, gummy world of sleep, full of clammy smells and foggy vapours.

**7** His leg twitched like a dreaming dog's, as he felt himself falling, and he jerked upright and fully awake once again.

**8** Was this some hallucinatory aftereffect of his experience in the palace? He was lost somewhere in a nether world between sleeping and waking, where his dreams became the property of others, available for public discussion in the street – like the tale of his origin.

**33** THE woman had paused once more while she waited for Cur to



## THE TIP OF HIS TAIL

recover his composure. 'If you don't fight, and you allow yourself to drown,' she said slowly, to be sure he took in the sense of the words, 'you'll come back to the surface, and the storm will clear. There'll be a boat waiting for you.'

2 'What?' Cur said again. He closed his mouth, which had been hanging open. 'I don't like boats.'

3 'I have an interpretation of this dream,' the girl said. The pressure of her incisor tooth expelled the blood where it touched her lower lip, leaving a white spot.

4 'It's not a reliable interpretation,' she went on. 'There are uncertain bits. You have to fill in the blanks.'

34 CUR did not know what to say. The girl was clearly embarrassed by her intimate knowledge.

2 He had almost made up his mind to be furious when she shifted her balance and reached to touch him with her fingertips. She breathed in as if preparing to say something else, but before she could begin, Cur growled. He could not help himself.

3 She pulled her hand back, and he felt his cheek warm in anticipation of her withdrawn touch. He was blushing, he realised in astonishment.

4 He was outraged at this betrayal by his body, which could normally be relied upon to impose inappropriately aggressive responses on him.

5 How was this girl able to unman him so easily?

35 'LIAR,' he said, fighting back as the blush subsided. 'I'll kill you.'

2 She drew away and covered her mouth with her hand. She turned and began to run. He did not want her to go, but he growled again to hurry her departure.

3 When she was well out of his reach, she stopped and called over her shoulder, 'THE EMBLEM OF THE WOLF OR DOG TURNING BACK MEANS ESCAPE,' and then, as an afterthought, 'A MAN WHO ESCAPES FROM HIS ENEMIES WITH SMALL HARM IS INDICATED BY A WOLF WHO HAS LOST THE TIP OF HIS TAIL.'

4 A moment later she was out of sight and earshot, though her scent remained.

36 PART of him wanted to follow, but curfew was about to fall. Too late, he realised that he did not know her name.



*Cur's First Murder*



## *Politic Worms*

**1** CROW walked back towards his shop, where he had an appointment. On the way, he checked off his to-do list in his head. ONE: PROCURE THE PLACENTA OF A CALF. TWO: DESCRIBE THE TONGUE OF THE WOODPECKER AND THE JAW OF A CROCODILE. Three: eliminate potential opponents. Four: take over the government. Five: become immortal.

**2** Not necessarily in that order of course, but yes, that was about it, besides his business with Magpie, who he found waiting for him under the swinging sign of the dog that marked Crow's place of business.

**3** The shop sat between a butcher and a glove-maker some way along an alley off the main street of the parish: a cheap location.

**4** Crow unlocked the street door and lit the gas lamps inside, which illuminated glass-fronted cabinets containing pestles and mortars, scales and weights, powders

and pigments, unguents and reagents, leather pouches and twisted pinches of paper, stoppered bottles, droppers and alembics, pickled animals, precipitated minerals and dried vegetables.

**5** All the cabinets had handwritten labels fixed to their fronts, with Crow's own catalogue numbers and classifications according to his own system.

**2** CROW'S outer existence was that of an apothecary and paint seller, with an increasingly lucrative sideline in the new photographic chemicals. But another self walked parallel to this life, as its shadow, or perhaps lay suspended within it, as a yolk lies within an egg – a mystical egg, for Crow was an alchemist.

**2** The role of shopkeeper was merely a disguise, an accident of colour and texture with no bearing on his substance, and he gained no satisfaction from providing a service to people he despised.



## FIVE WOUNDS

3 Crow turned around to see whether Magpie had followed him inside the shop, but he remained on the threshold, perhaps waiting for his eyes to adjust. He was silhouetted by the late evening sun, so that Crow could not make out his features.

3 MAGPIE took a further step forward, and shifted the tripod from off his shoulder as he placed his box of photographic plates down.

2 He looked around. Every line inside the shop was crooked. All the walls undulated and bulged, and the cabinets wouldn't close properly. The whole building looked like someone had picked it up and then dropped it again.

3 'Have you done this kind of work before?' Crow asked.

4 'Sometimes,' Magpie said. 'But usually babies rather than adults. You know, for the parents.'

5 'These are a control,' Crow said. 'A standard to measure progress against. So they've got to be perfect.'

6 Crow led the way up a spiral staircase to his workshop. The stairs were all at slightly different angles, so the treads were never quite where you were expecting them to be. It was like negotiating a ladder on a plunging ship.

7 When Magpie had regained his footing at the top, Crow revealed his two

subjects, who were laid out on marble-topped tables. The marble was colder than the surrounding air so it was beaded with condensation. Or perhaps that was an effect caused by the bodies.

8 'Why corpses?' Magpie asked.

9 'How can you understand life if you don't understand death?' Crow replied.

4 CROW'S tree of thought did not begin in the external world, nor in the bodies on the tables, but rather deep within himself, and it bore its first fruits in the putrefaction of his own leprous body.

2 His disease was an alien infection, obviously, caused by poisons, logically, which must have entered his body from outside. Similarly, death itself was a disease that infected the body – a parasite whose larval form we absorbed every day in the food we ate and the air we breathed.

3 Incubated in our warm, moist bodies, its eggs hatched, and it consumed us from within. The worms of death were initially sated by our young flesh. They curled quietly inside us, drowsy and gorged.

4 As they exhausted the goodness of our bodies, they became hungrier. Infuriated, they bumped against our intestine walls and defecated into our blood.

5 Finally, they sucked the life out of us, as a dog sucks marrow from a bone. Our

## TREE OF THOUGHT

aged bodies desiccated and our bones became brittle.

6 After our death, the worms escaped from the corpse into the soil around it.

5 CROW'S body was already well on the way to white sterility and black liquefaction. The skin on his hands and feet and lower legs was flushed and shiny, hardened and varnished like the shell of a beetle, but soft and unstable underneath.

2 Sometimes the coarsened skin flowered with ulcers. He could not feel it when he cut himself, and so his wounds blackened and filled with new kinds of poison if he was not careful to wash them.

3 Crow's particular problem was thus an exaggerated instance of the general human condition. He was the new Adam, the visible avatar and exemplar of the universal corruption, from whom the phoenix of incorruptibility might issue forth.

4 THE FIRST MAN IS OF THE EARTH, EARTHY: THE SECOND MAN IS THE LORD FROM HEAVEN.

6 IN order to purify any substance for medicinal purposes, Crow had first to reduce it, to putrefy it into base matter. It must lose its life in order to be reborn. The same principle therefore applied to his body.

2 THOU FOOL, THAT WHICH THOU SOWEST IS NOT QUICKENED, EXCEPT IT DIE.

7 CROW began by reducing his own flesh, polluted and riddled with worms, to its essence. He removed goblets and slivers from his own toes, and then attempted to accelerate the process of decay, to bring the dying life to its point of rebirth.

2 He ate the results, thus introducing the essence back into his body, where he hoped it would draw the worms of death as a lodestone draws iron, and thereby nullify the death that already pricked his fingers and tingled his feet.

3 But the essence of death, which would cure death and flush its worms from his system, eluded him in his body, and so his attention had gradually turned outwards, to the bodies of others.

4 'I see,' Magpie said. 'These corpses are your mirror.'

5 'And my antidote,' Crow said. 'Death inoculates against death.'

8 UNTIL now, Crow had folded foreign bodies into a foetal position and stored them inside large jars, each of which had a tap at the base. Sealed inside these containers, the bodies bloomed into new life through fermentation.

2 Crow occasionally drained off the liquid that accumulated, which he

## FIVE WOUNDS

retained in smaller jars he stacked against his workshop windows. There the sun heated and stirred their contents, and eventually penetrated the workshop interior, refracted through the thick liquids.

3 Crow never opened his windows. He did not want to dissipate the accumulated fug.

9 EVENTUALLY, the corpses in Crow's jars were reduced to bone, although this took months. Crow took the bones and ground them into a coarse powder.

2 He tried to find a compound that would hold the powder suspended in the drained, fermented fluid as his coloured pigments were held in linseed oil or egg tempera. He spread these experimental pastes on his own extremities, but still to no good effect.

3 Now he had decided to observe and sample the process of decomposition in the open.

10 BUT the air in the workshop was not exactly 'open'; rather, it was concentrated and rarefied. It was an essential part of the experiment.

2 Its resistance increased, and Crow moved through it sluggishly. It dragged at his limbs and clothes like water, and his movements produced visible swirls



and currents, like the haze above hot paving stones on a summer afternoon.

3 Here the distinctions between solids, liquids and vapours could not be maintained, and the entire room became a specimen jar.

11 'WHO are they?' Magpie asked, indicating his subjects. Both of the exposed bodies on Crow's tables showed obvious signs of trauma.

2 The first was a woman, no longer young but not old. A white plastic bag was in position over her head and was secured by a piece of string wrapped twice around the neck and tied at the front.

3 'This one's a suicide,' Crow said. 'The mark of the Beast,' he added, touching

## THE MARK OF THE BEAST, THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB

the mottled skin where the woman's stilled blood had come to rest.

4 'The blood of the Lamb,' Magpie said.

5 The other body was older and in a more advanced state of decomposition. It had clearly been worried by some kind of animal. The skin and muscle of the face were missing, as were the left calf and the generative organs. The teeth bared in a rictus of defiance.

6 'Ritual assassination by dog,' Crow said. 'Obviously it took them a while to get the body back. Does it bother you?'

7 'Not at all.'

12 'A criminal and a victim,' Crow said. 'I imagine the man did something to deserve it. Don't we all? The woman killed herself, her own jury and executioner.'

2 'Not my area of expertise,' Magpie said. 'I don't judge. Don't need to. People judge themselves. But I do need more light in here.'

3 'I have lamps and reflectors,' Crow said. 'We just need to set them up.'

13 'DUST,' Magpie said.

2 'What?'

3 'In the light, swimming, like animalculae under a microscope.'

4 'Ha, yes! Like worms.'

5 'Disgusting,' Magpie grimaced. 'Wait for it to settle. Don't move. Don't disturb it.'

6 'Don't disturb the worms. Good advice,' Crow said. 'You know, I've thought about this for a while. Does the reflection of an object's surface reveal anything important? But that's the challenge. How do you pass through appearance to essence?'

7 'What makes you think you have to choose?' Magpie said. 'But I know what you want. I can help you steal it.'

8 'I want to get well,' Crow said. 'That's all. A modest ambition.'

9 'No. You need to be sick to get what you want. And I know whose sickness you need to steal.'



## *Worms*



## *Crow's Dream*

**1** THE transformations of Crow's body would become an occult model for the body politic, which he intended to remake in his own image. He aspired to reduce his actions to a series of exemplary, universal and transparent gestures – like the flick of a tyrant's hand.

**2** If Crow commanded the wills of others, his own frailties would be overcome through his command over their interchangeable, bodies.

**3** Thus the pyramids were built. Thus the soldiers of the Sultan conquered in his name, and were absorbed into his person – in history.

**2** THE higher up the political ladder Crow rose, the fewer men who could compel him to obey them, and the more men he himself could command.

**2** The higher he rose, the less he would be an object manipulated according to the purposes of others, and the more he

would become a subject, able to manipulate in turn.

**3** As his power increased in quantity, so it would change in quality, and the possession of this power would change him.

**3** Power would perpetuate itself in him and so he would become immortal. It would grow like a beneficent mould in his mind and burst, puffing its spores into his blood to counteract the work of the worms.

**2** Crow practised upon himself, inflicting pain on those parts still sensitive to it.

**3** LIMITS INTERESTED HIM. HE WANTED TO SEE AT WHAT POINT HE WOULD BREAK. He had not yet reached his breaking point. He hoped he never would.

**4** CROW had begun to test his will by extinguishing those of other people, absorbing other lives within his own.

**2** It had begun as a game. He overheard

## FIVE WOUNDS

a conversation between two discharged soldiers as they prepared to toss a coin to pick which of them would put the other's eyes out.

**3** They could only make a living if one was willing to sacrifice his sight, so they could work as a blind beggar-and-keeper team.

**4** The situation appealed to Crow, who waited until the men had carried out their plan, and the loser was moaning on the ground. Then Crow tempted the winner away with a purse full of gold and vague promises of a job.

**5** 'Jean,' groaned the man who had drawn the short straw. 'Where are you going? Come back. Help me.'

**6** 'Don't worry,' his companion said. 'It's a gentleman. We can eat for days. I just have to leave you alone for a bit.'

**7** In the months that followed, Crow sometimes saw blind Jacques, who became increasingly emaciated as time went on. 'Have you seen my friend Jean?' Jacques asked. 'He's got my eyes.'

**8** Crow left buttons and laces from Jean's clothes in Jacques's tin cup. 'Who's there?' Jacques would cry. 'What have you done with him? Where is he?'

**9** Crow whispered, 'I SOLD HIS MEAT TO THE FLIES, ON CREDIT. IF THEY DON'T PAY YOU, KILL THEM. IF YOU CAN CATCH THEM.'

**10** Jacques flinched as Crow clapped his hands near his ear, and a burst bluebottle fell to the floor. Then Crow stole away on tiptoe, exaggerating his movements pre-

cisely because they were invisible to the butt of his joke.

**11** Jacques's ignorance was a living monument to Crow's superior knowledge.

**5** JEAN was folded inside a giant bottle, with Jacques's mangled eyes sewn onto his outstretched, bloated palm. Curiously, wherever Crow stood in the workshop, the eyes seemed to follow him.

**2** Ever efficient, Crow had combined Jean's murder with an experiment on the existence of the soul.

**3** If he locked a living man inside one of the jars that he used for fermenting corpses, what would happen to the expiring soul, trapped inside?

**4** Would it suffocate without fresh air, as the body did before it? Would it condense like water vapour? Could he then distil the liquid and consume it, as savages consumed the hearts or brains of their defeated enemies?

**5** Crow found no physical trace of the soul, but perhaps the experiment was flawed. He would have to find some way of staining the soul, so that its vaporous emissions became visible.

**6** WHEREVER Jean's soul might be, Crow had compassion on his body, in gratitude for Jean's sacrifice to Crow's higher purpose.

**2** Thus Crow placed a few cats and dogs in the vinegar with Jean for company.



The animals had been killed by divine intervention, and Crow had hoped that death by such means might change the process of tissue disintegration.

3 But decomposition had proceeded in a disappointingly predictable manner, and so he donated the mangy corpses to Jean.

4 Occasionally Crow stood on a chair and removed the jar lid to stir the glutinous liquid, watching the various bodies bump against each other in new patterns, as the eyes of the unfortunate Jacques rolled back and forth, taking in their surroundings.

7 CROW'S political ambitions were not abstract or ill-defined. He had a career plan. He was a member of the Guild of Paint Sellers, but intriguing within the guild was not the way forward.

2 Instead, Crow's ambitions were focused on his supernumerary status as a volunteer Guardian of the Public Conscience.

3 The Guardians staffed the palace bureaucracy, and separate chapters also provided the state assassins and executioners, to whom Crow was attached.

8 THERE was some ambiguity about the precise division of privileges between the assassins and the dogs of the Ghetto, whose role was the subject of a long-standing lawsuit.

2 Fifty years after its inception this suit was no closer to a settlement, even

though all the original litigants had died, for the most part by poisoning, strangulation or a stiletto between the ribs.

3 The dispute focused on who had the right to carry out assassinations of targets in police custody, when such a procedure was necessary to prevent embarrassing trials. There was a fatal ambiguity in these situations (in more ways than one).

9 WITHOUT the Guardians, the government could not function. The bureaucrats among them – the scribes and secretaries – had to be descendants of citizens who had never engaged in manual labour, but the assassins were traditionally recruited from men with no family or known history, and no attachment to any particular place.

2 Crow had no difficulty in meeting these criteria. 'I was hatched from an egg,' he replied, when asked about his ancestry. As far as he knew, he had been conceived in sin and forcibly removed from the arms of his unmarried mother, from whom he had no doubt contracted his disease.

3 He dissipated his childhood in a series of surrogate families, but he was expelled whenever his illness revealed itself, only for the cycle to begin anew.

10 CROW would prove that the lowest, most corrupt origins were no obstacle to the man with a purified will.

2 He was doubly glad he had not been



## FIVE WOUNDS

born a citizen, since citizenship carried the burden of respectability, and so the Treasurer of the Public Conscience was usually elected from the ranks of the anonymous assassins to head the guild.

**3** The Treasurer was not known by this title because of his management of money. Rather, he managed the credits and debits on the City's moral accounts, which were calculated using a double-entry system, according to a tabulated list of virtues and vices, whose values were adjusted according to inflation and measured according to the current, universally accepted medium of exchange – which is to say, years in purgatory or indulgences to be cashed in against such.

**11** **DESPITE** this theoretical rigour, it was not easy in practice to keep track of the city's assets and liabilities.

**2** The nobles who held the most important political offices resented a commoner exercising a supervisory role over them, and they frequently submitted their written confessions in arrears, or not at all. Hence the Treasurer only knew very roughly the overall state of the Public Conscience.

**3** Originally, his task had been simple enough: to ensure that the moral debits resulting from actions committed in the name of the state did not outweigh the credits. But things had become more complicated.

**4** The government was so heavily and inextricably committed to various forms of hypocrisy that it had become impossible to balance the books. For instance, the number of assassinations had quadrupled over the last fifty years.

**5** In effect, there was serious inflation on the expenditure or debit side, which had outstripped the available traditional forms of income or credit. There simply weren't enough virtuous deeds to go around.

**12** **THE** government's solution was to transform the role of the Treasurer, who was henceforth obliged to transfer many of the debits accrued by the state to his own private account.

**2** He then eliminated any person who was aware of the actions that had incurred the debit. Occasionally, this meant disposing of a secretary or a noble magistrate, but patriotism demanded sacrifices.

**3** The Treasurer's willingness to personally assume the state's moral debts meant that the nobles who officially ran the government (or in whose name it was run) did not have to be aware of everything done in their name.

**4** Lips close to ears. Hands covering mouths. Eyes averted.

**13** **THE** Treasurer's secret knowledge was a source of fear among the nobles. How could he be held ac-

## THE PUBLIC CONSCIENCE

countable, if he was the one drawing up the accounts?

2 Their mistrust was responsible for the curious set of regulations governing how long the Treasurer was permitted to remain in office.

3 He lived in the government palace, and it was compulsory for him to eat the food provided for him there.

4 Every meal contained a small dose of arsenic. Once the Treasurer had consumed a certain number of meals, he died. How long he lived depended on his age and constitution, but Treasurers rarely lasted for longer than a couple of years.

5 After each incumbent died, his body was burnt along with his account books, and the ashes were scattered on unconsecrated ground.

6 Masses were not said for his soul, for surely his soul was in hell. A service of thanksgiving was instead held for the deliverance of the state from such a corrupt and evil man.

7 What terrible luck that such men kept getting elected!

14 **THUS** the Treasurer could not reveal himself to be immoral before his election. He had to have a spotless public record.

2 A certain amount of gossip could be tolerated, but nothing provable, nothing to damage his credit.

3 More urgent whispers, but no identifiable words.

15 **FOR** Crow, the position would be ideal, apart, of course, from the artificial restriction on the term of office.

2 Crow did not need to be recognised as the most important man in the state, at least not at first.

3 He wanted only to be free. He wanted only to live for ever, without the superstitions and fear bred by the certainty of death. Was this too much to ask?

4 God had been presumptuous in allotting him a finite slice of time in which to achieve his ambitions. Did He not know who Crow was?

5 Well, nor did anyone else for that matter, with the possible exception of the unfortunate Jean. Crow had hoped he might carry the news of Crow's irresistible rise as far as heaven, but so far Crow had received no sign of divine recognition.

16 **THE** major problem with Crow's plan to become Treasurer was how to avoid the effects of the arsenic.

2 The solution lay in his as yet impure elixir of death, which would, in its finished form, absorb and expel all the poisons the stomach could not separate.

3 The election itself posed more immediate challenges of a constitutional and legal kind.

## FIVE WOUNDS

4 The Great Council of nobles elected the Treasurer, but the names of potential candidates were proposed by the Committee for Public Health, which also ordered or approved all executions and assassinations.

5 A new election was coming, since the current Treasurer was ailing fast, but Crow was unlikely to be appointed. Six men had claims ahead of his, and all of them had also managed to preserve a façade of respectability.

6 At meetings of the assassins' chapter, their collective condescension was almost too much to bear.

7 Snickering behind Crow's back.

**17** CROW was not sure how to get around this problem, but surely it was just a matter of applying himself with sufficient energy and imagination?

2 Once in office, he could work on his next task: supplanting Cur as the nominated future leader of the dogs, which would enable him to merge the two competing groups of assassins and combine their strength.

3 He would slip his pale fingers into the city's guts and squeeze until its eyes popped and bled, like those of bobbing Jacques.

**18** THE only thing that worried him was a dream he had been having recently.



2 In it, he was posing in his workshop for Magpie, holding up his leg for the camera, touching an open sore with the tip of his finger, as Christ had touched lepers.

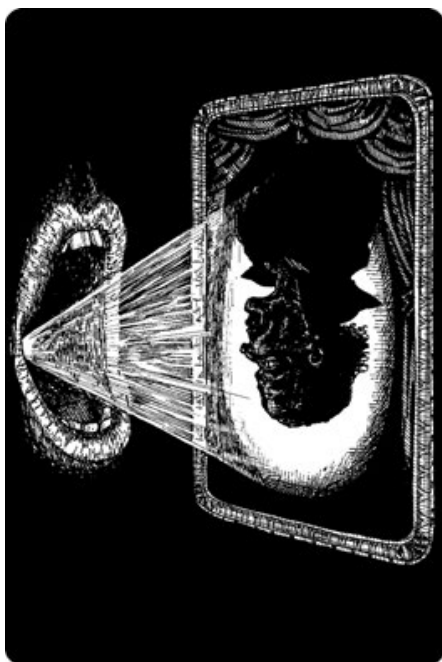
3 Somehow he could tell, he knew not how, that Magpie's attention lay elsewhere, perhaps directed towards the window, disturbingly open as the precious atmosphere in the room fled.

4 Before he could concentrate on this problem, a flickering tongue of pale silver light spoke to him in exhalations from within the sealed box of the camera.

5 Its delivery was slow and pained, hindered by a hacking cough and an overly formal vocabulary.

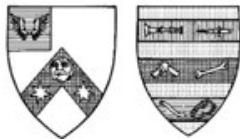
5 'I remain alive within all the signs of

LICK: TO FLICKER OR MOVE LIGHTLY OVER OR ROUND (SOMETHING)



death,' it said. 'I am awake on the dissection table, unable to speak or move, screaming silently.'

**6** The camera was now a lantern projecting light, which spilled from the lens onto his skin like Greek fire.



*Crow's Dream*



## *MeNe, MeNe, TeKeL, UPHARSIN*

**1** THE camera was now a lantern projecting light, which spilled from the lens onto her skin like Greek fire.

**2** 'GOD knows what that meant,' Gabriella said when she was sure she was awake. She sat up on the edge of her Turkish bed, which had an overfull mattress and was surmounted by a ruched crown of gossamer silks. It felt like sleeping on a cloud.

**2** She reached over for the packet of loose tobacco lying on the bedside table next to the Bible, then paused and instead took hold of the book. After flicking through the thin pages, she finally selected a passage from the prophecies of Daniel, which she tore out, taking care to leave the adjoining pages intact.

**3** Then she took a handful of tobacco and began to roll a cigarette.

**3** SHE moved across to her bedroom window as she licked the edge of the

paper to seal it. In the alley below, a boy was painting a slogan on the wall. She'd seen him before: he had an eye patch.

**2** The slogan was also familiar. The neighbourhood gangs used it to mark their territory.

**3** MeNe, MeNe, TeKeL, UPHARSIN.

**4** GABRIELLA had grown up under the shadow of these mysterious words, which had first appeared under quite different circumstances in the plaster wall of her father's palace, shortly before his death.

**2** A clumsy, disembodied hand had written them with a phantom quill, which it had dropped twice during the inscription, to its obvious irritation. (It had flexed repeatedly, as if to clear a cramp, before recovering the quill and continuing.)

**3** The letters were shaky and spidery. There was a particular problem with the letter *e*, which had been rendered in lower case and with incompetently ex-



## FIVE WOUNDS

ecuted decorative curlicues, partially obliterated by pools of glowing, astral ink.

4 Gabriella – and everyone else – knew it was the letter *e* nonetheless, because this was not the first time in human history the message had appeared.

5 It had been delivered before – to Belshazzar, king of Babylon. This was Gabriella's first lesson in the science of decipherment: that an illegible message was easier to transcribe if you already had some idea what it might say.

5 IN the biblical account, the prophet Daniel – who specialised in the INTERPRETING OF DREAMS, AND SHEWING OF HARD SENTENCES, AND DISSOLVING OF DOUBTS – had translated the message for the king.

2 It was not good news. In effect, God had sent Belshazzar a telegram. Translated, the words meant: NUMBERED. Stop. WEIGHED. Stop. DIVIDED. Stop.

3 Daniel expanded. NUMBERED, BECAUSE GOD HATH MEASURED THY KINGDOM, AND FINISHED IT; WEIGHED, BECAUSE THOU ART WEIGHED IN THE BALANCES, AND ART FOUND WANTING; DIVIDED, BECAUSE THY KINGDOM IS DIVIDED, AND GIVEN TO THE MEDES AND PERSIANS.

4 Belshazzar was killed the same night.

6 GABRIELLA wondered at God's economy of expression. Surely He

could afford to send longer messages? Perhaps communication through the celestial ether was expensive.

2 The message was also dangerously ambiguous. It was not a proper encryption, since it required interpretation. In other words, the message and its meaning did not 'fit' exactly, one on top of the other.

3 Daniel had to add words to explain the relation between the two. It was more like a riddle than a code or cipher.

4 God was placing a lot of trust in His prophet.

7 THINGS had changed since Daniel's time. God had become increasingly concerned about the interception of His messages by hostile listeners, and increasingly suspicious of His own staff.

2 Now, under normal circumstances, His prophets had little scope to exercise their own initiative. God's messages were also subject to complex encryption protocols.

3 They usually contained unpredictable numbers of null characters – meaningless syllables, words and phrases included purely to throw Satanic surveillance off the scent. Unfortunately, they also had the potential to confuse the intended recipient.

8 THE old ways had not been entirely abandoned. It was still necessary to deliver some messages in the form of al-



## TELEGRAM FOR BELSHAZZAR!



legories, using the relatively insecure communication channel of dreams.

**2** Like the message delivered to Belshazzar, such dreams required expansion before they yielded their meaning. Their logic – if they could be said to have any at all – was visual and symbolic.

**3** Hieroglyphs were the purest expression of this symbolic language – a kind of mystical language that originated in Egypt, whose lineage could be traced back to the Edenic tongue spoken by Adam and Eve before the fall.

**4** Gabriella's dreams were full of such symbols, for she was an angel, even if her abilities were somewhat impaired.

**9** TO those who possessed divine wisdom, hieroglyphs were supposed to communicate directly, all at once as Plotinus put it, without the potentially confusing mediation of words.

**2** In Gabriella's experience, the reality

was quite different. She consulted all the most important dictionaries, but not once did she correctly guess the meaning of an image without reading the commentary first.

**3** God was trying to stop the uncontrolled proliferation of meaning, but he would not fully succeed – Gabriella believed – until he adopted an exclusively phonetic system of encryption, which spelt out exactly what He wanted to say in full.

**4** In the meantime, dreams remained an important part of the divine communication system.

**10** GABRIELLA lived in her father's palace with her aunt and uncle, but they kept a lot of the rooms closed and shuttered, so she spent most of her time in the library. The wooden shelves were warped and the books were swollen and spotted with mould, but most of

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them were still readable. Gabriella made a fort of blankets and cushions in an attempt to stop the chill seeping up from the marble floor.

**2** One treatise particularly interested her: a guide to heraldry, which compiled all of the coats-of-arms used by noble families in the city.

**3** The shields were printed in monochrome but they had been hand-coloured by one of the book's previous readers. The paint had been applied enthusiastically and without much consideration for the nominal boundaries indicated by the designs.

**4** This alteration was both a defacement and an enhancement, both a wound and an insight.

**5** In heraldry the nuances of colour were not supposed to matter. It was the *idea* of red that counted, and not the particular pigment used to embody that idea.

**6** Indeed, it was possible to dispense with colour altogether, replacing it with conventional cross-hatched patterns in black and white: horizontal lines for blue, dots for gold and so on.

**7** Clearly her ancestor had disapproved of this puritanical solution.

**11** GABRIELLA thought about all of this as she walked through the city's streets. As she dodged porters bumping their carts backwards and for-

wards over the bridges, or housewives arguing with fishmongers and greengrocers, or priests cradling their fat bellies, or children chasing each other with sticks, she studied the shop signs.

**2** In her street alone, she passed The Golden Lion, The Sun, The Gryphon and The Baby Jesus.

**3** She knew that these signs existed for the benefit of illiterate people, for most of whom The Golden Lion meant *this* street and *this* owner.

**4** The shop's customers might be aware vaguely of other, idealised lions: heraldic and hieroglyphic, biblical and occult, moving irresistibly and intangibly through abstract, disembodied spaces in books and visions.

**5** As far as they were concerned, however, the only golden lion that mattered swung on a bracket in the wind, where it had been rendered illegible by seventy years of rain and sun.

**6** They did not need to see it, because they knew it was there. It kept watch over their comings and goings, their births, marriages and deaths: their memories.

**7** Gabriella clung to these truths: rooted in the details of individual lives, not beamed in from the heavenly spheres.

**12** UNFORTUNATELY, as an angel, she had responsibilities she could not escape.

2 So she memorised as many different emblems and allegories as she could, and tried to ignore the condescension and ignorance of her neighbours.

3 Lips close to ears. Hands covering mouths. Eyes averted.

13 CERTAIN heavenly safeguards complicated Gabriella's attempts at interpretation.

2 In order to minimise the risk of a security breach, the divine dreams delivered to angels and prophets self-destructed after three days, when the prophet's memory wiped itself automatically.

3 Vivid fragments remained: isolated syllables visible on the charred remains of a burnt letter, but whenever Gabriella tried to reassemble them, she was struck with a divine headache that arrived with an atonal trumpet blast.

4 It was true that the dream remained in the addressee's head, but this was not such a problem for divine security because each of these dreamers only had access to the contents of a single text, whereas Gabriella's mind acted as a clearing house for dozens or even hundreds in a year.

14 ACCORDING to the current rules of interpretation and decipherment, the one thing of which Gabriella could be absolutely certain was that

the message delivered to her father did not mean Numbered weighed divided. God would not have been so foolish as to use the same cipher twice.

2 Of course, the general import and practical implication of the message were clear. Like Belshazzar, Gabriella's father had been killed shortly after the hand's appearance. The ground had opened up and swallowed him, before closing again with a sulphurous belch.

3 The palace had quaked; chips of plaster and a Murano chandelier had fallen from the ceiling, and the wine cellar had exploded, causing a red flood that drowned a number of local cats and dogs.

4 This last development was no doubt symbolic, but Gabriella had so far failed to locate the relevant reference. Maybe it



## FIVE WOUNDS

was a variant of the plagues described in Exodus.

5 The corpses of the animals had lain bloated and unburied in the street, since the locals were afraid to touch them. One night they had mysteriously disappeared, which was generally felt to be further evidence of heavenly disapproval.

15 UNDER the circumstances, Gabriella's insistence on deciphering the text was puzzling to those around her. Her quest was impious as well as pointless. Let it go, and move on. But Gabriella persisted.

2 Her stubbornness was born partly out of guilt. She felt responsible for her father's death. It was because of Gabriella that he had incurred God's disapproval.

3 Her mother had died in childbirth. Even in their undeveloped form, the wings made a normal delivery impossible, so Gabriella was extracted by caesarean.

4 The very sight of her irritated her father, whose dynastic hopes were doubly thwarted by the death of his wife and the appearance of a daughter.

5 An angel was an even worse liability. She could not be married off, and she invited unpredictable interventions. Her presence would fatally undermine his authority, since every order he gave would be vulnerable to divine denial.

6 The child would burble in its cradle, and worlds of meaning would rise and fall as wild-eyed mystics vied with each other to produce ever-more radical translations of her infantile proclamations.

7 'BU-BA-BAFF,' the child might say, wriggling its toes, and assassins would fling themselves at the duke, moved by an inner voice that would not be contradicted.

8 'Ga-ga-goo,' it would pronounce, and his peasants would revolt, seeking equality before the law, common ownership of property, and polygamy. His palace would become a magnet for every fool and madman in the city.

16 HIS anxiety was intensified by an incident that occurred when Gabriella was still small.

2 THE LORD CALLED TO HER, AND SHE ANSWERED, SAYING, 'HERE AM I.' And she ran to her father, and said, 'HERE AM I, FOR THOU CALLED ME.' And he said, 'No I didn't. Go back to bed.' And she went and lay down.

3 AND THE LORD CALLED YET AGAIN, 'GABRIELLA.' AND SHE AROSE AND WENT TO HER FATHER, AND SAID, 'HERE AM I, FOR THOU DID CALL ME.' And he answered, 'I really didn't. Go back to bed.'

4 NOW GABRIELLA DID NOT YET KNOW THE LORD, NEITHER WAS THE WORD OF THE LORD REVEALED TO HER.

## THE GOSPEL OF BU-BA-BAFF



5 AND THE LORD CALLED GABRIELLA AGAIN THE THIRD TIME. AND SHE AROSE, AND WENT TO HER FATHER, AND SAID, 'HERE AM I; FOR THOU DID CALL ME.' AND HER FATHER PERCEIVED THAT THE LORD HAD CALLED THE CHILD. And he was not happy about it.

6 He escorted her back to her room and locked the door. 'Don't bother me again,' he shouted through the keyhole. Drastic action needed to be taken.

17 HIS wilder fears were misplaced. Since the new encryption protocols had been introduced, there was less ambiguity about what constituted a message and less scope for radical interpretation, but Gabriella's father would not be

mollified by the local priest's attempts to explain this.

2 He employed a deaf nurse who was indifferent to Gabriella's episodes: when her eyes rolled back in her head, her limbs twitched, and blood issued forth spontaneously from her palms and feet.

3 'I'm not listening,' her father would say, holding his hands over his ears. 'La-la-la,' he would repeat loudly, over and over.

4 But maybe God was actually trying to say 'la-la-la'? Maybe it was an incantation, like 'abracadabra', whose enunciation might have unforeseen consequences?

5 The possibility of hidden meaning nagged at him constantly, and so he kept Gabriella segregated in order to contain it.

6 Her early education consisted mainly of fairy tales recounted by the nurse, who moved her hands in intricate expressive gestures or tapped and stroked words out upon Gabriella's palm as if telling her fortune.

18 WHEN Gabriella reached puberty, her father made plans to render her impotent by removing her wings, which had nothing to do with flying.

2 They were too ungainly for that purpose, and too weak to lift the weight of the body attached to them.

## FIVE WOUNDS

**3** Their true function was as aerials or antennae. Vibrating and flapping, they received the signals that passed into the sublunary world from the various spiritual intelligences.

**19** GABRIELLA was given no warning of her father's plan. He simply pressed a chloroform pad to her mouth.

**2** But she dreamed of the operation as it took place, watching in horrified fascination from a vantage point somewhere above the amateur surgeon's left shoulder. As he severed the first wing, the dream was interrupted with a blizzard of static, and her father's face melted into a blob.

**3** When the surgeon got the second wing off, the soundtrack cut out, but the outlines of both men were still recognisable as such.

**4** In the centre of the frame, the edge of the surgeon's saw crackled and jumped as it caught the light.

**5** They had tied a gag in her mouth, so she could not scream.

**20** THE surgeon had not been able to cut close enough to the torso to eliminate the entire wing, so Gabriella retained an abnormal silhouette, but her father had largely succeeded in suppressing details of her unfortunate condition, and the precise nature of her deformity remained obscure to the suitors attracted

by her generous dowry.

**2** A man named Rut applied for Gabriella's hand when she came on the market. Rut had an ill reputation, but his ancestry was impeccable, and so Gabriella's father had accepted the proposal immediately.

**3** Shortly after the amputation, when Gabriella's stumps were still raw and sticky, the hand appeared to write its message on the palace wall, the earth opened up, and Gabriella's father was seen no more.

**4** But Rut did not withdraw his offer. Apparently her orphaned status made her an even more lucrative catch.

**21** THE loss of her wings did not remove Gabriella's prophetic powers – it just interfered with them.

**2** She still received other people's dreams, but the signal was often weak or confused. The soundtrack was not synchronised with the picture, or was dubbed into a foreign language, occasionally an extinct one.

**3** Sometimes the vision played at the wrong speed, so that the participants sounded as if they had been drugged or had inhaled helium.

**4** Most of the transmissions were interrupted at some point. Poetic denunciations of wickedness were muddled up with shopping lists, love letters and streams of obscene oaths.



## A WATCHMAN UNTO THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL

5 The reception might improve if she turned over in bed so that her wing stumps pointed in a different direction, but since she was insensible when the dreams arrived she could not control this reflex.

22 IT was bad enough that God enciphered His communications. It was infinitely worse when the texts were corrupt to begin with.

2 Ciphred text sounded like nonsense, but it was mingled in Gabriella's mind with text that actually was nonsense, or was contaminated with earthly purposes and desires. She could not work out what was what.

3 She could never be sure of a dream's meaning, and she often had difficulty identifying the addressee.

4 As a result, many of the messages she was entrusted with remained undelivered, and the catastrophes she was supposed to avert overtook their oblivious victims. Gabriella felt this keenly.

5 She read, I HAVE MADE THEE A WATCHMAN UNTO THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL. WHEN I SAY UNTO THE WICKED, 'THOU SHALT SURELY DIE'; AND THOU GIVEST HIM NOT WARNING, NOR SPEAKEST TO WARN THE WICKED FROM HIS WICKED WAY, TO SAVE HIS LIFE; THE SAME WICKED MAN SHALL DIE IN HIS INIQUITY; BUT HIS BLOOD WILL I REQUIRE AT THINE HAND.

6 The dreams consumed themselves in a

magnesium flash after three days, but their scorched remnants remained bitter in her imagination.

7 'HIS BLOOD WILL I REQUIRE AT THINE HAND,' she repeated as she cut and recut her arms and thighs, offering the liquid that oozed out as a libation to placate a jealous God.

23 GABRIELLA tried to escape from the cacophonous meaning that pursued her, barking and slaving.

2 She would invent a private language. She would rename all the plants and animals around her, classifying them according to wilfully illogical rubrics.

3 She decided to begin with the empty rooms of her father's palace, spaces that – for her – were filled with forgotten laughter, with ancient, stifled moans of passion and pain, and with long-dead voices raised in supplication and longing.

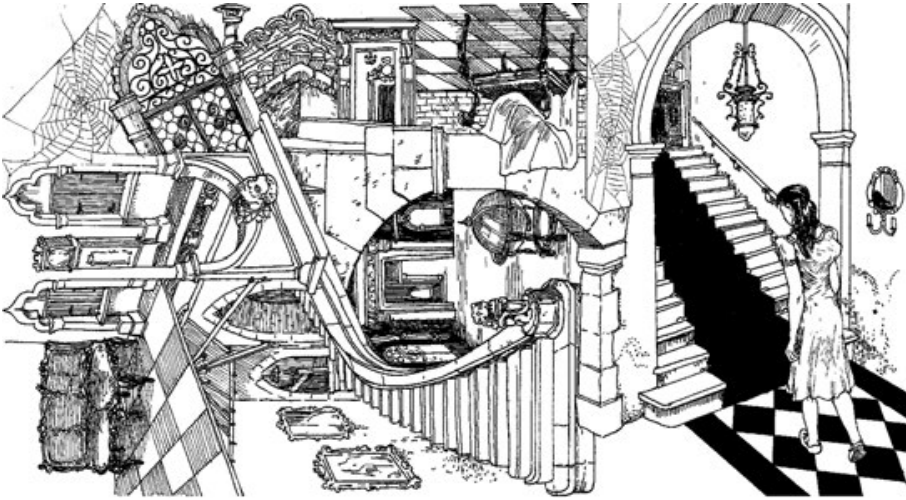
4 Wherever she went, voices hummed in Gabriella's ears under the surface of an outward, enveloping silence.

5 More urgent whispers, but no identifiable words.

24 SHE tried to ignore these voices as she inspected obscure allegories frescoed on the ceilings and walls. The paintings were coated in cobwebs, and flaking with the salt they had absorbed from the air.



## FIVE WOUNDS



2 Gabriella found their obscurity comforting, since they made no demands on her, and she began to transform the interiors of the palace into a theatre of memory.

3 ‘The Room of the Spinning Top and the One-Eyed Doll’ lay next to ‘The Room of the Trapped Bluebottle,’ which was reached by means of the ‘Staircase of the Twisted Ankle’, under which lay ‘The Closet of the Ants and the Rotted Apple’.

4 The only rules were that the labels should be assigned arbitrarily, and she would not disclose them to anyone. On no account must they cohere into a system.

5 The only room she could not reimagine was the locked one with a bottomless crack in the floor, with the four mysterious words still written on its walls.

in grids. Instead, she preferred to remain lost, and wander aimlessly until she stumbled upon an exit.

2 Often she was trapped inside the palace for hours, hungry and footsore, but she refused to carry threads into the labyrinth, or mark the walls with pieces of chalk.

3 Her task was made easier by the uniform blankness of the rooms, in which the only movement besides her own was that of the dust she disturbed.

4 In one room she found an old set of diplomatic despatches copied by an ancestor who had served abroad as an ambassador. She could not quite bring herself to destroy this evidence of human purpose, so she locked the sheaves of paper in a box, and threw the key away.

25 SHE resisted the temptation to draw plans or link the names up

26 THE next day a dog approached her and dropped the key at her

## MANY MANSIONS

feet, wagging its tail and waiting for a pat on the head.

2 She glared at it suspiciously, but saw no light of sinister intelligence in its eyes. It was just a normal dog, not one of the mercenaries from the Ghetto. She scratched its ear.

3 Obviously the discovery of the papers was an omen. Reluctantly, she studied the texts. They contained no hieroglyphs, but were instead enciphered according to a purely mechanical process.

4 Each of the symbols consisted of a letter combined with a number – for example, m42, or g21. Most of the symbols represented syllables, although a few indicated common words in their entirety, while the z series represented single letters.

5 According to the city's cipher, Gabriella's name would be rendered as m61 z7 b33 z16 g41, which actually yielded gab-ri-e-la, since the cipher ignored double consonants.

27 THIS was all very interesting, but the contents of the despatches were less enlightening: mostly complaints that the ambassador needed more money and wanted to come home.

2 What, then, was God getting at by returning the key to her? Reluctantly, she wrote out the names she had applied to the rooms of the palace.

3 After some manipulation and re-

arrangement, she discovered that if they were filtered through a polyalphabetic cipher using the key phrase of JESUS WEPT, they yielded a single sentence, repeated over and over again.

4 HISBLOODWILLI REQUIREATTHINEHAND: the only variation in the text being occasional spelling mistakes in the repetitions.

5 Her father's paranoid fantasy had come true.

28 NOW Gabriella decided to apply herself to translating the mysterious message on the wall, but her efforts were impeded by preparations for her wedding, as well as her visionary dreams, which tormented her without respite.

2 Few of them could be made to yield sense. One of those dreams belonged to a man named Cur who lived in the Ghetto, but even that had been garbled.

3 One of its remaining fragments was from the end, when a monotonous voice intoned senselessly, 'PROCURE THE PLACENTA OF A CALF. DESCRIBE THE TONGUE OF THE WOODPECKER AND THE JAW OF A CROCODILE.'

4 This voice disappeared as Cur's head ducked below the surface of the bloody water for the last time.

5 At that point, there had been an ear-splitting feedback wail, followed by si-

## FIVE WOUNDS



lence for a few seconds, before dull, enveloping underwater pressure made her ears pop. Then the dream's coda arrived.

6 Even with Cur, she did not know whether she was in time. Maybe it was a repeat transmission, and others had gone unheeded, lost in her wiped and rerecorded memory.

29 IT was precisely because of her poor reception that she enjoyed a freedom of action denied to God's other messengers. She only got half the transmission, so she had to fill in the blanks.

2 She did not see this freedom as a blessing. Rather, it was an absurd responsibility. God obliged her to gamble with the lives of others.

3 Each uncertain interpretation was a commitment whose consequences she could not anticipate.

4 When she stood in front of the mirror and assumed her most solemn expression, she burst out laughing, but her laughter was bitter. It was ridiculous to be an angel.

5 She silently mouthed, 'THERE WERE SIGNS, BUT I COULD NOT READ THEM. THERE WERE SIGNS, BUT I COULD NOT READ THEM,' over and over, until the unreleased sounds were reduced to meaningless and indistinguishable sensations that hummed in her palate, tongue and teeth.

6 In conclusion, she poked her tongue out at her reflection, and then stomped about her bedroom.

30 SHE found the clichés associated with her vocation embarrassing, so she dyed her hair black and delivered her prophecies in a bored monotone, or with a sneer.

2 If she could solve the message on the

palace wall it might reconcile her to her lot. In the meantime, she would try to prepare for married life, even though everyone else seemed to regard the impending ceremony as a joke.

3 Snickering behind Gabriella's back.

31 SHE had not met Rut, but his reputation suggested he might share her iconoclastic tendencies. All in all, she felt hopeful her situation might be about to improve.

2 Angels were not supposed to marry – her father had certainly assumed this to be the case. Maybe God would release her. She hoped so.

3 Despite everything, Gabriella remained an optimist.

32 'THE photographer's here!' Gabriella's uncle shouted from downstairs as she sat, looking out the window. The sun had now risen and the boy with the paintbrush had disappeared.

2 'You know, for the engagement daguerreotype! Magpie.'

3 'I told you,' Gabriella shouted back, 'I'm not interested. Tell him to go away.'

4 Last night's dream had left her uncomfortable about the idea of being photographed, so she got up to lock her bedroom door, in case her uncle planned a more decisive intervention.

33 FROM her window, Gabriella watched Magpie leave.

2 He walked in a peculiar posture, hunched, with his face averted from the early morning sun, although that might have just been because of the boxes he carried and the tripod slung over his shoulder.

3 He walked past the still-wet slogan on the wall before he turned a corner and disappeared from view.

34 SHE longed for her husband-to-be. She longed to speak without a script. She longed for words that belonged to her alone, so that she might give them freely to another.

2 But still she could not escape from the message that haunted her, the message whose origins were lost to everyone but her.

3 MeNe, MeNe, TeKeL, UPHARSIN.



*Wings*





## *Sentimental Value*

**1** 'I don't want a daguerreotype, Cuckoo said. He was sweating in the heat from hundreds of candles stuck to every available surface. The heat was dangerous: he had to be careful.

**2** 'No?' Magpie said. 'What do you want then?'

**3** Cuckoo was a gambler, and he knew that he must risk everything in this conversation, so he began with the boldest bid he could think of. 'I want to steal something.'

**4** 'How daring. What's it got to do with me?' Magpie pushed his chair back from the table, rattling the chain that fixed it to a bolt on the floor. Everything was chained down here, even the tables.

**5** Cuckoo raised his bid higher still. 'I've been watching you.'

**6** 'You've been watching me.' Magpie's voice was flat, but Cuckoo recognised its meaning anyway, as the words met his own blank expression.

**7** A threat.

**2** CUCKOO was used to remaining calm under provocation. Other card players rarely took him seriously. He was too young, and his face was set too modestly.

**2** No one could ever tell when he was bluffing, and he had already won most of their money by the time they realised that he was not someone to be taken lightly.

**3** 'I'm not watching in a bad way,' he said to Magpie. 'I mean, I don't want to steal anything from you. I mean, I need your help.' A strategic admission of weakness, this, intended to draw attention from a more fundamental vulnerability.

**4** 'My help? To steal something?'

**5** 'Well, we are in the Thieves' Guild,' Cuckoo said, looking around. 'So I'm presuming you're a thief.' Magpie did not reply.

**6** The Guild Hall was surprisingly spartan, the walls whitewashed to reflect the light from the candles: for some reason they hadn't got around to installing gas here.

## FIVE WOUNDS

There were no shadows: or rather there were dozens of faint, overlapping outlines cast by the multiplied light sources.

7 Since mugs and glasses couldn't be tied down, the customers had to bring their own. And it was forbidden to stand close to anyone: the drinkers edged round one another, their eyes fixed on each other's hands, and their own hands flattened protectively over their pockets. The till behind the bar had three guards with blunderbusses.

8 'You know I'm a thief,' Magpie finally said.

9 'As well as a photographer.'

10 'Same thing,' Magpie said. 'The only difference is that people invite you into their homes to take pictures. But that doesn't answer the more important question. Why would I help you?'

11 'Because the purpose might interest you,' Cuckoo said.

12 'The purpose?' Someone bumped into the back of Magpie's chair. Cuckoo watched the woman withdraw: she stepped backwards in case Magpie took offence, but he only dipped his fingers in his wine and flicked them back over his shoulder.

3 'NOT yet.' Cuckoo was not ready to turn over this particular card. 'But I have a daguerreotype for you,' he said instead. He had to resist the edge to wipe

the sweat from his hairline.

2 'I've got plenty of daguerreotypes already.'

3 'Not like this. It has sentimental value.'

4 'Ah, sentimental value. Notoriously difficult to quantify.'

5 'So numbers are the only values you recognise?'

6 'I didn't say that.'

7 'Numbers are important in card games.'

8 'I prefer chess.'

4 NUMBERS, cards. Mixed up and dealt out in endlessly shifting patterns, variable within fixed limits, each deal of the cards was a new beginning, and the rules of the game revealed exactly what the numbers meant.

2 Cuckoo needed to know at every point what he had to do to win.

3 He needed HIS SEPARATE PARTS TO BE KEPT SEPARATE, and so he tried not to be distracted by the accidental form in which the cards presented themselves – the pictures and designs, the grease stains and the creased corners.

4 These were human weaknesses, the body in which the soul of the cards was clothed. It was only the immaterial, intangible numbers that mattered.

5 The same was true of the money staked on the cards. Cuckoo tried not to worry about what it could buy, or the form it as-



## GROSS PHYSICALITY



sumed. He must transcend gross physicality and ascend to the pure idea of value.

6 Money was ultimately just another set of numbers, no more or less important than any other.

5 BUT Cuckoo could never quite achieve this ideal. He remained attached to baser impulses, impure, although not at all mercenary.

2 Sentimental, perhaps, like his feeling for the daguerreotype he offered now.

6 'CHESS is God's game,' Magpie said, 'and He never loses.'

2 Cuckoo did not believe in the utopian vision chess offered. He believed instead in a world of unequal opportunity and

hidden snares. He clung to the possibility of failure because he needed it to lend meaning to his actions.

3 'You prefer chess,' Cuckoo said. 'Perhaps because you like to play God?'

4 'Is that a pun?' Magpie asked.

5 'What? No. Maybe.'

6 'Do you mean play at being God or play against God?'

7 Cuckoo had to think about this before he made another bid. 'Me, I stay out of God's way,' he said. 'I keep my head down.'

8 'I discipline myself. Stick to the rules; exemplify the rules. Don't stand out, except at the end, if I win. People notice that. But it can't be helped.'

9 'You aspire to invisibility,' Magpie said. 'I see.'

7 CUCKOO knew that what he did was an art, even if it was an impure one, so he tried to avoid contact with the most impure aspects of it.

2 He did not swear when he lost, nor gloat when he won. He wore gloves when he played, and he insisted on fresh packs of cards when the ones in use became too sticky and dirty.

3 His technique was to look once at his cards, memorise them, and never touch them again until he had to lay them on the table.

4 Every physical contact was a reminder of the grubby and compromised world

## FIVE WOUNDS

he had to live in. He picked the minds of men, not their locks, and thus he left no signs that might betray his presence.

5 Minds, like locks, had some point of 'give' in them, a moment when the tumblers turned and stubborn resistance dissolved into surrender. Cuckoo waited for that point in a game of cards.

6 Sometimes he had to recognise that the lock was too tight or complex, it had no give in it. Better not to play then. But now he had to move into a new kind of game, one where his integrity was the stake.

8 'WHAT was your name again?' Magpie asked.

2 'I didn't give it.' Cuckoo held out his hand. 'Cuckoo.' Maybe he had been wrong about this man. But he had to try, whatever the cost. He could go no further alone.

3 'Cuckoo,' he said again, keeping his hand held out. A breach of the rules here: sometimes that was necessary too. Then he put the glove to his mouth and pulled it off with his teeth, after which he extended his hand, now bare, once again.

4 No response. Wait.

9 CUCKOO knew that minds could only be picked inside the game, where the rules were fixed so that they

bound the characters as well as the actions of the players.

2 Within the game, character was realised only in tics, tricks and habits that had nothing to do with who people were (or who they believed themselves to be) outside its boundaries.

3 Outside the game, he could not crack a mind as a thief cracks a safe. He could only crack it the way an egg is cracked.

4 When he got through the shell, nothing was neatly resolved. Instead, everything got messier, with emotions slipping and sliding, bleeding into each other as tempers flared.

5 But he no longer had the luxury of knowing the rules in advance. Bigger risks now. Bigger rewards.

6 So: Don't think too much. Just keep moving. A new strategy as well as a new game. Spontaneity.

7 'Cuckoo,' he said again.

10 'I'VE heard of you,' Magpie said, still ignoring Cuckoo's outstretched hand, and instead revealing a hand mirror with an ornate frame, seemingly conjured from mid-air.

2 He made a half-turn away from Cuckoo, to isolate his companion's reflection. As he turned the mirror, the glare from the candles blinded Cuckoo.

3 He searched frantically through his

## A BREACH OF THE RULES

shoulder bag. 'How did you? That's my mirror.'

4 'Let me guess. It has sentimental value.'

5 'Like your camera.'

6 'But I still have my camera,' Magpie said. 'It's safe. It's always safe. So why would you let someone steal your mirror?'

7 'I'd never show my cards normally either. But this is a special occasion.'

8 'I don't need any favours from you. I know you already.'

9 'Only by reputation.'

10 'What other way is there to know someone?'

11 'By theft,' Cuckoo said.

12 'Go on,' Magpie said.



## *Little Bastards*

**1** THE mirror was Cuckoo's earliest memory, before which there was only confusion, only the indistinct sensation of being lost, walking aimlessly through the corridors of the Home for Little Bastards, seeing himself reflected in disgust and horror in the faces of others.

**2** Lips close to ears. Hands covering mouths. Eyes averted.

**2** CUCKOO was born with a defect, imperfect and incomplete.

**2** At first, the skin on his face was as fragile as the surface on a cooling glass of boiled milk, so that a fingertip might unmoor its integrity.

**3** Later, even as it curdled, it remained unstable, gelatinous.

**4** Fingers still smudged and imprinted it, and the bone underneath was soft, more like cartilage.

**5** Cuckoo remained vulnerable to pressure, however indiscriminately applied.

**6** More urgent whispers, but no identifiable words.

**3** IN the Home for Little Bastards, Cuckoo was mostly ignored and left in a corner, but at least he was fed and changed regularly.

**2** He endured while swarms of anonymous children sickened and died, but as he grew into self-awareness he grew into fear, because the other children were afraid of him.

**4** A nurse placed a carnival mask of white plaster over his face so that he would not look so strange, and his expression began to set into the shape of the mask, like jelly in a mould.

**2** When the string on the mask broke, it made no difference. Underneath, his face bore its imprint. Now he was an object of ridicule rather than one of horror.

**3** Snickering behind Cuckoo's back.

## MANIPULATIONS

**5** WHEN Cuckoo found the mirror, he began to work out how his face might belong to him.

**2** There was nowhere he could go to be alone, but he liked the kitchen, because it was warm there, and no one bothered him if he stayed quiet. He could watch the cook and her assistants chopping and stirring and kneading and plucking. Sometimes they gave him a spoon to lick.

**3** At night he crept back down and watched the cockroaches scatter when he lit a candle. He ran his hand along the hanging ladles and tongs and skewers, so that they tinkled and clanked against one another. Their intimacy was a friendly one, not like the little bodies crammed together in the dormitory upstairs.

**4** His face was still softer than other people's. When he ran his nail along his cheek, a little curled shaving came off, as if from a bar of soap, and when he held his candle in the air near his cheek, the skin grew softer and looser from the heat.

**5** He could not change his expression very easily, and he could only do it from the outside, but he practised smiling and frowning. Softening the flesh with the candle made it easier to change the shape.

**6** He imitated the expressions he had seen on other faces. He tried a range of them, and became expert at shifting them quickly with his fingers.

**6** A few children in the orphanage were popular with the nannies, wet-nurses, teachers and priests: angelic-looking children who were not ignored if they were quiet or beaten if they were noisy.

**2** They were popular because they were beautiful, cheerful and pleasant, and they were cheerful and pleasant because they were popular.

**3** Cuckoo studied these children. He picked the best boy, and watched his face respond to other people.

**4** In the kitchen, Cuckoo began to melt and press and push and mush and mess about with his flesh. He worked and strained, his eyes staring into their own reflection from inside the volatile mask of his face.

**7** HE could not get his skin to look right. Under the carnival mask it had been smooth, unnaturally so, and when he wanted it smooth again, all he had to do was squeeze it back into the mask, erasing any trace of his manipulations.

**2** But his fingers left marks behind, overlapping ridges and whorls that betrayed him.

**3** So he stole a silver knife and instead of heating his face, he heated the knife and pressed it to his skin, spreading and smoothing flesh over cartilage like plaster over brick.

**4** Much better.

## FIVE WOUNDS

**8** AS Cuckoo angled his mirror, the candle flame flared off the blade, obliterating his reflection.

**2** He imagined the glass as a recording device, which would retain only the movements of the knife's point and edge across his face, reducing his efforts to a pattern of lines.

**3** What was his face now but the summation of these tiny, accumulated motions?

**9** EVENTUALLY he sneaked back to the dormitory and went to sleep, careful to lie on his back on the lumpy straw mattress in case he damaged his new face by rubbing it into his flour-sack pillow.

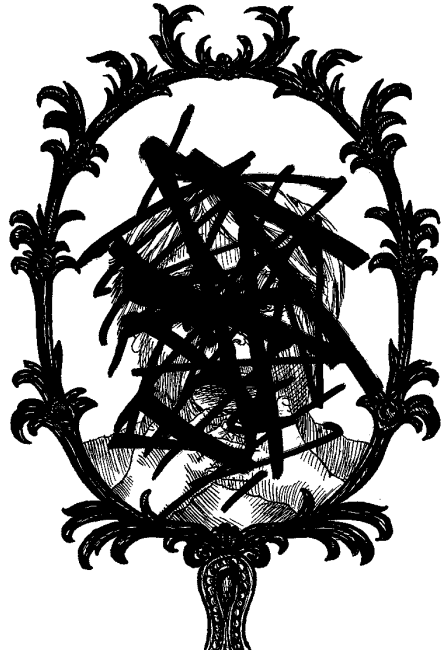
**2** In the morning, no one paid him any attention and he grew agitated while he waited for his porridge. He beat his wooden spoon against the edge of his bowl.

**3** 'Hello, Robin,' said one of the nannies, mistaking him for the boy whose face he had copied.

**4** Then Robin arrived.

**10** THE two boys stared at each other. Robin frowned. He started to cry, louder and louder. He began to scream.

**2** Cuckoo was also upset, but his face was fixed into a cheerful expression, and so his body began to twitch as his feelings sought an outlet.



**3** He could not stop his limbs from trembling.

**11** THE nanny looked from one boy's face to the other and back again. Her mouth dropped. She grabbed Cuckoo by the shoulders and began to shake him. 'Who are you?'

**2** Cuckoo said nothing.

**3** 'Who are you?'

**12** WHAT was happening? He must have got something wrong. Now there were other people, and everyone was shouting.

**2** He began to cry too, and this made him feel odd, as his fixed, simpering smile dissolved into his tears.

## WHO ARE YOU?



3 The nanny knelt down and stared into his red eyes. 'It's Cuckoo!' she said.

4 'Yes,' Cuckoo said.

13 THEY locked him inside a cupboard for a week. When they released him, they made him wear the carnival mask. He could only remove it at night, and now everyone was scared of him again.

2 Cuckoo was also afraid: of his unstable memory, which he could not fix, because it was not really his memory. It was not alive in his body, and its subject, his numb face, remained dead beyond recovery.

3 His face could not be reanimated, no matter how great his passion. It would

never remember nor know anything of its own history, a history that began in the forgotten movements of its cooling flesh.

4 But Cuckoo had learnt some things: his catechism.

14 NO good looking like someone else if the original was still around. No good if he was *nearly* perfect. People somehow knew that something was wrong.

2 So he continued to practise at night, timing how fast he could adjust his expression.

15 WHEN Cuckoo had to leave the Home for Little Bastards, they took his mask away, and threw him out the back door with some spare clothes and a little money. He did not look back as he walked away.

2 The only possessions he kept were the silver knife he had first used to shape his face and the mirror that had first shown him who he was.

16 'SO,' Cuckoo concluded, 'no one gives anything away.'

2 'Only theft or exchange,' Magpie agreed.

3 'But who you are can be renegotiated.'

4 'So negotiate,' Magpie said.

5 'I'd rather gamble,' Cuckoo said.



## FIVE WOUNDS

6 'I told you, I prefer chess,' Magpie said.

7 'Let me tell you about this  
daguerreotype then.'

8 Cuckoo had finally withdrawn his out-  
stretched hand, but only to fish out a  
cameo from a pocket in his waistcoat. He  
was relieved it was still there. 'Have a  
closer look,' he said, holding it out.

9 Magpie leaned forward.



*Cuckoo's Reflection*



## *I'm Not Your Son*

**1** CUCKOO survived by playing cards, but he could not help contemplating other possibilities, which continued to attract and appal him.

**2** He was having difficulties with his feelings. Perhaps it had something to do with his face?

**3** Certain reactions were infectious – a laugh, a yawn. When people felt something sharp and strong, their face instantly followed.

**4** Cuckoo was immune to these infections. His shifts of expression were painstaking and mechanical and so his feelings backed up, because he had no sensual language in which to express them.

**5** He could feel his face become COARSER AND THICKER AND MORE RIGID, LIKE CLAY DRYING OUT, and his body began to mimic his face.

**6** He moved stiffly and awkwardly. His reaction was to sink himself deeper into games, which made things worse.

**2** NEAR where Cuckoo lived on one of the islands in the lagoon, an old man lived. His son had left home many years ago and never sent word of where he had gone.

**2** The old asked travellers if they had seen his son, and showed a daguerreotype to anyone who would pay attention.

**3** Cuckoo had never spoken to the old man, but he had seen the picture and overheard enough of the man's monologue to memorise the relevant information.

**4** Was this not the perfect opportunity to correct his earlier mistake and make a life for himself? But since he could not afford to make a mistake, he needed the man's daguerreotype to get the face right.

**3** THE theft was easy: he didn't require Magpie. He hired an accomplice to distract the old man with tales of foreign places, and to tempt him to show the daguerreotype.

**2** Then Cuckoo jostled the old man's el-

## BEHOLD, HERE AM I

bow. Before the daguerreotype hit the ground, Cuckoo snatched it up and slipped it inside his sleeve, where it nestled as he walked away: a hidden Ace.

**4** OVER the next few weeks, Cuckoo practised the missing son's silvery face in the mirror and tried to summon the courage to act.

**2** He did not believe in the face he created, but he persevered. He needed to know what the limits of his abilities were. He needed to fail again if that was what it took.

**3** The son was now ten years older. Cuckoo was reproducing a ghost.

**5** HE chose his moment carefully. After dark, when the old man was alone with his grief, Cuckoo stepped into the light from the lantern on the old man's porch. He did not call out or make any gesture to attract attention. He did not trust himself to speak.

**2** He remained still, simply waiting for the old man to see him. He waited a long time in the cold night air, while his breath steamed in front of him.

**3** An owl hooted and thrashed, and something small screamed. A drunk sang a bawdy song, and then fell over and shouted at someone who wasn't there. A flight of geese honked in sequence as they passed overhead.

**4** A moth flung itself against his face and

he batted its furry body away. He checked it hadn't spoiled anything with his mirror before returning to immobility.

**5** The cold began in his toes and fingers, and gradually climbed upwards. His entire body felt like his face. He hadn't understood how exhausting it was to stand still for hours at a time.

**6** When the sky began to brighten and the birds began to sing, the old man left his bed. Cuckoo was still waiting, racked with cold and doubt, waiting for the blessing of a father he had never known.

**6** WHEN the old man saw him, he clutched his chest. He ran towards Cuckoo, who took a tentative step towards him, staggering unexpectedly because his legs had gone dead.

**2** When the old man reached Cuckoo, he placed his hand on his face and pulled it towards him until he could kiss Cuckoo's forehead. His tears fell into Cuckoo's eyes and blinded him too.

**3** The old man said, 'I've always loved you,' while he pressed so hard on Cuckoo's cheeks that their shape began to distort, although the old man did not seem to notice this.

**4** Cuckoo fell to his knees in the mud, and he too began to cry, because he knew what he was going to say now. He steadied his breathing.

**5** 'You have never loved me,' he said. 'I'm not your son.'

## FIVE WOUNDS

**6** Cuckoo stumbled to his feet and ran in the half-light, while the sound of the old man calling his son's name gradually faded behind him.

**7** AFTER that disastrous conclusion, Cuckoo began to spend more time at the 'Thieves' Guild, because now he really was a thief – the daguerreotype he kept in his pocket proved that – and he sought the violent and treacherous company of the only people who valued silence about the past as much as he did.

**2** Many of them were also obsessive gamblers, so Cuckoo could always get a game with them, although you could never quite be sure what would be in the pot at the end.

**8** CUCKOO'S experience with the old man left him scared by the need he had felt to confess: to bear witness to who he was not.

**2** But after a while, the idea of stealing someone else once again began to seem attractive. This time he added a further refinement, which he hoped would eliminate the ambiguity that had tricked him into blurring out the truth.

**3** A young man visited the Thieves' Guild. He spent a lot of money, buying drinks for everyone and tipping the whores, and he didn't keep an eye on his pockets. As a result, he was popular.

**4** It hardly seemed worth it to bludgeon him in the alley after his first visit and strip his unconscious body, although someone made the effort as a matter of form. There were traditions to live up to.

**9** CUCKOO knew who this young man was, and was not fooled by his apparent generosity and vulnerability. His name was Rut.

**2** Rut courted disaster only as a form of profligacy. Everything he did was intended to hurt or torment someone.

**3** He spent his money carelessly to indicate his contempt for his parents, who endlessly restored his funds, since their pride would not permit that their son should appear to be wanting.

**4** He delighted in humiliating the people attracted to him because of his family's wealth, and he trusted in the power that wealth brought him.

**5** Cuckoo was not fooled. He had learnt to measure the power of money by risking it, and Rut did not take risks, not really. He was complacent: willing to take a beating because he did not believe in the possibility of his own death.

**6** Cuckoo never played cards with him.

**10** 'SMILE,' Rut said one night on the way to the privy. He was dressed eccentrically in green velvet: a smoking jacket with huge lapels, and

## SMILE, YOU MISERABLE FUCKER

breeches, but without stockings.

2 'Smile,' Rut repeated. 'Smile, you miserable fucker.' Before he could get any further, he was distracted by the urgent desire to be sick, to which he immediately succumbed, over Cuckoo's shoes.

3 Surely Cuckoo would be doing the world a service if he could replace Rut? In the process he would transform a scoundrel into the loving son he knew he could be if only he had the chance.

4 But the switch would have to be perfectly coordinated, and this was beyond Cuckoo's abilities. Also, what would become of Rut afterwards? That was the real problem.

11 CUCKOO needed an ally. He needed to trust someone. But the only way he could prove himself was to betray the old man again. 'Will you help?' Cuckoo asked Magpie.

2 He took the daguerreotype from Cuckoo's outstretched hand. 'Yes,' he said, dropping the image into a pocket.

12 CUCKOO'S knowledge of Rut did not need to be exhaustive. He just needed an outline to construct an alternative biography, shaped according to his own needs, whatever they might turn out to be.

2 But he did need to get the face right, and this time he did not have a

daguerreotype, so he followed Rut about, staring at him, trying to isolate and memorise details so he could reassemble them later.

13 'ARE you in love with me?' Rut said to him one night at the bar. He turned his face to one side, then the other, so Cuckoo could examine his profile. Then he pushed Cuckoo in the chest. 'I'm getting married.

2 'She might as well be rich.' He suppressed a belch. 'Might even be fun, screwing a madwoman. Might know a few tricks.'

3 Cuckoo mumbled and backed away.

14 HE tried to keep an open mind about Rut's fiancé. Sanity was a relative term after all, and he was in no position to be picky about deformities.

2 All would be revealed, except for Cuckoo's origins, which he intended to erase as irretrievably as the memory of the girl's parents.

3 No one could tell him anything definite about what had happened to either her father or her mother, beyond the fact that they had bequeathed a lot of money to their daughter.

4 He would discover her history at the same time that he reinvented his own.





*Cuckoo Runs Away*



## *Souvenirs*

**1** MAGPIE did not think of himself as a photographer. Rather, he was a collector of exemplary imperfections.

**2** Photography was merely the most sophisticated of the tools available to him in the practice of this vocation.

**2** MAGPIE was born smoother than other children, his skin stretched and silky and hairless, as if it had been burnt. He was coloured in patches of black and white.

**2** His eyes were clouded and milky. They did not move when his parents passed toys in front of them.

**3** The doctor said that the child would never see, but his parents did not believe the doctor. After his birth, they began to take a series of commemorative daguerreotypes, which were now in Magpie's possession.

**3** Alone in his treasure trove, he laid them out in front of him.

**3** A daguerreotype of a crib, surrounded with shiny things, distinguishable under a magnifying glass: tinfoil and Christmas tree decorations; silver coins and chocolate wrappers; mirrors and stained glass; polished pebbles and small pieces of veined marble; locks of hair and spotted eggshells; dried fruits, berries and wildflowers; patterned, textured cloth and thread.

**2** Magpie remembered that visitors to his parents' house could not look at this daguerreotype. Even in black and white, it gave them a headache and made their eyes water.

**4** IN the daguerreotype, Magpie's infant self was almost obscured behind the crib's decorated bars.

**2** He remembered lying under noisy colour like a fish under water, and as a fish at the bottom of a pool sees light dancing dimly upon the surface far above, so he

## FIVE WOUNDS

had begun to be aware of patterns and spots that seemed far away.

3 The milky part of his eyes had shifted and begun to boil, like the clouds in the sky when a storm is coming. His parents watched and held his eyelids open.

5 NOW Magpie saw everything that the image preserved, and he tried to remember, but the knowledge was not alive in his body; rather, it was trapped in the theatre of his head.

2 He rehearsed new meanings in this theatre, meanings he was not yet ready to release upon the world because they could not be articulated in the language of the senses.

6 A second daguerreotype, of a blurred baby, kicking on a cloth. Here Magpie had smooth thick black hair to go with his patched skin, and he could remember the dim perception of a uniform brightness around him.

2 During the day, he would finger the shiny things from his crib in the dappled shade of a tree, and at night, he would crawl towards the lights of the village when his parents laid him down.

7 A third daguerreotype, of a child, sleek and small, squeezed into a shirt with a starched collar, held tight: pin-sharp focus.

2 Still Magpie would not go outside during the day to play with the other children, because the harsh, enveloping light of the sun scared him.

3 He wanted the light to be confined in bright, lonely spots, or diffused and indirect, so that he could control it. When it was everywhere, it was too confusing.

4 Form took on substance at the border between light and shadow.

8 THEN there was a break in the sequence of images, and Magpie was not sure how many daguerreotypes were missing, but in the next one that survived, his face betrayed everything.

2 When the picture was taken, he had not known how to read the messages written in his own body. But now he understood what it meant to be a thief, and to live by the light of the moon.

3 Now he could see his fear of the blindness he had been born into. Now he understood how the image exposed him.

9 THE milk in his eyes had drained away, but if the light was too strong, he could smell its sourness and feel it congealing in his tear ducts.

2 He had learnt that the moon shines at night because it reflects light from the sun, and so he reasoned that reflected light was better for his eyes.

3 In the dark, he squeezed into cellars

## THIEF!



and back rooms to get his hands on the coins and precious things stored there. People began to talk, but not to his face.

4 Lips close to ears. Hands covering mouths. Eyes averted.

10 THIS fourth daguerreotype was of a bored young man. He had already handled all the beautiful things to be found in his village.

2 Although Magpie's parents made him give back almost everything he stole, his neighbours hated him.

3 They tied him to a tree at noon. They hung hot glass on the branches and draped fake papier-mâché trinkets around his neck with an accusatory sign. Magpie closed his eyes, but the sun burnt through the lids.

4 There was no image of this experience. When Magpie tried to imagine it as a daguerreotype, he saw only thick white

deposits, gathered indiscriminately on a burnt-out plate, accumulated in pale luminous layers that obscured the subject entirely.

5 More urgent whispers here, but no identifiable words.

11 INSOFAR as the things he stole were beautiful and finely crafted, so Magpie began to think of the act of stealing as something finely crafted and precise, a cut like the intervention of a surgeon on an insensible patient.

2 He wanted to steal for others, to take from them the source of their fears and not just their wealth. He owed this to his parents.

12 WHAT could he take from them to make their lives better? What could he remove that they lacked the courage to lose?

## FIVE WOUNDS



2 He would steal himself, and it would be perfectly planned and executed, like all his thefts.

3 So he left a trail to a place where wolves went to drink, and he sprinkled it with blood from his own arm.

4 A good thief knows that theft costs, because theft is loss, and he must absorb the knowledge of that loss in his own body.

5 As he sprinkled blood on the ground, Magpie wept for his parents, who would soon believe that he was dead. Then he left for the city, where there would be many new things to steal.

6 He walked at night through a silvered forest, ignoring the wet that seeped into his shoes and trickled inside his collar. He held his head down to protect his face from the snow and kept an angled mirror close to his eyes, so that he could always keep the moon in view.

7 The trees aligned and broke apart with

each new step, as if the space itself were opening and closing, as if it were breathing.

8 Flakes melted on the mirror's surface.

He regarded a world without colour, a world of ash. He felt at home in this world. He saw in it an intimation of ashes to come.

9 In the forest, the wind sounded like laughter.

10 Snickering behind Magpie's back.

13 WHEN he reached the city, he began to hoard. For his work, he rented a studio he stocked with shiny gewgaws to distract predators.

2 All the things that mattered were stored underground in a leaking basement. He was careful that no one shadowed him there, and he rarely made arrangements to meet people in advance.

3 Instead, he arrived unannounced, when his associates were dull and vulner-



## THE HOUR OF THE WOLF

able – at the hour of the wolf, on their way to work in the pre-dawn twilight or staggering home from the tavern.

4 Hidden at first in a halo of silence, he waited for his moment to interrupt their progress, to speak, and then to disappear once more.

**14** THREE or four times a year, he carried out what he thought of as ‘special’ thefts.

2 He chose someone to be both victim and beneficiary. He lived alongside them, ignoring his own needs and wants.

3 He watched them until he knew them, and he looked for what they openly loved and what they secretly hated – for the space in-between. He looked for the thing that poisoned their lives but which they lacked the conviction to destroy.

4 Then he took it.

**15** SOMETIMES the theft was simple, even banal, if the subjects led sufficiently banal and uncomplicated lives. He did not judge their lack of ambition.

2 He once stole a vile, garish ornamental clock that a man had inherited and felt obliged to keep. Magpie burnt it and sent its blackened, mechanical innards back to the owner in an exquisite box, chosen from his own hoard.

3 Or there was an artist whom Magpie heard cursing his gift because he could

not sell any pictures, while the time he spent painting them left him unable to do any other job.

4 So Magpie arranged with others, expert in their own specialised fields of endeavour, to kidnap the painter.

5 They told him they would kill him if he picked up another brush. They smashed his work to pieces.

**16** OR there was a young man who worked to support his mother. He had been called by the duke to serve as a soldier in the galleys, and only those who were physically incapable or sick were allowed to refuse the duke’s call.

2 Magpie arranged for an accident at the man’s workplace. In exchange for his foot, the young man was saved from the chance of being killed in battle, or so Magpie reasoned.

3 A good thief must be able to calculate odds, and balance probabilities. A lesser loss was worth conceding to forestall a larger one.

4 Sometimes all someone needed was a push.





*Magpie in the Forest*



## *Perspective*

*(Cur's Dream)*

**1** MAGPIE tried not to interfere with his subjects.

**2** When he took portraits on commission, he used only the most banal of phrases, bleached and faded by overuse: translucent words, which weren't even heard as words, but as soothing or imperative sounds of the sort one might use with a dog.

**3** 'Sit up now, please, straight.'

**2** HE tried not to change the rules. Meanings needed to be kept locked in boxes and under glass, as his daguerreotypes were kept: safe from dust and further exposure. So he kept himself safe, hidden, his manipulations as precise and expert as those of a pickpocket.

**2** His photographic paraphernalia, like the neck brace and the flash powder, were not just essential elements but also useful distractions: hocus pocus to disguise the true nature of the trick.

**3** 'You're out of frame. I can't see you properly.'

**3** MAYBE the next one. So Magpie told himself when the potential of the latent image inevitably turned into the disappointing actuality of the revealed daguerreotype.

**2** He could never properly reconcile these two states – the potential and the actual – and so he existed in the space between them: unrevealed, powerful, but also vulnerable, especially to direct sunlight.

**3** And yet he could not stop trying. He had to gamble, when all he really wanted to do was to play chess.

**4** 'Have you ever seen a daguerreotype before?'

**4** THE principle was simple. Light ate into certain chemical compounds, and its action upon them left a scar. This scar could be revealed, as secret writing

## FIVE WOUNDS

in lemon juice or urine appeared when heated over a candle.

2 Daguerre had worked out how to render these images permanent, fixing them to the surface of silver-plated copper sheets as small and thin as playing cards.

3 'Keep still.'

5 THE silver had to be thoroughly polished. Magpie found this part of the process soothing.

2 He worked according to the clicking rhythm of a metronome, moving his hands over the plate in precise beats, backwards and forwards.

3 It was laborious and repetitive. It was a form of meditation, necessary to prepare his mind as much as to prepare the plate.

4 As the surface of the silver became progressively smoother and shinier, his mind became emptier, open to receive impressions from outside, as the plate would do when properly treated.

5 'Look straight at the camera please.'

6 WHEN Magpie had first bought the chemicals and the apparatus from Crow, he had been warned of the dangers involved.

2 Contact with iodine caused the skin to flake and peel; inhalation of mercury vapour caused kidney failure. Magpie did not need to be told what cyanide did.

3 The risk of poisoning was a way of em-

pathising with the sensitised plate, as he exposed himself to the same substances that worked upon its surface. To feel what the plate felt, see how it saw.

4 He wanted to give it consciousness, and feel the unused recesses of his own mind bubble and dissolve along with the excess iodine, leaving only the pure capacity to see.

5 'Don't mind the smell. It's just the chemicals.'

7 IN Magpie's treasure trove snails covered the walls and left crazy patterns on the surface of his hoard. Like him, they loved to trace the shape of objects.

2 In a space cleared in the centre of the room – a ritual space, a magical space – Magpie had waited until night fell outside to develop his first daguerreotype. It was always gloomy in the basement, but this special moment required a double darkness.

3 He knew the room by touch, but snails crunched underneath him as he measured out the steps back to an extinguished lantern. The flint caught like lightning, silhouetting everything.

4 As he angled the plate to the lantern flame, a bat jumped out from one of the room's shadowed corners and bounced around.

5 In the daguerreotype, as in Magpie's philosophy, form took on substance at the

## SICK

border between light and shadow. Each of these opposites contained its opposite, boiling at its edges, as life did death.

6 'The light in here's nice. Soft, diffuse.'

8 THE shadows of a daguerreotype were blank. To stare into them was to stare at the empty polished surface of the silver plate.

2 The lighter parts of the image were made up of the deposits left by the action of mercury upon iodine, but they only became visible when the plate was held at an angle next to a dark surface.

3 Tilting it seemed to obliterate the image as the silver caught the light and the tones reversed, so that the shadows flared and the highlights were swallowed up and flattened out – transformed from white to a dull, dark grey.

4 As Magpie flicked his wrist back and forth, the image he held winked on and off, delicate as the pattern on the beating wings of a moth. Then he tapped the edge of the plate against a black cloth, as if to trap the image in its positive form, like a specimen jar.

5 'This might pinch. The hinge on the brace is stiff.'

9 ON that first night, when he opened the grimy basement window to try to shoo the bat outside, a full moon played hide-and-seek among the clouds.

Only a small square of sky was visible from the basement window, but the moon was perfectly framed above the internal courtyard of the tenement.

2 Magpie watched it appear and disappear. The moon was the model of a daguerreotype.

3 'Can you smile? Most of my customers seem to like that pose.'

10 HIS health was already deteriorating, but he welcomed fever as an altered state of consciousness.

2 It changed his relationship to his body, of which he became increasingly aware even as he evaporated around it.

3 He was a halo enveloping its black silhouette. He was a spirit photograph; he was a double exposure.

4 Contact with chemicals both mortified and exalted his flesh. Illness was intoxication; nausea, euphoria.

5 He wanted always to be sick.

6 'Are you feeling all right? You look queasy.'

11 AT first, Magpie had paid prostitutes to pose in his studio. They required no explanations, but in other respects they were not ideal subjects, because they had mistaken assumptions about the nature of his interest. He did not want the illusion of intimacy.

2 To remind himself of this, he removed

## FIVE WOUNDS

the faces from their portraits. It required little force. A single motion of his thumbnail would do it.

3 'Don't squirm. You'll only get scratched.'

12 UNDER a magnifying glass, which revealed details invisible to the naked eye, the image was fully present. More present than the living bodies of the prostitutes had ever been.

2 'Pretend you're dead if you like. That sometimes helps people stay still.'

13 MAGPIE would eliminate what was inessential and reveal what others could not bear to see.

2 He would steal from his subjects the revelation of their deeper selves and the truest aspect of the world they inhabited.

3 He would photograph the shift between the face people presented to others and the scratched face they revealed involuntarily and refused to acknowledge.

14 'CHEESE.' Something in this man, a hunger he recognised. 'Yes, good, hold that. One, two, three, four, five. Do you want to tell me about the sickness now?'

2 'What sickness?' Cur said.

*(Politic Worms)*

15 'HAVE you done this kind of work before?' Crow asked.

2 'Sometimes,' Magpie said, wincing as he tried to place his feet on the staircase up to Crow's workshop. He stopped to add, 'But usually babies rather than adults. You know, for the parents.'

3 Magpie didn't like photographing dead babies. They owned nothing, and they were beyond the help of his interventions. So were their parents, whose grief ran too deep for remedy. It could never be dislodged.

4 Such stubborn persistence disturbed him. And it was never the other way round. Grown children didn't want pictures of their dead parents.

5 'These images are a control,' Crow said, when they had both reached the top of the stairs. 'A standard to measure progress against. So they've got to be perfect.'

6 A different kind of job then. Nothing to do with grief. Rather, exemplification. His own specialty. 'Why corpses?' Magpie asked, approaching the two marble-topped tables at the centre of the workshop space.

7 'How can you understand life if you don't understand death?'

8 Obviously it was the presence of the bodies that mattered, and not the absence of the persons to whom they had once belonged.

16 MAGPIE had never photographed himself. He tolerated



the images of his childhood because he no longer resembled them.

2 He accepted his own invisibility as a necessary condition for obtaining the kind of photographs he wanted, but in practice it was difficult to achieve complete transparency.

3 His subjects responded to his presence in a vulgar and awkward manner, without comprehension of what might be achieved.

4 Presence, absence; white; black; diamond; coal. How might one avoid such obvious dichotomies? How might one inhabit one's own reflection?

17 NOW he saw that only the dead could remain still long enough to

leave a fixed impression on the plate's surface without being prompted or paid.

2 He could not bring the bodies in front of him back to life, or even giving them the semblance of life.

3 Rather, he now understood how his early nude studies had been a way of killing his subjects.

4 Imperfectly compliant and passive, the prostitutes were incapable of offering themselves fully to the camera's gaze. They were not truly naked.

5 By contrast, these corpses held back nothing, because they had nothing left to lose. Faced with such generosity, he felt no desire to steal anything from them.

6 'I see,' Magpie said. 'These corpses are your mirror.'

7 'And my antidote,' Crow replied. 'Death inoculates against death.'

18 MAGPIE examined the woman's face, sealed under plastic: its outline conjoined with its own death mask, moulded to the contours of her silhouette.

2 The features were smooth and indistinct, like Magpie's own: immune to passion. 'Do you want me to leave the bag on?' he whispered, close to her ear.

3 There was no response, and Magpie was reluctant to interfere, so he left her as she was, but he touched her shoulder, then the cuff of her blouse, and finally



## FIVE WOUNDS

her sheathed cheek –to let her know she was the most important person there.

4 He wanted to establish a connection, encourage her to forget about the camera and offer herself directly to him.

5 Worried that the man might feel left out by this favouritism, he walked over and moved the other corpse's bloated hands carefully, placing one over the ravaged face, and the other over the space between the legs.

6 That might make him feel more comfortable.

19 'WHO are they?' Magpie asked.  
2 'This one's a suicide,' Crow said. 'The mark of the Beast,' he added, touching the mottled skin where the woman's stilled blood had come to rest.

3 'The blood of the Lamb,' Magpie said.

4 The stains were the same bluish-black hue that iodine assumed in its solid form, while their purplish penumbra took the tone of iodine vapour escaping into the atmosphere.

5 The other body was older and in a more advanced state of decomposition. It had clearly been worried at by some kind of animal.

6 'Ritual assassination by dog,' Crow said. 'Obviously it took them a while to get the body back. Does it bother you?'

7 'Not at all,' Magpie said.

20 MAGPIE had barely noticed the smell. By now he was permanently nauseous, but also wrapped in a protective aura of mercury and cyanide.

2 He adjusted the two bodies again. They seemed to be giving off their own phosphorescent, bluish glow, like the figures in a painting he had once seen in the government palace.

3 'A criminal and a victim,' Crow said. 'I imagine the man did something to deserve it. Don't we all? The woman killed herself, her own jury and executioner.'

4 'Not my area of expertise,' Magpie said. 'I don't judge. Don't need to. People judge themselves. But I need more light in here.'

5 'I have lamps and reflectors,' Crow said. 'We just need to set them up.'

21 'DUST,' Magpie said.

2 'What?' Crow said.

3 'Disgusting,' Magpie grimaced. 'Wait for it to settle. Don't move. Don't disturb it.'

4 His skin shrank under its insensible touch. He resisted the temptation to stamp and tear and brush at his clothes.

5 'You know, I've thought about this for a while,' Crow said. 'Does the reflection of an object's surface reveal anything important about it? How do you pass through appearance to essence?'

6 'What makes you think you have to

## AN INTIMATE CUT; A COLD CARESS

choose?’ Magpie said. It was like waiting for the moon, as it flickered on and off within a stream of clouds.

7 With living people Magpie had found it impossible, but in this room, appearance not only coincided with essence. It eclipsed it.

8 ‘I know what you want,’ Magpie said to Crow. ‘I can help you steal it. I know whose sickness you need to steal.’

*(MeNe, MeNe, TeKeL, UPHARSIN)*

22 ‘THE photographer’s here! You know, for the engagement daguerreotype! Magpie.’

2 No answer. Then, finally, from somewhere upstairs, a petulant voice. ‘I told you. I’m not interested.’ A door slammed.

3 A wasted early-morning appointment, but then he already had what he needed from this girl, and he was not expecting a daguerreotype to reveal anything new.

4 Perhaps it was better not to risk a second encounter. She had been drugged during their first, but who knows what latent images and unconscious sensations the brain might later develop?

23 ON his last visit to this palace, Magpie had acquired a potent trophy for his treasure trove at the invitation of the girl’s father, who had died

shortly afterwards under circumstances both mysterious and notorious.

2 He had explained to Magpie that Gabriella was cursed to live her life apart from others. He wanted to give her the gift of normality, but he lacked the courage to carry out his own plan.

3 In short, Gabriella’s father had employed Magpie to remove her wings, which had sprouted at the same time as her breasts.

4 An intimate cut; a cold caress.

24 THE patient had been waiting when he arrived, laid out on the kitchen table. A cat rubbed against Magpie’s ankles as he blackened a set of surgical instruments over an open flame. He pushed it away without looking.

2 He cut clumsily into the gristle at the base of Gabriella’s first wing, where it met the shoulder. His hands were slippery and the saw kept catching.

3 He could not get it all the way through, so he had to twist the wing backwards and forwards, until it finally gave with a crack of cartilage. Then he cut the remaining stringy ligaments with a pair of scissors.

4 The cat yowled. ‘Shut up! Wretched creature,’ Gabriella’s father said.

5 The second wing quivered nervously. Gabriella’s father held it down as it shied

## FIVE WOUNDS

away from the knife. It came off quicker than the first one.

6 Magpie threw both wings into a bucket. They were not large. The feathers were still downy and grey.

7 Gabriella whimpered. 'La-la-la,' her father chanted every time she opened her mouth.

25 MAGPIE had taken the wings with him when he left, hurrying in case Gabriella's father tried to stop him. He could already see them on the wall of his treasure trove.

*(I'm Not Your Son)*

26 'WILL you help?' Cuckoo asked.

2 Magpie took the daguerreotype from Cuckoo's outstretched hand. 'Yes,' he said, dropping the image into a pocket. 'But why stop at one theft?'

3 'Because I only have one life,' Cuckoo said.

4 'But I know so many people who'd love to swap places. There's a man in the Ghetto.'

5 'I've got this one worked out.'

6 'Are you sure?'

7 'Yes.'

8 'I'm not,' Magpie said. 'But it's an interesting proposition. What do you need?'

9 'I need to make him forget,' Cuckoo said.

10 'Who?'

11 'Rut.'

12 'Forget what?'

13 Cuckoo breathed out. 'Himself. Everyone he's ever known. Everything he's ever done. Where he's from.'

14 'I can arrange that. But I'll need help. So there'll be a favour in return.'

15 'That's fair.'

16 'Wait for me.'

17 'I don't have much choice, do I?'

*(Perspective)*

27 'ARE you here about Cur?' Crow asked. 'Is he willing?'

2 'Not yet,' Magpie said. 'You'll know when.'

3 'What do you want then?'

4 'Something special.'

5 'More photographic supplies?'

6 'No,' Magpie said. 'A normal apothecary wouldn't have this particular item.'

7 'What is it?'

8 'I need to make someone forget.'

9 'Forget what? An old lover? Try a witch.'

10 'Who they are, what they've done.'

11 'Ah, yes. That would require a special recipe.'

12 'Any ideas?'

## SOMETHING SPECIAL

**13** Crow moved to one of the cabinets in his shop and peered inside. 'Maybe distilled extract of Lethe. But it's mythological, and the mythology is pagan, so don't get bogged down in transmigration of souls and all that nonsense. That'll get you in trouble with the Inquisition.'

**14** Magpie waved off the warning. 'Ideas don't interest me.' He tried to look over Crow's shoulder. 'I just need to know if you've got any of this water.'

**15** Crow turned around and stepped in front of him. 'I do. Only because I'm interested in regeneration.'

**16** 'How much?'

**17** 'Who's it for?'

**18** 'Oh, don't worry; no one'll get hurt.'

**19** Crow snorted. 'Not the point. If I deliver it to you, you deliver yourself to me. Knowledge of your purpose is your bond.'

**28** MAGPIE wanted to continue his acquaintance with the couple lying on the slabs in Crow's workshop. By exposing Cuckoo's secrets instead of his own, he could worm his way further into Crow's confidence.

**2** It was a game of mirrors in which the final revelation was continually deferred, as he pitted his targets against one another, shuffling them like he rearranged his daguerreotypes.

**3** Crow lacked the selflessness to rule. Only Magpie could bring all these varied fates together, and twine their strands to form a crown. Only Magpie was willing to martyr himself to his destiny.

**4** The time for transparency, for invisibility, for dissolution and reaction, was coming to an end. Now it was time to fix himself once and for all.











## *Two Jolly Sailors*

**1** TWO wills united in one purpose: that was how it was supposed to be. To share a secret was a symbolic act, like cutting thumbs and mingling blood, but no intimacy had flowed between Cuckoo and Magpie.

**2** To Cuckoo, his ally's face remained almost as unreadable as his own. But perhaps it was better to keep things on a professional basis. After all, Magpie had fulfilled his end of the bargain. He had obtained a suitable concoction for Rut from a man named Crow, an apothecary.

**3** Magpie had made the introductions at Crow's shop, and Cuckoo understood this meeting to be the signature on an unwritten contract that would require repayment at a later date.

**2** 'WHAT does he know about me?' Cuckoo asked Magpie afterwards.

**2** 'More than he says,' Magpie said. 'He knows a bit about everything. He specialises in interpretation.'

**3** 'What does that have to do with me?'

**4** 'Your face is a ciphered message,' Magpie said. 'Who knows what he sees there?'

**3** RUT was not a difficult person to track. He went out every night, and he got drunk every night

**2** Indeed, the only problem for Cuckoo and Magpie was to walk slowly enough to remain at a safe distance behind him without appearing suspicious to other passers-by.

**3** It involved a lot of untying and tying of shoelaces, and feigning blank curiosity about the contents of shop windows.

**4** They just needed to wait until Rut staggered home alone.

**5** For six nights, Cuckoo and Magpie meandered through the city's alleyways as Rut failed to extricate himself from a rotating roll call of prostitutes, pickpockets and sellers of dubious aphrodisiacs and hallucinogens.

## FIVE WOUNDS

**6** On the seventh night, Rut was finally alone. He stopped at one of the embarkation points for the gondola ferries that went from one side of the Great Canal to another.

**7** 'Hey! Where is everyone?' He belched. 'I want to cross!' He did a little dance of frustration on the wooden steps leading down to the water.

**4** CUCKOO and Magpie sped up. Hearing synchronised footsteps behind, Rut began to turn around. Magpie dropped a sack over his head.

**2** 'You're under arrest,' Cuckoo said. 'Come quietly.'

**5** CUCKOO and Magpie had agreed that pretending to be agents of the Committee for Public Health was the best way to ensure the target's docility.

**2** At first, all went smoothly. Rut shuffled along through the deserted fish market, his feet slipping on discarded fish guts and melting slivers of pink ice, his confidence sapped by his blind dependence on their direction.

**3** But progress stalled when he stubbed his toe on a protruding paving stone, a disruption that nearly pulled everyone over.

**6** 'If this is about that nun, I swear it wasn't me,' Rut said. 'Anyway, she's not really a nun. She hasn't taken her vows

yet. Not really my cousin either. Distant relation, hardly worth mentioning.'

**2** His voice was muffled by the burlap sack. It sounded a little like Cuckoo's. 'You'll find out soon enough what it's about,' Cuckoo bluffed.

**3** Rut squirmed and wriggled as Magpie tried to get him in a headlock, while Cuckoo tried to pull the sack further down over Rut's arms.

**4** 'You're not very good at this,' Rut said. 'Are you sure you're agents of the Committee?'

**5** 'We—' Magpie said, but got no further before Rut threw him off with an abrupt twist. At the same time, Cuckoo's grip slipped down, and he only managed to hold on for a few more seconds as Rut dragged him along.

**6** When Rut was free of both of them, he took off. Fortunately he ran immediately into a brick wall and knocked himself unconscious. His left foot twitched, and then lay still.

**7** MeNe, MeNe, TeKeL, UPHARSIN. Cuckoo stared at the words written on the wall, and then at Rut's prone figure.

**2** Magpie was doubled over and wheezing. Cuckoo heard approaching footsteps. 'Quick,' he said. 'Get the hood off.'

**3** Cuckoo grabbed at the sack, which was now pinned to the pavement by Rut's body. As he pulled the sack off, Rut's

## HEAVE HO

neck jerked up with it, then the back of his head cracked down onto the cobbles.

4 'Careful,' Cuckoo scolded himself as he turned Rut's head to inspect the damage.

5 Crow rounded the corner behind them. What was he doing here?

6 Cuckoo tried unsuccessfully to will his face into a warning frown, but Magpie refused to look in his direction. 'Ha, ha. He's always drunk,' Cuckoo said for the benefit of the new arrival. 'We need to get him home to bed.'

7 'Ha, ha,' Magpie said, tilting his head slightly as he kicked Rut in the side.

8 'Need a hand?' Crow asked.

9 'That would be—' began Magpie.

10 'No thank you,' Cuckoo said. 'We can manage.' He had not told Crow how he intended to use the potion, but what had Magpie revealed?

11 'Well, if you're sure.' Crow walked on.

12 'See you around,' Cuckoo said, watching him leave. 'What do you think you're doing?' he asked Magpie when Crow was out of sight.

13 Magpie shrugged. 'I told you. He knows more than he lets on. And Rut's heavy. I don't know if we can lift him by ourselves.'

14 'We can drag him by the ankles,' Cuckoo said. 'Grab a foot.'

8 THE two men heaved. Neither was accustomed to physical exertion, but

Rut slowly began to move. His arms stretched out lazily behind him and his body made a gritty scraping sound.

2 'Hurry up,' Cuckoo said. 'We've got to get to the mainland by daybreak.' Magpie grunted and pulled harder.

9 CUCKOO had chosen a plain, clinker-built dinghy with a plank to sit on and an oar on either side. Something less ambitious than a gondola was called for, a craft that clumsy amateurs could row, at least for a mile or two.

2 With Cuckoo and Magpie facing the stern, there was just enough space to shove Rut into the prow, if they folded his legs into a foetal position. They covered him with a tarpaulin.

3 Cuckoo now saw his original plan had been unrealistic. How would they have kept Rut subdued when they were rowing and there was no room for him to sit? 4 He was grateful for Rut's impetuosity, but newly anxious he had not rehearsed this part of the escape. Still, how difficult could rowing a boat be?

10 THE oar was heavier than it looked, and at first the boat dragged along the side of the fundamenta with its prow stubbornly pointing inwards.

2 Magpie was not pulling his weight. 'I don't have space,' he complained, shrink-

## FIVE WOUNDS

ing from the seaweed coating the stone bank.

3 Cuckoo stood up and leaned across, pushing against the slimy stone with his palms so that the boat wobbled and began to drift unsteadily towards the canal's centre. He shifted his feet, and sat down abruptly, his feet splashing in scummy bilge water. 'Now you do,' he said.

4 They moved forward painfully, but the boat still drifted back towards the bank. After a few more stubborn strokes, Magpie's oar scraped the brick and jumped out of his hand. It fell in the water with a splash.

5 It was going to be a long night.

11 WITH a little practice they managed to work out a more efficient technique, and they made some progress, reaching the edge of the lagoon only two hours later than Cuckoo had anticipated.

2 An empty, black expanse. There were lights visible from the factories on the mainland, diffused by atmospheric pollution to the shape of smouldering tapers, but they were worryingly small.

3 Cuckoo's arms ached and now his back and thighs were beginning to hurt too. The rough surface of the oar, which had initially seemed reassuringly plain and workaday, was rubbing the skin off his palms. Blisters would not be far behind.

4 A fisherman sped past on a sandolo,

standing up and directing the craft expertly from a single stern oar. 'Having fun?'

12 CUCKOO flexed his fingers and picked up the heavy oar again. 'Why – don't – we – drop – him – in – the – lagoon?' Magpie suggested, expelling the words one by one between his uneven strokes.

2 'Even – if – the – body – comes – back, – it'll – be ... unrecognisable.' Magpie's rhythm faltered on the last word, which was too long to pronounce in a single breath.

3 The two men paused, and the boat immediately bobbed up and began to turn with the tide back towards the city. The oar trembled as Cuckoo lifted it from the water and tried to support its weight. He could hear the lapping water, his and Magpie's ragged breathing, a stifled snore from Rut.

4 'No,' he said at last. 'We'll stick to the original plan.'

5 'Why?' Magpie scratched the flaking skin on his hands.

6 'Because I want him to have a chance at a new life too.'

13 THE sun came up while they were still on the lagoon. Cuckoo was shaking and it was increasingly difficult to lower the oar all the way into the water.



2 Magpie too was taking shallow strokes, so that his oar sometimes leapt up and splashed them.

3 He pulled a black mask over his eyes when the sun grew too intense. 'You navigate,' he said, but every time Cuckoo looked over his shoulder to check their course, the boat shifted direction. This meant that he had to look again to check their bearing, thus causing the boat to veer once more.

4 Torture.

14 WHEN they were half a mile out from shore, Rut began to stir and moan. 'My head,' he complained.

2 He struggled to sit up, but before he could do so, Magpie lifted up one side of his eye mask, reached for the water jug and turned round to smack the back of Rut's head.

3 'Stay down,' he said. 'You're rocking

the boat.' Then he readjusted the mask, picked up his oar and recommenced rowing. When they finally reached the shore, Magpie staggered out of the boat and collapsed in the sand.

4 'You have to come back and help me,' Cuckoo said. Magpie groaned. 'Come on,' Cuckoo said. 'We've got to get further inland.'

5 'All right, all right.' Magpie picked himself up and started to brush the sand from his clothes.

6 'Come on, come on,' Cuckoo repeated.

7 'Wait.' Brush, brush. 'Okay.' Brush. 'Leave him with me. You get the horses.'

15 CUCKOO walked to a nearby village where he'd already made arrangements. That took another hour, and when he got back, it was difficult getting Rut slung over the third horse. It kept shying away as they struggled to lift

## FIVE WOUNDS

the body high enough to clear its back, and Rut slipped off the first time they got him on.

2 Magpie showed the bloody base of the water jug. 'I had to knock him out again.'

3 Cuckoo was beginning to wish he had agreed to Magpie's suggestion. Eventually they were able to strap Rut on using a coil of rope from the boat.

16 THEY rode up off the sand, past the dunes and marram grass, into stagnant marshland, then on into a forest. It was now mid-morning, so they had to watch for fellow travellers on the roads, and hide whenever they heard someone approaching.

2 In the afternoon, much later than Cuckoo had intended, they reached the spot he had chosen: a busy crossroads where Rut was sure to be discovered before serious harm befell him.

3 Magpie recovered the flask of Lethe water mixed with brandy from inside his cloak, while Cuckoo kept watch. Magpie opened Rut's mouth, and poured the mixture in. Rut coughed and choked, and it slopped over the sides of his mouth.

4 'How many times do I have to say it? Careful, careful.' Cuckoo peered into the shimmering distance of the roads around them. He wrung his hands to expel the anxiety gathering in his limbs.

5 Rut struggled to his knees, moaned impotently and vomited. Then he collapsed into the mess he had voided and began to snore once more.

17 'HE didn't keep it down. What does that mean?' Cuckoo whispered, although there was still no one else around. 'Will it work?'

2 Some part of Cuckoo hoped it would not, and that Rut would wake up puzzled but unchanged, forgetting only the events of the previous night. His blackout would swallow Cuckoo's unworthy purposes.

3 'I don't know.' Magpie turned his flask upside down to confirm it was empty.

4 What was going on with Magpie? He'd been enthusiastic enough when they'd made the plan.

18 THEY still had a long way to go, but they could stop at an inn by the lagoon after they returned the horses. Cuckoo had reserved a room there.

2 Fortunately, the boat was not due back for a few days. Cuckoo needed to rest to prepare himself for his new role.

19 THE two men rode in silence to The Two Jolly Sailors. A small village had grown up around the ferry station, with warehouses and a customs post, but most of the inn's customers



## BRIDE AND GROOM

were overnight visitors waiting to catch the first ferry.

**2** As they approached he could see coloured paper lanterns strung in the courtyard, and hear music floating over the reeds.

**3** Not quite music: a meandering argument between a violin and a guitar, stopping, then wobbling to life again as a further point occurred to one of the participants.

**4** The aftermath of a wedding: ravaged chickens and wasps crawling on smeared cake, half-empty glasses and stained tablecloths, bottles rolling on the floor; the bride and groom alone at the top table, she weeping and hiccupping, he mumbling to himself and thumping a champagne bottle off his bony forehead in time with one or other of the quarrelling instruments.

**5** It was early evening but Cuckoo couldn't see any guests. Even the violinist and guitarist were invisible.

**6** Inside the inn, streamers dangled from the fittings and the floor was scattered with confetti. Cuckoo dinged a bell at the desk to waken the porter, who was wearing a party hat with a too-tight string squashing his ears against his head.

**7** Cuckoo felt dizzy as he climbed the stairs, with Magpie stepping uncomfortably close behind him. He fumbled to get the key into the lock, but when he

finally got it open a new problem presented itself.

**8** Only one bed.

**20** CUCKOO stopped a passing chambermaid, but all the other rooms were taken. 'Hark at Lord Muck! Wanting a double mattress to himself'

**2** After delivering this rebuke, the maid harrumphed off to attend to another guest. 'Empty your own chamber pot while you're at it,' she flung back as a parting shot.

**3** Cuckoo stood at the room's threshold, reluctant to commit himself by entering, but really having no choice. He had to get a few hours' sleep or his face felt like it might fall off.

**4** 'Window or door?' Magpie said.

**5** 'Eh?'

**6** 'Which side?'

**21** CUCKOO lay with his head squashed against the headboard, next to Magpie's feet.

**2** Cuckoo's pressed his arms tightly against his sides to avoid accidental contact with his bed mate, although there was little chance of that, given Magpie was lying on top of the blankets with his cloak wrapped round him.

**3** Cuckoo tried to prepare himself for sleep. A low thud came through the wall, followed by a series of interrogative

## FIVE WOUNDS

squeaks and a higher-pitched series of impacts, counterpointed by an irregular sound he took to be a lamp wobbling on its circular base.

4 Plaster flakes fell onto Cuckoo's face from the connecting wall, where they lay undisturbed, indistinguishable from his skin.

5 Magpie wriggled his toes near Cuckoo's nose. His socks were made of silk, but they were stained from his leaking boots. 'Just ignore it,' Cuckoo said. 'At least someone's having a good time.'

22 MAGPIE couldn't sleep. He flicked the remaining grains of sand from within the hidden folds of his clothes and watched the moon rise through the window.

2 He shifted towards the edge of the bed, inch by inch, touching the floor with his toes before testing it with the flat of his foot, placing a hand on the bedpost, standing on one leg with his other foot pressed into the bedclothes, then twisting it across and down to the floor.

3 Finally, only the tips of the fingers of his left hand still touched the counterpane. He let go. He waited for a response. None came.

4 He knelt to riffle through Cuckoo's bag, and from it he took the hand mirror and the knife. He placed them on the floor, again moving with exaggerated

care, so that the touch of metal and mother-of-pearl against wooden floorboards made no sound.

5 Which to take?

23 HE picked up the knife and breathed on it, as if to mark it invisibly, and waited for the condensation to leave its surface. Then he replaced it in the bag.

2 He closed his fist around the handle on the mirror and stood up.

3 He slipped his feet into wet boots. Ugh. He moved across the room, step by step, avoiding the cracks between the floorboards, easing the door off its latch, balancing on the balls of both feet, pulling the door closed behind him, swallowing the sound inside his mouth, then running down the stairs two at a time, quick, anxious to get going now.

4 Outside, the white tablecloths flapped, applauding Magpie for his brilliance.



## *Return of the Prodigal*

**1** CUCKOO dozed, dreaming of hissing and wailing cats. When he twitched awake, it was already long after dark, and Magpie was gone.

**2** Downstairs, Cuckoo counted out a seemingly endless number of coins until the porter nodded his satisfaction. Then he took the last ferry back to the city.

**2** IN the city, Cuckoo returned to his room and stayed there for three days fasting, eating only bread and water.

**2** He assembled what he hoped was an exact image of Rut's face out of the details he had memorised: The strong line of the nose like the prow of a ship, the bruised, fleshy lips, the shining forehead and arrowed brows, the sunken sockets.

**3** What colour were Rut's eyes? How could he have forgotten that?

**4** His mirror was gone. He had searched his bag again and again, but there was no sign of it. Magpie.

**5** He bought another to transform himself into Rut. Its surface was mottled where the backing was peeling away.

**6** He had tried writing a diary for a while, but he never knew what to say, because his experiences didn't belong to him. He burnt the diary now and dropped his silver knife in a canal, as if it was a murder weapon.

**7** No going back. He must die unto himself.

**8** He looked at his reflection in the water, as the ripples left by the knife's fall slowly dispersed. His expression shifted, but whatever illusory form it appeared to assume was immediately transformed into another.

**9** He worried about why Magpie had taken the mirror, but by itself it proved nothing, and Magpie had merely anticipated his own intentions. Only the ritual was spoilt, perhaps, although his faith was the only thing that gave it meaning.

## FIVE WOUNDS

**3** THE door to Rut's palace was over eight feet tall, set inside stone pilasters, with a monumental pediment that threatened to crash down on the heads of interlopers.

**2** The door screeched across the marble floor when Cuckoo shouldered it open, but no one came to answer the sound.

**3** Cuckoo waited in the entrance hall. A coal fire burned in a grate; a skinny, hairless dog lay in front of it on a Turkish rug. The coal was wet, so it smouldered and popped, making Cuckoo jump. The dog growled: a low, continuous sound, rising and falling, but never ceasing entirely. It didn't move towards him though.

**4** Servants occasionally trotted across the hall and up the double-sided curving staircase, racing to be somewhere else. None of them paid any attention to Cuckoo. The whole house seemed hushed and anxious, no doubt because Rut had been missing for long enough to suggest he was not sleeping off a binge in a doorway or a whore's bed.

**5** Cuckoo did nothing to attract anyone's attention.

**6** Eventually, a maid he'd seen before, half an hour ago, returned to the hall. She stopped and looked at him. 'What do you want?' The dog barked at her, but she ignored it: apparently it didn't like anyone.

**7** 'I don't know,' Cuckoo said to her.

**8** The maid raised a chapped hand to her mouth. 'Oh sir, it's you! What's happened to your face?'

**9** 'My face?' Cuckoo said. 'What about it?' He reached up tentatively.

**10** 'It seems so ... empty,' the maid said. 'You were always so ... full of life, sir.'

**11** 'Do I live here?' Cuckoo asked. 'It's familiar, but I don't remember. Everything before this morning is blank.'

**12** 'Wait here, sir. I'll get your parents.'

**13** 'I have parents?'

**4** THE maid ran upstairs. There was silence for a few seconds, followed by a squeal and the sound of shuffling footsteps, followed by a more measured step and a lower, soothing voice. An older woman glided down the stairs. 'Son?' she said, moving her hands together as if she was washing them.

**2** 'Mother?' replied Cuckoo, his hands awkwardly at his sides.

**3** 'Is it true you can't remember anything?' Rut's mother was wearing a bell-shaped gown with extensions on either side of the waist that must have made it difficult to get through a doorway head-on. Her hair was piled up above her head and sculpted like a piece of garden topiary.

**4** 'I remember a struggle,' Cuckoo said, 'a blow, darkness, water, sickness. When I woke up, I was alone. My feet led me here.'



5 Rut's mother embraced her prodigal son, her dress deflating a little as she did so. Cuckoo had to hold back to prevent her from smudging his face. 'Never mind where you've been,' she said. She drew back and pinched his shirt fabric. 'What are you wearing?'

6 'Perhaps someone stole my clothes.'

7 'We're glad to have you back,' said Rut's father, who had now arrived at this touching scene. He was wearing an old-fashioned dress coat with enormous buttoned cuffs, together with breeches and stockings. He had a small powdered wig pinned to the top of his shaved head, where it sat awkwardly like a bird's nest.

8 'Can I sleep?' Cuckoo asked. He wanted to hide from these people he had just met.

9 'Of course,' his father replied. 'We'll call a physician. We can talk when you wake up.'

10 As Cuckoo wearily began to ascend the stairs, Rut's father instructed a servant standing goggle-eyed nearby to carry a message to Gabriella's family. 'Tell them the wedding's still on,' he said.

5 CUCKOO slept in a four-poster bed with a goose-feather mattress and sheets that slid off his limbs and pooled underneath him. When he awoke, there were sugared almonds to eat and rosewater to wash in.

2 Rut's parents arrived with a physician, who examined him. Cuckoo flinched as the man reached for his face. 'For some reason,' he apologised, 'I don't want you to touch me there.'

3 The physician shrugged and withdrew his hand. 'There's no obvious sign of injury,' he said, 'but there might still be psychic damage. That can have physical manifestations too. It's well known that

## FIVE WOUNDS

shock can turn a person's hair white overnight.

4 'Here, the slight changes in appearance and in the timbre of the voice, as well as the apparent immobility of the face, may be related symptoms. The boy has received a considerable fright. I hear he's been keeping dangerous company recently.

5 'Maybe he caught a glimpse of the devil, and his expression froze in surprise.' The physician crossed himself piously before continuing. 'No doubt the sight was so terrible his soul couldn't bear to retain it.

6 'The mind is a wax tablet. It takes impressions from the senses, but the flames of hell are hot enough to destroy all trace of their passing, leaving it smooth, as it was in infancy.'

7 'Oh,' exclaimed Rut's mother, and turned towards Cuckoo. 'We warned you, but you wouldn't listen.'

8 'I'm sorry, mother,' Cuckoo said. 'In future I shall do better.'

9 'His personality may also be altered,' the physician cautioned.

10 'Altered?' Rut's father said. 'But he's still our son, no?'

11 'Oh yes,' the physician confirmed. 'His substantial form is the same; only the accidents have been altered. The appearance, the voice, things like that. Now we'll leave him to rest.'

6 CUCKOO was disappointed to learn his recreation of Rut was so unconvincing, but grateful for the physician's rationalisation of that fact.

2 This part of the plan was immaculate, however distressing the earlier complications had been.

3 By faking the amnesia he had actually induced in Rut, he could excuse any gaps in his knowledge or hesitancy in his conduct, while he could gradually introduce the facts he did know to boost his position by suggesting that his memory was beginning to return.

7 CUCKOO'S thoughts were interrupted by the squeak of the door, which opened just wide enough to admit the figure of the maid who had greeted him.

2 She giggled. 'Hello,' she said, and turned the key in the lock. 'I've missed you these last days.'

3 Cuckoo cleared his throat as she approached the bed. She pulled back the covers and began to stroke his hand. Her knuckles were split and scabbed.

4 She noticed his glance. 'The drudge is sick, so they have me doing the pots.' She returned to her coquettish voice. 'My, my, grandmother, how hairy you are!'

5 Cuckoo improvised. 'Er, all the better to keep me warm?'

6 The girl turned him around away from

## BIG BAD WOLF

her, and her hands began to massage his back. 'My, my, grandmother, what big shoulders you have!' she said.

7 'Um, er, all the better to ... carry firewood?' He did not have big shoulders, and he wasn't particularly hairy. Nonetheless, the massage felt good. His muscles still ached from the rowing.

8 'My, my, grandmother,' the girl said, 'what big teeth you have!'

9 Cuckoo paused. 'All the better to eat you with?'

10 'I thought you'd never ask.'

11 Cuckoo interrupted her. 'I'm not feeling very well. And I am getting married soon.'

8 THE girl stared at his cold face, and hers fell. She ran for the door. Outside the room, she flattened her back against the closed door, holding her soul to the flame of his memory, and feeling it melt a little, grow soft and dreamy.

2 No. She chewed at her bloody knuckle. The others had been right. He did not care about her. Now it did not suit him, he had thrown her aside.

9 INSIDE, Cuckoo sucked an almond. He was fated to disappoint others, unable to respond in the way that they seemed to expect.

2 He hoped his wife would be an exception, but he feared otherwise.





## *The Fencing Master*

**1** MeNe, MeNe, TeKeL, UPHARSIN. Cur had no idea what these words meant. But whenever he tried to track the girl's scent, it led to the same inscription, painted on one wall or another.

**2** This particular manifestation was scrawled on the shell of the Misericordia, a building abandoned by its owners when funds had dried up halfway through construction – before the façade was added, so that it now presented only an ugly surface of bare, uneven bricks, across which the red paint of the letters dribbled enthusiastically.

**2** CUR closed his eyes to fix his position more clearly. He heard a new sound, of feet leaping on floorboards. Backwards and forwards, up and down, round and round, in a complex and confident rhythm.

**2** Cur knew that the Misericordia was rented out to anyone who wanted to take advantage of its yawning interior, al-

though he did not know who the current tenants were. A ballet school perhaps.

**3** A scrape of steel sliding against steel and a strangled yelp of frustration. The footsteps ceased for a moment, before beginning again.

**4** The Misericordia did not even have a front door. Although the outside looked like a factory, the ground floor inside was all white stone columns, the walls punctuated with flaking frescoes of philosophers or saints. The staircases were boarded up, but a ladder pointed up through a trapdoor.

**5** When Cur poked his head through the trapdoor, he saw two men circling one another with rapiers outstretched. They moved at the centre of a varnished wooden floor. As Cur drew himself up into the room, the two men lowered their blades.

**3** AN almost featureless space. At its far corners, separated by the length

## MISERICORDIA

of the shorter wall, two sets of blankets and bedding were folded away with military precision.

**2** The arrangement was peculiar. If the purpose was to separate the occupants by the maximum possible distance, then the two sleeping spaces should have been placed at opposite ends of the room's invisible diagonal line. If, on the other hand, the purpose was to permit nocturnal conversation and companionship, the distance between them was still inconveniently large.

**3** In the Ghetto, Cur had his own room, but his sleep was subject to unwelcome interruptions from any of the dogs that took it upon themselves to enter. He hated being vulnerable in this way and he could not imagine willingly sharing a room, but then he had never had a friend.

**4** In any case, what was clear here was the spartan nature of the fencers' lifestyle. The only other furniture in the room besides the bedding was a rack for swords with a simple table in front of it.

**5** 'A customer!' said one of the men, when the silence had become uncomfortable. His voice reverberated, gathering rather than losing force from the empty space.

**4** 'JUST browsing,' Cur replied. His interrogator had a purple birthmark that swallowed up most of the left side of

his face. Cur felt his eyes flick over it involuntarily before he could bring them back under control.

**2** The man's left eye appeared unnaturally large, floating wetly in this violent eruption of colour. 'I can offer you a free lesson, if that will help,' he said. 'And then, if you carry on, I'll teach you my foolproof thrust, which is irresistible.'

**3** He had set his mouth in a grim little line, whose suppressed sneer dared Cur to make an issue of his disfigurement. He appeared to have mistaken Cur's initial silence for revulsion.

**4** 'I can defend myself.' Cur held the man's gaze and kept his expression as blank as he could to make it clear that he intended no challenge. Then he blinked first, deliberately.

**5** THE fencer spoke. 'That may be true, but fencing is essential for any civilised man, like dancing and conversation. It is both a dance and a conversation.'

**2** 'I'm not civilised,' Cur said. 'I don't talk much. I definitely don't dance.'

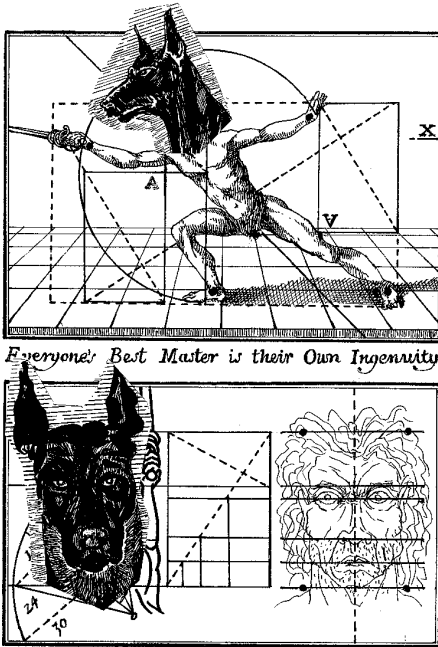
**3** 'Well, I need not detain you then.' The fencing master prepared to return to his interrupted match.

**4** 'Wait a minute,' Cur said. He wanted to make sure the man had not misunderstood him. 'How long have you been here?'

**5** 'Not long. Since the painter finished.'

**6** 'The painter?'

## FIVE WOUNDS



7 'The one who did the *Paradise* in the government palace. This was the only place large enough to spread it out.'

8 The other fencer flexed his rapier blade between his two hands. 'He used the old building, not this one.'

9 'Are you sure?' The fencing master's birthmark flushed, like someone had turned his face on.

10 Cur was not much concerned with the unresolved question. But surely this was an omen? 'I've changed my mind,' he said. 'I accept your offer of a free lesson.'

6 'VERY well.' The fencing master adopted a dramatic pose, as he prepared to deliver a well-rehearsed speech. 'Fencing is both a science and an art.' He kept his back straight but lowered his

torso by bowing his legs and swished the rapier through the air.

2 'Why is it a science?' Cur's role here was to supply the necessary cues.

3 The fencer closed his eyes and recited: 'FENCING IS GEOMETRY BECAUSE IT'S LINES, CIRCLES, ANGLES, PLANES AND MEASURES. IT'S ARITHMETIC BECAUSE IT'S NUMBERS TOO. EVERY MOVEMENT OF THE BODY MAKES AN ANGLE OR AN EDGE. EVERY MOVEMENT OF THE SWORD MARKS A LINE. EVERY GUARD OR COUNTER-GUARD CAN BE RENDERED AS A NUMBER.'

4 He opened his eyes and rotated his arm in a circle. 'We annotate movement. It becomes legible.'

5 'And why is it an art?' Cur said.

6 'Because everyone's best master is their own ingenuity. The course of a duel can't be predicted in advance. You have to improvise, respond to your opponent. Your actions have immediate and obvious consequences.'

7 'The fencer is responsible. He is free.'

8 'I'm not free,' Cur said.

9 'We're all free,' the fencing master replied. 'Even a man being tortured is free: he decides when the pain has become unbearable, when he must submit. The fencer tortures his own body, and he decides when to stop.'

10 'Torture my own body? I don't think much of your sales technique,' Cur said.

11 'Come and see.' The man walked to the table and opened a selection of

books, flicking through the pages until he reached a set of illustrations.

**7** CUR followed him and glanced at the images. 'I don't like pictures. I don't like books either.'

**2** 'These are for instruction, not entertainment' the fencer said, tapping a page to stop it turning over.

**3** Cur forced himself to look. In contrast to the overcrowded painting in the palace, these images were simple black-and-white line drawings. Pairs of fencers engaged in combat, inscribed within grids and geometric figures.

**4** The settings were sterile, emptied of any detail to which Cur's senses might cling, but the nearly naked fencers were rendered in exquisite, almost erotic detail.

**5** 'Fencing is seduction,' the man said, apparently reading Cur's mind. He picked up his rapier again. 'You wait for the moment when your opponent surrenders to you.'

**6** The men in the illustrations skewered each other in the head. Blood spurted from their wounds to emphasise the fatal consequences.

**7** The dying body of the defeated fencer relaxed and opened. The body of the victor was stretched like a gymnast, pointed (literally) at the opponent's wound, but the faces of the defeated men were implausibly placid, seemingly indifferent to their fate, and the geometric logic of the

illustrations concealed the tension and strain that would rack any real body held in imitation of the figures.

**8** THE fencing master continued his lesson. 'The sword's an extension of the arm, straight out from the shoulder.'

He pointed his blade at Cur.

**2** 'A line drawn out from the sword point and parallel to the blade should always hit your opponent in the head or the chest.'

**3** The fencing master lowered his blade and passed the rapier to Cur, taking hold of his hand and pressing his fingers around the hilt. 'Stand, like this,' he said. He nudged Cur's feet apart with his own boot, and then positioned Cur's arm at ninety degrees from his body.

**4** 'The thrust,' the master said, lunging forward with an empty fist to show Cur how it was done. 'It uses the point. It stabs.' Cur tried to copy his movement.

**5** 'The cut,' the master said, angling his wrist and slashing an imaginary sword through the air. 'It uses the edge. It slices.' Cur slashed.

**9** 'THE shortest distance between two points is always a straight line, which is why the thrust is usually better than the cut,' the master said.

**2** 'To cut, you've got to move the sword out of line for a second, so that you can swing it back in. So a cut takes two

## FIVE WOUNDS

movements. In. Out.' He demonstrated with his invisible sword. 'The thrust is better. Step, stab.

3 'So when you're halfway through a cut, then your sword's out of line, your body's exposed. Your opponent thrusts, you're dead.'

4 'I see,' Cur said.

5 'The cut leaves a line; it disfigures,' the master went on. 'But the thrust leaves no mark. Only when you withdraw and the wound starts bleeding.'

3 Fencing would allow him to fight the black dog in cold blood, without anger or hatred, as he had killed the counterfeiter, but it would also allow him to fight without demeaning himself – from a distance, and yet close up.

4 Of course the black dog would not have a sword, and would be fighting by different rules, but he could deal with that. Or not. It did not matter.

5 'Show me more,' he said.

10 THE master changed tack, testing Cur's mental agility. 'Where do you look when you fight?'

2 'In your eyes?' Cur said.

3 'No,' the master said. 'At my sword hand. The eye can dance and feint like the feet. The hand doesn't lie.'

4 Cur wasn't sure about this but he shifted his gaze to the man's hand anyway. 'I see,' he said again, although he did not.

11 CUR'S response to the illustrations was different from his response to the painting in the palace. Turning the pages of the fencing manuals, he could enter the picture space by an act of will – but he also remained outside.

2 The illustrations were deceitful, and fencing was a lie, but it might still be useful. He could impose the rule of sight upon his other senses.



## *The Bagatto*

**1** THE dowry negotiations had been concluded, and the engagement had been announced before state officials.

**2** Gabriella had been shown publicly, escorted by her dancing master; she had made the obligatory visits to relatives enclosed in convents.

**3** The day for the exchange of rings and vows approached. Fortunately her dreams had abated, for which she was cautiously grateful. Perhaps God was giving her a holiday.

**2** SHE had been warned that some disaster had befallen the groom, who was strangely altered and subdued as a result.

**2** Maybe he had received a vision. She knew how upsetting that could be. She hoped that God had not tried to warn him off her.

**3** THE day of the betrothal celebrations was the feast of Saint Paul,

when the stars make a special aspect.

**2** Since Gabriella's father had been an important politician, festivities took place in the government palace, in honour of his memory. The gazette reported on events in a satisfied tone.

**3** *In the Senate hall, the benches were pushed aside. Women were allowed in and there was dancing.*

**4** *In the evening, they laid out supper tables and removed the partitions to make more space. Pine-nut cakes, partridges, pheasants, baby pigeons, many other dishes. A lot of people, driven by curiosity, arrived without invitations, but they were all fed.*

**5** *The party continued until dawn, when showers finally arrived to end forty days of drought. People laughed and clapped even though they were wet.*

**4** EIGHT days later, the wedding itself took place, as the same reporter described.

## FIVE WOUNDS

*2 Fifty women came to the bride's palace to carry her train into the church. A herald stepped out in front of the procession and blew a horn to clear the way, as the women wound like a serpent around the Piazza, accompanied by four large wax torches and the trumpets and fifes of the duke.*

*3 The bride wore a sky-blue velvet dress, although it had a strange cut at the back that provoked gossip among the ignorant and ill-informed. All the women wore gold chain necklaces and strings of pearls.*

*4 The marriage vows were exchanged at the high altar. The groom and his company wore black, which in my opinion was the wrong choice. On a day like today, they should have worn red silk, or at least scarlet cloth.*

**5** THE black cloth had been Cuckoo's idea. Gabriella thought he was unnecessarily solemn. She stuck her tongue out at him when no one was looking. He did not laugh.

**2** She did not know any of the fifty women whose presence paid honour to her family's pre-eminence. Her aunt shouted instructions to their long line, sometimes manhandling them into place.

**3** None of the women spoke to Gabriella: she doubted they would have much to say on the niceties of Babylonian cuneiform or how to apply frequency analysis to polyalphabetic ciphers.

**4** She was irritated with her dress. She

had not been consulted about its design, and it rode up under her arms because the space allocated for her wing stubs was insufficient.

**6** CUCKOO did not know any of the groom's party either, though most of them were under the impression they knew him.

**2** He was bothered by slaps upon the back and ribald comments, but his silence was discouraging. What a bore he had become!

**3** Rut's erstwhile friends were puzzled by the fastidious way Cuckoo picked at the potted pheasant and the other delicacies, and his failure to flirt with any of the servant girls.

**4** Maybe he was trying to impress his bride, although why he would bother was beyond them.

**7** IN the evening, after the ceremony, there was a reception staged on the duke's barge, which had been borrowed for the occasion. It processed up the Great Canal, propelled by a hundred gold-painted oars on two decks.

**2** The gazette's intrepid reporter was not invited, but he did not need to draw upon private sources to describe what happened next.

*3 When the barge reached the water entrance to the groom's palace, cannons fired*



## MARIAGE

*blank charges from the opposite bank. Fireworks rocketed and spun from the palace windows in response.*

*4 There was more dancing in the great hall of the palace, surveyed by paintings of the groom's ancestors. Then the bride and groom went to give themselves pleasure: they not yet slept together. They had not even been alone together.*

**8** ONLY the last part of the report was erroneous. Cuckoo could not escape the feeling he was there under false pretences, and so he decided to play a trick upon his bride.

**2** He and Gabriella sat facing each other in the library in two matching wingback chairs. She had changed into a white one-piece dress hanging loose from a high waist. It had a square neckline edged with lace, and short puffed sleeves.

**3** Even though it was summer, a fire smouldered in the grate. 'We'll play a hand at cards,' Cuckoo said, conjuring a pack from within his waistcoat and tapping its edge against the folding table between them. 'If I win, I'll stay with you tonight. If you win, I'll leave. Okay?'

**9** 'ALL right,' Gabriella said. She had heard rumours of her husband's peculiar sexual practices, but she would give him the benefit of the doubt.

**2** Cuckoo pulled on his gloves and dealt

the cards. 'There's only two of us, so it'll have to be Mariage.'

**3** Gabriella played carelessly, since she wanted to lose, but no matter how indifferently she chose which card to lay down, she could not avoid winning.

**4** At the conclusion of the game, Cuckoo conceded. 'You've won.' He met her eyes for what seemed like the first time.

**5** 'Oh dear,' said Gabriella, who had been looking forward to the evening's conclusion.

**6** Cuckoo stood and picked up a poker to prod the dying ashes of the fire. 'Tomorrow we'll play again,' he said.

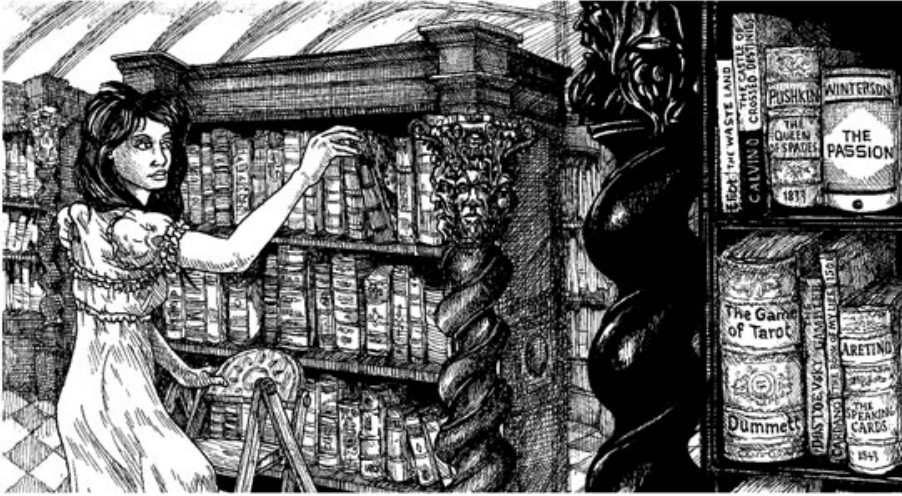
**10** GABRIELLA would just have to wait. She slept alone, restless in an unfamiliar bed, kicking heavy blankets onto the floor.

**2** When she awoke, she felt uneasy. Some hint of a dream that had failed to materialise, like thunder on a humid night.

**3** The next day three different servants paraded into her bedroom with a selection of things to eat on trays, but she only took some fruit and a little tea. All that day she did not see Cuckoo, except from a distance. Every time Gabriella was about to summon her courage to call out to him and ask him to wait for her, he slipped through a door and closed it behind him.

**4** Her new relatives were kind, but dis-

## FIVE WOUNDS



tant. Her father-in-law read her passages from the gazette about the wedding, while her mother-in-law embroidered a handkerchief. They were delighted with the gazette's account, but every time they turned to see its effect on Gabriella, they fell silent.

5 She spent most of the day in the library, checking to see if there were any interesting works on cryptography. She examined the chairs she and Cuckoo had used, moving them closer together. They were covered in a furred cloth that sprang to attention if you rubbed it the wrong way.

**11** AT dinner, Gabriella smiled at Cuckoo from the opposite end of the long table, but he could not respond. Later, they played Mariage in the library. 'I didn't know you liked cards,' she said.

2 'Well, I do.'

3 'I like codes,' Gabriella said. 'And ciphers.'

4 'Oh?'

5 'If you think about it, cards are a kind of code,' Gabriella said. 'Their true value is mathematical. In play, I mean,' she went on, 'but that value is represented by a design, by a picture.'

6 'Yes,' Cuckoo said had a clear idea in his head about what cards meant to him, and he did not want to complicate it with new and potentially confusing notions. It might undermine his ability to perform if he had to start thinking about codes.

7 Nonetheless, he wished to encourage her. It must be boring for her in the palace during the day. 'Go on,' he said, flicking his thumb along the edge of the deck he was shuffling.

8 Gabriella was warming to her theme. 'Well, maybe it's wrong to call the pic-

## THE TAROT

tures a code. I mean, the purpose isn't to disguise anything. But still, the images mean extra effort for the players.'

**9** She tucked her feet beneath her on the enormous padded chair. 'The most efficient system would be to just have a number, maybe a colour code for different suits. The pictures make it more difficult to tell which card is which, and they're not relevant for how the game works.'

**10** 'Most players are distracted by the pictures,' Cuckoo said, placing the cards on the small table. 'I look objectively. I count numbers.'

**11** 'That's not what I meant,' Gabriella said. 'The pictures are great. *Because* they're irrelevant.' She unfolded herself and turned over several cards, tracing the designs with her index finger. The Ten of Bells, the King of Leaves. 'I love these. Where are they from?'

**12** 'Germany.'

**13** 'They remind me of shop signs.' She looked at Cuckoo. 'I'm a bad player. I want the pictures to distract me.'

**12** 'THEY'RE not completely arbitrary,' Cuckoo said. 'The pictures, I mean. They're standardised to make them easier to print. And Kings come above Knaves, and so on.'

**2** 'What about the Tarot?'

**3** 'That's what I was thinking about be-

fore. Everyone wants to know what the cards *mean*. Doesn't matter. Only how they behave in play.'

**4** 'I'm interested in the Tarot,' Gabriella said. 'Some people think they're hieroglyphs, and they came from Egypt. That's why the cards reveal the future.'

**5** Cuckoo disagreed. 'When I play, I make my own future.'

**6** 'But the cards still reveal it, don't they?' Gabriella said. 'I'm not convinced by the hieroglyph theory,' she continued. 'I didn't know people used Tarot cards just to play games.'

**7** 'That's what they're for,' Cuckoo said. 'Games. Not fortune-telling.' Then Cuckoo made a guilty confession, a sentimental confession, regarding an impure impulse. 'Actually, I do have an idea about one of the pictures,' he said.

**8** 'Yes?' Gabriella said.

**9** 'I think the first trump may be an exception to the rule about the pictures being irrelevant to how the cards behave in a game.' He shifted in his chair.

**13** 'IT shows someone standing in front of a table,' Cuckoo said. 'Holding something or manipulating something.'

**2** 'There are objects on the table, sometimes coins. The coins are easier to identify. In some versions, there are other people, standing behind the central figure.'

## FIVE WOUNDS



3 'No one knows precisely what the subject is, which is why there are so many variations.'

4 'The tradition is corrupt,' Gabriella said. 'If the artist doesn't know what they're drawing, they can't draw it clearly or accurately.'

5 'I believe the picture shows a moneychanger,' Cuckoo said, 'or a conman playing one of those games where you guess which cup the bean is under. There's a clue in the name: the Bagatto.'

6 'I thought it was the Magician,' Gabriella said.

7 "'Bagatto" is the original name. "Small thing", "worthless thing". "Bagattino" is the name of a copper coin. It's the lowest

trump, which means it can be taken by any of the other trumps in play.'

8 'He can't be a moneychanger *and* a conman,' Gabriella said.

9 'Can't he? Some words have two meanings. "Rut" does. Why can't a picture?'

14 'I think "bagatto" is related to two other words,' Cuckoo said. "Barattare", which means "exchange", and "barare", which means "cheat".

2 'Bankers and tricksters both take your money. With a banker, the customer changes one kind of coin for another. With the gambler, you pay money for the possibility of winning more money. You pit your wits against him.

3 The moneychanger makes open and fair calculations. The trickster's game is rigged.'

4 Gabriella clapped her hands. 'Both swap things around. They're translators, interpreters.'

5 'In a way,' Cuckoo said. 'The moneychanger gives you a literal translation. You get the exact equivalent of whatever you paid him – minus his commission – but you get it in a different currency.

6 'But the trickster keeps putting you off. The bean is never under the cup you choose, but you're sure it'll be there next time, if you just have another go.'

**15** ‘HOW do you know that your interpretation’s right?’ Gabriella asked.

**2** ‘I don’t,’ Cuckoo admitted, ‘but it’s consistent with how the card behaves in play. As I said, the Bagatto is the lowest trump, so it’s weak, but it’s worth a lot of points when you count up at the end. So it’s vulnerable, but it’s also valuable. A trickster card.’

**3** ‘Well, that makes sense if it shows a conman,’ Gabriella said, ‘but not if it shows a moneychanger.’

**4** Cuckoo considered this for a moment. ‘Well, since it’s vulnerable,’ he said, ‘it’s more likely to move from one player to another than other cards are.’

**5** ‘Like the moneychanger’s coins. But anyway, no interpretation explains everything. The best is the one that explains more than the others.’

**6** ‘And every interpretation’s a gamble. Trying to understand a picture, or a word for that matter, is like guessing which cup the bean’s under.’

**7** ‘If you don’t want to make a mistake, don’t play.’

**16** GABRIELLA reached over to touch Cuckoo’s hand. ‘Angels are also interpreters,’ she said. ‘They carry messages from God, but they don’t charge commission. They don’t trick anyone.’



**2** Cuckoo looked at her hand touching his. ‘Are you sure nothing’s lost in translation?’

What about the parables in the Bible? Don’t they hide things? Shuffle the meaning out of sight before revealing it with a flourish at the end?’

**3** ‘But not to mislead,’ Gabriella said, taking her hand back.

**4** ‘Well,’ Cuckoo said, ‘aren’t you misleading someone if you withhold information from them?’

**5** ‘Is a card player misleading her opponents by not showing them her hand at the start of the game?’

**6** ‘Anyway,’ Cuckoo continued, picking up a theme that Gabriella had laid down,

## FIVE WOUNDS

'the Angel's a different card. It's one of the highest trumps. It shows the Last Judgement. I suppose that makes sense too.' He dealt the cards for another hand of Mariage.

7 'In real life, angels don't always have to end their messages with warnings.' Gabriella picked up her cards and began to rearrange them.

8 'BUT JUDGEMENT IS THE ONLY REAL ENDING,' Cuckoo countered. 'Even the settling of the scores at the end of a game is a judgement.'

9 'It's not fair though,' Gabriella said, playing her first card. 'The odds can be fixed, or you can have a bad hand.'

10 'It isn't a final judgement either,' Cuckoo said. 'It can change next game.'

17 'SPEAKING of which,' Gabriella said a minute later, 'I appear to have won again.'

2 'Beginner's luck.'

3 'You really don't want to stay?'

4 'Fair's fair,' Cuckoo said. 'We've got to stick to the rules.'

5 'We made the rules up, so why can't we change them?'

6 'If you change them in the middle of the game, winning doesn't mean anything.' Cuckoo was already rising to his feet.

7 'What do you play for, usually?' Gabriella asked, sweeping all the discarded cards together. 'Money?'

8 'Usually,' Cuckoo said.

9 'Why do you care? You're rich. Richer now we're married.'

10 'You need a stake,' Cuckoo said. 'If a choice has no consequences, it means nothing. But I don't care about money. Not really.'

11 'No?' Gabriella handed the gathered pack back to him.

12 'I'll prove it,' he said, tucking the cards into his waistcoat. 'How can I prove it? What about if I propose higher taxes? I mean at the next council meeting. I'm supposed to go to those, aren't I? Why not? Let them tax me.'

13 'Be careful,' Gabriella said. 'That's dangerous talk, if the wrong person hears you.'

14 'I am careful. I only speak to people I trust.'

15 Gabriella smiled.

18 THERE was a noise outside the library. 'Who's there?' Gabriella called.

2 'Shush,' Cuckoo said, tiptoeing towards the door. When he opened it, the gas flames guttered, as if a ghost had just passed by.

3 But there was no one, only a discarded feather duster.

19 AFTER Cuckoo had left, Gabriella sulked for a while. She was





beginning to suspect there was more going on here than met the eye. All that talk of tricksters had given her an idea.

2 That night, dreams flickered at the edge of her unconscious vision, growling, almost distinct, waiting for the right moment to pounce.

3 They would step into the open soon, so the next day she went back to the library and practised shuffling.

20 THAT evening, the game began as usual, but it progressed differently. The fortunes of the two players waxed and waned, as they would in a game between equally matched opponents.

2 Cuckoo looked at Gabriella. Had she guessed his strategy? Gabriella stared back. Had he guessed hers?

3 All along, Cuckoo had been stacking the deck to ensure he would lose. Now it

seemed that Gabriella was trying to beat him at his own game. On every hand he shuffled and dealt, he lost. On every hand she shuffled and dealt, she lost. Eventually, in a series of spectacularly incompetent plays, Gabriella succeeded in losing a hand that Cuckoo had dealt, and the game was his.

4 'Fair's fair. We have to stick to the rules,' Gabriella said.

5 Cuckoo put down the cards and removed his gloves. Her behaviour was puzzling. It seemed that his chivalrous deception had been misplaced.

6 Outside the library door, the hairless dog whined and scratched. It followed Cuckoo around, so he recognised its senile noises.

21 'HOW about a dance?' Gabriella asked. An impulse, but it felt right. Cuckoo had refused to dance



## FIVE WOUNDS

at the wedding, but maybe he would be less self-conscious now they were alone.

2 'There's no music,' he pointed out.

3 'There's always the music of the spheres.'

4 'I can't hear it.'

5 'I can, sometimes. Depends on the atmospheric conditions.'

6 'What's it like?'

7 'Avant-garde: weird time signatures, twenty-minute harp solos, seraphic drones, that kind of thing.'

8 'Not really dance music then.'

9 'Depends whether you're a higher angel. It's hard to copy their style if you don't have wheels.'



22 SINCE Cuckoo did not find this answer especially helpful, he tried a more specific question. 'Well, how do *you* dance to it?'

2 'Like a neurasthenic with a migraine,' Gabriella said. 'Works for me.'

3 They began to dance in the open area in front of the fire, getting in each other's way, then faster, closer, moving to the same strange rhythm, until Cuckoo clipped a wall and almost fell into his partner.

4 As he lost his footing, he had already begun to anticipate the imprint her fabric would leave on his precariously sealed skin.

5 He recalled the sting and the smell of burnt hair from a drop of molten wax that had accidentally fallen onto the back

of his hand, when he had not yet learnt how to angle the candle efficiently against the planes of his face.

6 He imagined the pattern of the weft of her dress as a scar, something to be retained indefinitely, and then he was surprised by the thought of her fingers touching the burn.

7 All this passed through his mind before he acted instinctively to interrupt the forward momentum of his frozen face by abruptly jutting an elbow out to his right.

8 It hit the wall just beside Gabriella's left ear. It left a dent.

9 He felt Gabriella's breath move his eyelashes – the only outward points of sensation in the dead, cratered moon that

## THE MUSIC OF THE SPHERES

confronted her, centimetres from her own face, which was now moist with a film of sweat.

**10** The pain in his elbow made him blink tears back. The liquid weighed his lashes down, so that her breath no longer moved them.

**11** He shook his head and blinked. She flinched, as if the blank denial was directed at her.

**23** ‘NO,’ he said, just as she began to move her mouth; whether to speak or gasp he did not know, because she gulped the sound back down, as if swallowing a hiccup.

**2** ‘No,’ he said again in an attempt to clarify the first iteration. ‘I didn’t mean you. It hurt. That’s all.’

**3** ‘Double negatives confuse me,’ she said. She kissed him.

**4** ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘That’s what I meant.’

**24** ‘I have to tell you something,’ he said, without thinking of the consequences. ‘I’m not Rut.’

**2** Gabriella did not flinch now. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ she replied. ‘You’re my husband, if you choose to be.’

**3** ‘There’s something else I have to tell you,’ he added, growing reckless. ‘This isn’t my face.’

**4** ‘That doesn’t matter either,’ Gabriella said. ‘I used to have wings.’

**5** Cuckoo could not quite see how this was equivalent, but he recognised a symbolic moment when he saw one. ‘That doesn’t matter either,’ he echoed. Now he was truly inspired. ‘You’re my wife, if you choose to be.’

**6** He took Gabriella’s hand and led her towards the library door. The two of them stepped over the hairless dog, which had now fallen asleep. They went towards Cuckoo’s rooms.

**25** ‘DON’T put the light on,’ he said. He was not ashamed of displaying his naked body, but he did not want her to see his withered features, which might betray and contradict his words of love.

**2** In the dark, he ran his fingers down her back, and she touched his face. Then the bride and groom went to give themselves pleasure.

**26** LATER, when it was already light outside, Gabriella said, ‘I can see your heart beating.’

**2** Cuckoo could see it too. He watched it jump against the skin of his chest and imagined it as a bird trapped in a cage.

**3** ‘Now I can feel it,’ she said, as she laid her palm against his breast. They sank back together into the hollow of the mattress, the sheets knotted around them.

**4** Cuckoo told Gabriella his story. Then

## FIVE WOUNDS

she spoke of her father, and of the message that had sealed his fate. 'I USED TO DREAM ABOUT HIM,' she said. 'I STILL DO, OR AT ANY RATE HE APPEARS IN MY DREAMS, EVEN IF THEY AREN'T REALLY ABOUT HIM.'

5 'THIS ISN'T ROMANTIC. I DON'T WAKE UP SCREAMING. THEY'RE NOT NIGHTMARES. THEY FEEL LIKE THEY COME FROM THE PART OF ME THAT WAS UNTOUCHED ON THE DAY OF HIS FUNERAL.'

6 'Untouched?' he said.

7 'Like your face,' she replied, touching it. 'Who are you?'

8 'No one you know,' Cuckoo said. 'No. Body.'

9 The words sat like stones, cold in his mouth. He spat them out carefully, one by one. He almost believed it was a lie.

10 'I lived by playing cards,' he said. 'God knows everything. God sees everything. Fortune's blind. I lived by Fortune because I didn't want to be seen.'

11 'So Fortune sent you?'

12 'No, God sent me, because He knew. But I still don't believe.'

13 'I believe in God, but I don't love Him,' Gabriella said. 'If He sent you, I want nothing to do with you. I hate His gifts. But I don't believe He sent you.'

2 'You mean, "MeNe, MeNe, TeKeL, UPHARSIN."?'

3 'Yes.'

4 Gabriella propped a pillow behind her and rolled a cigarette. 'Bad,' she said.

5 Cuckoo took the cigarette from her outstretched hand and carried it over to the gas lamp on the wall. 'Bad enough to deal with a bad man?' he asked, lifting the glass chimney and leaning in towards the flame. Careful.

6 'Yes,' Gabriella said, as he handed her the cigarette.

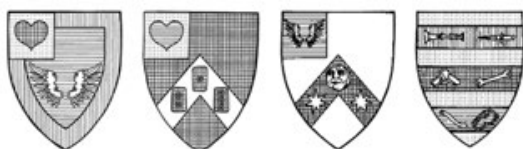
7 'I already owe him a favour.'

8 'Does he know who you are?'

9 Cuckoo lay down on the bed again. 'He knows who I used to be. Beyond that, I'm not sure.'

10 'Maybe you should find out.'

27 'HOW badly do you want to understand His message?' Cuckoo asked.



*The Bagatto*



## *Trails*

**1** THE messenger had arrived when the cock crowed and curfew ended. He had probably been waiting outside in the dark until the gates of the Ghetto were unbarred.

**2** Cur had been dreaming of meaty bones and bloody rabbits until someone threw a glass of water in his face.

**2** THE messenger took Cur to a palace. Inside, a familiar scent curled somewhere in the background. Clouds and loose-leaf tobacco.

**2** Cur was taken upstairs to a cosy room in which a middle-aged couple sat on either side of a small breakfast table. A hairless, farting dog lay flopped in front of a smouldering fire. Cur leaned over to scratch it between the ears, and it twitched its tail once.

**3** 'I wish to hire your services,' the man said. He tapped a yellowing copy of the gazette that lay folded on the table in

front of him. His breath stank of old socks from the tarry coffee he was sipping.

**4** 'How do you know what they are?' Cur said. He glanced at the headline on the gazette, which referred to a marriage from a couple of months ago.

**5** The man stood up and drew himself into a military posture, with his hands together behind his back. 'I've got friends on the Committee for Public Health.'

**6** 'Our son,' the woman interrupted. 'He's called Rut.' Her mouth was darkened with drinking chocolate. Her scorched hair was in curlers.

**7** 'He disappeared,' the man said, moving over to the window and looking down.

**8** 'You want me to find him?' Cur said.

**9** 'No, he came back,' the woman said.

**10** 'What then?' Cur nudged the dog with his foot and it grunted.

**11** 'We want to know what happened while he was away,' the man said.

## LEAVENED WITH THEIR SAVOUR

12 'Ask him,' Cur said.

13 'He can't remember,' the woman said. She dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

14 'If we know what happened,' the man added, still not looking at Cur, 'then maybe we'll understand why he's changed.'

15 'For the worse?' Cur said.

16 'For the better,' the man admitted.

17 'Still, it's upsetting,' the woman said.

18 'We like tradition in this family,' the man said, glancing at the portrait above the fire, which showed an admiral in armour with ships on fire in the background. 'Here.' He picked up a folded shirt from the window seat and handed it to Cur. 'This is his.'

19 'Where do I start?' Cur said.

20 'Try the Thieves' Guild,' the man suggested.

21 'You know I can't leave the city? If the trail hits water, that's it. I can't follow.'

22 'Try anyway. Tell us what you find out.'

23 'Do you want me to talk to him? It might help.'

24 'Not today. He's sleeping late.'

25 'He just got married.' The woman smiled and touched her husband's hand.

26 He pointed at the gazette. 'Front-page news.'

27 'I see,' Cur said. 'Does anyone else live here? A woman, perhaps? A young woman?'

28 'Our daughter-in-law,' the woman said. 'Gabriella.'

29 'Gabriella. Where did she come from?'

30 'An old family,' the man said. 'But she has nothing to do with this.'

3 CUR thought otherwise, but he began at the Thieves' Guild anyway. It looked naked in the daytime. Its entrance was painted like a gaping mouth, but with the doors closed the mouth was gagged.

2 He sniffed a rag torn from Rut's shirt. Civet, brine, fried onions.

3 The trail was cold and confused. Rut came here frequently, so the invisible lines left by his passing were scored one on top of another at this central point.

4 Around the entrance, an empty mass of olfactory scribble. Cur needed to isolate the most recent lines by walking around a perimeter slightly away from the building, where the concentration of trails began to break up.

5 He made a few false starts, but in the process, he discovered that in all the recent traces, two other scents crossed Rut's. Not until he had already left the Guild, so they were not with him; rather, they waited for Rut outside and followed him.

6 One of them belonged to the photographer, Magpie, whom Cur had not seen since having his portrait taken. The

## FIVE WOUNDS

other scent had been in the palace that morning, but he had paid no attention to it, so he could not be sure. Honeycomb, porridge, vanilla.

**4** CUR located a trail where Rut was initially alone, and then accompanied by his two shadows.

**2** He followed it to the point at which the scents mingled and combusted, near the fish market. The alley was little frequented, and so the lines there remained relatively clean.

**3** On top of the three trails, a faint rusty undertone of blood: a smear, or a few scattered drops. Seasoning, like a pinch of salt to improve flavour. Not a murder: a scuffle perhaps, a skinned nose or fist.

**4** Beyond the blood, the scents of the three men jumbled, as they meandered towards the water. Sweaty. Cur lowered his nose to the walls and sniffed deeper. Something else, a faint hint of rot cut through the salty blood. Fermenting, like mushrooms or mould.

**5** Crow, the paint expert. What was he doing here? He had not stayed long, just long enough to brush the bricks with his exudations.

**6** Time to track him down.





## *Incognito*

**1** A chipped enamel bowl and an unglazed water; a framed woodcut of the Virgin and Child, nailed above the doorway opposite the foot of the bed on which he lay; a whitewashed wattle-and-daub room, the texture of the horsehair visible underneath the plaster.

**2** He blinked and sat up. His clothes had been washed and folded over a wooden chair with a straw seat.

**3** Rut sat up and poured some water into the bowl. He splashed himself, then listened. Chickens running, scattering dirt, someone whistling at them and throwing feed; more distantly, an excited dog harassing lowing cattle.

**4** 'Is anybody there?' His voice sounded unfamiliar to him in the blank space of the room. He was not sure if it had carried, and he was about to try to open the door when he heard skipping footsteps.

**5** A young woman opened the door and hopped on the threshold, her mouth open, still holding the can with which

she had been feeding the chickens. Behind her came a man in a stained smock and a woman holding a rolling pin with flour on her hands.

**2** 'HE'S awake!' cried the daughter, staring at Rut.

**2** 'Shush,' said the man. He stepped in front of his daughter and removed his cap, twisting it in his hands.

**3** 'My husband found you at the cross-roads,' said the woman, 'but nothing to say where you came from. What happened?'

**4** 'I don't know,' Rut said, suddenly confused. He felt his nose. It had been broken, and there were several scabbed lumps on the back of his head.

**5** 'Do you want us to send a message to anyone?' the man said.

**6** 'No.'

**7** 'What's your name?' the girl said.

**8** 'I don't know that either.' Rut regarded her. However he had ended up here, the situation had its advantages.



## *A Meeting of Minds*

**1** MAGPIE was perusing the chemical section of the shelves, running his fingers through the dust on the surface of the thick glass bottles. He was waiting for Crow, who was upstairs.

**2** He studied his fingertips and frowned. He was having problems with dust in his studio. Not like this: particulate and dry. In his studio, it was yellow fluff and hair. It gathered in dense, interwoven clumps in the dustpan.

**3** Every morning he swept the floor obsessively on his hands and knees, and every morning there was more. Whenever he thought he had gathered every last particle, he noticed another hair, or another delicate, woolly frond skittering away from the breeze generated by his breath.

**4** He could not understand where it was coming from. He did not own anything yellow, yet there it was, in congealed

flecks which also stuck to his clothes after they had been washed.

**2** CERTAINLY his skin was a problem, but he did not believe he was capable of generating that much hair, and he did not own a dog or a cat.

**2** He overcame his distaste and sifted through the dust for clues. His suspicions were confirmed by the discovery of toenail clippings: conclusive evidence, because he always disposed of his own tidily.

**3** However, the origin of this detritus remained a mystery. Fortunately, his treasure trove remained immune from the infestation.

**3** THE bell on Crow's shop door rang. Since Magpie was not expecting to see him, it took him a few seconds to recognise Cur.

**2** 'What are you doing here?' Cur said.

## DUST

3 'Waiting for you perhaps,' Magpie said.

4 The bell rang again. Cuckoo and Gabriella entered. Cuckoo looked different.

Not like Rut exactly, but not like his old self either. Gabriella's presence disturbed Magpie more. Had Cuckoo told her anything? But then, why would he?

5 'What are you doing here?' Gabriella said.

6 Magpie twitched. 'Who are you talking to?'

7 Gabriella indicated Cur. 'Him.'

8 'Waiting for you perhaps,' Cur said.

4 AS they all regarded each other, Crow rattled down the stairs from the workshop, answering the several dings of the bell. He was pleased with the tableau that met his eyes. A pity Magpie could not take a daguerreotype.

2 Crow imagined all the heads in the room separated from their bodies and floating in jars, dumbly, waiting for the inscription of ulterior motives upon them.

3 'Can I help anyone?' he asked. He could not stop a note of sarcasm entering his voice whenever he uttered this phrase.

5 'MeNe, MeNe, TeKeL, UP-HARSIN,' said a loud voice. The jars on the shelves clinked against each other.

2 'What?' Crow said, looking under the counter for the source of the voice. 'Who's there?'

3 'How do you spell that?' Magpie said.

4 Cur barked a short laugh. 'It's all over the walls outside.'

5 'You don't pronounce it like that though,' Gabriella said.

6 'What does it mean?' Cuckoo said to her.

6 'MeNe, MeNe, TeKeL, UP-HARSIN,' the voice said.

2 'Where there's a will, there's a way,' Crow said.

3 'Freedom exists only in the kingdom of dreams,' Gabriella said.

4 'Give a dog a bad name and hang him,' Cur said.

5 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained,' Cuckoo said.

6 'Every bird thinks its own nest fine,' Magpie said.

7 'MeNe, MeNe, TeKeL, UPHARSIN,' the voice said.

8 'One must howl with the wolves,' Cur said.

9 'Better to be a knave than a fool,' Magpie said.

10 'Don't judge a book by its cover,' Cuckoo said.

11 'The devil can quote scripture for his own ends,' Gabriella said.



12 'You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs,' Crow said.

13 'McNe, McNe, TeKeL, UPHARSIN,' the voice said.

14 'The cowl does not make the monk,' Cuckoo said.

15 'Love me, love my dog,' Cur said.

16 'Either Caesar, or nothing,' Crow said.

17 'Tell me who your friend is, and I'll tell you who you are,' Magpie said.

18 'A little nonsense now and then is relished by the wise man,' Gabriella concluded.

7 THE voice cleared its throat, and began to speak again. 'McNe—'

2 'All right, all right,' Gabriella said. 'Jesus. Enough already.' The voice swallowed the next word with a cough, and concluded with a puff of multi-coloured smoke in the centre of the room.

3 'What just happened?' Cuckoo asked.

He touched his mouth with a gloved fingertip. 'I didn't mean to say any of that.'

4 'None of us did,' Cur said. He sniffed the evacuated air. 'There are five of us,' he pointed out. 'But only four words. Or three, depending on how you count.'

5 'One too few then,' Magpie said. He readjusted a pair of jars that had rattled themselves out of line. 'Or two, depending on how you count.'

6 'Three too many,' Crow said. 'Or two, depending on how you count.'

8 'MAYBE all four words mean the same thing,' Gabriella said. 'Maybe they're all for the same person.' She turned to Cuckoo. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'This sort of thing happens to me all the time.'

2 'Anyway, I think the cat's out the bag as far as I'm concerned. Like the man said, "McNe, McNe, TeKeL, UPHARSIN".



That's what I'm here for. Still, a little privacy would be appreciated.' She stared at Cur and Magpie.

3 'I know where I'm not wanted,' Magpie said.

4 'Do you?' Cur said, and snapped behind him to move him out the door.

9 CUR closed the shop door behind the two of them as he left. 'You've seen this message before,' Gabriella said to Crow.

2 Crow lifted the counter flap and stepped forward into the shop. 'Did you get home all right?' he said to Cuckoo.

3 Cuckoo remembered that Rut had not seen Crow before. 'When?' he said.

4 'Oh, yes; that's right.' Crow corrected himself. 'You were out cold when I last saw you.'

5 'Was I?' Cuckoo said. Careful, careful. Who did Crow think he was talking to?

6 A dry spatter of pebbles and dirt against the windows, children laughing. 'Little shits, they think it's funny, Crow said.

10 'YOUR shop sign's a dog,' Gabriella said. 'Why?'

2 Crow moved to one of the shelves, where there was a small collection of books and leather-bound manuscripts. He picked one up, and opened it to a passage that was already marked. 'THE DOG IS THE MOST PHILOSOPHICAL CREATURE IN THE WORLD,' he said.

3 'WHEN THE EGYPTIANS WISH TO INDICATE A SCRIBE, OR A PROPHET, OR AN EMBALMER, OR THE SPLEEN, OR A JUDGE, THEY DRAW THE HIEROGLYPH OF A DOG.

4 'A SCRIBE, SINCE HE WHO WISHES TO BECOME AN ACCOMPLISHED SCRIBE MUST BARK CONTINUALLY AND BE FIERCE AND SHOW FAVOURS TO NONE, JUST LIKE DOGS.

5 'AND A PROPHET, BECAUSE THE DOG

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LOOKS INTENTLY BEYOND ALL OTHER  
BEASTS UPON THE IMAGES OF THE GODS,  
LIKE A PROPHET.

6 'AND AN EMBALMER, BECAUSE HE LOOKS  
UPON THE BODIES WHICH HE HAS TAKEN  
CARE OF NAKED AND DISSECTED.

7 'AND THE SPLEEN, SINCE THE DOG ALONE  
AMONG OTHER ANIMALS HAS A VERY LIGHT  
SPLEEN. IF DEATH OF MADNESS OVERCOMES  
HIM, IT HAPPENS BECAUSE OF HIS SPLEEN.

8 'AND A JUDGE, BECAUSE AS THE DOG  
GAZES INTENTLY UPON THE IMAGES OF THE  
GODS, SO THE JUDGE OF ANCIENT TIMES  
CONTEMPLATED THE KING IN HIS  
NAKEDNESS.'

11 'THE spleen means anger,' Crow  
said, flapping the page so the  
book looked as if it was flying. 'It is the  
seat of anger.'

2 'I know the text,' Gabriella said.

3 'Who is the scribe? Who is the  
prophet? Who is the spleen? Who is the  
embalmer? Who is the judge?'

4 'Am I the judge?' Cuckoo said. He was  
not sure if Crow's questions were rhetorical.

5 'You're the scribe, obviously,' Crow  
said. 'I'm the judge.'

6 'Oh.' Cuckoo was disappointed.

7 'Don't listen to him,' Gabriella said.  
'You can be the judge if you want.'

8 'No, I'm the judge,' Crow said.

9 'Maybe you're the embalmer,' Gabriella  
said.

10 Crow dropped the book and banged  
the counter flap up and down. 'I am the  
judge!'

12 'HOW can I be the scribe?'  
Cuckoo said. 'I'm not fierce. I  
don't even like dogs.'

2 'A gambler lives under Fortune's sign,'  
Crow said, 'and she does not favour any-  
one. He must bark if anyone approaches.  
He can't let his opponents get close.'

3 An uncomfortable pause. 'I'm no gam-  
bler,' Cuckoo said. 'I play an occasional  
hand of cards, but only for fun. I'm  
pretty well off really, so I don't need to  
gamble.'

4 'My mistake.' Crow smiled. 'Anyway,  
we know who the prophet is.'

5 'I wouldn't believe everything you read  
in books,' Gabriella said.

6 'But I should believe everything little  
girls tell me? Sugar and spice and all that?  
... MeNe, etc., etc. Have you heard it be-  
fore?'

7 'Read, not heard,' Gabriella said. She  
turned a page in the book Crow had dis-  
carded.

8 He snatched it from her and closed it.  
'It wasn't delivered the same way then?'

9 'No.'

10 'Was it hidden? A personal commu-  
nication? Private?'

11 'On the contrary,' Gabriella said. 'It  
glows in the dark.'

12 'It's from the book of Daniel, you know. Originally.'

13 'I don't think that matters anymore. It belongs to all of us now.'

14 'Maybe. Or it belongs to one of us. We can work out who. A process of ... elimination.'

13 CUCKOO touched Gabriella on the arm. Even without the supernatural paraphernalia, meeting Magpie and Crow together had been a bad omen: the only two witnesses to his transformation, even if one of them did not know what he had seen. Or so Cuckoo hoped.

2 'Let's go,' he said.

3 'You can't escape your destiny,' Crow said.

4 'Is that a threat?' Gabriella asked.

5 'An interpretation,' Crow said.

14 GABRIELLA took Cuckoo's hand. Perhaps it had been a mistake to come here. But then, surely the voice had confirmed that she was in the right place, if nothing else? 'I think I had a warning for you,' Gabriella said. 'A dream. But I can't remember most of it.'

2 'Oh yes?' Crow said. 'Another time, perhaps. I've had enough excitement for one day.' He was not interested in Gabriella's dreams now that God had spoken directly to him.

3 'Well, maybe it wasn't for you.'

4 Crow held the door open for his remaining guests. His exalted destiny awaited their departure. 'See you then,' he said.

5 'Come on,' Gabriella said to Cuckoo. 'I need to talk to the man outside anyway.'

6 'Which one?' Cuckoo said.

15 OUTSIDE, Cur regarded his companion. Magpie stared at the floor and kicked at a tuft of grass, which emitted a small plume of sand. He kept his back to the sun, which was shining down the length of the alley. His fingertips were grey. 'Dust,' Magpie said, holding the offending hand out into the beam of the sun.

2 'What about it?'

3 'It spoils everything.' Magpie's skin did not smell, which was curious, but his body had a mineral halo. A walking laboratory.

4 'Children like playing in mud.'

5 Magpie looked directly at Cur. 'Dust and dirt have the same mother, but different fathers. Dust comes from earth and air; dirt from earth and water.'

6 'Or earth and shit,' Cur said. 'I learn things from dust. Skin, hair, pollen, seeds, mites, lichen. Soot, ashes.'

7 A gang of children ran past, led by a boy with no shoes and an eye patch. Several of them flung pebbles at the leaded



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windows of Crow's shop. Magpie flinched. 'Impure,' he said. 'Everything the body sheds. Death.'

**8** The boy with the eye patch stopped and turned back to lob an apple core at Cur, who caught it. 'Everything dies,' he said. He tried to pick a seed out of the wizened brown flesh with his finger.

**9** 'Death isn't disgusting. But dust is neither dead nor alive. A boundary, like the edge of a shadow.'

**10** 'A boundary?'

**11** 'The edge of a shadow divides light and darkness,' Magpie said, gathering his cloak around him. 'Dust is the boundary between the visible and the invisible. But it won't stay fixed. It moves with every puff of air. Dust is the enemy of every daguerreotypist.'

**12** 'I don't know anything about daguerreotypes,' Cur said. He had never seen his own image. The picture Magpie had taken of him lay unexamined in its case inside a drawer in the Ghetto.

**13** 'Dust on the lens flares light,' Magpie said. 'Dust on the plate means marks on the image. Interference.'

**14** 'No. Dust is the message,' Cur said. He dropped the apple core in the dirt.

**16** HE was about to say more when the shop door opened. Gabriella and her companion joined them. 'We're

finished,' the man said, walking ahead.

**2** Cur, concentrating on Gabriella, let him pass. She smelled like the Bora wind: of mountains and snowy meadows; but also of hair dye and starch, cheap tobacco.

**3** She managed a shrug in response to his unspoken question. 'Meet me later,' she said. 'I tried to explain when we met before, but you wouldn't listen. It might be too late now. Anyway.'

**4** 'Where do we meet?' Cur asked.

**5** 'At the palace,' Gabriella said.

**6** 'Which palace?'

**7** 'My husband's, of course.'

**8** 'His name?'

**9** 'Rut,' Gabriella said.

**10** Cur frowned. But he nodded and stood aside. This girl was full of surprises. After the couple had departed, Cur re-entered the shop. Magpie followed.

**17** 'WHO were they?' Cur said.

**2** Crow crossed his arms and leaned on the counter. 'Ask them yourself.'

**3** 'I will.'

**4** 'Well then.'

**5** Magpie was standing too close to Cur, who gave him a shove. 'Do you know her well?' Cur said to Crow.

**6** 'I've never seen her before.'

**7** 'Go on,' Magpie said, getting too close again. 'I know why you're here. Tell him.'

## A CURE

8 'You want paints?' Crow asked Cur.

9 'No.' He growled at Magpie, who giggled but took a step back.

10 'Nobody wants to buy paints anymore. But you want something.'

11 'A cure,' Magpie said. He reached over to poke Cur. 'Go on.'

12 'What if someone has two natures,' Cur said. 'And they need to keep one of them under control. How would they do that?'

2 'I told you about this,' Magpie said to him. 'You agreed. Remember? When I took your picture?'

3 'Maybe,' Cur said. He recalled their conversation differently, but he picked up the packet anyway. His fingers traced its outline.

18 CROW went to the case in which he kept his poisons. 'This'll do the trick,' he said, selecting a sample of the purest arsenic he had been able to obtain, hiding the skull-and-crossbones on the label with his body, then turning the jar so it faced the wall.

2 'What is it?'

3 'Does it matter? It'll do what you need, but it might not take effect straight away. You've got to complete the course – and stay off alcohol while you're at it.'

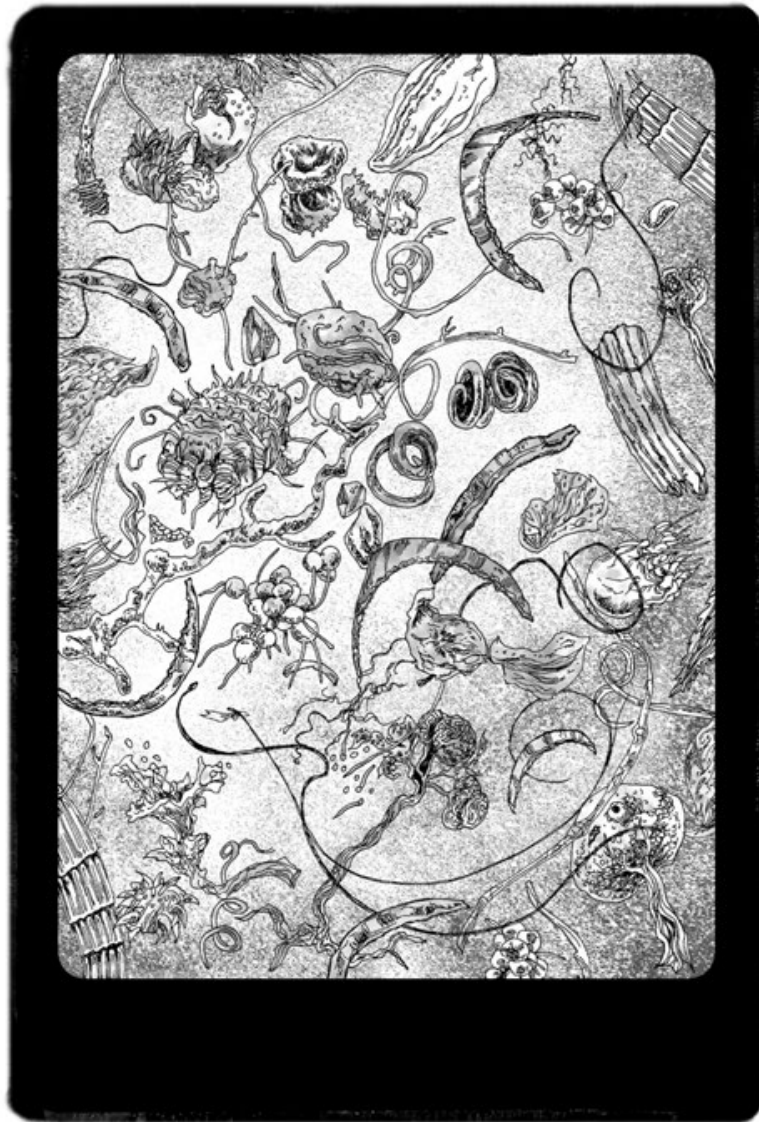
4 'Oh, it's not for me,' Cur said. 'A friend.'

5 'Of course. Grind it up and add it to their food.'

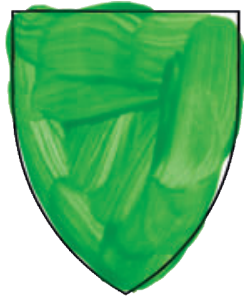
19 CUR sniffed the package. Metallic: brittle flakes. A faint smell of garlic. It reminded him of one of the pigments in the palace, but he could not remember which.



*A Meeting of Minds*



*Dust*



## *A Dog Returneth to His Vomit*

**1** RUT was not enjoying living on a farm. The countryside stank, and the insects bothered him.

**2** At sunset, clouds of gnats hung in the air at head height and brushed against his face. Like a spider's web, but they touched only at distinct points, where they left a reflexive itching.

**3** When the sun set outside the curtainless windows of his room, the gnats collected like a plague in a thick layer at the bottom of the frame and flicked and jumped up towards the light of the lantern inside.

**4** Hundreds of tiny flies drifted past at dusk like dandelion seeds. Sometimes bigger flies in diseased shades of yellow and green, surrounded by a corona where the light inside diffused through the hair on their bodies.

**5** When he smacked them with paper, they exploded. Rut smeared their guts on the glass.

**2** HIS only consolation was the farmer's daughter, but so far she was merely friendly: the same lukewarm responses she'd offer anyone.

**2** In the mornings, at an ungodly hour, he clumsily milked cows who shuffled and mooed in protest as he mashed their udders with chilblained hands, his face pressed against their shit-spattered hides.

**3** He was determined to get something in return for his time and labour, but there was nothing on the farm he wanted – apart from the girl.

**3** ONE day, the cows were all in their stalls and the farmer's daughter had stopped to light a lantern. Its orange glow isolated her in a corner of the barn.

**2** She was wearing her father's old boots, which she had to shuffle along in like clogs. As she left the lantern's charmed circle of illumination, Rut blocked her path.

## WHAT DO I WANT?

**3** She raised her hand in protest. He grabbed it. She winced. He slapped at her thigh with his free hand. 'Let go,' she said.

**4** 'You've got something I want, but I can't remember what. Remind me.'

**5** 'Let go.'

**6** 'Tell me. What do I want? Who am I?'

**4** RUT'S other hand gripped the back of her thigh more tightly. She struggled, and he knew she was about to cry for help. To quiet her, he banged the back of her head against the wooden post to which he had her pinned. Just a tap, but she cried out anyway. The horse whinnied in its stall, and banged its withers against the partition, which shivered.

**2** He kicked the girl's legs out from under her. 'You're attracting attention,' he said. She tried to struggle to her feet. He knelt down beside her and slammed her head against the post, harder this time. 'I told you,' he said, less politely. 'Be nice.'

**3** She tried to raise her arms, grabbing ineffectually at the back of his neck. He banged her head as hard as he could, then once again to be sure. She stopped struggling.

**4** The horse snorted and reared up, tossing its head; the cows lowed in protest. A drop of blood fell into the milk.

**5** 'NOW I remember,' Rut said. As his past life welled up inside him, he tried to

hold it back, so that he would not disappear under its rush.

**2** HE WAS SWALLOWING HIS OWN VOMIT AND ITS POISON WAS FLOODING BACK INTO HIS SYSTEM. HE FELT THE BURNING AND CORROSION OF ITS PASSING.

**3** Finally his head cleared, and he felt renewed. He stood up. There were questions to be answered. He needed to return to the city, but maybe not just yet.

**4** The lantern swung in a breeze from the door. He prodded the body with his foot. Obviously he had to leave, but he should let her parents know who their guest had been. Only polite.

**5** He returned to his room for ink and paper and wrote a short note thanking them for their hospitality, which he signed and left on the girl's body. Tracing the letters of his name for what felt like the first time was immensely satisfying.

**6** He skimmed a mouthful of rosy milk as he walked out of the barn.





## *Abdication*

**1** CUR waited in the library with the hairless dog, which had followed him up from the entrance hall, grumbling as it climbed the stairs.

**2** Gabriella and her companion arrived, accompanied by a servant carrying a refreshments tray. After the maid had left, Gabriella fussed over the contents of the tray while she composed herself. 'Tea?' she enquired, looking up.

**3** She waved a teapot promiscuously at the two men, tracing what appeared to be an elaborate figure in the air (perhaps imagining the spout as a pen nib), although its weight caused her arm to wobble, thus rendering the figure's outline uncertain.

**4** Her companion pushed a doily-covered china plate at Cur. 'Biscuit?'

**5** Cur shoved a stick of shortbread into his mouth. He gagged on it then slurped down some tea, after which he managed

to break the biscuit up with his teeth. His two companions were silent as they listened to the exaggerated sounds of his teeth and throat.

**6** 'Another?' the man suggested. Cur was already reaching out when the girl intercepted and confiscated the plate.

**7** 'I'm Gabriella,' she said. 'This is my husband. His name is Rut.'

**2** 'HE may be your husband, but he isn't Rut,' Cur said, speaking through a paste of shortbread. He closed his mouth and continued mashing up the shortbread.

**2** 'What?' Gabriella said.

**3** Cur waved his hands to indicate he was nearly finished. He swallowed before continuing. 'Different smell.'

**4** 'But I look like him,' the man said.

**5** 'Appearances can lie. Scents don't.'

**6** 'Are you going to tell anyone?' Gabri-



ella asked. She placed her hands around the teapot to stop them shaking.

7 'Depends.'

8 'On what?' Gabriella said.

9 'Tell me how you know about my dream.'

10 'What dream?'

11 'Don't play games.' Cur sprang up and padded to the door, as if to call Rut's parents. The dog's eyes followed him.

12 'I'm not,' Gabriella said. She came to the door and covered his hand with her own. 'Honest.' She looked at her husband, who nodded.

3 WHEN Gabriella had explained, Cur spoke again. 'When we met,' he said, 'you told me I woke up too soon and missed part of my dream.'

2 'I remember that much,' Gabriella said. 'It happens sometimes. Like a codicil attached to a will – but I can't remember what was in it.'

3 Cur summarised her own words for her.

4 'I can give you the obvious interpretation,' she said when he had finished, 'but without the original dream I can't guarantee its reliability.'

5 'So: I'd say your parents are alive, but reaching them is going to be hard work. If I'm right, the death symbolism is a bit heavy-handed, but that's not my fault. It's your dream.'

6 She paused. 'I don't think you actually have to die. That really would be over the top. No doubt some painful, redemptive ritual is required. Details are up to you. Improvise.'

4 'WHAT are you going to do about me?' Cuckoo asked. 'About us,' Gabriella said. She touched the cuff of Cuckoo's sleeve.

2 'I don't know,' Cur said. 'You're pretty cosy for an impostor and his dupe.'

3 'Things aren't what they seem,' Gabriella said.

4 'Well, I have to think.' Cur turned to Cuckoo. 'Why are you disguised as Rut anyway?'

5 'I wanted a new life.'

6 Cur barked. 'Don't we all.'

7 'I took his.'

8 'What did you do with him?'

9 Cuckoo looked away. 'I didn't kill him.'

10 'What about the other man? At the shop, I mean. The photographer.'

11 'Magpie? He helped with Rut.'

12 'Did he now?' Cur mulled this over for a moment. 'Why?'

13 'Er, I don't really know,' Cuckoo said, when Cur refused to fill the silence.

14 It wasn't necessary to point out the inadequacy of this reply, but it was as good a moment as any to withdraw. Cur

## FIVE WOUNDS



would leave Cuckoo to ponder the wisdom of making deals with the devil when you did not know the precise terms of the contract.

15 But then, had he not made his own deal, and with the same partner?

5 CUR wandered in a daze among the fish-market: stalls of bream in serried rows, arranged in imitation of the scales on their bodies, shapeless sole flopped on top of one another, lobsters feeling out their surroundings, eels writhing in buckets. Cut grass and lemon; fertiliser and nappies.

2 Even if Gabriella was correct, did it change anything? He was still who he was. But something had already changed. It had begun at the fencing academy. He did not know what the change meant, but he decided to give himself over to it.

3 It was only when he was living inside the story, without knowing what might happen next, that he could think of a way to escape its inexorable progress.

6 ON the way back to the Ghetto, Cur reviewed his training with the fencing master, but he found it difficult to distinguish individual sessions.

2 If he ran his hands over his body, he could list every cut, abrasion, sprain and bruise, but he could not remember what order he had received them in or how they had been inflicted.

3 Recollected sensations, whose vividness was somehow related to their lack of specificity, but these lost sensations floated in a mental ether, isolated from one another like specimens in jars.

4 Nothing that might be classified as an event, which is to say: none of the jars had labels.

5 He had memorised routines: set sequences of movements whose whole point was to prepare for their own dissolution in the unexpected response that interrupted their progress.

6 Only when his opponent departed from the script did a true event occur, obliging him to respond in kind. Cur had learnt to use routine to prepare for its opposite: to put himself in A STATE OF GRACE WITH CHANCE.

7 HE knew the fight he sought would not be an orthodox one. The fencing master had techniques for opposing pikes and halberds, and even firearms, although the latter were not very reliable. But he had no idea how to fight teeth and claws.

2 The very notion seemed absurd to him. Since he felt that way, Cur had not revealed his plans beyond an initial, hesitant enquiry.

3 Fortunately, he did not need an efficient method for killing. He only needed a method that refused everything the black dog had done to him.

8 CUR had hoped a decisive moment would present itself when his training was sufficiently advanced, but as time went on, he realised his life proceeded in much the same way that each individual bout did, leading not to a terminus but

only to a series of potential departure points, none of which could be isolated or transformed into a final revelation without a corresponding leap of faith on his part.

2 But he was too dull to make the leap. It was all he could do to place one foot in front of another on his way back to the Ghetto.

9 HERE, now, at the far end of the bridge that led home, Mr X was waiting, smelling of chalk and baby powder. Move forward, one step at a time. 'An execution is imminent,' Mr X said.

2 'Whose?'

3 'A noble.'

4 'Unusual. What for?'

5 'Treasonous talk,' Mr X said. 'Of the worst kind. Fiscal irresponsibility.'

6 'Who?' Cur watched the birds wheel and churn around the giant cranes at the edges of the open space.

7 'A man named Rut.'

8 Cur looked at Mr X. Who did he mean? Or rather, which version of Rut? 'Where is he?'

9 'Family palace,' Mr X said. 'He disappeared, then came back. Might have something to do with it. None of our business.'

10 'What's he accused of?'

11 'I told you. Treason.'

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12 'What's the evidence?' Two of the dogs loped past behind Mr X. One of them was carrying a bone, and the other was feinting and nipping around its companion's mouth, trying to snatch it away.

13 'Denunciation. Servant girl with a grudge.'

14 'Hardly conclusive. He didn't look like a traitor to me.'

15 'Oh?'

16 'I'm doing some work for his parents. I thought you knew.'

17 'It doesn't matter. What does a traitor look like anyway? It's a hidden crime, like poisoning. You can't smell it.'

18 'But I know him.'

19 'So?'

20 'You want me to kill him anyway?'

21 Mr X gathered his matted robes around himself. 'Why would I be telling you otherwise?'

22 'I thought you said it was an execution.'

23 'Execution, assassination. What's the difference?'

24 Cur placed his feet apart and leaned forward. 'No,' he said.

25 'No?'

26 'No.' Now the word was an affirmation, a credo.

10 'WHAT do you mean, no?' Mr X said.

2 'If you need an interpretation, I can recommend a good prophet.'

3 Mr X began to protest. Cur drew his sword. Mr X blanched. Cur turned the rapier around and clubbed him down with the hilt.

4 Then the black dog rose up from its nest of bone and gristle under one of the cranes, its eyes bloodshot, and its claws unclipped. The claws dragged in the dust of the Ghetto, tracing patterns as it galloped across the space separating it from Cur.

5 As it approached, Cur stepped in front of the prone figure of Mr X, who was crawling out of the way. Cur swished his rapier through the air.

11 THE black dog gnawed on its own anger. Enough was enough. Cur had to learn his place once and for all. 2 He was too valuable to kill, but it would take some part of him as tribute – a reminder of what he had irrevocably lost long ago.

12 CUR held his sword in line. Its weight pulled his arm down, but he resisted the pull, and his hand did not waver.

2 He imagined his face from the outside as a mask. He imagined it was made of wax.

3 He moved the blade down fractionally as the space between him and the black



dog narrowed. Then he shifted the point up, up as it launched itself.

**13** ITS body passed the blade and slammed into his side. Its heat smothered him.

**2** His left hand was an alien creature, shouting with pain, trying to drown him out. His opponent disengaged, then turned back and spat two fingers out.

**14** CUR was on the ground, and as the black dog circled him, he kicked out to keep it at bay.

**2** His blood congealed in the same dust his boots raised. He could smell it, but he did not respond to its call.

**3** He said, 'ON THE NIGHT I FIRST UNDERSTOOD MY FATHER WAS DEAD, I SCREAMED AND WANTED TO BITE. I GROUND MY TEETH UNTIL MY JAW ACHED.

**4** 'Useless, impotent passion. But the opposite's true as well: power can be cold. And who told me he was dead? You did, and you're a liar.'

**5** Cur made sure to give his words no inflection. After he had spoken, he took hold of the sword, got to his feet and brought the point back into line. He flicked blood from the remains of his left hand, then extended it backwards for balance.

**6** The other dogs in the Ghetto began to gather and bark, but they made no move to stop him or come between him and the black dog.

**15** THE black dog stayed just outside Cur's reach. It was beginning to understand this was not just one of his tantrums.

**2** On the contrary, he was almost unre-

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cognisable – barely even dog-like. Maybe he was was a bad investment, no longer an asset.

**3** The black dog kept its eyes on Cur as it licked the severed fingers and lapped the blood spilled in the dust, which furred its tongue.

**4** It circled him until thick coils of hate and fury burned its throat and stomach. It leapt again, just as Cur took a single step forward, lunging.

**16** THE rapier blade went down the black dog's throat. As it impaled itself, its weight forced the blade down to the floor.

**2** Cur let go of the hilt and the black dog collapsed. It gagged and choked, trying to grip the hilt with its front paws.

**3** Cur knelt by its side and spoke into its ear, so no one else could hear. 'I'M NOT YOUR HEIR,' he said. 'I'M NOT YOUR SON.'

**17** CUR walked to the foot of the bridge and threw the packet that Crow had given him into a canal.

**2** He watched it sink, imagining the waters closing once again over his own head, fighting, struggling mindlessly for breath, but then he was breathing easily, in rhythm with his movements.

**3** In. Lunge, thrust, withdraw. Out. Relax.

**4** He walked over the bridge and out of the Ghetto.

**18** HE made for the public ferry. He needed to leave before the dogs decided to bring him back – or kill him. He was improvising, as the fencing master and Gabriella had both told him he must.

**2** Before, he had been unable to think his way around the problem, because he assumed it had to be met directly, as he had confronted the black dog.

**3** But this was a different kind of problem. It required passivity, but a quite different kind of passivity to that of the scarecrow he had once imagined himself to be.

**19** CUR held a coin up to the gondolier, who was bobbing up and down, perched on the stern of his craft. 'I want to get to the mainland,' he said, 'but I need a favour.'

**2** 'Yes?' The man reached for the coin.

**3** 'I need you to knock me out for the journey.' The man stared at him. Cur tried to ignore the plashing sound of the waves. A bead of sweat trickled down his cheek. 'I'm not joking,' he said when the man made no response. 'I can't make the trip otherwise.'

**4** He turned around and touched the back of his head. 'Hit me here with an oar.'

**5** 'Are you sure?' the gondolier said.

**6** 'Yes.' To emphasise this point, Cur ad-

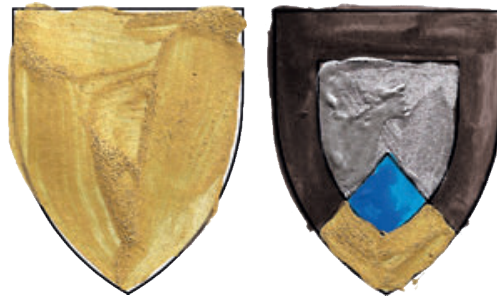


ded, 'I'll pay double,' fishing among the crumbs in his pocket for another coin. Apparently this offer was decisive, because before he could extract his hand his legs turned to meat and jelly.

7 As he slipped down into the red waters of unconsciousness, he remembered he had done nothing about Cuckoo and Gabriella.

8 They had to decide their own future. It wasn't up to him anymore.





## *Invitations*

**1** THE gilt-edged invitation had arrived two days before. The Treasurer was dying, and Crow was on the guest list for a dinner to which potential successors had been invited.

**2** An achievement in itself, but Crow had no illusions about his place in the pecking order. There were seven guests, and he was the least likely to be elected.

**3** Crow locked the door of his shop and laid out an ink well, and paper made from the finest cotton rags. He practised copying the handwriting on the invitation. He wrote out six versions of a new message, which explained that the procedure for appointing the Treasurer had changed.

**4** In fact, the message confided, the election had already taken place in secret, and the recipient of this note had been successful. 'Congratulations,' wrote Crow six times, adding two exclamation marks with brimming points to each copy.

**5** What appeared to everybody else to be a preliminary dinner was actually a ceremony of investiture, during which the unsuccessful candidates would be assassinated.

**6** Hence the addressee was not to worry if diners started dying around him. The necessary prelude to the moment when, as the only survivor, his succession would be revealed as both inevitable and glorious.

**7** Obviously discretion was essential in the meantime, since the other guests knew nothing of these new arrangements. The winner must also remain at the table until the end of the dinner, otherwise confusion might result.

**8** Crow had the six envelopes delivered to his fellow guests, whose names he obtained by bribing a clerk. By the same means, he made sure Magpie was commissioned to take daguerreotypes of the lucky seven.

## A PROPOSAL

**2** CUCKOO was enjoying himself. For a few anxious days, Cur's visit had threatened to disrupt his new life with Gabriella, but they heard no more from him, and Cuckoo began to believe they never would.

**2** Every night, he and Gabriella played cards before they went to bed. Cribbage, Trappola, Picquet, Costly Colours, Scopa, Truc – Mariage. They only played games for two, and with every hand Cuckoo grew closer to his wife.

**3** 'YOU know that most games measure progress in terms of your deviation from the mean?' Cuckoo said.

**2** 'What do you mean?' Gabriella said.

**3** 'A positive number means you're ahead. A negative number means you're behind. Zero means you're exactly average.' But Cuckoo did not bother to keep score anymore.

**4** ONE day Cuckoo walked home after dark. He passed by the Thieves' Guild, and looked in through the smeared windows on either side of the gaping entrance. He did not have any friends in there. His face itched, but he resisted the urge to scratch it.

**2** Away from the Guild, the streets were quiet, and the air was cold enough for him to see his breath. He turned a corner near the fish market to find two figures

blocking his path. 'Hello,' Magpie said, twirling a knife through his fingers. 'Long time no see.'

**3** 'A proposal for you,' Crow said.

**4** 'I'm not interested.' Cuckoo attempted to move past, but the two men closed ranks in front of him.

**5** 'Listen,' Crow said, punching him in the stomach.

**6** Cuckoo tried to stand up, but Magpie's hand pressed on the back of his skull. 'Stay down,' he said. 'You're rocking the boat.'

**7** Crow stooped down and punched up, hard, in Cuckoo's face. He felt it give. He went down on one knee. It was suddenly difficult to breathe.

**8** Another fist connected, and he found himself on the floor. Crow was behind his head, kneeling on his arms, which were stretched out. Magpie straddled his chest, his knees on Cuckoo's shoulders.

**9** Cuckoo could already feel his hands swelling with trapped blood. His legs were free, and he moved them WITH AN ANIMAL'S KICKING VICIOUSNESS, but he connected with nothing.

**10** Magpie held the blade in front of his eyes, close, then began to work. Lacking Cuckoo's expertise, he was clumsy. He pricked gums and tongue.

**11** When Magpie had finished, he held Cuckoo's old mirror up in front of his face. In it, Cuckoo saw a crude approximation of Crow's features.

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**5** 'DID I say "proposal"?' Crow said, his face looming upside-down into Cuckoo's view. 'I was being polite. You owe me, remember? You don't have a choice, unless you want your secrets spilled with your guts.'

**2** 'I told him everything,' Magpie admitted. 'It was the only way to get what we needed. Sorry.' He did not sound apologetic.

**3** 'What do you want?' Cuckoo's face felt funny. No one else had ever manipulated it before, not even Gabriella.

**4** 'I need you to take my place at a banquet,' Crow said.

**5** 'Where will you be?'

**6** 'Oh, I'll be there, but not as myself. A kind of masquerade.' Crow nodded at Magpie. 'He'll be around too.'

**7** Magpie smiled. 'It'll be fun.'

**8** 'What do I have to do?'

**9** 'Nothing; eat; stuff your face,' Crow said. 'I'll do the work. Come to the shop in three days, early in the evening.'

**10** 'What if I refuse?'

**11** 'Don't.'

**6** CROW placed his hand over Cuckoo's mouth and nose and began to destroy the image of his own face. He kept going until the surface was completely featureless below the eyes.

**2** Cuckoo tried to shout, but there was nowhere for the sound to come out. He

was suffocating, as Crow smeared flesh over his mouth.

**3** After a minute or so, Crow pushed a finger through into the interior cavity between his teeth, and wormed it around. The finger tasted horrible. Cuckoo resisted the temptation to bite it off. As Crow withdrew it, Cuckoo sucked in air.

**4** Crow lifted his finger to his mouth, and licked off the blood that had seeped from Cuckoo's tongue. 'Do you understand?' he said, when his finger was clean.

**5** 'Yes,' Cuckoo said, with difficulty.

**6** Crow and Magpie released him, and stepped away. Cuckoo lay on the ground for a few seconds, feeling the circulation return to his hands.

**7** He touched his face. He needed to fix it. He stumbled up, and started walking with his cloak held high, as if he were playing a carnival game.

**7** WHEN he got home, Gabriella called out to him, but he locked himself in her boudoir, which was separate from their shared room.

**2** He moved aside the bottles and compacts on the dressing table. His hands shook, but he forced himself to look at his reflection in the three-panelled mirror. He recognised nothing as human, not even the eyes.

## DEEP IN THE NEGATIVE

3 He was so pale he was almost translucent, so the first thing he did was rub some of the blood from his mouth into his cheeks, to loosen them up. Then he began to put everything back where it belonged. When he had finished, it still looked wrong.

4 He unlocked the door. 'What's the matter?' Gabriella asked.

5 'Nothing.'

8 SILENCE WAS THE ONLY WAY TO STOP  
THE FEAR SPILLING OVER THE EDGE.

2 The game had concluded. Crow and Magpie were far ahead, and Cuckoo's score was deep in the negative, beyond the point where bluffing was any use.

3 No coming back from this. Now he had to pay.











### *Blood Unto the Banquet*

**1** ON the night of the feast, Cuckoo left without speaking to Gabriella. At Crow's shop, he sat face to face with the pale man while Magpie held Cuckoo's stolen mirror up behind Crow, and Cuckoo worked until the two faces were nearly identical.

**2** Crow applied a crude disguise to his own face, then changed into a pair of black trousers with a gloss stripe down the side, a shirt with a starched bib, and a long black tail coat. Magpie tied his white bow for him.

**3** Cuckoo put on the outfit that Crow had provided for him: a black sack coat, a studded shirt with a round collar, a black bow tie. No different from Cuckoo's usual dress, but Crow insisted. Not very formal for such an important occasion, but maybe it would be presumptuous of assassins to dress like their betters.

**4** Crow gestured in Magpie's direction. 'You go with him,' he said to Cuckoo. 'I've got to get there early.'

**2** 'I thought we were friends,' Cuckoo said when Crow had left.

**2** 'Whatever gave you that idea?' Magpie said. 'Here, hold the tripod, and I'll take the rest. You're the only one not working tonight, so you might as well carry something.'

**3** The two men walked towards the palace. Magpie explained that the feast was not supposed to be enjoyable. Rather, it was a test of the candidates' ability to maintain a cheerful disposition in the face of adversity.

**4** The food would be magnificent, but prepared with deliberate carelessness, and with no logic to the combination of dishes, so cumulatively they would take a heavy toll on the stomach.

**5** Fish, the mainstay of the city's diet, was excluded as insufficiently imaginative. Heavier, more exotic meats were favoured, mainly because they were difficult to digest.

**6** Fortunately, it was traditional for the

## FIVE WOUNDS

cook to be merciful with at least one of the desserts, so Cuckoo could look forward to that.

**3** WHEN they arrived at the palace, Cuckoo showed Crow's invitation to the gatekeeper, and he and Magpie were ushered through to the Great Council hall.

**2** Magpie began to set up his equipment near one of the larger windows, to take advantage of the remaining natural light.

**3** Above head height, every available inch of space on the walls and ceiling of the hall was covered in paintings.

**4** The lower part of the walls had rich wood panelling, but this was spoiled by a network of dull copper pipes, which supplied the gas lamps.

**5** The carved benches where the nobles sat when the Council was in session had all been shoved to one end of the room, but the dais where the duke sat was a permanent structure built into one of the shorter walls, positioned under a painting of heaven that took up the entirety of the wall.

**6** Cuckoo waited his turn in front of Magpie's camera apart from the other guests. He studied the *Paradise*.

**4** CHRIST and his mother hovered above, forming a radiating centre around which spun concentric rings of saints.

**2** The perspective was oddly flat. Cuckoo was not positioned by the painting as someone floating inside the infinite space of heaven. Rather, he was looking at it through a telescope, from an infinite distance away.

**3** Jesus had once been abandoned by his father. 'MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?' he had cried, hanging on the cross. This was not the same man. Here he was in charge, and ready to judge.

**4** Cuckoo believed in judgement, but he preferred the human version nonetheless: the man lying in his mother's arms, bleeding from hands, feet and side.

**5** 'AS Christ is to the saints, so shall I be to the city's inhabitants.' Crow appeared suddenly at Cuckoo's elbow to offer this original interpretation of the painting.

**2** He held out a tray, and said more loudly, 'Glass of wine?' Cuckoo ignored him, and went to have his picture taken.

**3** The other guests had applied white lead to their skin to increase its luminescence for the camera, but Cuckoo dismissed the servant holding the brushes.

**6** WHEN Magpie had finished in the Great Council hall, he took his equipment down to the cellar, where a space had been set aside for him to develop the seven plates.

## IT WAS CROW, IN THE GREAT COUNCIL HALL ...

**2** He had chosen the spot carefully. It contained the stopcock for the gas supply to the room above.

**3** Magpie was under instructions to interrupt the supply six times, upon Crow's signal, and on each occasion to reopen the valve after counting to twenty.

**4** It would be tricky to coordinate this with the developing, but Magpie was not worried. None of his subjects were going to be around to complain if the plates were over- or undercooked.

**7** ABOVE, the first course was dried pea purée with sprouts. The peas had been soaked in wine dregs overnight to soften them, but before that the wine had been left open to sour.

**2** The caked faces of the guests floated above the white tablecloth in the greenish gaslight.

**3** After everyone had been served, and when the guests were all miserably chewing, Crow clanged a tray against the main pipe on the wall.

**4** The hissing of the gas diminished until the lamps sputtered and appeared to go out.

**8** IN the basement, Magpie began to count to twenty.

**9** AT the dinner table, Cuckoo waited for the ectoplasmic afterimage of the

six whitened faces to disappear.

**2** The mood was one of boisterous good humour. 'Woo, I'm a scary ghost,' someone said. 'Shush,' replied someone else.

**3** A thud at the far end of the table to Cuckoo's left, followed by a plop and a gurgle.

**4** After a few more seconds, during which Cuckoo saw there was still a faint illumination coming from the walls, the hissing of the gas increased again, and the lamps flared up.

**5** Cuckoo stared at one of the flames as new bright spots spread into his field of vision. He turned back to the table, where one of the guests was lying face down in his soup, with a gory candlestick on the table in front of him.

**6** An expanding, lurid blotch surrounded his body. Cuckoo blinked and refocused. The blotch was still there.

**7** Turning, he made to rise to his feet, but the man on his right pulled him back. 'Sit down,' he said, 'or you'll spoil everything.'

**8** 'Yes,' Crow hissed, appearing once more, this time to remove the soup. 'Eat something. You're making me look bad.'

**10** CROW passed the Master of Ceremonies on his way back to the kitchen, but the man barely noticed him.

He was frowning in the direction of the victim. He drummed his fingers against

## FIVE WOUNDS

the rigid bib of his shirt.

2 The Master did not recall any deaths being scheduled for this evening, but that was typical. No one bothered to tell him anything. In any case, it was bad form for staff to pay attention to expired guests. It would only encourage the killer, whoever he was.

3 The Master walked over to the corpse and removed the puree from underneath the smeared face in as dignified a manner as he could manage.

4 He flicked a fragment of bone off the silver plate's rim. 'I'm sorry the food was not to your liking, sir.'

11 THE second course of jellied quail eggs, just a little off, was served shortly afterwards.

2 Cuckoo only managed to get a few mouthfuls down before Crow thumped the pipe again and the lights dropped to a glimmer.

3 When they were restored, another guest lay dead with a dagger in his back.

12 THERE was less mess this time, but even so, the stains would take some effort to remove.

2 The Master of Ceremonies ran his finger round his neck where the flesh bunched over his pinched collar. All he ever tried to do was preserve a standard

of decorum. Not his fault if the guests let him down.

13 THE third course was soused hog's face. The pig's wizened, eyeless features floated in front of Cuckoo in a briny liquid. Looking at it, he felt a spasm of recognition. The face bobbed jauntily as he dragged his spoon through the brine, creating eddies.

2 The routine already established in the first two courses was repeated, except this time a gun muzzle flared, illuminating the darkened room like a spurting firework.

3 Afterwards, a third guest lay dead in the yellow glow of the refulgent lamps.

4 Cuckoo found it impossible to make small talk or sustain his appetite, surrounded by oozing, gaping wounds. His remaining companions apparently had no such difficulty.

5 They shrugged. 'Just one of those things!' said the man on Cuckoo's left. 'What can we do but carry on?' agreed the man immediately to Cuckoo's right.

14 THE Master of Ceremonies was surprised but gratified by this response. Normally, the table manners of assassins left a lot to be desired, but perhaps standards were finally improving.

2 If only they would stop dying, everything would be perfect.

**15** THE centrepiece of the banquet was a dressed swan, presented as if on its nest, with a skewer holding the neck erect. It wore a gold crown and a garland of silver flowers.

**2** The meat was accompanied by piping hot chaudron sauce made from the swan's guts, boiled in its blood. Cuckoo attempted to wave the sauce away, but Crow ignored his protestations, and continued pouring until the slices of meat on his plate were drowned.

**3** As Cuckoo stared mesmerised into the black depths of the sauce, Crow struck the empty saucière against the pipe. The liquid on Cuckoo's plate seemed to swallow up all the light in the room by itself.

**16** ANOTHER blow fell. When normality was restored, a spanner had mysteriously appeared, placed neatly parallel to the dessert spoon in front of the second guest on Cuckoo's right, who remained miraculously upright, but slumped back in his chair with a deceptive air of nonchalance.

**2** His balance was a little off, however, and so his body gradually dropped further and further to the left, until his incomplete head touched the shoulder of the man immediately on Cuckoo's right, who jumped as a result.

**3** The body then fell to the floor, causing

the living diner to blush and stare fixedly at his plate.

**4** Cuckoo picked at the swan.

**17** THE fifth course was an exotic dish, chosen as a special treat: Scotch collops, as consumed in the savage north. Mutton fried in butter, with claret, nutmeg, anchovies and horseradish.

**2** It sounded promising, but the butter had been overdone, so the mutton was sheathed in elongated bubbles of fat in the same greenish shade as the light issuing from the unreliable lamps.

**3** As usual, the latter cut out, and during the gloomy intermission Cuckoo slipped the contents of his plate onto the floor under the table.

**4** As he ducked to do so, he felt something whistle through the air above his head, and heard it connect with the guest on his left, who let out a startled oof.

**5** Cuckoo could not think why the man was surprised, since the course of events seemed entirely predictable, but if everyone wanted to sit around waiting to be killed, that was their business.

**6** A few seconds later, in the renewed glare, he saw a piece of lead piping rolling on the floor. He stopped it with his foot before it reached the hanging edge of the tablecloth, since its further



progress might reveal the collops he had deposited under the table.

**18** THE only other surviving guest remained undismayed. On the contrary, with every course he became more relaxed. He grinned at Cuckoo as a generous serving of gingerbread arrived. **2** Cuckoo nibbled, tasting a not unpleasant combination of cinnamon, liquorice and aniseed along with the ginger. He waited for darkness to descend.

**19** IN the blackout, the man on Cuckoo's right silently concluded that he did not think much of the arrangements.

**2** Instead of using this inefficient one-by-one technique, the organisers would have been better to slash everyone's throat at the end. Then the dinner would not have been marred by uncomfortable



lulls in conversation. Just his luck the dullard on his left was the last to go.

**3** He regretted his earlier faux pas, which he hoped no one had noticed: it was only because he had rented his suit, and he

didn't want to get brains on the cloth. He was still musing on this when Crow slipped the garrotte around his throat.

4 He tried to cry out and got as far as, 'You're making a mis—' before he began to choke and thrash, a ghastly drawn-out process not yet concluded when the lamps came back up, revealing Crow with a knee in the man's back and a cord around his puckered neck.

5 The dying man coughed, and sprayed Cuckoo with crumbs of chewed gingerbread.

20 'OOPS,' Crow said. The Master of Ceremonies regarded him critically.

2 Crow gave the garrotte a final twist, and the body of his last rival went limp. Then he ran for it.

21 'DON'T run,' shouted the Master of Ceremonies – not at Crow, who was clearly a lost cause – but at the other members of his staff, who were about to abandon their posts in pursuit. Things were bad enough already without waiters running inside the palace.

2 Crow's footsteps echoed up the stairwell. 'And don't come back!' the Master called after him. 'You're fired!'

3 He turned to his head waiter. 'You can't get the staff nowadays.'

22 THERE was one positive thing about this otherwise disastrous evening that consoled the Master of Ceremonies. In contrast to his disappointment at the conduct of the new waiter, the Master was impressed with the surviving guest's stoicism.

2 True, the man had gasped when he got a face full of gingerbread, but his expression had not changed one whit in the last few hours.

3 The Master felt a gesture of appreciation was in order. He considered the syllabub, ready to serve as the final course.

4 The glasses had a spout protruding from the base, so that the clear wine and sherry which collected underneath the creamy curd could be drunk separately. A sprig of rosemary had been added to each glass.

5 'Would you like an extra helping of pudding, sir?' the Master enquired. 'I seem to have six portions spare.'

6 The curd quivered at the top of the glass, slopping over the pungent liquid underneath. It had obviously turned.

7 Cuckoo struggled up from the table on his way to vomit.

23 CROW hurried through the dark streets. He had a final chore to perform this evening before he went to bed. But it was not wise to visit Magpie's apartment immediately, in case he



## FIVE WOUNDS

ran into the dappled man on his way home from the palace.

2 So Crow went to a barber's shop, where there was an after-hours card game in progress. 'Some news for you,' he said to the proprietor. 'Straight from the palace. But you didn't get it from me, right?'

3 The barber nodded.

4 'Seems there was quite an eventful dinner tonight.'

24 LATER, when Crow judged enough time had passed, he peeked through the bullseye windows of Magpie's studio. The round swirl at the centre of each square pane distorted the room beyond, which was in any case only lit by the street lamp, but if he pressed his cheek right up to the glass, he could make out his accomplice slumped in a chair with his head hanging backwards.

2 No doubt he had been trying to keep watch, but the evening's excitement had defeated his good intentions.

3 A table lay between Magpie and the window. Upon it were seven daguerreotypes, arranged in an arrow formation, whose tip pointed at the window. Behind Magpie were the props he used to photograph visitors to the studio: a stuffed leopard to show vainglorious men to advantage, a classical column for

nobles, a bust draped in costume jewellery, a rack of fancy-dress costumes.

4 He had pushed his chair far back from the table, as if afraid that some unconscious movement of his would disturb the daguerreotypes. Even unconscious, he lacked the nonchalance of the corpses at the dinner table.

5 The table was close enough to see that the faces of six of the seven tiny images had been erased.

6 The seventh, which had been placed at the apex of the arrangement, showed Cuckoo pretending to be Crow. It was undamaged, but underexposed so that the face was barely there to begin with.

25 CROW was in a reckless mood. One of the windows was slightly ajar, so he used a stick to unlatch it. Then he squeezed into the room, where he placed himself between Magpie and the table, interrupting the connection between the subject and his objects.

2 Magpie snorted in his sleep, but did not wake.

3 Crow pocketed the image at the apex of the pyramid as a memento and then took a small twist of paper from his pocket – one of those in which he dispensed paint powder.

4 He opened it to reveal hairs and clippings he had saved from the two corpses

## LET ME PULL THE MOTE OUT OF THINE EYE

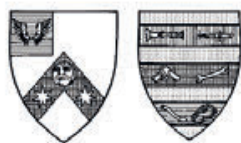
in his workshop, along with fibres from their shrouds.

**5** 'I delegate dust to you,' he said, 'since it concerns you. I renounce it. Go, dust! Go to your master.' Crow blew gently, and as the contents of the packet dispersed into the air, he imagined the death rattle in the throat of the dying Treasurer.

**6** He blinked. Ouch! He poked his finger around the edges of his twitching eyelid, looking for a stray fleck that seemed to have lodged itself there.

**26** WHEN Crow returned home, he found a letter waiting for him in a black envelope, informing him of the Treasurer's death.

**2** Even his imagination was prophetic and fatal now.



*I'll Huff and I'll Puff...*



## *Gabriella and Cuckoo's Dream*

**1** GABRIELLA was waiting up for Cuckoo. 'Where have you been?' I was worried.'

**2** She had watched him leave. SHE WANTED TO KNOW WHERE HE WAS GOING, LOOKING SO RAW, BECAUSE SHE WANTED HIM TO COME BACK. SHE HAD WANTED TO TRACE WHERE HE WAS IN HIS ABSENCE, TO FOLLOW HIM AROUND AND WATCH OVER HIM, WILLING HIM TO STAY ALIVE.

**2** CUCKOO admired sincerity because he could not recognise it in himself. Here it was visible in the tremor of her voice and hand; perhaps even her ragged lip and ravaged nails.

**2** His true genius was for spontaneity. To win, he had to gamble everything; he could not hold anything back. To act with complete indifference to consequences was the trump card in his deck of strategies. Perhaps that was sincerity too?

**3** Cuckoo told Gabriella what he had

done. They held each other, and Gabriella slept.

**3** SHE lay on Cuckoo's arm. He could feel it dying. A few minutes passed before she shifted, and he was able to recover his numb limb.

**2** It tingled and burned as he flexed his fingers. He raised them to touch his face, and held them there until he could distinguish the texture of the dead surface.

**3** Then he gouged until he met teeth and tongue, mutilating the mouth that had betrayed him with its craven 'Yes', until its shape approximated the one Crow had created.

**4** He pressed the mess back, reshaping the cavity, smoothing it down until there was again no trace of violence.

**5** He lay awake for a long time, but eventually he too slept.

**4** THAT night Cuckoo and Gabriella both had a dream, from which they

## FIVE WOUNDS

awoke together. Gabriella described the dream to Cuckoo, who recognised in it every detail of his own.

2 On this occasion, it seemed, her reception had been perfect.

5 'THERE were four men on horseback,' Gabriella began. She and Cuckoo sat up in bed, supported by pillows. Cuckoo had closed the chiffon curtains around their four-poster, and the material glowed in the early morning light.

2 Gabriella continued: 'They moved forward in a triangular formation through ploughed fields. The earth broke beneath them like raw steak pummelled and minced at the butchers. Black stains on the horses' hooves.

3 'Just before dawn, near a village beginning to wake. They smashed the ice on the water trough as if it were the head of a criminal and they the executioners.

4 'The three who followed borrowed the will of the one who led. They breathed through a film of melted frost that congealed in their lungs. Inside their bodies, it stuck to the bones, slowly hardening and contracting.

5 'One of the men was already doubled over in the saddle and could not straighten up. The leader held a golden cord tied around his chest.

6 'His jawbone was already too warped and his mouth too blocked with hard de-

posits to permit speech, so he whistled like a bird.'

6 GABRIELLA chanted in a singing voice. 'There was snow in patches over the earth, which the horses marked with bloody hoof-prints.

2 'The horses rolled their eyes, refusing to look at what they rode towards, always looking instead at the trail behind.

3 'The three men at the water trough drank. Then took turns sprinkling or flicking water on the mouth of the fourth.

4 'The village gathered around them. The more people arrived, the more they willed the horsemen to leave. Their will was cumulative. They whispered to each other.

5 'Lips close to ears. Hands covering mouths. Eyes averted.'

7 'PART of the village had burned recently, and the snow spat where it touched the smouldering wood.

2 'The snow had a consistency like soap powder, soft and gritty with grey flecks. It smeared rather than dissolved.

3 'It did not smell of soap, however, but of contagion, of rotten chickens and alcoholic piss.

8 'SOME of the people now stood around the visitors in a circle. There was another, noisier circle farther away. Its members whooped, moving in a

## A DAINTY DISH

chain of interlinked hands around something in the centre.

2 'In and out they went, and I could see – now I was looking through the eyes of one of the men – that they were trampling, stamping down on something. They moved in once more, and their cries reached a crescendo.'

9 'MY attention came back to the circle of villagers surrounding me. They stirred with menace. My leader leaned back in his saddle. I looked out from this body, unable to direct its movements, trapped inside its cage.

2 'The circle made way for a boy of about eleven years, who held out a steaming baked pie. He smiled, and I saw that his mouth was misshapen and chopped. I could not see his teeth or his tongue.

3 'As I looked between my leader and the child, I saw the two resembled each other as father and son, or older and younger versions of the same person.

4 'The boy held up the dish. "Four and twenty," he said, "baked in a pie." I looked around the circle in which we were enclosed. Their mouths were damaged like the boy's.

5 'More urgent whispers here, but no identifiable words.'

10 "WHEN the pie was opened, the tongues began to sing," the

boy said. "Wasn't that a dainty dish to set before the king?" As he finished speaking, he offered up the pie.

2 'My leader took a knife and cut into it twice, taking out a steaming slice.

3 'The tongues inside began to wag at the disturbance. They tensed and curled – pink and purple snails exposed outside their shells.

4 'The crippled man whistled beautifully, which brought tears to my eyes.'

11 'THE boy dropped the rest of the pie on the ground. The crust broke. The tongues began to crawl away.

2 'My leader dismounted and methodically stepped on each one until it stopped moving, twisting his shoe to wipe it off before moving on to the next.

3 'The boy stared at this adult version of himself, who looked back at him blankly.

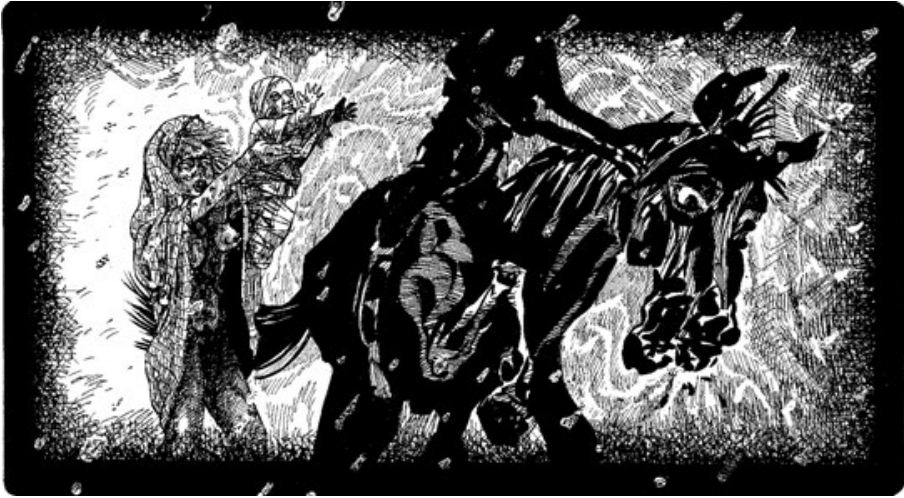
4 'With a look of contempt on his face, the boy spat at a spot just below the leader's eye. The loss of his tongue did not impede his accuracy (or his speech, now I come to think of it).

5 'The expression on my leader's face did not change. He called to the body I was inhabiting to follow and, leading the fourth man by the cord around his chest, made his way out of the circle.

6 'I followed, looking back over my shoulder, just as my shying horse did.

7 'Snickering behind my back.'





**12** ‘ON the way out of the village, a girl of about eighteen years followed us. She was wearing a shawl and carrying a parcel of rags, wrapped up in brown paper and string. A living parcel.

**2** ‘She was weeping and stumbling, moaning, “Please.” She held the parcel up to me.

**3** ‘MY SILENCE WAS AN UNRELIEVED PRESSURE. I FELT AS IF MY SPEECH HAD STOPPED BECAUSE MY MOUTH WAS FULL OF BLOOD.’

**13** ‘SHE was naked under the shawl, and covered with black sores that glowed like sunspots on her incandescent skin.

**2** As her body flared and glowed, the spots began to spread like the charred edges of burning paper.

**3** “Please,” she kept saying, holding her child out to me until her mouth

crumbled to hot, glowing dust, which blew around me and into me, silting up my nose and throat.

**4** ‘I did not resist its invasion. I WOULD CHOKE AND GAG ON IT IF I TRIED TO BRING IT OUT. IT WOULD BURN MY THROAT AND SOUR MY MOUTH, FOR WHAT I FELT WAS DESPAIR.’

**14** ‘THE child was gone. Scorched brown paper and string flew up and away on the wind.

**2** “Come,” my leader said. “It is time.” I was filled with grief that made no sense to me. Then I woke up.’

**15** GABRIELLA’S voice reverted to its normal pitch as she pronounced these final words.

**2** ‘Whose eyes were you looking through?’ Cuckoo asked.

**3** ‘Whose eyes were you looking



through?’ Gabriella replied. She pulled the blanket higher around her as the sweat cooled on her body. The stubs on her back ached with the sensation of quivering phantom wings.

4 ‘I’m trying to see things from your point of view,’ Cuckoo said.

5 ‘I’ve got no point of view,’ Gabriella said, surprising Cuckoo by repeating the words that had come unbidden to him in answer to her question.

16 GABRIELLA continued. ‘I’m an empty vessel, a medium through which messages pass. Or they echo, trapped inside.’

2 ‘Empty?’ Cuckoo said. ‘I don’t think so.’

3 Gabriella said nothing.

4 ‘We have to leave,’ Cuckoo said. ‘Crow isn’t going to stop with this favour, and God knows what he’ll want next. I don’t want to be Rut anymore.’

5 ‘Yes,’ Gabriella said.

6 ‘What does the dream mean? Is it a warning?’

7 ‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ Gabriella said. ‘It hurts too much.’

17 ‘WHEN I try to remember my childhood,’ she continued, ‘I can’t tell the difference between dreams and memories. I remember floating above the ground and flying through the air.

2 ‘So maybe dreams don’t always predict the future. Maybe they’re about the past too.’

18 GABRIELLA’S thoughts turned elsewhere. ‘Everyone’s connected,’ she said. ‘You, me, Cur, Crow, Magpie.’ She ticked the names off.

2 ‘Five fingers,’ Cuckoo said, watching her.

3 Gabriella picked up the theme. ‘Five wounds.’

4 ‘Five wild cards,’ returned Cuckoo.

5 ‘Or five marked cards. Someone’s playing games with us.’

6 ‘Well, it can only be God or the devil. Take your pick.’

7 ‘Maybe,’ said Gabriella, hedging her interpretive bets. ‘Maybe it’s someone else. I mean, God and the devil. Not much of a choice, is it? Like Madonna or whore.’

8 ‘How does Rut fit in?’

9 ‘I’m not sure he’s part of the sae game. He’s not connected to me.’

10 ‘Except you were supposed to marry him.’

11 Gabriella poked Cuckoo in the shoulder. ‘But I’ve never met him! You broke that connection before it was made.’

12 ‘Maybe in some other world, you are married to Rut,’ Cuckoo said, ‘and Crow was arrested after the dinner, and I’m



about to be elected Treasurer of the Public Conscience. Or you're married to Cur, and Magpie is about to become Treasurer.'

**13** 'The cards could be dealt differently.' He folded his hands together. 'Different choices could be made.'

**19** 'YOU know that guardian angels are assigned to events, not people,' Gabriella said. 'Each event has an angel; each choice.' She returned to her original point. 'Rut isn't connected to Crow either.'

**2** Cuckoo was not convinced. 'Crow was there when Magpie and I kidnapped him. It depends on whether you count that as a meaningful connection. He wasn't there by chance.'

**4** 'Well, Rut is definitely not connected to Cur.' She pressed her palms against her temples and closed her eyes. 'I've got to work with what I know. What I can prove.'

**5** 'So why assume that because some things are connected, everything must be connected?'

**6** 'Crow believes it.'

**7** 'That doesn't prove anything. He thinks we're all dogs and I'm a scribe.'

**8** 'No, no. You're the judge.'

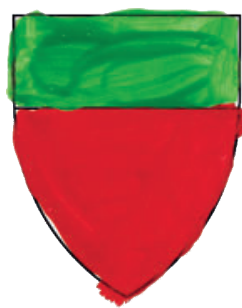
**9** Cuckoo clapped his hands. 'I'm the spleen! The spleen!'

**10** Gabriella kissed him. He could not feel her lips, but he could taste them.

**20** THREE days later, on the morning of Crow's unopposed election to the office of Treasurer of the Public Conscience, Gabriella was surprised to discover she was still able to remember Cuckoo's dream. Indeed, it was more vivid than before.

**2** It must have been addressed to her as well as him. Armed with this unwelcome knowledge, she was able to identify part of its meaning, but she had to wait to be sure.

**3** In the meantime, she would say nothing to Cuckoo.



## *Two Jolly Sailors*

**1** IN a tavern on the mainland, Cur waited once again for inspiration. He had assumed his future would become clear if he acted to change it, but instead he felt paralysed.

**2** Still there was no revelation and now each day was the same, equally pointless. He lacked even the routine of fencing to distract him.

**3** He drank a lot, not for the initial intoxication, but because the hangovers dulled his senses.

**4** At night, when he was drunk enough to be confident but not too drunk to concentrate, and when there were no other customers to annoy him, he went to the barber salon in the village next to the inn.

**5** Pneumatic chairs with damp towels draped over the arms, leather headrests stained with pomade; brushes, combs and a bewildering variety of scissors and razors, stacked in a jar that reminded

him of the sword rack at the fencing master's.

**6** The chair did not go down low enough, so Cur had to sprawl with his legs out and his backbone curved. Otherwise, the man could not reach his face to shave him.

**7** Cur did not mind. The posture was a natural one for a drunk, and he wished to appear unexceptional in every way.

**2** UNSHAVED, he was matt and itchy; his half-alive dead hair absorbed light. Shaved, he was gloss and raw; his half-dead living skin reflected light.

**2** He suspected himself of hypocrisy as the barber reduced his face to bland, innocuous planes, but there was another reason that shaving disturbed him.

**3** Once, when Cur had accidentally sliced a flap of skin from his upper lip, he had felt a keen sense of anticipation in

## FIVE WOUNDS



the false seconds that followed, when the only evidence of his slip was a sickle-shaped line.

4 Then, as the blood finally welled up, its smell excited him, much more than the blood of others.

5 From then on, he had been careful to avoid breaking his skin with a razor, but now, helpless in the hands of another man and uninhibited by alcohol, he was subject to perverse temptations.

6 He began to enjoy the preliminary rituals: the application of the warm lather with a soft sable brush; the barber running the blade backwards and forwards, up and down on the strop.

7 He had once seen a dog in the Ghetto dragging itself under a fence through a hole scabbled out for that purpose. The bottom edges of the wooden boards scraped across the sinews of the dog's back.

8 It took advantage of the situation to scratch an itch, moving against the fence with the same rhythm as the strop against the razor.

3 A potential customer glanced in the plate-glass window, but seeing Cur, swerved away. The barber was afraid too. The bravado of his cheap cologne could not disguise it.

2 The sickly gaslight was not ideal, but the barber had another problem he didn't understand: Cur wanted him to make a mistake.

3 At first, Cur would remain as still as the alcohol allowed, trembling in its grip, but ready to be steadied by the barber's firm direction.

4 He particularly liked the moment when the razor touched the fulcrum of his jawbone, below his ear, before it moved down, following a defined line of

stray hairs and avoiding the broad sections of stubble on either side.

**4** CUR had always preferred the parts of a woman's body where the bone lay close to the surface, under a thin layer of muscle: shoulder blades, ribs, hips.

**2** He liked all these points because there was no fat for the teeth to grip. Joints too: wrists and ankles.

**5** IN fencing, Cur had discovered that the wrist cannot move without producing a corresponding movement of the forearm to balance it.

**2** After the barber had been working for a while, Cur instructed him to hold the razor out, straight.

**3** Instead of allowing it to move over him, he would instead move under and around it.

**4** As the barber held it steady and motionless, Cur tried to pivot his face with the poise of a fencer executing a lunge.

**5** The razor was his opponent, but he permitted it the privilege of touching him.

**6** The sensation of its passing was peculiar, and indistinguishable from the rasping sound it produced. Did it drag, pinch or prick? Did it shear, slice or sever?

**7** It cleaved, leaving tidelines of hair and scum in its wake. A perfect balance of resistance and surrender.

**6** AT the wrong moment, precisely, he moved backwards, abruptly, catching against the razor's edge.

**2** Then he bled, but with restraint and grace, as a fencer should.

**7** A lambent drop moved over the surface of the soap, red on white, without mingling, as a raindrop moves down a windowpane. Cur willed it to swell and fall: to escape, and thereby fulfil itself.

**2** He breathed. In.

**3** He kept the side of his neck and face steady, to avoid interrupting the trail now making its way over his jutting cheek and chin.

**4** Out. He moved to alter its trajectory. A fraying thread in its wake.

**5** In. Tributaries collected in the sculpted lather.

**6** Out. The remnant ran onwards and downwards, towards the lowest point of his chin, where it gathered, waiting to fall, away and into nothing.

**7** In. It would assume the perfect form of a sphere in mid-air, until impact broke it.

**8** Out. For a few moments, it would be free.

**9** In: he held the breath.

**8** AS the drop separated itself from him, the barber moved to contain the spreading stain on Cur's face with a cloth.

## FIVE WOUNDS

2 Cur reached out to arrest the man's movement, but he succeeded only in intercepting the drop's descent.

3 It hit his shirt cuff, but did not bounce off. Instead, it penetrated the cheap cloth, as rain penetrates soil.

4 Out, finally: with a snort of irritation.

9 THE barber retreated, apologising. Cur stared at his cuff. It was visibly darkening to brown under the lamplight, and the blood was already indistinguishable from a number of other stains of uncertain origin.

2 The heart defies gravity. Blood defies the heart. Gravity defies blood.

10 CUR did not regret killing the black dog, but that act had also left a stain. Freedom was turning out to be a burden. He was not sure how to carry it.

2 Slumped in the barber's chair with a half-shaved face, he felt imperfectly defiled.

3 The barber was still in the corner, surrounded by a line of swept curls on the tiles, as if that was a magical barrier to protect him.

4 Cur picked up the razor to finish the task himself. His hands were steady now.

11 HIS mood was not improved by the arrival of a new guest at The

Two Jolly Sailors later that evening. The tavern had a nautical theme: oars and lobster pots hung on the walls, together with a collection of rope ends showcasing common knots.

2 The man looked around for a likely victim from the doorway. Perhaps he chose Cur precisely because Cur radiated hostility towards him. Or perhaps he was encouraged by the number of empty glasses on Cur's table.

12 'RUT,' the man said, holding out his hand. Cur had guessed his identity before he spoke, but he said nothing.

2 He did not believe in coincidences, and he wanted to protect Cuckoo, for whom he had a sneaking admiration. He ignored Rut's outstretched hand.

3 'I'm on my way home,' Rut said. Cur wondered if he would find Gabriella and Cuckoo there. 'What about you?'

4 'I left home,' Cur said. 'I don't know where I'm going.'

5 'Maybe we could swap places,' Rut suggested. 'You know, I chose this place because I just gave up farming. I was wondering who the other jolly sailor might be. Maybe it's you?'

6 'I doubt that.' Cur ordered another bottle of wine.





*Cut Me*





*Guy Guy, Poke Him in the Eye,  
Put Him on the Bonfire, Let Him Die*

**1** MeNe, MeNe, TeKeL, UPHARSIN. Crow was convinced that Gabriella's message was meaningless, if indeed it was still her message and not his own. A disappointment either way.

**2** He had tried every decryption technique he could think of, and nothing worked. Maybe it was a diversion, or else a cruel joke. But he did not intend to tell Gabriella any of this.

**3** Crow was offended by this additional evidence of God's lack of respect, and saw no reason to give one of His employees a helping hand. Instead, he carefully smoothed out a piece of stained paper that had been attached to the body of the woman who once lay in his workshop.

**4** It had been tied around her neck along with the plastic bag, as if it were a luggage label. It contained three short sentences, although it was unpunctuated, as an authentic deciphered text would be.

**5** In his workshop, he sat at a desk under one of the murky windows and composed an introductory note for Gabriella using ink made from the fluid drained from one of his jars, mixed with a little lampblack. Then he copied out the words on the stained label, being careful to reproduce the eccentric capitalisation of the letters.

**6** He folded the letter and heated the end of a stick of sealing wax over a candle, then squished it over the fold and pressed his signet ring against it, leaving the impressed image of a dog sitting up on its hind legs, wearing a judge's wig.

**7** In the street outside, he whistled to one of the urchins who swept the crossing. He gave him a copper coin – a bagattino – and told him to deliver the message to Gabriella, who would certainly give him another coin when he arrived.

**8** The boy had a filthy eye patch; even his

## THE GUNPOWDER PLOT

working eye was gummy and crusted. But he seemed to be able to make his way about. He skipped away.

**2** THE old Treasurer was safe in the ground now. Crow's election had not yet been announced, and it would not be confirmed publicly before he moved to his lodgings in the government palace later that day, but a suite had already been prepared, or so the Master of Ceremonies had unctuously informed him.

**2** Every possible comfort would be provided. The Master laid particular emphasis on the qualifications of the cook, who had been trained in France and used only the finest ingredients.

**3** Crow had not succeeded in isolating the essence of death; he had not even achieved the more modest goal of identifying a specific antidote for arsenic. His experiments were inconclusive, and he could not understand why.

**4** He could sprinkle gold dust into his food by means of the salt and pepper shakers. He could also introduce the latest distillation prepared from his fermented corpses by means of the olive-oil bottle, but he could not be sure either strategy would work.

**5** He had to take a risk and move fast, while he was still at his peak, before the poison weakened him.

**3** CROW travelled to the palace by gondola, in his best velvet frock coat and a top hat, with a phial in each of his pockets containing his concoctions.

**2** The Master of Ceremonies showed him around. Crow already knew the public rooms, but he stopped briefly to renew his acquaintance with the *Paradise* in the Great Council hall.

**3** He cast his mind back to his first meeting with Cur. How strange that the wolf-man had eliminated himself from the contest. Cur's will must be weaker than his.

**4** Whatever the reason for his disappearance, it was fortuitous, since it left the dogs vulnerable.

**4** CROW was inspired. His first action as Treasurer was to order twenty barrels of gunpowder to be delivered to the rear entrance of the palace as soon as possible.

**2** While he waited for this order to arrive, he was obliged to consume eighteen meals in the palace over the next six days. He counted them, every mouthful.

**3** The meals were at odd times, since they were served in the duke's dining room, but after or before he ate there with his councillors. Crow instead ate alone at the foot of the long table, at the opposite end to where the duke sat.

**4** The salt and paper shakers were in the

## FIVE WOUNDS

form of gigantic sea serpents. Crow lifted one up between both hands and peered into its beaten silver mouth: it had a perforated throat.

5 The olive-oil bottle was blown into the shape of a flying angel. The fluid dribbled out from what Crow assumed was supposed to be its vial of wrath, but the angel had puffed cheeks and held one end of this elongated vial in its mouth like a trumpet. The glass-maker had obviously got his verses from Revelation mixed up. A poor design for a bottle: top-heavy, and the opening of the vial-trumpet leaked oil everywhere.

6 By any objective measure, the food was delicious, even if much of it was actually leftovers from the duke's table, to which the arsenic was presumably added before it got to Crow.

7 It was all ashes to him. Probably the liberal application of gold dust and elixir did not help.

5 THE cook complained to the Master of Ceremonies that Crow did not appreciate his work, since he insisted on smothering it in extra salt and oil.

2 Whenever a waiter tried to remove one of the choicer bottles of wine from the cellar to serve at table, the cook would snatch it away and take a long swig, then smack it down at his side, daring all of them to remove it.

3 'Give him table wine,' he shouted. 'He won't know the difference.'

6 THE sullen and ham-fisted waiters particularly irritated Crow. He felt their eyes on him every time he stood up to lift the salt cellar or the oil bottle.

2 'The craftsmanship on these is wonderful,' he said to the Master of Ceremonies. 'Might I beg the favour of using them exclusively?'

7 'THE oil bottle was a present from the King of Spain', the Master of Ceremonies said, giving the glass a polish with his sleeve. 'And the shakers came from the Sultan.' But he happened to know the duke hated both of them, or had the last time he was cogent enough to express an opinion on the subject.

2 So the Master of Ceremonies granted Crow's request.

8 THE duties of the Treasurer were more onerous and duller than Crow had anticipated.

2 His sat all day in a stifling corner office with a tiny window that was painted shut, and added his name to the bottom of papers whose contents he did not have time to read before they were whisked away by junior clerks.

3 'What would happen if I refused to sign one of these?' he asked, waving a



sheet covered in dense spidery letters. Since Crow's office was up in the attic next to the prisons, he had to shout over the sound of a voice that cried, 'Oh God no no, please, let me down!'

4 'I'd take it away, then I'd bring it back a week later,' said the clerk to whom Crow had addressed this question.

5 'Sweet Jesu save me! I don't know anything!' A crack and a scream.

9 WAS this power? It infuriated him. But it would all be irrelevant once the gunpowder arrived.

2 It was due on the morning when a debate on fiscal policy was scheduled, which was sure to draw high attendance levels, especially after the recent gossip that someone was planning to propose new taxes, applicable only to nobles.

3 Crow would move the barrels himself, and he would allow no one to inspect

their contents. Then he could redefine the meaning of power on more rational grounds at the same time he redefined the structure of the state.

10 THE gunpowder arrived on the seventh day, before breakfast, from which Crow excused himself on urgent government business. He went down to sign the invoice.

2 'What are the barrels for?' asked the Master of Ceremonies, who was suspicious of this unscheduled delivery.

3 'Urgent government business,' Crow said, and shot him.

11 CROW watched the nobles begin to arrive in the Great Council hall: ordinary noblemen in black, senators in scarlet, procurators in purple; the duke in white and gold, senile and mumbling to himself alone on the dais.

## FIVE WOUNDS

**2** Crow left them and began to transfer the barrels to the cellar under the Great Council hall, rolling each on its rim. Hard work.

**12** THE noise made by the rolling barrels was clearly audible in the hall, and the nobles sent one of their number to investigate.

**2** The man arrived when Crow had moved about a quarter of the total, and had begun to despair of finishing on time.

‘What are you doing?’ the man asked.

**3** ‘Moving barrels of salt cod,’ Crow said, sweating. ‘For a banquet to celebrate my election. All the nobles are invited. I got the cod at a twenty-five-per-cent discount from Cyprus.’

**4** ‘Good news!’ said the man, pleased at the prospect of a free meal, even if it was only salt cod. He took off his robe, whose flapping sleeves made manual labour impossible. ‘I’ll give you a hand.’

**5** The noise redoubled as more nobles took their seats, now including Crow’s frustrated curses. Another attendee was sent to investigate, since the first had not returned. ‘Will you be long?’ the second man asked.

**6** With the help of the first man, Crow had moved about half of the barrels. ‘Not long,’ he said. ‘I’m moving barrels of oysters for a banquet to celebrate my election. All the nobles and their wives

are invited. I got the oysters at a fifty-per-cent discount from Crete.’

**7** ‘Very good news!’ said the second man. ‘I’ll help you.’ He folded his robe up and pitched in.

**8** When the first speaker arose in the Great Council hall to introduce his topic, he was interrupted by a deafening rumble, belched out from the cellar. The speaker despatched a third emissary below. ‘Are you nearly finished?’ the third man said.

**9** With the help of the first two messengers, Crow had now managed to shift three-quarters of the barrels. ‘Yes,’ Crow said, wiping his forehead with his grimy sleeve. ‘I’m moving barrels of caviar for a banquet to celebrate my election. All the nobles, their wives and mistresses are invited. I got the caviar at a seventy-five-per-cent discount from Greece.’

**10** ‘Excellent news!’ said the new arrival, and he too stopped to help.

**13** CROW decided to let his noble assistants finish the job, so he sat down and took a rest.

**2** He had accidentally dropped a barrel on the insensible toes of his left foot, so he took the opportunity to study the pulpy mess.

**14** SHORTLY afterwards, the terrible rumbling and shouting

## A GAME OF FOOTBALL



stopped, and the three go-betweens returned. The speaker cleared his throat once more, and tried to ignore the excited murmuring about a free feast spreading around him.

2 'Today,' he began, 'our city faces a grave threat.' He took a deep breath as he prepared to denounce the dangers of excessive taxation of noble wealth.

3 Then the Great Council exploded.

15 CROW ran limping from the building with his hands over his ears.

2 A pity about the *Paradise*. Still, you couldn't make an omelette without breaking eggs. Outside it was a real pea-souper, the fog billowing thickly around Crow in imitation of his cloak. There was an enormous bang behind him, but looking back he only saw a dim black-and-orange glow.

16 TILES and glass shattered, and wooden shutters reverberated as noble hands and feet, arms, legs and heads rained down.

2 An old woman selling corn to feed the pigeons and a number of stunned birds were scythed by the impact of flying body parts, which emerged without warning from the fog.

3 When the storm died down, a group of boys began to play football with the Duke's head. It rolled unevenly, since its revolutions were interrupted by an irregular, protruding tongue.

4 Vaporised blood coloured the fog pink. It condensed on window panes, and the rivulets that ran down mimicked the erratic path of the boys dribbling the ball.

17 UNFORTUNATELY for Crow, not every noble had come to the debate that morning.



## FIVE WOUNDS

2 Just before the gunpowder arrived, he had heard a messenger tell the Master of Ceremonies that a party of important senators was absent due to food poisoning. They had all been to the same private party the evening before, where they had dined upon shellfish.

3 So, while the insides of their comrades were liquidised, they squatted at home over chamber pots and threw up into buckets.

4 Among their number was Rut's father.

18 CROW had to move fast, before the absentees regrouped. Frustrating, because there were a lot of perfectly good noble corpses lying around that would only go to waste.

2 Crow proclaimed a state of emergency through a megaphone, reading from a prepared statement while standing on top of the smoking pile of ruins that had once been the Council hall.

19 IN the fog, no one could see him, but they could hear his voice, which acquired authority from the disembodied nature of the delivery.

2 The boys even stopped their game of football. It was boring anyway. No one could keep score, since the fog made it impossible to see one end of the Piazza from the other, and the players kept slipping on squishy remains and insensible birds.

3 Now they stood patriotically to attention,

with their hands held over their hearts, as Crow described how he was reluctantly obliged to assume the reins of government that the duke had let fall, at least until a proper succession could be arranged.

4 One boy with an eye patch seemed to be weeping, he was so moved.

20 WHEN he had finished speaking, Crow marched at the double across the city with a bodyguard of would-be assassins. They carried a collection of butchers' cleavers, axes, kitchen knives and hammers, but they were adequate for his purposes.

2 One of them had somehow acquired the lead pipe Crow had used at the dinner in the now-demolished palace, and he brandished this weapon with particular enthusiasm, no doubt because of its association with the man who was going to turn them all into kings.

21 AT the Ghetto, Crow brushed aside the protests of Mr X. 'The black dog is dead and your heir apparent is missing,' Crow said. 'You're defenceless, leaderless. I can destroy you.' Crow snapped his fingers in Mr X's face.

2 As he spoke, the dogs gathered, returning from the corners where they had scattered in confusion after Cur's departure. 'Or you can join me,' Crow continued, now addressing his remarks to the crowd, 'and we





can divide the city. I'll throw you the choicest cuts from its carcass.'

3 Crow explained what he had done, and what he planned to do. He left out the part about becoming immortal.

22 MR X primped his tangled robes, which were not as impressive as Crow's. 'It won't work. If you want to be their leader, you've got to become one of them.'

2 'Yes,' Crow said. This was what he had been waiting for, ever since Magpie had explained it to him at their first meeting. 'I'm ready,' he said.

3 'You don't understand,' Mr X said.

4 Crow held up his hand. 'I understand everything. Hurry hurry! Begin now!'

5 'If you insist,' Mr X said, bowing and

gesturing for Crow to go ahead of him, farther into the Ghetto, into the dripping, rusting interior of the old foundry.

6 Crow turned to face his supporters. 'Behold the apotheosis of King Crow!' he shouted, holding his dead arms aloft.

23 THE small crowd of assassins had huddled closer together when the dogs arrived. They cheered. The dogs barked. 'What's an apotheosis?' someone said.

2 'Stupid,' said the man with the lead pipe. 'It's what apofecaries do.'

3 The cheers died away. No one followed Crow inside the foundry.

24 INSIDE, X walked towards a bound and gagged dog, its mouth sticky with dried blood and foam. Mr X scraped some of the foam from its mouth.

2 Then he led Crow to an abandoned office with a gaping safe and filing cabinets spilling old account books puffed with mould and slime.

3 As Crow stepped through the door, he reached into his pocket to touch the daguerreotype he had stolen from Magpie.

25 THE assassins waited with their new allies for their leader to emerge. Seconds became minutes;

## FIVE WOUNDS

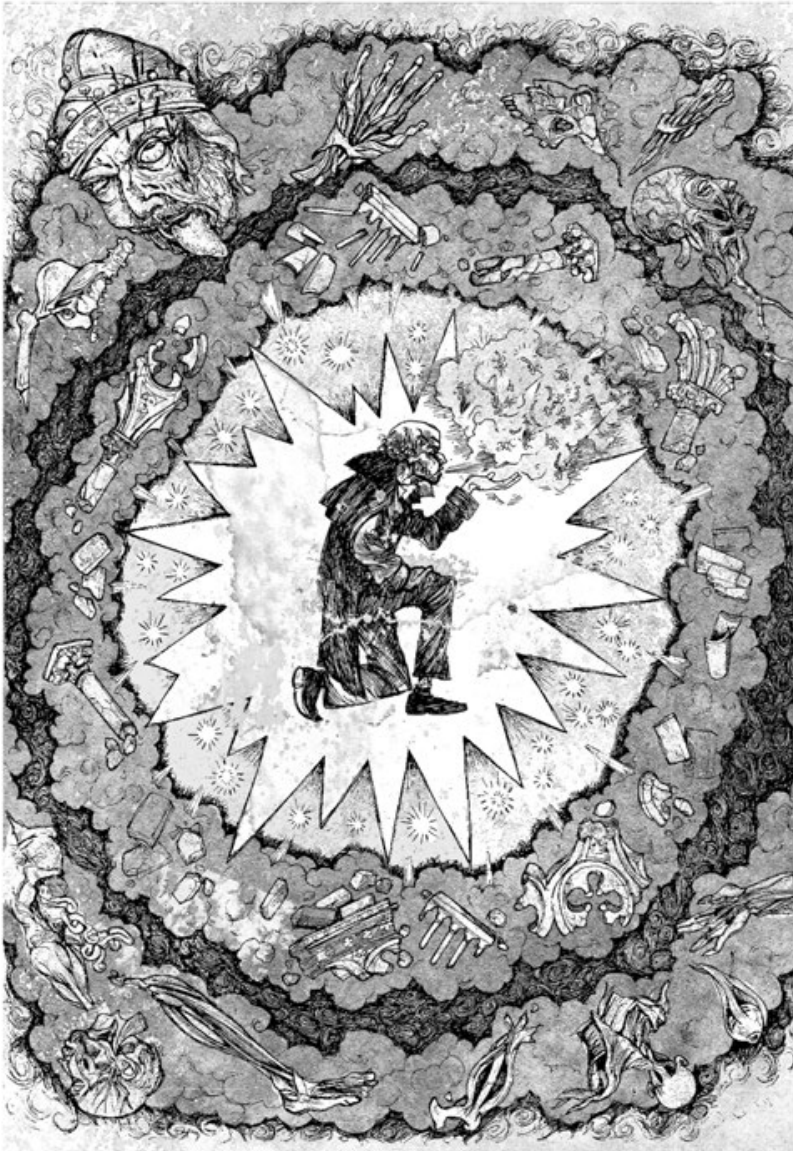
minutes dragged. Valuable time was slipping away, and Mr X had disappeared.

**2** At last, the boldest of the assassins sneaked inside the foundry and looked around until he found the office. He walked on tiptoe: there was really no need, but it was a hard habit to break.

**3** He placed his lead pipe carefully upon the floor and eased open the creaking door over the crunching glass from the broken window. Inside the room, Crow lay slumped in a seated position against the rear wall. His eyes stared and his mouth hung open. His face was coated in a thick slaver.

**4** 'Boss,' hissed the assassin. 'Boss! We've got to do something or things will return to normal.' No reply. The man closed the door and turned around, defeated.

**5** When he got back outside, half his fellows had already disappeared – but there were even more dogs, sniffing and scratching and fighting over bloody fragments snatched from the ruined Piazza.



*... And I'll Blow Your House Down*



## *Abomination of Desolation*

**1** MR X hurried to Rut's palace through the choking fog. He had tried to warn the pale man. Was it Mr X's fault if he would not listen?

**2** It was one thing to undergo the initiation process as a baby, but quite another for an adult. Infants were still adaptable, their natures unformed. Adults were less flexible. Instead of bending, their wills and minds snapped.

**3** Mr X was going to have to save the city now, if he wanted to keep his job. Would he get any credit for doing so?

**4** He kicked a stray bloody hand out of his way.

**2** HE had some trouble gaining admission when he arrived, but once he explained who he was, Rut's father agreed to see him.

**2** 'Sorry about the smell,' Rut's father said, 'but I don't know where any of the servants are.' He gestured towards a col-

lection of overflowing chamber pots peeking out from under the bed. Not just chamber pots: a jug, a vase with now-wilting flowers. A wash basin. A top hat.

**3** 'Make it quick,' Rut's father said, attempting to get his leg into the wrong hole in a pair of breeches. 'There's a constitutional crisis.'

**4** 'That's what I'm here about,' Mr X said, and proceeded to explain what Crow had done.

**5** 'Thank God for our deliverance!' Rut's father burst out, when Mr X had finished. 'We need to elect a new duke immediately!' He blushed, perhaps imagining himself as a candidate for the role.

**6** 'I have a better idea,' Mr X said. 'Leave the state of emergency as it is. Leave Crow in power.'

**7** 'But he's an imbecile!' protested Rut's father. He was now trying to attach his stockings to the breeches. 'You said he'll never recover his wits.'

8 'Exactly. The dogs can guard him, and prevent anyone seeing him, except you and your companions. You can consult him, and then deliver his orders to the people. You'll be able to do whatever you want.'

3 RUT'S father had an even better idea. He was, in his own way, an idealist, with no wish to take personal advantage of the situation. Nonetheless, it could be exploited for the good of the state.

2 'We can have a totally just government,' he said, his eyes shining. 'Every decision can be made on the turn of a card or the throw of a die, and we can blame the Guardian's whim. But really *no one* will be in charge. Corruption will be impossible!'

3 His limbs shook at this delicious prospect, and also a little with the aftereffects of the shellfish.

4 'I don't care,' Mr X said, 'so long as our position is protected. And by "our", I mean "my". I want a state pension, separate from the dogs' salary.'

2 'Fine.'

3 Rut's father made a mental note to cancel the poison in the Treasurer's food. The scheme would only work as long as Crow remained alive. Eventually Crow would die of natural causes, but by then his reign would be well established.

4 Perhaps they could stuff and mount

the corpse, and wheel it out onto the palace balcony on feast days, to wave to the gathered crowds.

5 Once Crow was dead, it would do no harm to let the people see him. Crow could become immortal, and his reign eternal.

6 Best of all, debits could be indefinitely transferred to his account, which would accumulate to negative infinity without endangering public morality.

7 'Let me speak to the other survivors,' Rut's father said. Mr X followed him as he bumped his way unsteadily down the marble staircase, clinging to the carved banister.

8 His wig was on backwards, but he did not notice.

9 'One other thing,' Mr X added, following after. 'You'll need to appoint someone to care for him. I've got better things to do than feed and change a dummy.'

10 'Sort it out yourself,' said Rut's father. 'Bill the government.'

5 MR X walked back towards the Ghetto, very pleased with himself. Who needed the black dog or that miserable, ungrateful boy?

2 His employers were fortunate to have an associate of vision and genius. Their future was guaranteed, and whatever Rut's father thought, the Ghetto would

## FIVE WOUNDS

be the centre of government, replacing the devastated palace.

3 He just needed a reliable servant. In front of the Ghetto walls, he noticed a blind beggar who regularly sat there. He would do. Better to employ someone incapable of understanding the true state of affairs.

6 'WHAT'S your name?' Mr X asked the man, who rattled a tin cup in the direction of his voice.

2 'Jacques,' the man replied.

3 Mr X looked in the cap, which contained a brass pin, a split conker and a bagattino. 'I have a job for you, Jacques. There'll be regular food and pocket money, and a nice uniform with gold brocade. You won't be able to see the brocade I suppose, but I promise it'll be of the finest quality.'

4 'Sir, I'd be happy to work, but is it a task a blind man can do?'

5 'Oh yes. Being blind is an advantage in this case. Come with me.' Mr X pulled his shirt cuff down over his fingers and offered it for Jacques to hold onto.

7 WHEN Mr X had explained his responsibilities, Jacques ran his fingertips over Crow's slack features. 'I'll have to shave you as well as feed you,' he said. 'But see how my hands shake from the

kicks I can't avoid because I don't see them coming.

2 'It's not so bad. I can avoid slashing your throat, I'm sure, but your face might not be so lucky.'

3 He felt out the shapes of Crow's nose, ears, lips, squeezing and flicking. 'Everything sticks out a bit, doesn't it?'

4 Jacques held a spoon up and pushed it in the general direction of Crow's mouth. 'Open wide,' he said. 'We wouldn't want you to go hungry.'

8 FROM the doorway of the abandoned office, Mr X began to tell a story. 'A black dog went into a kitchen to steal a bone.' He paused as he watched the spoon in Jacques's hand waver.

2 'THE COOK KILLED THE DOG WITH A LADLE, AFTER WHICH MANY BLACK DOGS IN TEARS CARRIED HIM AWAY AND BURIED HIM UNDER A STONE, ON WHICH THEY WROTE, "A BLACK DOG WENT INTO A KITCHEN TO STEAL A BONE. THE COOK KILLED THE DOG WITH A LADLE ..."'

3 Flies lazily left the corners of Crow's lips as Jacques smeared the spoon's contents over his immaculate face.

4 'Et cetera, et cetera,' concluded Mr X. 'What's the motto of the story, Jacques?'

5 'I don't know, sir.'

6 'DEATH CARRIES WITHIN ITSELF THE IMAGE OF INFINITY, AS INFINITY CARRIES





THE IMAGE OF DEATH,' Mr X said. He waved his arms at Jacques. 'Behold the abomination of desolation!'

7 'I can't see, sir.'

8 'Oh yes. I forgot.'

9 Crow drooled as the daguerreotype of the disguised Cuckoo fell from his open hand.





### *The Multitudinous Tongue*

**1** SPANISH troops were loose in the streets, pillaging and raping, sparing only those who knew the secret signal.

**2** At Rut's palace, the pot boy was scooping blackberry jam from a jar and smearing it over his face. The cook was hiding under the kitchen table, swiping at the legs of anyone who came close with a wooden spoon. The lady's maid who attended Rut's mother had emptied a bottle of perfume over her own head. She was crying in her petticoats at the sink trying to scrub the stench out of her dress.

**3** The two gondoliers had broken into the wine cellar and were knocking the tops off a collection of bottles, taking a swig or two, then splashing the rest of the contents over the walls in the entrance hall.

**4** They pulled the tail of the hairless dog, trying to get it to spin round and chase itself, but it just whimpered.

**2** A dragon had shat grenades down the chimney of the ducal palace and incinerated the survivors as they tried to flee across the Piazza.

**2** Rut's father had gone out, and was not expected back tonight. Some believed he had abandoned them. Rut's mother had locked herself in her room with a blunderbuss, which she threatened to discharge at anyone who tried to communicate through the door.

**3** THE prophets of Bu-Ba-Baff had revealed God's judgement: all the surviving nobles were now servants, and the servants were in charge.

**2** Cuckoo should have gone to the Great Council that morning, since Rut was a noble, but Rut's father had warned him there might be trouble if he made an appearance.

**3** 'What's this I hear about treachery and taxes?' he had asked.

4 'I honestly have no idea,' Cuckoo replied.

5 'Well, best keep out the way until it blows over.'

4 THE duke had faked his own death to draw out the traitors whose secret opposition had been undermining his rule. In three days, he would return to punish anyone who had taken advantage of his absence.

2 When Cuckoo heard the explosion and saw the giant column of black smoke across the city, he knew it must have something to do with Crow, and he did not wish to live under a government run by the pale man.

3 He had been unable to speak to Rut's father about his suspicions, but he wrote a letter explaining everything – including his deception and his unwilling involvement in Crow's election.

4 As he wrote, Gabriella gathered together as much of her money as she could find, since Cuckoo did not want to take any of Rut's.

5 A crack had opened in the pavement of the Piazza, spilling forth demons dressed in the robes of nobles, while angels strafed them with thunderbolts.

2 In the confusion, no one noticed Gabriella and Cuckoo leaving – except the maid who had once been Rut's lover. But



she regretted slipping a secret denunciation into one of the lion's mouth boxes, so she said nothing. Surely her little note couldn't be the cause of all this upheaval?

6 THERE were new taxes on everything: colds, afternoon naps, kissing with tongues; beards, Tuesdays, exclamation marks.

2 In the street, a breathless boy wearing an eye patch arrived with a crumpled envelope in his hand.

3 He was a week late. There were so many distractions! Only today, there had been an explosion, then a game of football in the Piazza, followed in turn by an exciting proclamation. The boys had been hunting for Spaniards and smashing shop windows when they could not find any.

4 'It's a letter for a lady called Gabriella,' the boy gasped, 'from the paint seller at

## FIVE WOUNDS

the sign of the dog. You know, the one who's in charge now.' He rubbed his uncovered eye.

**5** Cuckoo and Gabriella looked at one another.

**6** 'He said you'd give me a coin.' The boy held out his hand.



### *Treasurer of the Public Conscience*

**1** ALL was proceeding according to Magpie's plan. No word from Crow since the palace had exploded, but that was to be expected.

**2** In the aftermath of the explosion, the fog darkened and thickened, turning to sleet and snow overnight as it mingled with drifting ash.

**3** Magpie moved invisible and unnoticed through a city whose air was now dappled in the same tones as his skin – except that Mr X appeared to be following him.

**4** Magpie picked his way round the edges of the rubble in the Piazza, watching the gossiping onlookers in his mirror. As he angled it, Mr X's face loomed. 'I've got a job for you.'

**5** 'What is it?' Magpie knew what it was.

**6** 'I hear you make daguerreotypes. You took some for the government once, isn't that right? We need a portrait of the new Treasurer of the Public Conscience.'

**7** Magpie gestured at the rubble. 'Not here.'

**8** 'The Ghetto,' Mr X said. 'Didn't you know the curfew's off and the government's based there now?'

**9** 'So that's why the streets are full of shit,' Magpie said. Excrement had started appearing as soon as the viscera had been cleared away. The dogs demonstrating their new power.

**2** THE next morning, when the light was still soft, Mr X took Magpie to the damp-ridden office where Crow still lay. Magpie had to thread his way through sleeping dogs, who stirred and sniffed as he passed.

**2** Crow did not move or make any response when the door opened. Around him, seven bowls of water were arranged in a semi-circle. 'A precautionary measure,' said Mr X. He left the two of them alone.

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**3** MAGPIE approached his former partner. Crow's face was covered in cuts. Some of them were quite deep, and one of his earlobes was missing.

**2** Magpie touched Crow's hair, brushing it gently with the back of his hand. He leaned in close. 'Tell me. Show me how you want to be photographed.'

**3** Crow's eyeballs jumped under his lids, but he made no reply. Magpie placed his ear close to Crow's mouth, as if to a conch shell. It seemed to him, as he listened to the laboured breathing, that he could hear the lagoon tide swallowing stones and spewing them out again.

**4** AS Magpie leaned in, an object lying by the body caught the uncertain light. It was scuffed to illegibility and furred with dust, but Magpie had no difficulty in recognising one of his children.

**2** He picked up the daguerreotype. Although its surface had been destroyed, he remembered Cuckoo's outline, and he traced the absent shape with his breath. Its condensation revealed the ghost of the dead image.

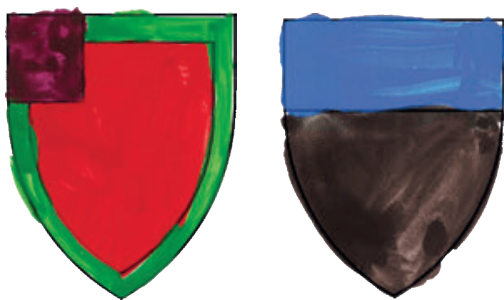
**5** MAGPIE began to set up the camera. The dim interior light would require a long exposure, but that was not going to be a problem, since the subject did not seem inclined to move.

**2** Everything was coming together for Magpie. His teeth were loose, and his lungs burnt and frothed, but that was the price he paid for being constantly light-headed. More importantly, his lost picture had found its way back to him, as he knew it would, and the mysterious plague of dust had stopped.

**3** Best of all, he had a living corpse to pose and dress and photograph.

**4** 'You need gold to fix a silver image,' Magpie said. 'Gold chloride.'

**5** He studied Crow's face. 'You're my mirror,' he said. 'Show me who I am.'



## *Vendetta*

**1** AS Cur paced up and down in a clearing in the woods, avoiding Rut, the breeze shifted, and he knew that Gabriella and Cuckoo were nearby. They had escaped too! He laughed.

**2** Even if Gabriella's interpretation of his dream was wrong, it would be good to find out who he might once have become. Do something.

**3** He walked back to the inn, anticipating his escape from the purgatory of the past few days. In particular, he was glad to be leaving Rut, whose attempts to curry favour disturbed him insofar as Rut seemed to regard him as a kindred spirit.

**2** A whiff of wet dog, rising from the lagoon. It shook its coat and splattered Cur with water. Then it went for his throat.

**2** It closed too quickly for him to draw his sword, but he did not want to bite it,

so it was able to maul him before he got it off.

**3** He kicked it in the throat, and while it was on the ground he stabbed it in the chest. As it coughed up blood, he knelt down and ran his hand through the rough curls on its coat. 'Easy now, easy,' he said, as the rising and falling of its chest slowed and stopped.

**4** There was a piece of paper tied around its neck. Cur opened the message, which was in Mr X's hand. *We are coming after you, wolf.*

**5** Let them come. He would kill them all.

**3** WHEN Cur returned to the inn clutching his throat, he could already see Gabriella and Cuckoo coming from the ferry.

**2** Rut followed him up the stairs. Cur ignored him. Only when he had finished throwing his belongings together with his free hand did he beckon to Rut.

## FIVE WOUNDS

3 'I have to tell you something before I go,' he said, as the blood seeped around the stubs of his fingers.

4 'Yes?' Rut's eager face shone.

5 'I really don't like you. Now get out of my way.'

4 GABRIELLA had not wanted to stop here. They were not yet far enough from the city, and Rut's father might send men after them. But Cuckoo wanted to eat, and surely Rut's father had more important things to worry about?

2 While they waited for their food, three men entered the inn. The conversation in the room dropped away.

3 They stopped inside the doorway to prevent anyone leaving. Each of them held a drawn pistol. One of them stepped forward.

5 HE stuck his pistol in his belt and drew a small axe instead. He used the blade to sweep the glasses from a nearby tabletop, then buried the edge in the wood surface. 'We're looking for someone,' he said, taking out his pistol again.

2 Cuckoo had a horrible premonition he knew who it was. He got to his feet and cleared his throat. The pistols swung in his direction.





## *Magpie's Dream*

**1** MAGPIE was in his treasure trove, asleep. On the wall, Gabriella's wings were mounted at the centre of a mandala made up of framed and mounted daguerreotypes.

**2** In his chair, Magpie began to grind his teeth, which shifted in their sockets.

**2** HE saw a painter who lived in fear, and moved his brush in trembling strokes, peering over his shoulder. He dreamed of a man with no foot, begging hopelessly for money.

**2** He remembered removing Gabriella's wings. He saw himself watching her watching him standing over her, in a dulled series of reflections, but what he felt was not dulled.

**3** He dreamed of the couple he had photographed in Crow's workshop, and he heard their cries for release. He dreamed of Rut, and felt what a dying girl had felt, so that she might not die alone.

**4** He dreamed of his parents, and his heart was struck with their grief.

**5** None of the succession of images would stay still – he could not fix them before they deepened to black. Instead, they took possession of him and would not let go, even after they crackled and broke up.

**6** Eventually Cuckoo appeared, standing in an inn with three pistols pointed at his head. His mouth opened, and it moved, but Magpie could not understand the words that came out. They sounded foreign, and the voice that spoke them was not Cuckoo's.

**7** A violent stabbing pain: Magpie could not tell if that was part of the vision or an interruption, but it did not wake him.

**3** THEN another, strangely familiar voice began to tell a story. 'The girl that Rut killed had three brothers,' it began.

## FIVE WOUNDS

2 Its words floated invisibly on a velvety black background. 'One had gone to seek his fortune on the sea as a fisherman; one had gone to seek his fortune in the forest as a woodcutter; and one had gone to seek his fortune in the mountains as a shepherd.

3 'When they heard of their sister's death, they returned to their father's house. The fisherman placed a boathook and a pistol in his belt. The woodcutter placed an axe and a pistol in his. The shepherd too had a pistol, and carried a wooden staff in his hand.

4 'When their father told them of the mysterious stranger, they resolved to take their revenge. They set out to look for Rut.

5 'When they travelled by boat, the sailor led; when they travelled through dark forest, the woodcutter led; when they walked in clear mountain air, the shepherd led.

6 'They journeyed by day and by night, having sworn an oath not to rest until their sister was avenged. Every time they came across a village, they asked after Rut.

7 'For many days, they found no trace of him. As they circled back towards their point of origin, the three brothers came to an inn whose sign depicted two laughing sailors. They went inside.'

8 The voice stopped here, but the screen remained blank. There was nothing

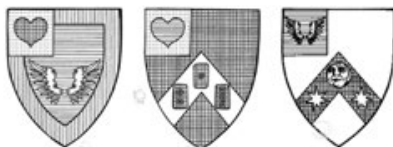
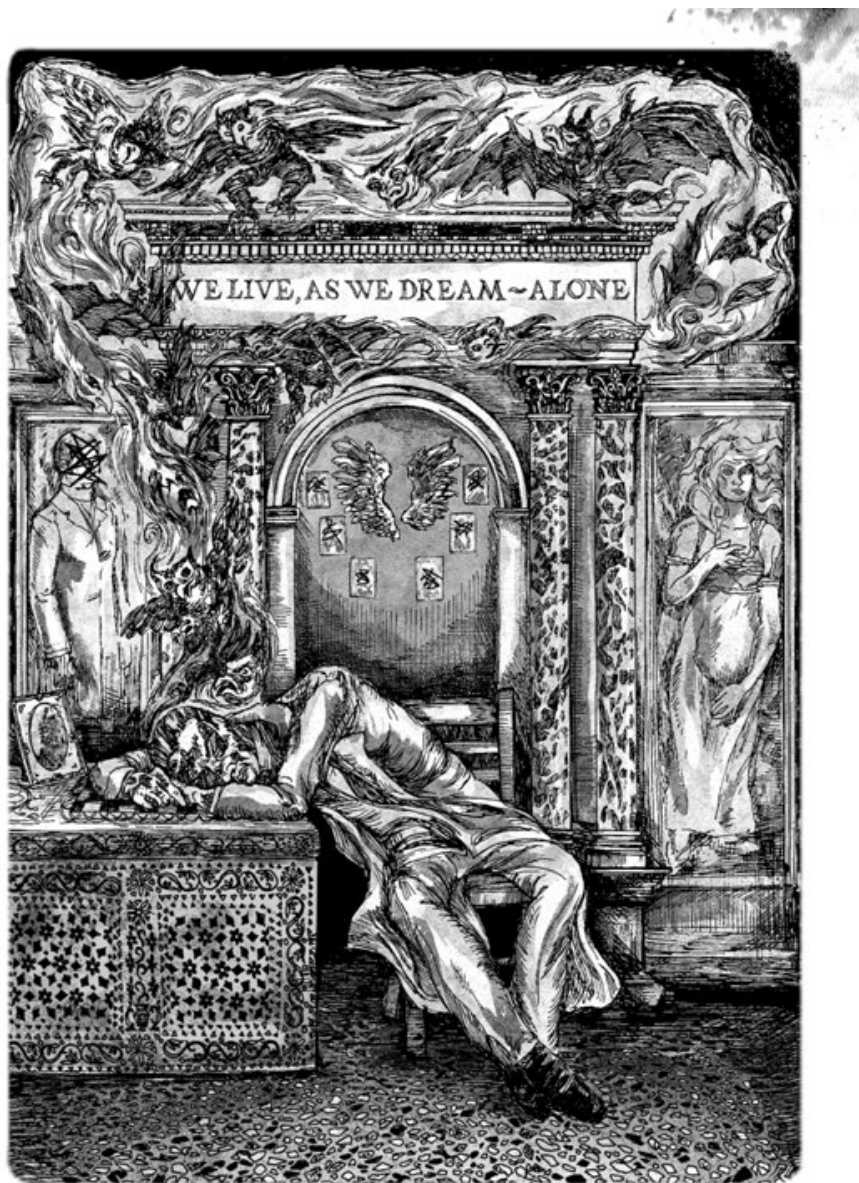
more, only faint afterimages of the stories that had gone before.

4 MAGPIE KNEW THEN THAT THE MEMORY OF GRIEF STAYS IN THE FLESH.

2 THE BODY RECALLS IT, FEELS ITS WEIGHT, MOULDS ITSELF AUTOMATICALLY TO ITS SHAPE AS THE LOSS IS REMEMBERED, THE MASK BECOMING TIGHTER AS THE MEMORY BECOMES CLEARER; NOT THE MEMORY OF THE DEAD PERSON, BUT THE MEMORY OF GRIEF ITSELF.

3 'WE LIVE, AS WE DREAM – ALONE,' his mouth muttered without his brain's consent, so that the words left no trace in his memory. On the wall, the wings hummed and the daguerreotypes gleamed dully.

4 The black screen in Magpie's head dissolved into grey static, into a cloud of immaterial dust, and then the dust spoke in a still small voice. 'MeNe, MeNe, TeKeL, UPHARSIN,' it said.



*We Live, As We Dream – Alone*



## *MeNe, MeNe, TeKeL, UPHARSIN*

**1** CUCKOO TRIED TO PREPARE HIMSELF FOR WHAT WAS COMING. HE BEGAN TO THINK OF HIMSELF AS MEAT FIT ONLY TO BE BONED AND GUTTED BY THE CORONER, ALREADY A DEAD THING IN THE AWARENESS OF HIS APPROACHING DEATH.

**2** When it happened, his face would dissolve into a final nothing. His open, unbreathing mouth would become an exactly average zero. A perfect moment.

**2** 'IS she with you?' said one of the men, tilting his head to indicate Gabriella, but keeping his eyes and his pistol on Cuckoo.

**2** 'Yes,' Cuckoo said. 'THAT'S MY WIFE.'

**3** 'And you are?'

**4** 'My name is Rut.'

**5** 'Indeed?' the man said, and pulled the trigger on his pistol a heartbeat before his brothers followed suit.

**3** CUR stumbled at the bottom of the stairs, reaching for the door handle,

tripping, slamming into the door instead – too late.

**2** Later, he covered Cuckoo's face with a handkerchief, averting his eyes. He watched Gabriella from a distance.

**4** SHE rocked in her seat in the now-empty inn, surrounded by overturned chairs and smashed glasses. She stuck her hands miserably into her pockets, where she found a biscuit and Crow's message, neglected in the panic of their flight from the city.

**2** She took the letter out and broke the seal. A note explained that Crow had deciphered her text. She turned over to the attached transcript, which consisted of three unpunctuated sentences.

**3** FORGIVE ME MY DARLINGS I CAN'T LIVE ANY LONGER I LOVE YOU ALL

**4** Perhaps it was a sort of garbled prophecy, warning her of what Cuckoo was going to do.

**5** If she had read it earlier, maybe she

## A PERFECT MOMENT

could have stopped him; but then, even if she had read it, she would not have known how to interpret it.

5 NOW nothing made sense, and her child would be fatherless.





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**3** 'And you are?'

**3** CUCKOO looked at Gabriella. She gripped his arm, so that the whiteness of her knuckles seemed indistinguishable from that of the compressed flesh visible between her fingers.

**2** His blood throbbed resentfully, trapped in his hand – as it had when Crow and Magpie attacked him. If his arm had been malleable, like his face, her fingers would have sliced through to bone.

**3** The Bible said husband and wife were ONE FLESH.

**4** He had never seen her face when they made love, because he did not want her to see his, but he had sensed it move and open. He had felt the outline of her mouth moving under his hand, and heard her cry his name.

**5** Her expression now was the opposite of how he imagined it then: utterly closed, focused upon him, bearing down with the same inescapable question he had just been asked.

**6** What did she want him to say? He shouted the question down into the well of his mind, but the only sound he heard in reply was an echo.

## A PERFECT MOMENT

**4** HER look gripped him as tightly as her hand did. He had seen that look before, but it was a moment before he made the connection, because then it had been on someone else's face.

**2** The old man, running towards him in the rain.

**3** But Cuckoo had not lied to Gabriella. He opened his mouth, but then it dawned on him that he had already confessed the only truth that mattered.

**4** YES, THAT'S MY WIFE.

**5** Before he could say anything else, Cur crashed through the door leading to the rooms upstairs. The men swung their pistols around to the new arrival.

**5** CUR raised his hands slowly. He did not want to kill anyone if he could help it.

**2** 'We're looking for someone called Rut,' the man in front said, addressing the entire room.

**3** 'You're in luck,' Cur said. 'He's upstairs. You're welcome to him.'

**4** 'How do we know you're not Rut?' the man said.

**5** 'He's not,' Gabriella said. 'He's our friend. His name is Cur.'

**6** The men lowered their pistols. They moved over to the stairs, and Cur stood aside to let them pass. Their leader went last, stepping backwards, so he could keep the room covered with his pistol.

**7** Upstairs, a cacophony of thuds and stamping feet, bodies hitting walls, two bangs in quick succession, a third a few seconds later – the sulphur smell of gunpowder.

**6** LATER, Gabriella, Cuckoo and Cur journeyed on together. 'I'm going to find my parents,' Cur said. 'I wanted to tell you, and thank you.'

**2** 'They could be dead,' Gabriella said. 'I'm not making any promises. Even if I was right, the message could be out of date by now.'

**3** 'I know, but that's where my past ended, so that's where my future should begin.'

**4** Cur had decided to leave Cuckoo and Gabriella to their own fate when they reached a fork in the path. 'It's not safe for you to travel with me,' he explained. 'There are dogs on my trail.'

**7** CUR turned left, and so the others went right. They had no particular destination in mind, but Gabriella was hopeful, and Cuckoo was willing to take a chance on things turning out well.

**2** Thinking about her own father, Gabriella realised she had not yet opened Crow's message. She took it from her pocket and broke the seal.

**3** A note explained that Crow had deciphered her text. She turned over to the



## FIVE WOUNDS

attached transcript, which consisted of three unpunctuated sentences:

4 FORGIVE ME MY DARLINGS I CAN'T LIVE  
ANY LONGER I LOVE YOU ALL

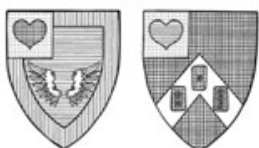
8 'WHAT is it?' Cuckoo asked.  
2 'I don't know.' Gabriella did not understand – but she did not need to anymore. 'I have to ask you something,' she said. Enough time had passed for her to be sure of at least one part of the dream she and Cuckoo had shared.

3 'What will the child of a man with no face and an angel with no wings be like?' she said. 'I'm scared God still wants to say something through me. Monsters are portents too. He might make me give birth to a litter of cats, just to prove a point.'

9 IT took Cuckoo a moment to unravel this. 'Don't worry,' he said, remembering the dream. 'God asked us to protect a child, and we shall.'

2 Then he smiled.





*We Live, As We Dream*





*Regnabo, Regno, Regnavi, Sum Sine Regno*



## Notes

There are numerous short quotations scattered throughout *Five Wounds* from a variety of texts. These are signalled by the use of SMALL CAPS, in imitation of the way lines from the Old Testament are conventionally rendered within the New. A few instances require more detailed acknowledgement. The text Crow reads from in 'A Meeting of Minds' is the *Hieroglyphics of Horapollo* in the English translation by George Boas; Gabriella quotes from the same book in 'Paradise'. The book quoted in 'The Fencing Master' is certainly a real sixteenth- or seventeenth-century Italian fencing manual, but I confess I no longer recall which; the translation may be my own. Several other quotations are from an autobiographical essay of my own written many years before *Five Wounds*. When the novel was first published, I made this available as a free download. I've now thought better of that decision: it should remain hidden.

Other passages, not marked, are paraphrases rather than direct quotation: The gazette reporter in 'The Bagatto' adapts lines from a famous Venetian diarist, Marin Sanudo. The originals can be found in Patricia H. Labalme, Laura Sanguinetti White and Linda Carroll, 'How to (and not to) get married in sixteenth-century Venice (selections from the diaries of Marin Sanudo),' *Renaissance Quarterly*, 521 (1999). The nightmare in 'Crow's Dream' adapts a passage from Gus Blaisdell's afterword to Joel-Peter Witkin, *Gods of Earth and Heaven*, 1989.

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## *About the Authors*



Jonathan Walker was born near Liverpool in the UK. *Five Wounds* was his first novel. He has a doctorate in Venetian history, and is also the author of two other novels and an illustrated biography of a Venetian spy, *Pistols! Treason! Murder!*



Born in Northampton in the UK, Dan Hallett studied illustration at the Anglia Ruskin University Art School in Cambridge. After graduating, he emigrated to Spain where he now works in Barcelona as a textile designer and illustrator, and where he also exhibits his paintings and drawings. Dan's first book as illustrator was Jonathan Walker's *Pistols! Treason! Murder!*