



Five Wounds

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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.

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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-

AWOO! AWOO!

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.

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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.

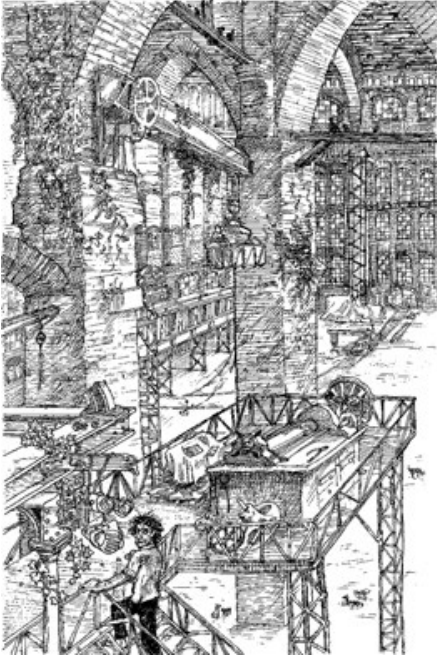
2 The death that Cur dreamed of was real. The dogs killed part of his future manhood that day, and made him one of them.

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

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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

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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