Newton's Niece

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«HarperCollins»

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A lavish and richly detailed portrait of the world of Newton and the London of that time.From the disturbing goings-on in a South London mental hospital, the narrator of this daring and ambitious novel hurtles back through the past, to the character of Kit, Isaac Newton's niece. What unfolds is a story of conflicting male and female universes at the beginning of the eighteenth century, a time when Newton and others were claiming the meaning of the world for themselves and trying to fix it in their grid, an emotional asphyxiation Kit determines to fight against. Full of music and science and politics, Newton's Niece is a book about disorientation, human life as self-experiment and the nature of Time, a novel that boldly explores sexual politics and the early feminist struggle.'Magnificent set pieces, a richness of thought, a prodigal and original talent.' Time Out

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Newton's Niece
DEREK BEAVEN

FOURTH ESTATE • *London*

Dedication

For Philip and Lyn

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Dross

'You're sticking me back in it.' The bland little consultation space, the beige of the chairs, the rust of the curtains, the hard paleness of the walls began to unweave. Their presence gave way; even the cyclamen on the ledge failed. I sensed tears needling my eyes. But I pressed on in an effort to describe the reciprocal image of my feeling: 'There's a room. I have to go in.'

'What's in the room?' Brendan's voice penetrated as if through a stretched film, a membrane.

At length: 'So many things. I don't know which are true.'

I smudged away the tears and murdered the memory of the room. Brendan and the July Saturday morning came back into focus, but not before another distinct and separate trace flapped in from the past. I was ten. I was holding the lid on a curious glass jar. I had just dropped a swab, soaked in poison spirit, through its neck. The magnified, common, beautiful, garden tiger moth panicked briefly at the bottom of its prison. I held the jar up to the panes of an old sash window, to see sunlight strike the bars on its still faintly moving wings.

I didn't tell Brendan about the moth. What was the use? None of it made any sense then.

He shifted in his chair and glanced at the clock. It pleased him to measure his sessions with a battered Fifties-style travelling alarm clock, illuminated in green with radio-active paint. It glowed in the dark, he said. Generally, I felt comfortable with Brendan: he had a worn but perky air about him. His spectacles grabbed on to the concern in his face and tucked into spills of comb-resistant hair, so that when he nodded their gold arms ticked away in a sign of genuine warmth. But I was annoyed with him just now. I was distressed and couldn't show it. If I'd turned to jelly at work and come to howl it out in front of him, or dashed my head against the wall to burst the build-up, he might have registered. But the wicked injunction that had been laid on me prevented the disclosure even of symptoms – although I think something inside was smuggling messages out in the hope that he'd catch on.

He didn't. He was on the wrong track. But even if, by some miraculous accident of speech, he should have come up, there and then, with the very names that were beginning to haunt me – Barnabas Smith, the two Benjamins, and Isaac Newton – they would not have triggered my violent rage or incandescent recognition; not then.

And this was the end of another session; troubling my sensitive eyes against an invisible barrier. Brendan put an arm on my shoulder and saw me to the door. Confused by this gesture, I thrust myself back into the hot street. For my true companions at that time were creatures of nightmare and poetry: I'd given up the attempt at teaching and was working by day as a cleaner in one of those terrible old mental hospitals, one of the last. By night, antique half-birds and, yes, moths, came to hold converse with me – products, perhaps, of my imagination.

The steering wheel felt sticky. I left Slough with the sun on my roof and headed towards the motorway intersection, hoping my rusty Ford would bear the rigours of the M25. And, as always, perhaps, half-hoping that it wouldn't. Mid-journey the peculiar breathing started again. I found myself panting, and wondered what it was that should manifest thus. I hung on to my faint suspicions and the concrete perspective ahead; they kept me going.

The Ford held together. I got crossly on with my shift at the hospital. It was in the children's block, the chronic section – poor damaged souls.

There's a subtle comfort in working with a mop and bucket, a kind of atonement that keeps a nagging voice off your back. I could begin to make inroads against the tide of chaos; even if the dirt was ingrained, it was not Victorian, as it was in the main building. The children lived in a separate Unit – built in the Sixties as a square, unlovely and functional contrast.

I mopped restlessly down corridors, and privately across wards, behind cabinets or under beds, some of which contained speechless and tragically handicapped occupants, their wasted limbs stretched out in a sort of not-sleep. Tied, I suddenly thought, to their beds. Seco, my workmate of

the day, left me alone. By lunchtime I'd reached the foyer at the main entrance to the block. It was a sensitive area. I hated having my work messed from all the coming out and going in while it was still wet. The coast looked clear. I needed only a five-minute window to get the whole floor done and dried.

Four minutes later the expanse of grey tiles shone sweetly with a fast-evaporating film of radiance, until the glass doors swung open with a flapping of white coats, and two pairs of medical soles left their thoughtless imprint on my wet floor. My blood seethed. It was the thin boss doctor, the callous one who soon after all this would be prosecuted for running a negligent ship, and one of his henchmen. As they charted their course, clipboards waving, between the double doors and the wards, I caught a snatch of their conversation.

'Of course, she's painting again,' the henchman was saying.

'What? Ms Jay? More slogans? More Action Now posters? Ha, ha,' his laugh more like a cough. 'Anyway, when?'

'No. Real painting. She's been up in the Art Room since this morning. I'm told she asked to have the dark room set up. Someone brought her some negatives. Alright to let that go on?'

'If she knows what she's doing. Bit of a special case. She'll be OK. Everything's more or less screwed down, I'm assured. Don't want to cross her again and have to sedate. Or risk the not-eating game.' They stopped to glance at a notice-board.

'Copying the photographs. Domestic reminiscence. But with each one some preoccupation seems to gain in strength. She's … well, strikingly intent.'

'Ah yes. Characteristic. Give a bit of leeway. However I don't think we want to run the risk of over-stimulation. Don't want her drinking the stuff. Silver, what is it … iodide? Or am I hopelessly out of date? You never know, if the press gets hold of it. Ask a nurse to pop up every now and then.' Moving on, their voices attenuated.

I caught: 'The cocktail as usual, then?'

'For the time being, I think so. Don't you? Just increase the … ' They turned a corner and disappeared from view, severing the name of the drug.

I rammed my mop into its strainer and twisted savagely. Then I applied myself to the smudges and footprints even though I could see through the doors, approaching fast, a posse of chattering nurses likely to ruin everything. But I knew who the doctors were talking about.

Saphir came from the girls' wing to complete the damage.

'That's not my bucket is it, Jacob?'

'No.'

'It'd better not be, that's all. Wait till I catch the bastard who's got it. Seco. Where's he bloody gone?'

She swung off with panache. She covered her legs with a black *shalvar*, and managed to make even her cleaner's overalls look expensive. She was a medical student doing a Summer job. Her pretty black braids, seen from behind, touched my recollection somehow. But my memory was shot to pieces – I'd learned that, at least, from my sessions with Brendan.

Later, after lunch, and when I'd finished my share of the washing-up, Seco the Italian grounded my bucket and forced me to be composed. He sat me down in the little scullery, insisting I take one of his Marlboros. Technically he had seniority. He said I should learn to relax – like him; and not to work so hard – like him.

'You gonna bust youself. Take it easy for Chrissake.'

But if I stopped my scrubbing I felt threatened, today more than ever. The cigarette tasted like its own ash. When it was finished I moved towards my mop.

'Sit down. You want another? Why you're so keen? This place is a dump. A dirty dump. Iss gonna stay that way no matter how much you do.'

I waved away the second cigarette. 'No thanks, Seco.' But I sat down again with him; and felt … panicky. My breath shortened and the scullery, its stainless-steel certainty slipping on the instant into doubt, receded with a sick faintness that reminded me of Brendan and the morning.

Before I could make a fool of myself I grabbed on to the remnants of the conversation. That woman the doctors were talking about -'Ms Jay'. I'd seen her. She connected something, somehow, but not from now. From before … whatever that meant. She *reminded* me …

'Where's the Art Room, Seco?'

I donno. You interested in Art? In Italy we know what is Art. These folk here just make … what you call it … splashes. Like mud. They too far gone, mate.' He wound his finger significantly at his temple. 'Waste of time. They don't know one end of a pintbrush from another.' He looked out of the window and gestured towards the main buildings. 'Iss over there somewhere, anyway. I donno.'

'How could I get over there?'

He looked at me as if to wind the finger again.

'No. I mean this afternoon. Now. This shift. I need an excuse.'

'Just go. Go over to get chemical. For you bloody toilets. Say we run out.'

'Yes, but Mr Prime'll check. He'll come over with me.'

'So tip what we got away. Down the pan.' 'Ah. Yes. Good idea, Seco. Thanks.' Doing violence to the drains. 'No problem. You have another cigarette. Then maybe we start.'

Sun slanted in through the reinforced windows. Heaven splashed over the taps, bright steel. We finished the washing-up, Seco and I. The torrid July day made us sweat in our overalls. Our rubber gloves stuck to our hands as we put away the cutlery, made all the work-surfaces acceptable, and trundled the heated trolley wagons back to their parking stations. Seco called another time-out. I was on edge. We'd exhausted the tales of his taxi-driving in Rome a week ago. We had not much left. Seco – whose name, because of what he claimed was my impure pronunciation, reminded me of the sharp taste of wine – let his smoke drift out into the sunshaft. Sitting on his stool, he kept watch through the windows for any of the managers venturing nosily to visit us, across the heat-drenched lawns.

'*Eccolo*!'

'What?'

'Mr Prime. He's come out.' His cigarette was suddenly at the 'ready' position, angled back, palmed with the quickness of an old hand.

'Where?' I peered across the grass to the office door. A small grey-haired man in a coat of authority was poised, clipboard in hand, on the brink of paying us a call. But he turned further than our direction, and marched off towards C block, which was a kind of vast *terrapin* hut, to inspect the geriatrics.

'OK. No worry,' said Seco.

In the dining-room beyond the serving hatch, the male nurses were finishing the last of the difficult ones, poor children in their bruised crash helmets, or gleaming, rigorous callipers. At last Seco threw his cigarette down. Its remnant melted fine geography into a floor tile.

'It's arright. We mop here first. You control that bucket. I this one.'

'Seco …?'

'*Si*?'

'I'm not feeling … I don't think I can …'

'What?'

I stopped. I held on to the mop handle. 'Never mind. It doesn't matter.'

'OK. Whose turn the toilets, yours or mine?'

'Mine. I think I …'

'It's OK. I take the machine. I scrub the dining floor. We finish here, OK?'

'OK.'

The toilets over here were unlike the crazing art-porcelain originals of the old building. There everything was excessive and mad, in a fantastic Pre-Raphaelite way. Here they were kickproof steel. When I first started the job I was confident that I could take them all on, block by block, and restore their shine; in, say, a couple of months. Now I knew by a sort of intuitive calculus that their rate of moral decay would forever just outstrip my labour; the backsliding fungus and slime had its old ammoniac eye on my workrate. I could never win. Yet I hung on to the delusion that if I worked still that little extra bit more furiously, a spurt might at last put me right with them.

Following Seco's advice, I checked the store cupboard and found only one and a half industrial standard containers left, which I put by the door of the toilets to compose themselves for their journey downwards. Then, armed with my other chemicals, I entered, prepared to begin.

Appalling! An opera of neglect. I hadn't seen them for a couple of weeks, having been assigned elsewhere by Mr Prime; and yesterday Seco had *volunteered* to do them. But I'd left them gleaming last time. My colleagues could have held the fort at least.

They were disgusting.

'Seco!' I accosted him.

'Si.'

'Have you seen these?'

'*Dio*! Terrible!' He tapped his teeth.

'But didn't you do them yesterday?'

'Sure.'

'Then how did they get like this?'

'These folks got no idea how to crap.'

What could I say? All my hopes, all my works, all my days: a personal waste. I set to furiously. I did not speculate then as to why it could be that I was hurling myself, with such intensity, into such a humiliating task, in so ruined and appalling a world.

A Chymical Toilet

It *was* the pits of the world – Cloaca Mundi, a kind of hell – inhabited by those for whom there was no hope of release. In the toilets you found the evidence. Some biological devil was at work. He made it his business to dehydrate the colons of these innocents so that they were mostly costive, and you might mop cruel khaki rocks about the floor, their sharp edges sometimes bloodied from a final passage.

On odd occasions a witty anomaly would appear in one of the corners: a starfish, or a dead wren. Always on the stand-easies grew encrustations which it took hours to remove with even the most powerful chemicals – a testimony to years of skiving cleaners. I speculated on the human interiors whose fluids had marked the deposited limescale. They'd given it such drama and so flamboyant a coloration. Satan had here his stony monument, and the story of his penetration into this world found here its only inscription. Well, no, not its only inscription. Some of them daubed: formless, wordless, lonely brown fingermarks on the walls of cubicles. I recognised the father and mother of all expression: without language; without design, representation, code; without signification of any sort; without hope of being heard – perhaps the damnedest and most tragic artistic cry.

I thought of Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel. We write our own story on the walls of our world; we project ourselves on to our account of the past – and the future. I did not think of Isaac Newton stitching his own version of things with meticulous and mathematical care into the very fabric of the universe so that scarcely a mouse could wriggle out from under those skirts.

Occasionally a naked madman lay unconscious on the stone floor. When I saw my first I'd thought he was dead. I went over, pulling off my rubber gloves, and knelt by his head. The memory of a star reflected in a pool of blood had flitted in, and out, of my mind. From where? From what? Then I'd noticed the fitful rising of his back. I took the details to one of the bored male nurses.

'It's alright,' he said. 'He's OK. It's the heat.'

'But he's lying on the stone.'

'Just leave him. He's OK.'

Unable in my condition to recognise negligence, I'd gone back and mopped around the terrible exhibit.

I began on the walls. Working my powders into a biting lather, I sought out the villainy of the place. I restored a fallen glory square foot by square foot, dodging the bouncing corrosive splashes that leapt off the tiles and paintwork towards my eyes. Inhaling God only knew what combination of active vapours, I mopped; I bucketed, seized with a grim enthusiasm. And the treasures of the floor and walls went raw into the jakeses from my brush and dustpan: sludges, geodes, hair, dead insects and arachnidae, a rubber glove and tainted paper waste, a mouse's skull and tail, a set of used plasters, dust and tomato, the ghost of a prophylactic and several other unnameable matters. I didn't flush.

Time rubbed on in my frenzy. I hardly noticed. Until suddenly I was assaulted through the high-stationed open windows by an infernal roaring and clanking. Then the frosted screen of the sky was blotted out. I identified the rattle of a huge diesel; presumably it was an apartment-sized delivery juggernaut parking close up next to the glass. So I found myself dark within one cubicle, scrubbing and deafened. It was a mechanical and stinking dark, and gave rise to non-visual sensory streaks: a trace of recaptured taste, and, with my hyperventilation, a recalled *other* smell mingling in my nostrils with the present fume. My lips pulled back from my teeth in a frightening grimace. I stilled them automatically.

Even as I tried for calm the cubicle floor grew unsteady. The seals and grouts sweated. Something hurt violently in my head, and something else was illuminating the wall in front of me. I swung round to look up and back for the source of the rays, but there was only noisy, noisome dark, and the shouts of men outside. But when I regained my balance and turned back, forms *were* cast on

to the surface in front of me. I tried to erase them from the wall of the cubicle with my scrubbing: bright transfers which began to declare themselves as lewd cartoons. They animated their moments, unrolling themselves beyond my brushstrokes. Still in my ears was the unstoppable roaring of the engine.

They held an initial fascination, these workings. They glowed and ran and re-expressed themselves. They scudded across the wall of the one cubicle and led me beyond, hiding themselves in the pipe-work where my brush couldn't reach. I panicked again with that wretched desperate feeling in my stomach. They were mine. They took me fast and crazy round the whole place, dabbing and scouring. The more I tried to dash them out the brighter they became, some too obscene, others too gorgeous – episodes from the history of my world. They defied cleaning powder and led across roughnesses of plaster, the dull drum of coated metal, the ridged slide of tiling, back to my original cubicle. She was there, that woman the doctors were talking about. Her long locks gleamed over water. I stared across a lake whose surface was immense. It was as though I stood upon a cliff. The moon's reflection – the moon itself – whirled in incredible rings and gears. It winked. It was loose in its chapel with water and tides.

I moved into action once my stomach had finished heaving. Putting off the need to drink, I groped to empty my whole container of powder into that bowl, and then, as my eyes normalised to the persisting but ordinary gloom, went on to all the others areek with their abominable soups. Next I made them ready for their final flush by stirring and diving with my brush, lest the huge energy of the event I'd just witnessed should eructate again out of the U-bend.

The lorry moved away while I was finishing the last. The rattling of its diesel drew off from my little lavatorial cave and the sun streamed in.

When I opened the cubicle door I saw there were great sweeps of foam where I'd brushed. Powder was everywhere. My rubber gloves felt claggy.

I wanted to leave it all behind there and then, but merely poking my head out into the corridor brought back the shrunkenness of the fallen world, and the wretched taste in my mouth. I'd seen too much; it had to be expunged. There was nothing for it but to mop the walls properly this time; to squeeze out in the bucket all that revelation.

In a while, though, more stable and beginning to relax, I recalled the whole ulterior purpose of today's entry into the toilets: the Bleach! That was no problem. My canisters tipped up conveniently over the well of the moon and stars. How simply the stuff gurgled down as if to give my whole vision a longed-for chemical white-out.

Now I could legitimately make my way over there. Standing by the last bowl, I cast an idle eye over the legend on the yellow plastic container I held in my hand:

NOT TO BE USED IN CONJUNCTION WITH OTHER LAVATORY CLEANERS

I mustn't share it with Seco? A joke? And then the mocking air went green and clutched at my eyes with caustic fingers. I gasped – the worst thing I could have done, because it made me gasp again. Instead of getting out I found myself coughing stupidly at the mirrors over the wash-basins, trying, as I gazed at my reflection, to make sense of the greenness and painfulness of things, and the seemingly relentless malice of the day.

Seco appeared at the door.

'Eh, Jacob! Saphir says …' He sniffed, choked, coughed, shouted, and yanked me from the faint green cloud. 'Santa Siberia! What! You do a Devil's fart?'

We coughed and retched our way out – out along the corridor by the dining-room, through the foyer I'd mopped that morning, through the double glass doors and right into the rose garden, where he fell to roaring hysterics. And while I comforted my eyes and jerked up a bit more corroded spittle from my insides, he pirouetted among the rose-bushes. Thus among their gaudy blooms, he shed his urbanity and shrieked with laughter. The sun flashed on his sharp Roman teeth.

'For God's sake stop laughing and get me a drink, you bastard!'

'OK OK. I get for you. You lie on the grass. What the hell you doing in there?' And he coughed and giggled all over again. I stretched myself on the corner of the dry lawn. 'Eh? What was it?'

'What's so damn funny? I could have been killed in there.'

Seco's eyes narrowed and his grin froze. 'I save you, mate. You got no gratitude with you bloody toilets. I'm Secondo. I'm second son – Lucky. Lucky for you, eh?'

'Yes. Sony. Thanks very much. Now for Christ's sake get me a drink. Please.'

'That's better. Otherwise I take you back to you damn toilets and I kill you.'

While he went off to the scullery I lay back. The sun worried the prickly-watery feeling in my eyes. My chest hurt from the gas, my stomach from the retching. I shifted a bit to my side and gazed over the mass of the asylum. Against the tough heatwave-blue stood the observation tower – what else could it be, that great fat Italianate finger, widening at the top to accommodate a windowed look-out under its pinnacles? The whole thing was a celebration of imprisonment, in two colours of brick topped with its gilt pyramid of a roof. It watched over the colony of suffering as if with a magnificent eye; or perhaps was a mere deserted symbol. Either way the effect was that we all policed ourselves, uncertain whether God was really watching from above.

A thought struck me as Seco was returning with the drink.

'Christ, Seco. Supposing some of the kids have gone in. They'll damage themselves, poor little sods. And I'll get the sack. Were the windows open?' In a mixture of altruism and self-interest I leapt up, swallowed the water and dashed back into the block. A speechless boy was on the point of entering the toilets.

'No, no, no, no, no! You go to toilet – you die!' said Seco, slitting his own throat with his forefinger and pointing to the door to emphasise the danger. A look of terror came over the boy's face as he turned to flee in tears.

I pushed open the door. Thanks to the open window which had allowed me to be so mysteriously oppressed by the lorry, all was well, beyond a faint bleachy smell. A teenager with a palsy was struggling to coordinate himself at the urinal.

The Tower of Bedlam

Holding the yellow canister – my passport – against my grey overalls, I stood windily at a high spot. The hazy blue of the clear half of the sky was air-brushed on to space behind the stucco of the gallery frames: no glass in these slot-thin outer arches. I'd finished the climb and was standing facing a pointed door. It was the entrance to the Art Workshop.

A surprising location: to my amazement I'd been led to the very top of the tower at which I'd stared as I lay painfully on the grass beside the children's block, waiting for my glass of water. The ascent had started by means of a grand staircase, intended mainly for show, clinging to the inside of the tower's walls. This had quickly given way to a series of wooden flights which led up from stage to stage. I'd waited for Polly to catch up with me at each one, but had been too impatient to enjoy the vistas over the woodlands of Surrey. There was a layer, as it were, of industrial machinery, and what looked like storage tanks for the oil-fired heating system. Finally, punctuated by a few mysterious doors, there came a spiral in which one lost track of number before emerging high up at the open gallery. In this institution the entitlement to Art Therapy, if Polly's geography was correct, was clearly dependent more on physical fitness than on psychiatric need.

'There! In there!' said Polly, recovering her puff and opening the door. She pointed through the arch at what could almost be described as a bower. I peered in, past the faded timetable of classes pinned to the oak. Who would have thought that this exalted place with its lightflood of ivory and its breezy hangings of unswept gossamer would be the place? I might have wandered about fruitlessly in the shrieking maze of corridors had it not been for Polly, whom I'd met in the dining-hall; as I had on my first day in the job, swimming towards me with her outstretched arms and big wet kisses, full of the Lord's innocence, sighing into my ear: 'You're my only 'eart, darlin'. My best 'eart.' Kiss. Squeeze. 'Ooh you're my 'eart, sweet'eart. Look at you!' Hug. Kiss. Bristle scratch. 'One true love (deep breath, long aspiration) hhheart.'

Polly, in her maroon slippers, with her three gypsy teeth and black beard – I didn't know the clinical name for her condition, no more worldly-wise than a toddler – was one of the ugliest and most spiritually open beings I'd ever met. She rejoiced my heart. And she'd taken me conspiratorially to this eyrie where they 'do pain'in'. Only she wasn't allowed to paint. "Cos I carn pain' nothin!' she happily stated of the foul prohibition. 'Nothin. Aint no use me pain'in. Cos I cam pain' nothin. Ar, you're my true love 'eart, aint you, darlin. Cam pain' nothin, me. But you. Ar, you're my …' Kiss. 'Pain' me a pitcher, darlin.'

I stood in the arch with a certain apprehension. What was I doing after all? Why was I intrigued by the mention of a woman and her images – to the extent that I should have tangled with chlorine and then made this bizarre climb? I suspected a dissociation; had I run up here in an urge physically to separate myself from an accumulation of pain? Did I expect her to inform me; to ease the intensity through some sympathetic current? Was it hope? I'd seen her before in my duties, going about like other patients. 'Ms Jay' didn't appear mad. Her face was urgent, yes, but her body looked as if she were cold – as if there would be no more summers for her, nor for the missing shape she appeared to cradle sometimes, down in the straggle of her long brown hair. Sometimes too in her ceaseless drift about the place, I'd seen her pause, her lips moving privately, while the twitch of a smile hovered about them – as if she were answering the whispers of a ghostly lover standing behind her. But she hadn't touched any chords in me – not then. And my revelation down there in the toilets had spilled too much too soon. I was resisting it; who would not indeed? So it was that something at the back of my mind drove me on all day towards what ought perhaps to have been a gentler discovery. For the forgotten and the forbidden constantly seek to be brought to light. I ventured in.

An almost untouched relic of the Arts and Crafts era, it might have been used for an interior by Holman Hunt – the Virgin's Studio, mawkish, but a distillation of the pure. There was an arrangement

of old easels, tables and stools. Certain Victorian values were enshrined here. The discreetly barred larger windows which ran all round between the oriels at the corners had stained borders with emblems. One of them was open, unhasped and swinging slightly, the only moving thing. I could see through it dark cloud-heaps gathering over the western horizon. But the studio was unoccupied.

On newspaper on a cupboard top nearest us stood a collection of crude uglinesses in clay, left by sad hands lovingly to dry. I wandered past it, uncertain what to do. In the centre someone had been sitting very recently at the main table. Brushes stood in a jar of cloudy, greenish water, and the house on the paper, with its wonky perspective, had pools of colour still wet on its lawns. Beside it was laid out a photographic print, monochrome, enlarged, clearly the source material for the work: a big, old house, in front of which was a car and a tiny family almost lost in the graining. A plastic cup of coffee stood nearly full, steaming faintly.

'Ar, nice,' said Polly, picking up the painting so that the greens trailed in droplets down over the bright blobs and dabs that were herbaceous borders. She put her head on one side. 'Ar, nice.'

Behind us, on the wall of the arched entrance, one corner and much of the space had been partitioned off and labelled 'Do Not Enter When Light Is On'. The warning light *was* on; but the dark-room door wasn't closed. Perhaps that was where she was. I put my head in. The tower's windows had been faced off with boards; in the murk I made out a sink, a photographic enlarger, and, on the bench nearest us, a white porcelain tray in whose chemical a darkening image lay. Polly pushed by me and took the thing out, dripping.

'Tha's 'er, look. See! Tha's 'er. Ar.' It was a formal portrait. 'See!' said Polly, pointing with her finger into the overexposed emulsion. Half out of the door, I held one edge. The image, taken in happier times, restored her youth and confidence. That face … An excitement tugged at my heart from beyond the sudden rational grasp of who she was. For now I could place her at last: a woman from public life. Her name was Celia Jenner.

We hadn't noticed that there rested on the corner of a desk a cigarette with an inch of ash beyond the burn. I laid down both the enlargement and my canister and made as if to put it out; the ash fell off as I picked it up. 'Ms Jenner!' I called, not quite sure what to do. Was there a toilet somewhere up here? Or down a stage, off the stairs perhaps?

'Ms Jenner!' I knew why the doctors had described her as a special case. It had been a heavy political story. She'd taken the rap for a financial scandal in her party, a homelessness project, had it been? A striking and distinguished academic, she'd moved into the public eye, and found herself manipulated. And then a breakdown; I remembered the papers now. The tabloids had claimed she couldn't hack it, of course, but there must have been more to it. Much more, to put her in this state. And no private clinic – still a woman of principle.

Polly called as well: 'Muzz! Muzz! Where you gone, Muzz?'

I looked again at the haunting photograph – so like. A pair of birds suddenly appeared in the room and proceeded to flap crazily against one of the barred windows: martins, with white fronts and thin tails. They had a frightful urgency. Polly grabbed on to me and the cigarette spun out of my hand on to a stack of loose artwork.

'I don' like birds!' She clutched at my overalls. 'I don' like 'em!' She screamed as one launched itself in our direction. 'Aaaah! They'll get in my 'air.' She pulled me across the room as protection. An easel toppled.

'It's alright, Polly. They're as scared as you are. Just keep calm.'

But she was in no degree calm. 'Get 'em away! Get 'em away! My 'air!' With one hand she covered her head; with the other she held very firmly to me and yanked me to the door. 'Help! I don' like 'em! Polly don' like birds! Fuckin' birds!' She now had the one hand over her offending mouth and had started to cry with the extremity of her distress and guilt. But she still hung on.

I got her outside the door and tried to force her to let go, because I'd seen flames starting where the cigarette had fallen.

'Don' go back! There's birds!'

'There's a fire, Polly.' Everything, absolutely everything, had gone out of control. But in turn tears sprang up for me. I had the room. It wasn't Victorian – no, earlier. I have to go in. A man in a full wig holds a stick. There is a child. Something unspeakable takes place. Eyes like the eyes of a monstrous owl are so close, so frightening. Here are coats with many buttons. Men have wide hats. My mother's breasts are pushed up by the squeeze of a curious dress. It is a voiceless, horrible knowledge that somehow it all makes sense at last; but it is impossible.

I scrabbled with Polly's wrists. Whenever I got one grip off she'd grab me again, with surprising strength. We wrestled for the doorway – I could hear the crackling sound inside. I must get in there to stamp it out. At the same time I knew that trace from the past was important. Both worlds fought for the freakish moment. Even up here in this unsullied haven I have brought my chaos and created a destruction. My ankle felt the splash of wet; the stone floor under us turned dark, and I saw the drips at the hem of Polly's skirt. She wailed in embarrassment, but she didn't let go. We twisted round in that outer gallery again. 'Polly! Don't you see? Polly!'

In a flash, there is a yard with horses; the copulation of dogs; the story of a wolf. Upstairs, in the house, there is a wig, a window, a coat with its full skirt hung on the chair, a woman's dress waiting, pain which can't be screamed. Hang on to something – it will end. It will be over before I die. Tied to their beds. Downstairs my mother plays the spinet. Outside, the grind of cartwheels and the thump of hoofs: inside, the peculiar breathing, panting, riding. And if I speak my mother will die. 'Polly!' I wrenched free and sprang into the room.

The Lull

There was a livid sky now. Driving the Ford back to Walton after I'd worked out my shift, I watched through the windscreen the heavy cumuli that had been building from the West ever since I came down from the tower. I'd said no word of my efforts with the fire; not to anybody. Polly was incoherent. I certainly hadn't told Seco. I'd changed my overall and kept my distance, even when he tried to chaff me to good humour, and called me over to enjoy from our scullery the spectacle of the emergency services, and the chance to down tools. So, of course, he knew no more of my activities than the chlorine incident.

'Eeeh, Jacob! *Vieni qui*! We sit down for a smoke, yes? You an' me. No one's bother us, eh? It's OK. No more gas. No problems. Look at that lot – commotions, eh? Why don't you just relax ever? You find t**he** Art Room, yes?'

All seemed lost now under the quickening wind. I drove along by the Cowey Sale. Great bruising thunderheads massed above the ugly bridge, and darkened the meadows. The river was ruffled, yellow and purple.

I turned through the town and, reaching home, crunched on to the gravel patch where I was allowed to park. On a gust I smelled, like a dog, the hot drift of rain to come.

My quarters were close: a cupboard for a kitchen and two poky cabins so cramped in the roof space, with their sloping ceilings, that you couldn't pass from one to the other without straddling the void of the top step. Now, as I bridged it after coming up the stairs, I felt again that today had taken it upon itself to peel me open. It was the most fraught day of my life as yet, and still it had not done with me, though the sirens and 'commotions' were past. I didn't sense how completely the walls of my world were cracking; what leaks had appeared and what flood threatened. I put it down to stress, Seco and Saphir; fumes, images and blurred deeds. I rested against the Baby Belling for a moment and took a grip on the angle iron which supported the house's cold-water tank.

But the smoke was still on my clothes. On what passed for the landing I tore them off and dumped them into a black bin-liner. Then I returned to the cooking space to wash in the sink.

Outside there came the first grumbling note of the storm. Far below, the front door banged. Mrs Dangerfield, my landlady, left for her rendezvous of the evening. My hands smoothing soap to soothe my forehead found bristles for eyebrows. They'd been scorched off. I felt upwards to my hair, searching the headache for a little tell-tale bump, but there was nothing. I dared not look in the glass for signs of charring in case I should seem a clown, a buffoon, a Grimaldi. Thus by increasing associations, signs and traces, the god of my past sharpened the edge each time before laying to his work at my hairline.

I would have welcomed an anaesthetic: alcohol, pills – alas I had none; companionship, the soothe of rain even. A pulse of lightning split the view from my tiny kitchen look-out, touching my gaze cruelly with its intimacy, until the echoes of the discharge died away. Dry and still lay the broad garden and the twin apple trees that grew out of the halfway hedge. Behind that, through the little pathway, waited the untended vegetable patch; and right down by the far fence beside a rush of periwinkle, the shed with its overwinding of creeper almost audibly rotted. A lush, dank, heated, Summer garden, it lay unmoving, waiting for the storm.

The bedroom looked out over the same garden. On the wall there was a vestigial mantelpiece and the traces of a fireplace; while on the mantelpiece itself much to Mrs Dangerfield's discomfiture sat my two skulls. I'd named them Entropy and Gravity, but I didn't know how I'd come by them. Standing naked at the window, I felt they were conspiring behind my back. A tree of electricity welded roots to neighbouring Weybridge. Almost at once the ruptured air hammered at my eardrums and rattled the bedroom window. I felt myself shiver as I finished towelling myself dry.

The very verdure of the garden was alert, still, and charged to shudder up at the sky. I opened the window and smelled, in the humid air under the grey, an energy in each green tendril. There; that was the present, waiting to continue; but I would not bear it, and turned to my bed. Perhaps exhaustion might disconnect me.

Again the air roared over the room, the house and the town. Almost in synchrony, my past chopped at my head, and the ache flared. Excruciated, I turned on my side to where I could see from the bed my clothes lying not far away, in their open black plastic bag. I thought I could smell the waft of char. The two skulls grinned, and then appeared to listen, I fancied, for a new note: a tentative patter that quickly swelled to a drumming din against the tile and timber immediately above me. Outside, the sky was emptying at last as if it planned to wash us all away.

Sleep came suddenly, and then dreams, as if pain was the developing chemical of an entire holographic film; as if a surgeon entered the shatter of my brainpan and started rebuilding every structure brick by illuminated brick. I conceived in that enlightenment a meta-Byzantine edifice full of images beside which the asylum itself, with all its old painted nooks, its dusty corners, alcoves, recesses, curlicues, cusps and mouldings, was an inhibited matchbox. Memories like moths came to life, stirred from far off in the rain, and headed for my bedroom. They passed the glass of my window, aligning their molecules with the molecular spaces in the structure of the panes, and entered whole and flapping, as big as storm birds.

When I awoke from that torrential sleep I had the key to it all. Now I understood why it was it should have been blotted out; for who could have lived with all that? Either forget, or go mad. Yes, with the bucketing along of time there had been no rest; no place for drawing breath, to order, to transcribe and to persuade myself.

But now I determined through my tears to begin this ragged chronicle, describing nothing less than a bulging, three-hundred-year-old universe, full of the echoes and resoundings of all knowledge, of all time and space, of all the stories my unusual flesh was heir to.

For I knew why the two skulls were on my mantelpiece, and who was the guardian of the Elixir of Life which my Uncle Isaac made with my help and by accident after twenty years of crazy research in his laboratory in Trinity garden. And I believed I had the first hint of why I tried to find Celia Jenner, and how I acquired the name of Jacob, and who were the Hatted Hummers. And of whom Saphir the Indian reminded me, of the Batavian Thorn, of Inertia and its cure, of the melting of my heart, and of the horrible speeding up of time.

So I took to my other little garret room, the one at the front, in the morning after the four elements celebrated themselves. Outside my dormer window the great oak tree by the Hersham Road, full of its waking Summer beauty, stirred in the cleansed air. The little caterpillars on its leaves set to their task of covering my car in sticky blobs. The sky was rich with day. One sodium streetlamp was still on, red, and reminding of the night. I sat at my desk to begin the story, which you will not believe.

First Things

My mother brought me in. I was dressed well in cleverly designed restraining garments; my coat, for example, gave the illusion that I stood habitually with my arms folded. They were in fact secured by the sleeves. I was fourteen. There'd been a bloody civil war and a bloodless revolution. The mathematics of gravity had just been published, and the universe had been told that it was dead. I had no speech but I could sing. I sang to him. To my Uncle Isaac. Church songs and street songs, psalms and farm songs; the old revolutionary songs my Granduncle Ayskew said he'd learnt in the army, that I didn't know the meaning of:

Let us with a gladsome mind Make away with all we find. Church and King will ay endure Till they take the common cure.

Here's an Earl and here's a Lord, Harlot's hair and Spainish sword, Church and King will ay endure Till they take the common cure.

All who seek to heap up gain While men landless do remain They their profit shall endure When they take the common cure.

Let them think on Charlie's axe Ere the next ungodly tax, For His mercies ay endure Taken with the common cure.

I piped, but my voice was breaking, and not just because of my age. My fit of rage was beginning to give way to the other emotion, hopelessness. Soon the restraint would hardly be needed and I could be sat in a corner without danger to myself or others. My mother used the fact that I could sing to shore up the lie she told herself that I was normal. She liked to give out that I was her young gentleman protector on the journey from Northamptonshire. And whenever she, flushed and carnal, came to Cambridge on one of her various *negotiations*, leaving me in my Uncle Isaac's rational care, she would first stand me in the centre of that charred and reeking chamber and have me sing. Why was it that I sang? Somebody once referred to the vocal art as licensed screaming. The negotiation that Autumn, I think, was with a Mr Trueman.

My mother was very persuasive. I see her now with her strict coiffure and her distinguished features, which were only belied by a moistness she managed to secrete on her lips even as her *Purity* eyes engaged you. Ordinary men melted; my Uncle Isaac shuddered.

So many years ago. I said you would not believe. I hear my young voice again, knowing and unknowing. It is not the voice of a stripling hero of fiction. I lack the clear skin and bold dash of a handsome Johnny who within a year or two will escape the hangman and sail off to Virginia in search of a fortune. I have the feel and looks, beneath my mother's grooming, of what I can only describe as a wolf. My teeth are too often exposed and there is a distinct howl to some of my high notes. The skin of my face is blotched from the various scratchings and attacks I have made on it. I register and understand what goes on around me but I do not take part, being racked with waves of rage and fear which make me pant, and occasionally growl. In my sullen phases I know I am collapsing inside. I can read well and write; for I may be uncontrollable, and inadmissible in society, but I am not stupid. Far from it: I have had enforced leisure for study, and my father is a clergyman. Now I remember it, he lies at home, dying, and my mother must be concealing her anxiety about income.

It was an Autumn of quiet red celebration. Low sun illuminated the Cambridge brick and stone so that it glowed brighter than the blue sky it cut into. That wonderful light struck inward at the casement, but I could not let myself feast on it.

My uncle, at fifty-one, claimed a total indifference to music or poetry in any form, but nevertheless made a point of shooting pained looks and drawing in his breath when any of my notes came out flawed. So the singing ritual pleased neither of us. He too was 'in his fit', and as she denied mine my mother over-acknowledged his, casting my music as a species of psychological bandage. She said it 'eased him' to hear my assortment of canticles and bawdry. She particularly toadied to

him now that he was famous and no longer the other embarrassment of the family; and we were facing destitution.

Isaac's dis-ease at the time was that he was laid low with an unusual melancholy. It was a bleak and restless frenzy. His bowels griped him and he went about a little stooped with his hands clutched across his belly, as if his body were feeling the loss of a child. But his look remained undemonstrative. As for the proof sheets of a special reprint of his *Principia* that Mr Halley sent, he could hardly bear to see their impressions. I grasped him intuitively, but could not articulate then what I can describe now – that he was at the mercy of what he had striven so hard to exclude from the whole universe: human feelings. He was experiencing a reaction equal and opposite to Monsieur Fatio de Duillier's Platonic teasing – that sly, Swiss and mathematical little *chienne.* Mr Newton's great brow was greatly knitted in a Type of stifled despair. Each icy orb promised to melt into a tear. But could not.

For politeness' sake he thanked my mother shortly when I'd finished. Every time, after I'd performed, he'd refer to me as a young siren, and laugh cynically. I disliked his jokes; they were wounding. Then he begged leave to cast himself down in the little cluttered bedchamber. I recall my mother following him and fidgeting in its doorframe. It was a frame only, because Uncle Isaac had taken off all the interior doors, including what used to be Mr Wickens's, to aid the supply of draught, and to ease all the coming and going.

She said: 'Well, is all agreeable to you, Ize? He has everything he needs in the basket, and I've done some baking for you. And Mr Anderson sent the wine. And Robert sends you his best wishes and blessing in Christ.' She lowered her voice to a mutter. 'There are his cords for the night-time under the package of his linen. Which reminds me I packed some of my own which I must take out directly. Linen, I mean. It's the last day or so of my courses and you can imagine … ' She drew breath and then whispered on. 'Regarding what I wrote to you about his … ' and here she only mouthed the word and I could not see her lips, but I knew she said *devil*, 'you will see what you can do, won't you?' She continued in a normal voice: 'But I believe I've seen to everything and he'll be no trouble. Is there a screen or corner where I can …?' She looked round and then back to him. I saw terror come into his eyes. But she was driven, tactless, itching to be changed and off. My dear mother: an unknown; a variable.

She left. I sat. He wrestled with his misery, ignored me, and at last was empowered to continue his Quest for the Philosopher's Stone – the riddle of *Matter.* It was the only thing he could bear to do.

I knew from previous visits that every bit of his space and time was pressed into the service of this great activity. He either worked here or in the laboratory – a tiled shed the College had caused to be put up for him in what was known as Mr Newton's Garden. There was a large iron furnace up here in the fireplace as well as the one down there, and scattered around both rooms were a number of secondary structures he had made himself, that bubbled and smoked at various times. Papers and books lay about inviting combustion.

I did not feel safe. But then I never did.

My mother would be with Mr Trueman for a week's holiday, hoping, I surmise, to clinch some relief for the family's financial crisis from this comfortable city businessman, in addition to that from my uncle's sense of family duty. It was the week in which we made the Elixir. Yes, it was accomplished. Newton and Co. (and an odd company we were) succeeded in the ultimate goal of alchemy; but it was never made public. Of course not. It was never sent up to the Annals of the Royal Society, whose august fellows later conspired to deny for centuries that their sainted Mr Newton even so much as looked at an alembic, let alone suffered from a primary obsession with the warped and solitary art of the *Puffers.*

And he'd had practice enough – after the twenty years he made his *chum*, John Wickens, help him fire and pour and puff and skim and slake, coming and going with the great scuttle full of seacoals, the nets of ores, ingots and fossil turds; crucibles, pelicans, tongs; bags and boxes of God knows what; until they both had hands as black as print and not an eyebrow between them.

But he did not achieve it by any rational means, as he'd have liked. It occurred because of *me* – and by *accident.*

My uncle had his own ways of dealing with me which were different from my mother's. He had no intention of attempting to exorcise my devil according to *her* wishes – I believe his new fame had suggested to her that he had some special power over the moon and thus could do something about my version of lunacy which my father could not. She had no more expectations from *that* religious quarter.

But Uncle did not hold with priests or ritual of any sort. When I made the noise and gestured to him that I needed to use the chamber – pot, he undid the concealed tapes that turned the sleeves of my green coat into a straitjacket and let me loose. He had a cane on the ledge over the chimney-breast should my sudden rage call for it. His only general precaution was to lock the main door to his rooms.

I went into my doorless sleeping space. This bedchamber was, like my uncle's own, off the main room, and it was empty for the very good reason that no one now in the College dared to share his noisome, explosive centre of activity. John Wickens, his close and only friend from the time they were both undergraduates, had left him two years ago, to get married; and was replaced in due course by an H. Newton who was not related to us, and whom I was glad to see the back of when my uncle dispensed with his services earlier that same year, 1693.

When I had finished he came and saw me clean myself up. Then he held my wrist with one hand and brought the chamber-pot in the other so that he could empty it as we went down to the laboratory.

His garden was immaculately kept by a gardener whom we passed on the way. It was a maze of pretty paths between which were beds of a great variety of unusual flowers that I wished I could destroy

In the laboratory I was left to myself in a corner and immediately began to seek manual comfort.

'Leave off that, you young dog!' said my uncle, looking up from his work at a crucible he had in the tongs. 'Or you'll feel my cane across you! I'm about God's work here and I want none of your impurities.' In my family I lived among lies and contradictions. Although I knew different about him, my odd uncle was held up to be a creature of the most absolute temperance, virginity, and, dare I say it, gravity. He even believed this himself. My mother and the College certainly did. He'd once quarrelled with another alchemist -Vigani, I think his name was – just because he'd told a lewd story about a nun. And yet I had earlier evidence that he suspected himself possessed and was tormented by the suspicion. The lies of adults were one of the reasons I could not speak. Their aggression was proportional to their denial. He came over and tied my right hand to a ring in the wall.

It was in the *Corner of Fermentation.* This corner of the laboratory had as its heart and nominator a great *hot-box* full of horse shit – a device used in those days before thermostatic heating elements by many a *chymical projector* for incubating any processes which needed generous room temperature over a long period. Sunk into the steaming rancidity of the *hot-box* my uncle had left a large vessel – a sort of glass bath – and in this vessel there was nothing except a grey, scum – plagued liquid.

I made noises at him equivalent to: 'Are you using this at the moment, Uncle?'

He looked up with a certain suggestion in his eyes that he was sorry for the way he'd corrected me and saw in me the image of his soul.

'What? Eh? What do you want? You can't do any harm over there.' Then he turned back to his torture of the metals.

With my free hand I could reach various piles of objects that lay about the Corner of Fermentation. It was, as it were, the slag heap of the operation – a dumping ground for sweepings, or for remnants of the process, or for forgotten things from former parts of the obsession.

I decided on a vaguely rebellious whim to drop everything shiny or attractive from the slag heap of bits into the bath. I looked at the prettier amalgams and lumps of pure metal. I thought of Elizabeth, whom I loved and could not come near. I thought of the curious composition of her

name, and the way the sounds might be made in the throat. These were the sounds that denoted her. Remote breathy compositions: El-iz-a-b-e-rh. I thought of jewellery and murder and beautiful women with soft breasts with whom I was not in love. I thought of these metals lying upon the flesh, their sharpnesses just grazing the tender nipples. Then I plummeted them. I had no idea of their rarity or chemical composition or the fact that my uncle must have had them supplied from strange sources and then worked them, in incalculable ways, according to his books and recipes. They were an assortment of metallic substances probably never before or afterwards assembled so closely in one small dump, not counting the other shards and offcuts, stone chips, curios, corals, crystals, dried offal and organs, pastes, bladders, potions and gums which he was too preoccupied to notice me adding in once I'd lost scruple for the seriousness of my project. Thus into that glass bath went some very far-fetched chemical company. Soon the faintest steam began to lift from its surface, and the tiniest bubbles to appear at its rim. This was my first and momentous attempt at experimental science.

Things Whereof a Man Cannot Speak

In the evening the mathematician Nicholas Fatio arrived, unannounced and knocking at the locked door. He regarded me with intense curiosity. I regarded him with suspicion, while my uncle was put into a complete fluster such as I had never seen in him before. 'It's the son of my half-sister Barton,' explained Isaac. 'He means nothing. His mother left him here for some days. She has some business to transact. It's a regular arrangement.'

When he had sat the man down he bundled me into my sleeping space and tied the tapes that crossed my arms again. He would have made me stay there out of sight but that the other man appeared in the doorway and started asking questions and opening a conversation. My uncle explained that I was dumb. 'He is … distempered. His mother gets exhausted with him. There is a need for … unusual measures.' But he did bring me to sit near, if not with them, in the main chamber by the furnace.

I had been sometimes stared at and mocked if I went into the streets, but next to my Uncle Isaac my looks must have achieved a slight advantage. He never dressed up or received company – he rarely washed, combed his hair or lurched as far as his wig, so preoccupied was he with the race against matter and, currently I guessed, the impossible disorder Fatio had already caused to his carefully cauterised feelings. Fatio had striking, somewhat petite features, a fashionable get-up, and unusual manners which I took to be French. In my experience no other like this had ever appeared in his chamber – *such* a young man of mode. I had never seen one. Behind my mask of exclusion from everything I gawped; while Isaac hastily and apologetically cleaned his face at the bowl, changed his coat from the one which was all burnt and spangled from molten metal, and made an attempt with a periwig.

Acknowledging myself half-animal I was very responsive to atmosphere. I picked up the ghastly tension in the air between the two men, although they preserved a brittle politesse, seeing that I occupied the third comer of a triangle. I was not exactly a public to their privacy, but I was, as far as they knew, sentient. As a result they were more open than they might have been in front of another, but yet cautious, and embarrassed. And still Fatio seemed to want to include me in the meeting. I felt there was some final passage of feeling, some *quod erat demonstrandum*, that one man *wanted* to engage in, but could not because of me; and some teasing defence or private cruelty that the other could *better* engage in because of me. So everything in the room felt more mad and distraught than ever.

He had brought no servant. Since Uncle rarely troubled the company in Hall at that time, they made a meal of some sort with what my mother had left and other scraps of food they could find. Isaac wouldn't untie my hands but fed me pieces and a little wine. The other man joined in, laughing, and pressing the food against my lips when I already had a mouthful, to provoke me and see me snap. Nicholas Fatio drank the most wine. He'd been away, he said, since their former break, which had left him so desolated, he claimed. He'd taken a second *tour*, and had also visited his mother in Switzerland. He was now recovered and had called in for good fellowship, and to show there were no hard feelings. And to learn of the progress of the Great Work, to which he reminded my uncle he had contributed so much in former months.

As he came to feel the effects of the wine, and because my uncle seemed to have become almost as incapable of speech as I was, he began to grow rhapsodic – to fill the painful vacuum in the room. The *tour* was a great cure for the distempered soul. He recommended it to us both in his curious English. He was casual about it all – a much travelled man. But although I might have flown at him and bitten him had I been untied, or have scratched at my own ears to drown out the sound, I could not but listen and be overcome by the descriptions he made with his words. They threatened and compelled me as much as the stories I'd heard as a little boy when the children were eaten in the forest. From the *camera obscura* of my mind I saw, through his words, and through his memory, the

exotic, damned, Papist lands to the South; the vineyards of Provence standing in the baking Summer heat, the enchanted white-walled cities and palaces; the pitiless Alps where the air bit and purified the lungs, and where wild mountaineers used women as currency; and then Italy herself, where no surface went unpainted, and where fornication was an Art. Seeing me half-snarling but listening, Monsieur Fatio engaged his wit. I believe I was the earpiece of a powerful Amplification. For me the Duomi were pressed all over with gold leaf; for me the cloves of European garlic opened like culinary sunflowers, ravishing the imagination of my brutalised taste with new and magic meals; for me the floating wonder of Venice reflected itself and its smell in the clouds.

A College servant knocked. We were all silent as he lugged in a box of logs. It was well after dark. He cleared some utensils and left. My uncle pressed Nicholas to stay the night. He accepted. But where was he to sleep, seeing that Monsieur Newton already had company? Isaac offered immediately to turf me out of my room: 'He can sleep on the floor.' Fatio experienced an access of nicety concerning the prior rights of family over friends: 'But no. It is not to be dreamed of, Maître.'

Uncle made a sort of gasp and offered his own room. Monsieur pursued him with a knowing eyebrow. Uncle became uncannily silent.

'No, no. *Pas du tout.*' Nicholas would couch himself on his cloak between the Desk of Opticks and the Athanor of Alkhimia.

Take my bed, man. For God's sake.'

'Pray, Maître, do not trouble yourself. I would not dream … Why, there is no man in all Europe whom …' and into fragments of French or Latin, or whatever, as was his fashion of compliment. And so, heavy with implications, they played out their game of offer and refusal, until Nick Fatio won, as he was bound to do, being the more calculating of two mathematicians.

Therefore, after some geometrical discussion which I was not equipped to follow, we all retired at more or less the same time, with the newcomer promised to stretch out by the furnace in the main chamber on the horsehair-stuffed seat, after he'd taken some more wine. My uncle found the night cords my mother had left and bound my wrists to the two head-posts of the spare bed, which was the configuration in which I had slept on my back for as long as I could remember.

Some chiming clock of the city and a pressure against my mouth woke me at about two. I opened my eyes to the almost pitch-blackness of an abominable assault. A male smell under my nose. Faint pallor of linen suggesting the presence of a part-clothed torso. His voice above me whispering in a foreign language. Fear mapped me to the bed. Something automatic made me try to scream but I had no voice, only a poor rasping in the throat. And my mouth had opened, which was the worst thing it could have done. Invasion; the thing stuffed back and forth in my head; the taste; the revolting sensation of being gagged at the very back of the palate, while held down by superior force. But for some reason I couldn't bite, and the violation continued, against my will but beyond my control. Why couldn't I bite? I felt waves of panic. My breath was knotted into my grimace, my neck locked rigid. I was sure I should die. Until I found myself at last panting through my squashed nostrils, like the choked dog in the farmyard. But it wasn't enough. The torso was all over my face. Not enough air to survive on. The fight for air. I would not survive. Could not. All my chest and throat contorted in the effort, the drag for air. A point of black pain expanded in a rush towards me, until it enveloped me totally.

Then I was out of myself and looking down from the ceiling in the small-hours murk which only a window's faint moon-and-starlight illuminated, at a larger person over a smaller one's head; whose hair was held down by a fist, and whose trunk thrashed between tied cords. I saw my knees rear up and catch him so that he grunted, withdrew and tried to wrestle me over on to my front. Great heaves of longed-for breath filled those lungs. In such dark, however, he clearly hadn't grasped the fact about my strung wrists; my body wouldn't turn. I watched myself twist and hurt. Then he gave that up and returned to the mouth, penetrating it and jerking on his violent weight. Why did I, that sufferer below me, comply? I watched the asphyxiation build up once more. I watched my renewed thrash.

Maybe a minute. He shuddered and came off. And again I saw the desperate lungs permitted at last to inflate themselves in relief.

I remember having a discarnate idea which seemed, incredibly, to exist everywhere around us both. I would sing. I would.

I did. And that was what now in *fact* filled the room with a powerful and almost tangible vibration:

Let us with a gladsome mind

I felt myself, as I returned to my body, swallow the stuff that was in my mouth. It was a reflex. And now I *felt* what I had only *watched* a moment ago – the great gulps of air rushing down my throat between each phrase of the hymn.

Praise the Lord for he is kind. For his mercies ay endure Ever faithful, ever sure.

I was squinting in the darkness into a startled face which itself had just made a sound: some little feminine squeak which mingled with my last two lines. It reminded me of a creature I'd once seen cornered – a hare which somebody had tried to make a pet of. He moved at once to escape but the noises had aroused my troubled uncle, because I heard him hurry round to my doorway. There was a crash of breaking glass followed by a cry of pain and a rational curse. Then his dark bulk appeared in the frame, and I could sense him peering in. Fatio turned and was clutching at his breeches, trying to tie or pull them up – I don't know which. My uncle roared in a roaring whisper:

'Villainy! Whoredom! Fornication! Caught in the net! By Christ Almighty!' And then he burst into tears.

Fatio claimed first in French and then in English that he'd been in search of a chamber-pot, being blind drunk, and had tripped over my bed in the dark. Then he too burst into tears and fell to grovelling at my uncle's feet, licking them and proclaiming his own mathematical limitations in an attempt to smother the memory of the incident in all of our minds.

'Maître, you are the foremost mage of all Europe. An intellectual Volcanus. Before which I humble myself, like the savage who knows no salvation, in abject Abasement. You have anatomised Light and thus have delivered us from our Darkness and Error; you have interrogated Change itself and given it Number; Movement, the Divine, you have glimpsed the limit; Prophecy! Gravity! The Moon! And you are trying for the Stone, and shall see it, yes, yes, draw even the constellations from their spheres and peer into the immortal Mind itself. It is that *Faculté Incroyable* which has so drawn me to you, has enforced my presence here, to be with you and none other. You must know that as soon as ever I heard of you I suffered that force you alone have justified – impulsion from a distant Attractor: I was drawn; I was conjured. And still I am drawn back to you here after you have bid me depart and I meant to be absent for ever.'

At last I could close my mouth. Something vomited back from my stomach. I spat up and growled and spat up again over myself and bared my teeth in shock. Inside I was weeping but no tears would come out of my wolf-eyes. The dark bulk of Uncle Isaac knelt down to break his hindering clasp. He put his arms around the snivelling one, and then took his, Fatio's, luxuriant, curling, blond hair and jerked it back in a tragic gesture.

'Not Mars with Venus, neither. Not betrayed with Venus. Nor even the messenger boy of the Olympians. But, to my eternal shame, Cerberus.' Visibly demonstrating a profound agitation, he picked him up like a child and returned him to the horsehair. I understood nothing that had passed.

No more was said. I doubt if any of us slept much more that night, but there was no more migration of place. In the morning I was freezing in my own sweat.

And no mention at all was made of the dark offences of the small hours. A servant brought food. We ate. Then I was tied to the desk, shivering and panting by turns. My neck and shoulders were filled with cramps. Newton kept sighing and staring at the furnace. Fatio began to shave, then he gave up. He proceeded to unpack his saddle-bag. He claimed to have a homunculus in a bottle.

From Egypt, he said. Furious, my uncle went to cast it out of the window, hurling up the sash in preparation, and saying:

'Nay, Sir. We do God's work here. At least by daylight.'

That was the sash by which I gassed the moth in the curious jar when I was ten, four years before.

The homunculus sat also in its curious jar. It was a little septic foetus, cushioned on its placenta, and hermetically sealed, by some glassblower, in a vacuum. Nicholas prevented its fate:

'*Maître! Non! Non seulement est I'homoncule fort précieux, mais encore pourrait-il être le truc même qu'il nous faut.*'

My uncle hesitated. And then:

'pray, Sir, get thee behind me. For years I've sought the justification of God in the secret of these metals and in these,' he indicated the walls full of leather-bound volumes, 'testaments. And I have sought freedom from the Fiend – at least, as I said, by day. The homunculus is but an emblem – a figure of rhetoric. It is not a literal requirement and refers to a state of the metals. As such this is an obscenity and declares in its horrible shape the continued presence of the evil one. My only hope is to maintain the restricted path. I shall try to keep up my shattered honour, sir, and my reason, as I am a gentleman and a Protestant; otherwise it shall not be done. When you return,' and I could see his disciple's sweet foxy eyes receive the hint that the straight path was compromised even as it was declared, 'take care that you not bring that abortion with you.'

It was enough. The Swiss collected his saddlebag and blanket, and affirmed that he would go out into the city to find a barber to attend to him. He did not return that day. My brain ran again and again on what had happened. I was wound up in a kind of shock, because there was no grounding of it. And most of all I wondered why it was that I'd submitted. It made it somehow my fault: I deserved all I got. I was already half-brute. What else could I perform upon myself? But a pure thought rose off that frenzy like the coil of a vapour, and lodged itself in a corner of my mind. I'd read of calculated killing. As I came of age that morning I realised what my brain was for. When he came back I would find a way … This thought I lodged in a safe place.

In speculating about where he might have gone I saw some point in making contact with the world of humankind – I would need to think their way in order to out-think *him.* I rummaged my random learning for any impressions as to where such an adult might go during the day, how he might exist while out of my sight; but the heaps of ideas remained as chaotic as the hotchpotch in the laboratory. With hindsight I reason now that he was meeting some contact: that he had gone back with the damned abortion to the Masonic Gentlemen's Club or the Papist Intelligencers, or the Parisian Rosen-kreutzers, or whichever bent spy-ring was paying him. So Uncle Isaac and I had a couple of days to ourselves. As the morning went on *he* ran his fingers through his hair and studied and got up to look into whatever he was cooking on the furnace. I, tied to my ring, and losing my clarity, attempted with my free hand to saw my arms with pieces of shiny rubbish before dropping them as ingredients into my primal soup.

The Portrait

I look back through memory's peephole. This laboratory, the place where I learnt my science, has no modern counterparts. No long mahogany school benches here; no gas points nor curving slender taps; none of those tripods and burners, and cupboards full of flasks; none of the distinctive microsensitive balances, preserved in glass cases; nor instant electricity piped down red cables from a suspended matrix. Not here either the functional fluorescent hum of the research lab, with its white coats and computers. No spectacles parked on the bridge of a painstaking nose. No female student glued by the eyelids to a microscope. Not a decerebrate cat in sight.

In fact he kept home for an intact and enormously well developed tomcat who used to snuggle up by day near whichever of the furnaces was alight. I had always disliked the cat, but at least it went out at night. Mr Newton's cat was an amatory legend of the college, if not the city: a feline Don Giovanni who had his own cosy hell to return to through one of the draught holes in the skirting. He would also follow my uncle up to his chamber and slip into a haven hotter still. And that was the place of his body-building activities. Simply, he ate most of my uncle's meals; for, as I said before, Isaac rarely troubled the company in Hall, and, if he remembered, ordered food to be sent up to him. But because his custom was to become totally absorbed in his project of the moment, he'd take merely a bite or two before another idea struck him, and then he'd dash back to his metals or his notes or his instruments. So the cat profited.

But in the garden room – the laboratory – there was usually no food, and the cat went there for solitude and repose. From the outside, the laboratory looked like a little negative mimicry of the College itself, which was built in a square around a magical fountain. So the laboratory sat in my uncle's private garden as if in a tiny quadrangle. And if it looked oddly shaped and hardly able to compose itself under its tiled roof, this was because its ground plan was an exact and secret replica of Solomon's Temple. Moreover, the garden – which in my memory looks like any number of formal ornaments of the period, with its mathematical division into four quarters and its little intricacies of flower beds – this too had its secret. For it was a representation of Eden, being planted with medicinal herbs from all the four continents we then knew of, each in its geographical set, and watered by special Rivers of Paradise that Uncle had ducted from the roof of the chapel, so that when it rained he might as Adam, or Solomon, or Jesus look out over the unfallen book of Nature. Apples, even, that Newtonian fruit, grew neatly pruned and disciplined along the walls on either side of the entrance. It being September, those that there were on the little trees glowed with ripeness.

Inside, and viewed from the Corner of Fermentation, this laboratory was what *we* should call a study cum sitting-room cum garage, albeit in Biblical configuration. It had three elaborate fireplaces, built around a central chimney. There was also a clock on a bracket and the remains of the tall water-pressure cabinet with which he'd played a density joke on a carpenter. On the stone floor there were three tables and some oaken chairs all covered with books and curiosities. There was one of his famous telescopes on a stand, and a number of other mechanisms in brass and leather which I didn't like the look of then, and can't put a name to in the recalling. Two pendulums made like delicately swinging miniature cupboards hung from the roof timbers. And he'd built a mobile close stool to save time. But above all there were his tools and his vessels. Everywhere lay the implements of a master craftsman: chisels, pliers, saws, tongs, ladles, scribers, grinders, a treadle lathe, bellows, gauges, rulers, compasses, hammers, drills; and everywhere else there were crucibles, flasks, coppers, cannikins, leathers, leads, cauldrons and tubes. For he'd become above all a wonderful artisan; the apotheosis of all those energetic and 'Puritan' young men from the skilled trades who for decades before the civil war attended lectures and evening classes in practical arithmetic, geography, navigation, weights and measures – in short, mathematics – because they wanted to take destiny into their own hands.

And thought they'd done it when a precisely ground cutting edge traced out a significant locus that terminated in some royal vertebrae.

But these young men married and were mercantile. If they somehow supplied a context for his activity they don't explain his origins or singular obsessions, the most fraught of which was alchemy. What motivated Mr Newton, Professor Newton even, to this solitary passion of *Prima Materia*? I, seeing him at that time through my wolf's eyes, could tell something: that he was a stunned being.

It suits our view now to look back and see him as a superior brain. Having lived quite long and seen many, I wonder if there is such a thing. In those days anyway it would not have occurred to us to think so. As samples of tissue go, brains are all much of a muchness. If we'd had the word maybe we would have seen ourselves then as *aerials*, that might through grace receive God's messages. We resonated; we were attuned; we rode down signals with the angels. Intellect, and its dysfunctions, were visitations we permitted, were granted, or had imposed on us. And some of us were thought to have been instructed by devils.

In any case, what could be more intelligent than language itself? I have my own reasons for resisting the cult of Genius. I say my uncle merely made himself proficient in the codes that were newly developing then, and cross-fertilised them for the sake of his overriding purpose: to get back all the control his birth and treatment had stripped him of, and to blot out everything else.

His father died before he was born. He was delivered, so my mother told me, a little bloody foetus that no one expected to come to life. They put it aside to be dealt with later. It lay, cold, and further out than the remotest galaxies for half an hour or more, which it might have experienced as longer than an ice age. At first, no one noticed it had started to move. Eventually the bundled mess in the corner turned into a baby, and they began with surprise to push pap into its mouth.

When little Isaac was no more than an infant, his mother, my grandmother, married Rector Smith, for financial security, on the condition that she left the child at Woolsthorpe. Rector Barnabas Smith, almost the squire, did not suffer the little children … Isaac was only allowed to make visits, brought over by his grandmother. Was this bar sufficient motivation for his whole later career? I doubt it. But I tell you this: as soon as he was old enough he tried to burn down their house.

He was an angry, isolated boy, though not a complete wolf; strong enough to suffer no fools and find few friends. He made models -windmills and other curious engines – from being inquisitive and much alone. He sought with miniatures the secrets of power and control. And when he was fourteen he forced himself to make friends with the girls at his lodgings in Grantham where he'd been sent to the Grammar School. But that didn't last, since they were out for more, it seemed. Love and so on. So he became difficult and solitary again, because the womb sang of interstellar distances, rejection and all he could not speak of.

Then circumstances put money his way, together with a sponsor, so that by a train of associated events he arrived at Cambridge, and was as lonely and powerless as he'd always been. The great Alma Mater fornicated and drank and prayed and idled her way along, leaving him little, hurt and open again, unnoticed in this corner for a year. He survived, convincing himself that by austerities he might become pleasing to God.

God in his turn took several more months to be convinced by Isaac's mortifications; then responded by thrusting in his way the submissive and equally lonely Wickens, who had a friend who owned a copy of Descartes's *Geometry.* Reading Descartes, Uncle Isaac saw his chance to grapple something back in face of whatever it was that had happened to him. It was a great secret tool that could put power into his hands. A Language of Shapes.

When he came up to Cambridge, Mathematics was a nothing – it was all but forbidden, or at least irrelevant to the business of cramming the heads of the future incumbents of the Church of England, like my father, with thirty-nine articles. The prescribed education my uncle found tedious; he wouldn't and couldn't do it except to pass through the hoops which would keep him there – and offer the time and space for his secret vice: Mathematics. Mathematics as subversion; Mathematics

as terrorist barrels under the House of the universe – or his stepfather's house as it was to him when he was a boy. Why else would anyone bore themselves with the study of Mathematics unless there was a significant payoff – world-shaking power, revenge, and personal, Godlike, self-esteem?

But at first the Descartes horrified him. He could make nothing of it and went to bed in despair that he should be overcome by another's words or diagrams. However, on the next day he went to it again and stayed up late by candlelight until he was four pages in. And so on. And this was his method, driven by day and by night and by an intensity of anxiety and desire, to give up all company or other solace in order to stabilise his sense of weakness, his cosmic helplessness, and the violence of his lust. It was this single-minded dedication, as I remember him admitting to someone much later, which was his character. 'I keep the subject constantly before me, and wait till the first dawnings open slowly by little and little into the full and clear light.' He forced himself, and was forced, to think on the matter in hand to the exclusion of all others. And so it was with all God's and Mother Nature's intimate secrets: her petticoat Light, her fluxional Change, her capacity to attract, her Mirror the Moon; and His eternal Motions.

By night … but by what right, you ask again, do I so assault *Genius*, that most treasured of latter-day concepts, which enables us to label other folk as lesser lights and use them accordingly in our monstrous schemes? Wasn't he a Cambridge Professor at twenty-six or whenever? Listen. The Lucasian Professorship was equally a nothing. It's true that he'd invented the calculus. He did this because his mathematics was entirely self-taught, and from only the most modern, analytical treatise of the times. So his thought was undamaged by any educational process. His boldness, arrogance and persistence paid off. Dr Barrow and Mr Babington slotted him into the Professorship. Dr Barrow, who was Lucasian Professor before my uncle, passed it across to him even as he stepped up the next rung of his own career ladder. It was a hobby-horse: they were the only two men in Cambridge who knew a surd from a tangent, anyway. Do you think students crammed the halls to hear the great 'Dr Newton' expounding the conic sections? Do you think they hung on his syllogisms as if he were a second Abelard? No one came. It was a purely financial arrangement, for which he must deliver a certain number of lectures. Every so often, then, Isaac read out some pages of his notes to the walls of a room and then went back to work. So they were able to pay him. But you see that he had then, and has always had since, shadowy backers in his doings, some human, some magical. And that is part of the mystery. But I know all this because I was there and saw what drove him.

Listen and I will tell this also before the Elixir is made. He had his eye on me.

I've indicated how I spent the time after the night of Fatio's attack. The first morning I was more or less left to myself in the laboratory. My uncle worked. Elizabeth's face appeared to me, at times weeping, at times blank, once terrible and mocking; so that I wrenched her beloved picture from my mental eye and returned to the material present. At one stage I tried to entice the cat to come within range so that I could torment him. Perhaps he picked up on my bouts of shuddering; because he seemed well aware of the intended violence, and stayed just out of range, purring and smiling. However, as I said, I was gradually evolving a mentality of revenge, which reduced my emotion at the time, and sent the image of the night into its own locker. To some degree. And this is a repression, which, as I look over my account, I realise is a precise term. For I repressed what I knew and had grasped, so that here I'm able to recover it, to remember it as a concept, and to set it down. But I also realise that *at the time* I knew in another way what it was that had made me feel so wolflike before, and why it was that, though I hated my rape and was tied, I had accepted it. *This* knowledge I cannot now recall, though I try and try, even stubbing my pen at the paper in my frustration. I'm only aware that then, that morning, I did have the key both to the inexpressible experiences that had formed me and to the repressible one which had begun to change me.

My uncle may have noticed something was different, for at midday he thawed a little and I was untied. He had brought pieces of bread and meat. He seemed to acknowledge that he had some duty of care towards me. I must be fed even if his life had become ashes. It dawned on me how I

should act; I grew very submissive and helpful. I made noises about assisting him with the work. I tidied up some of the mess. I controlled my face and stroked the cat. So we passed the day, at the end of which he nearly smiled on me, and asked whether the cords were really necessary. I shook my head and looked sadly down.

On the next day, after a morning's alchemical labour, we went out to a nearby house to buy a pint of soup in one of his cans. We'd become a social unit. My arms remained untied. I nodded to my acquaintance, Slack, the Porter, as if all were well.

Isaac went up to his chambers to prepare the soup, and left me, so great was his trust in my new demeanour, to mind the furnace in the laboratory and sand clean a few vessels, some for a new step in the work and some to eat the soup from. My mother would have imagined he'd done wonders with my devil. I saw to the fires, worked with energy and finished quickly.

And then I crossed the garden, climbed the stair to his chambers and padded in with the pair of scrubbed-out iron bowls, whose insides had curious patterns left by melted metals. I came upon my uncle standing on a stool against the wall, holding a brace and bit. He looked round with a start and got down.

'My portrait,' he said suddenly, as if to explain himself, although through the years I'd got well used to the oddest of activities. 'I am, it seems, become famous, boy,' he said, looking at me guiltily. 'They want my likeness and are sending a limner. I thought I should be ready to hang the picture.'

I made a singing noise.

'But of course he won't leave the picture here,' he said, out-thinking himself. 'Or only briefly, perhaps. Ah, no. Probably not at all. Of course. You caught me in a moment of folly, my boy, and the drill bit has gone right through the wall in any case.'

Into my bedroom? I moved to put down my bowls and get a brush to sweep up the mess.

'Forgive me, boy. I'm … not myself. Foolishness.' And he turned his head away, leaving me feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable. No one had ever asked my forgiveness. 'I'll use it for something. That rack of polishing pastes wants mounting somewhere out of the way.'

I looked thoughtfully at the soup and my bowls.

'Yes. I forget about food, sometimes. I suppose we've got to eat, haven't we? But don't touch this cucurbit. I've got something important going and it has to boil continuously. Use the lower hook, here. No, not that one. And don't whatever you do …' etc.

The soup cheered us both up. In the afternoon we returned to the laboratory where he said he had something very delicate to do. I read; which is to say that I looked at the diagrams in one of his Alchemical books. I could make no sense of their inscrutable Latin.

But the Alchemical illustrations were intoxicatingly curious. I could see now why men became obsessed with the mysterious quest. Not that Isaac was that kind of romantic. His aim was to demystify the whole corpus and win the game. His great gamble was that, hidden behind the flounces of fantasy, the Green Lion, Virgin's Milk, Tailbiter, the Mysterium Conjunctionis, the Net, and so on, there was some genuine key to matter carried down from Mosaic times or before, and therefore stamped with a Biblical authority, as if God had delivered Nature to us in a brown paper package but supplied the instructions in Japanese. For he was caught on the notion of God the Artificer. He had to be. His whole position was that there was a Master Mechanic behind the whole creation, who had worked expertly in the construction of a neat little engine for us, which was clear and rational, if complex. But, since its creation, whores, devils and whoremongers, and Papists dressed as whores, princes and whoremongers had used the blueprints to wipe their backsides. He blamed the inscrutable nature of inherited wisdom thus to avoid offending God.

Now had he not believed this way, as in my cloudy way I did myself at the time, because it was in our family and the tradition in those parts, then he must have become a mere fornicator or incendiary. But more and more he felt himself led towards the role of *Favoured Apprentice in whom I am much pleased.* Which disturbed and motivated and thrilled him the more success he had. Why,

I'd seen him with my own eyes searching the Scriptures again and again, and I realised later that he was checking and rechecking for the timescale of the great winding down, the Apocalypse and the second coming. Not for vanity, but to see whether he *was* the … you know; because it would affect his plans, his conduct. Should he speak out now, or should he wait? Should he denounce the Church of England as a harlot and start rooting out the money-changers – he'd researched the proof – or should he keep quiet? Of course he did speak out on King James – with some success. I was much younger, and didn't know what the Glorious Revolution was. But everyone had been suddenly very proud of mad Uncle Isaac, and he was made an MP. But then even after the *Principia* there still remained the tantalising matter of the metals; and the fact that this so resisted solution suggested that indeed the time was not fulfilled. And then there were the shadowy backers, about whom he never spoke, and who supplied him with materials and manuscripts.

I looked at the strange images, finely engraved. A man stood in a boiling bath with a crow on his head. A peacock in a bottle in a garden of paradise. A crucified snake. A man having his head split open with an axe so that a beautiful virgin might emerge fully clothed from the incision. A king and a queen pressing their naked bellies together as they drowned in a river. Tools of revenge?

So the day passed. Then more soup and a meal sent up from Hall. Sure enough there was a new rack of jars neatly mounted on the wall. And the Autumn evening fell into night. He had placed a screen across the door to my bedroom. Thoughtfully. My heart warmed to him for a moment. I was getting used to the liberty of being my own attendant and sleeping without cords. I took in a copper of warm water. By candlelight I went naked and stood in it to clean my body. Then stretched up and felt my own breast there in the flickering glow to see whether Fatio's knee had left a mark. Of course there was none, in spite of the sensation I had. Was it *his* hungry eyes I felt on me? There was a crash from beyond as if my uncle had bumped into something.

I found the lens in the morning when he had gone out to enquire about something to do with a horse and Mr Locke. I was clearing up our breakfast when I saw that the stool was broken. It was a pretty little stool, the one he'd been standing on to drill the hole. I looked up at the rack of jars, thanks, as I now know, to Mr Locke's Associative Theory. Among the jars was a little brass cylinder. I dragged over a chair and stood up to examine it more closely. It was an exquisitely made eyepiece, its brazings bright and new. From this level I could also see the hole in the wall behind the jars. I placed the eyepiece into the hole, drawn on by the train of ideas. It fitted exactly. I applied my eye to the lens and the whole of my bedroom leapt into view.

Love's Limbeck

'I'm ready to attempt Projection,' said my uncle quietly, as if it were an everyday sort of thing.

'But, Maître,' said Nick, 'I had no idea you would embark on such a thing. If I had known I would never have left you. I would have been here, with you, by your side at such a time.' And then he continued in a Swiss Latin which lost me. But I knew the falseness and flattery of it from its tone.

It was a grey, squally day. The air was full of droplets; they blew finely against the casement windows, then dried again – a faint cold precipitation of Winter in our jar. *He* had just arrived. My Uncle Isaac and I had spent all the previous afternoon preparing the furnaces – all five, in both rooms – which he had constructed himself; I'd never felt so involved – in anything. My uncle was keyed up, and kept moving from one place to another, checking the colour of this one's glow, supervising the firing of that, or the rich boiling of another, giving me instructions and then taking the tongs or the bellows out of my hands. 'No, no, no, not like that; like this. See? Stronger. Not that strongly. Let me. Here.' And mere was the occasional 'Good', and just the occasional 'That's right.' So despite my discovery of the lens we still had a good time together, sweating and chuckling, both so excited about I didn't know what that we neither of us touched the food sent up. The cat bloated.

Some of the pictures in the books had shown a man and a woman standing on either side of a brick oven, she wearing a moon and he a sun. I fancied myself absorbed into the magic of the curious process, as playing a part in a masque. My mother had once allowed me to stay to see a masque in Cambridge. In the figure of the magical heroine I'd allowed myself to suspect that there was a condition of life unlike my own imprisonment – my imprisonment in the male body of a wolf creature. Now I allowed myself in thought to escape into this masque of earth and fire, full of roar and hiss, strenuous lift, and dip to your partner. I tasted salt sweat whenever I licked my lips. Then, when it was late, and we'd banked up the fires because we were exhausted, and the amalgam in the larger crucible was skimming with a faint crinkly green, like the burnish on a housefly, while the last concoction in its glass needed to cool down for some hours, I slipped out of my clothes and into bed too quickly for the lens; to fall nearly asleep, nearly elated.

But Nicholas showing up next morning changed the whole atmosphere.

'It is not a position I would naturally have occupied;' said Isaac.

'Pardon me? Position?'

'The position of Projector. It smacks of sorcery. Quackery, charlatanism,' said my uncle. 'I told you we do God's work here. We proceed along rational paths. The grand drama is not my way, Monsieur Fario. What I've been seeking to do, as you, Sir, must know … For it's I who've brought you to this converse with matter, and opened your eyes a little – though you imagine yourself already an adept, and once sought to betray me in London with the …friend … you wrote of, claiming to have made a production of the medicinal Stone to sell! Yes indeed, Sir, I know you what you are, since I went there to London to find out all and expose the traducement.' Fatio's face turned white. 'But we shall say no more of these thing;' went on my uncle, his voice trembling. 'What I've been seeking to do is to bring logic and order to my subject. Mine, Sir. I have made it mine enough.' He looked up at the shelved volumes, and at the open ones, and a sudden rage lit up his face. He brought his fist down on the desk quite unexpectedly and a whole case of stoppered bottles threatened to smash themselves against each other. 'It is an art hopelessly … forgive me … Papist! Cartesian! Hookish! And Athanasian!'

These thundering epithets were my uncle's oaths. They were the areas in which he saw the greatest evidence of the underlying whoredom that clogged up the works of things; and showed moreover that Descartes had become for him almost the Antichrist, together with his other *bêtes noires;* which was surprising in the light of what I said before, and had occurred because he'd realised that in the wake of *I think therefore I am* his necessary God was rapidly disappearing down a Cartesian

vortex. You should imagine that in these Words lay twenty years of utter frustration at the labyrinth the whole subject of chemistry represented to him.

'Of course, of course,' said Nick, soft and startled, unwrapping from its basketwork protection a large glass object – not the homunculus – which he had brought.

'However, things have come to a pass,' said Isaac, taking the object without comment as if somehow its production were pre-arranged and the conversation merely for the benefit of some audience beyond the immediate action, 'which seems to demand that the arcanum of the Mysterium is attempted. Under properly controlled conditions,' rolling these phrases grandly off his tongue to intimidate the other man with his intellectual authority even as he took the key ingredient. 'For I don't see how else we might know the complete ins and outs of the curiosity referred to so often, and so grossly, in the tomes.' He jerked his head again towards his shelves.

'You mean that never before have you …? You haven't …? You've never tried …? Never done …? In all these years?' said Nick, allowing the sexual innuendo to build up in all these silences while maintaining a look of wide-eyed scientific innocence on his foxy little face.

'No, Sir. I have not,' replied my uncle firmly. 'I've been seeking the Net, the Atomic Theory, a matter of weights, truth and values, not questing vainly after fools' promises.'

'Ah. *Bien sûr. Bien sûr*,' the Swiss nodded.

'But today Philosophy demands this ultimate. I tell you, Sir, something I would not confess to any other. To none other.'

'Monsieur Isaac, what is it you have to confess to me alone? It is a boundless honour you do me with this intimacy. What is it, Maître? What?'

'It is … I have of late, Sir, entertained more than ever my … my dark suspicion.'

'Suspicion, Isaac?'

'A terrible suspicion. A suspicion that … that I am mocked.'

'Mocked? By whom? Ah, Monsieur …!'

'Do not interrupt me, Sir, I beg you. Mocked by … by all this. By my own Art. By these metals. By … but it's of no account. I've been under such strain these months. It is nothing. Of no account. Take no thought for a moment's lapse. Come along, boy, we must take the vessels down to the greater Athanor.'

And he led us down the stairs in a curious parade of three, bearing strange gifts out to the micro-temple where we should generate the divine child. But Nick wouldn't give up.

'Mocked, my dear Monsieur Newton? How is this? My feelings for you, Maître. Maître, my love … and respect for you.'

'Sir! The Athanor.' We entered the laboratory.

'Isaac!'

'Don't tempt me, Nicholas. I've had such sorrow at your hands. Four years I have known … Don't mock me now, Sir. I'm about to do a terrible thing because of you; and this … creature,' indicating me.

I felt my eyes widening and my lips peeling back from my teeth.

'You! Yes, you … !' suddenly turning on me, his demeanour madly changed, and then breaking away with his head in his hands. 'The satyrs mock the lame smith even as he attends to his fire. But you two shall be initiates and I shall burn the corruption out of you as I've burnt it out of myself and these metals.' He flicked at his mercury-white, disordered hair. 'No. Forgive me. That's unjust. For my hard heart reaches out to you both in … it is such a knocking in my breast …' tears sprang to his eyes and he could hardly breathe to say the phrase,'… in love. There. It is a word I have given to no one else before this moment. You are the chosen ones.'

I think we were both aghast.

'But my mission!' he went on, turning away as if to cover the lapse. 'Don't you understand how important it is that I should be utterly … But of course you couldn't. Although I thought perhaps,

Nicholas, my dear … my dearest … friend, that you might have … Never mind. Listen, both of you.' He took from his bench a great leather book and exposed the pages to us. 'The work of Alchemy is said to be a Christian work, a Platonic fulfilment of … of love. What we do in the fire, according to these writers from the past, from the dead, is to purify the flesh of the world. And I? I've sought only to understand. I've sought to understand what it was that lay behind the trumpery and lewd filth it was all dressed up in. What was the star regulus, the dove, the eagle, the Babylonian dragon, the Green Lion, the menstruations and ferments of the actions of the Sal Ammoniac, the royal or uncommon sperm? What were they? Find them, said my soul. Uncover their truth. These I would, by my pure … my nearly pure life lay at His feet, saying Father, so hath your servant performed.' The book fell open at its title page: its *Tableau de Riches Inventions.* I saw the representation of an eagle flying. Far up in the sky, it was attached by a string from its beak to a sealed vessel below. My uncle went on: 'And yet He kept all from me in this matter. For years. For years! But what does He ask of me now? To be drawn into the very flesh of these emblems even as the old writers describe? To find my passions, even *my* very flesh, set … set alight so that I may not separate myself from the business I … we … do. God mocks or instructs … Or the Devil does!' and he heaved a great sigh, 'and this grotesquerie that we embark on now is what I must do to put Him to the test as He puts me; saying, very well, let us try whether we can all burn away the faeces of carnality, for this glass may be the vessel, but so is this body and this room and this unusually quadratic College in which we find ourselves locked up together. In our own torment. Oh I am all broken in pieces.' He paused and stared from the brick of the small furnace, to Nick, to me. Then he picked up his thread again, 'Could it be that even as I attempted with cool head to construct the sense of the wretched books, they have with their cold pages constructed me?'

Outside the laboratory the wicked East Anglian wind was getting up. Sure enough, a storm rumbled in the distance. We raked out, woke and refuelled the main furnace, and then bellowsed it until it was roaring, with a terrible white incandescence inside its walls. Into this heat we lowered, Fatio and I, according to my uncle's instructions, the conical crucible that contained part of the work from yesterday. Within a short while I saw the clay grow a kind of transparent orange. My uncle set on top of this an alembic, which I gathered was to collect a distillate as it ran down a long tube, which he wound round so that the nozzle entered the orifice of another furnace. This we also renewed, and installed in it a bath of iron which was spiked by its feet into the clay of the floor. To my amazement, he poured into it the contents of my great fermenting bowl – the one I'd filled with bits at random. He muttered to find so much trash at the bottom of it, but seemed to believe the decanted soup was satisfactory for his purpose. Then, he took Fatio's sealed glass which I'd brought down from his chambers. I had a chance to inspect it closely. It was egg-shaped. Coming from each end of the egg were metallic projections fused through the shell, which was intricately silvered and obscure. It seemed designed to stand by itself in a fitting in the base of the iron bath, so that the thick wire coming out of its top stuck up towards the chimney.

Over this Newton and Fatio together lifted a ceramic cover to marry up with the iron rim, but not before they'd threaded a fine chain through the top. For the first time I noticed that this chain hung down from the interior of the chimney. Its dangling end was so designed that a little biting clip could fasten on to the wire from the glass egg. The whole apparatus now seemed complete, with the egg nested in its cover and seated in its ironware, but it remained to them to feed in the downpipe from the alembic and make all the seals up with fireputty.

'So,' said my uncle, 'the hermaphroditus must be roasted over the coals until he's ready to give up his star semen. This essence rises up with desire and we draw the spirit down this long condensing tube so that it fertilises the Queen here.' Then he went over to his workbench and took one of his notebooks. He motioned us to sit down.

'Twelve years ago I felt I was on the verge of solving the riddle of the metals, but it merely drew me on to torment me and left me weeping and bereft – as indeed I find myself now. Had it not been that I wrestled with *Heavenly* Nature and overcame

'You speak of your *Principia*, Sir?'

'I do, Nick. But this earthy trade came near to wrecking me. I felt as though I should die with grief. Listen.' And he began to read from his notes:

'May 10 1681' I understood that the morning star is Venus and that she is the daughter of Saturn and one of the doves. May 14 I understood the trident. May 15 I understood "there are indeed certain sublimations of mercury" &c as also another dove: that is a sublimate which is wholly feculent rises from its body's white, leaves a black faeces in the bottom which is washed by solution, and mercury is sublimed again from the cleansed bodies until no more faeces remains in the bottom. Is not this very pure sublimate sophic sal ammoniac? May 18 I perfected the ideal solution. That is two equal salts carry up Saturn. Then he carries up the Stone and joined with malleable Jove also makes sophic sal ammoniac, and that in such proportion that Jove grasps the sceptre. Then the eagle carries Jupiter up. Hence Saturn can be combined without salts in the desired proportions so that the fire does not predominate. At last mercury sublimate and sophic sal ammoniac shatter the helmet and the menstruum carries everything up.

'Two years later I made Jupiter fly on his eagle.'

'Sir, I had no idea you had achieved these things,' said Fatio. 'You told me nothing of it.'

'Yesterday I completed the retracing of those steps, ready to put everything to trial today as I told you, in the light of what I now suspect.'

'That you are mocked? I still do not know what you mean, Maître.'

'That it is not possible to separate off the Me from the It. The Us from the That.' And he pointed to the fire. 'It is my worst fear – that what goes on in there depends on us, and on what goes on out here. It is that which I put to the test today.'

I looked out of one of the windows. It had started to rain heavily on to his Biblical garden. A man stood outside. Great drops bounced on and battered at the opium poppies, and at the stranger's wide, black hat. We, inside, were both awestruck by the solemnity of my Uncle Isaac's tones.

Projection

Could he predict the weather? I don't know how he was so confident there'd be a thunderstorm overhead that day; and not just a late Summer drift either, but a full blaster from off the North Sea, with proper maritime impulsion in it. Perhaps some Intelligence was looking after its own, or perhaps he had some secret since lost. Why not? There must be such things. Unless he called it up … I just preserve the image of him in my mind's eye, up there on the chapel tower with Charles Montagu (for that was the name of the visitor) in the pouring rain with the great kite soaring into the whelming grey above him, and his hands looking disproportionate because of the huge ceramic gauntlets with which he was controlling the string. A thin rope, separate from the kite's actual string, ran from the top of the laboratory chimney up to heaven. I began to understand what was being done, and something of its danger. However, no member of the College seemed remotely to concern himself with Mr New-ton's eccentricities. Occasionally scholars in cloaks, or servants, or deliverymen passed across as much of the open space as they had to until they could get themselves under cover again. They hardly looked up. Maybe they were used to him. I was not used to this.

Popular wisdom ascribes the origin of this kite activity to Benjamin Franklin. I imagine the masonic tradition which hovers around so much of early science carried the technique to him, but he certainly didn't invent it. It occurred to me that this was what I'd seen darkly illustrated in the *Tableau de Riches Inventions.*

But Fatio too was impressed at the sight. And we could make out the miniature aqueducts Uncle had made from the chapel deluging the water from above on to the courses in the garden. Four tiny rivers rushed in Eden. Lightning ripped the clouds in the distance behind the College roofs. As the thunder boomed, Nicholas hurried me out of the rain to the interior of the laboratory. The storm was coming nearer. I ran to catch up a poker and stood with it next to the furnace watching him while he was latching the door. My lips snarled away from my teeth. I measured his skull, then turned the weapon side-ways, while still regarding him, until its point stood in the hottest part of the fire. It was a defensive action, you understand. My plans for settling him were not nearly advanced enough.

'No, boy. I mean you no harm. It was all a misunderstanding. Besides there is much to be done. Projection, boy. The great work. We are chosen. We must … co-operate.'

Once again I was unable, as it were, to bite. He had the craft, it seemed, to rob me of my will, so that I was confused about what was real, what had really happened and what had not. He acted as if there were no matter between us, and I had difficulty holding on to the truth of my memory in face of that mesmeric exercise. How could this be? It was a mystery; nevertheless there I was, snarling, but morally disarmed for the time being. He actually touched me, moved me to a station where I could pump the bellows; and I went, mute and obedient, to work.

The fire roared and whitened; my face scorched. Thunder again. He was moving about behind and around me, checking the apparatus with a light risky touch, as if to have hands close to that focus was to court death – which, of course, it was, for who could tell exactly how and when the kite would catch hold of God?

Something was going on in the apparatus. I speculated on that egg Fatio had brought, which was sitting in the juice of my fermentation bath, opaque, pregnant. How had the man happened to bring exactly what my uncle expected? How was it that the whole apparatus seemed to have been designed around it? What was Projection? They had spoken of the snake Uroboros. I imagined a horrible creeping thing of the earth trapped in that glass prison, as my soul was trapped in me, live, poisonous.

And so I expected any moment that the momentous would happen. But seconds stretched into minutes, and, while there was the rattle of rain and the surge of wind and a constant rumbling from all around, nothing roared down the chimney; although occasionally some water penetrated its fall and hissed into the heat. I ran to the door and unlatched it. Fatio looked up and made after me, but

all I had in mind was to look up again at Uncle Newton. There he was, alone and soaking on the tower in the puffy wind; no, there was Charles Montagu too, struggling with a safety rope perhaps. Uncle Isaac, near-exhausted it could be by now, working at the string to keep the kite high, staggering about in whatever space there was against the leads; and there it flew, still up, far away, in danger of disappearing into the actual cloudbase. Fatio pulled me back within by the arm. I hated his grip, but submitted. Backs against the wall, and well away from the central furnace, we sat down on the floor to wait.

He was calm, as if his nerve allowed by daily discipline for this scientific extremity. I had to admit he was calm. The apparatus shuddered in its excessive heat. He took out something from his coat pocket that looked like a musical instrument – possibly a high flute – and then began to take powder from a box he drew from another pocket. I didn't see the details of the little ritual that went with the preparation of his smoking mixture, but I understood what he was about when he took the crazy chance of striding quickly to the furnace to get some end of charcoal to light it with. Then he was back near me against the wall.

He puffed a while for his own satisfaction, inhaling in short breaths from the pipe. Then he passed it to me – it was wooden, a hard, dark wood, inlaid with yellow amberish material and fitted with metallic rings.

'Keep puffing, boy,' he said in his accent. 'If you don't keep puffing it will go out, and one of us will have to dare to go near the fire again.' He laughed. 'I have seen it done once before, but I would not tell *him* that. At least, I have seen it *tried*.' He laughed again. I sucked anxiously on the pipe. At once a bitter-sweet fume choked me. I made noises which came closer to speech than I was used to, apart from my singing. Hard smoky consonants were forced from my throat.

'Again! Again! It will do you good. It will cure you of your … impediments.'

I snatched some down into my lungs as I had seen him doing. I coughed. He moved closer and held it for me in my mouth till I had no choice but to breathe in a good quantity. Then he took it back and smoked at it himself a moment or so. I wanted more, for my wishes were altered and my discretion suspended in a way I did not understand, so that between us we got through it and I learned how to bear the smoke and cough less.

However, the last pulls hurt me and I stood up. But my standing was unlike any standing I'd made before; it was a lurch into a vault, and the vault was full of my feelings and childhood – I did not recognise them but knew they were mine. I looked down, it seemed an immense distance, to the floor. My feet were the feet of a wolf, a story-book wolf, grey, thin, feral; I felt the coil of my wolf thighs above the narrow ankles, strung up like clock-springs. And there were my hands, intricate with grey fur, from which the sharp nails protruded. Suddenly the room was alive with the language of smell winding its detail through the long passage that led from the end of my subtle nose to my brain. Nick's smell, sickening, evil; my own, amplified incredibly and full of the tones of unhappiness. Traces of Uncle Newton lifting and curling almost visibly from every object in the place; and the sharp odour of cat. Then I knew again why I felt half-animal and why I could not speak; and the space was peopled with horror. I know I knew it then, I say. But it was not graspable in the way I name and describe things to you now, and so as I write I weep almost with frustration that I can't get it back. But I do remember what, drugged, I *saw*.

'And if by the help of such microscopical eyes, a man could penetrate further than ordinary into the secret composition and radical texture of bodies … ' so wrote Mr Locke as I was to read in after-times. And the description fits also the effect of my directing my visual attention to what, in those expanded seconds of dislocated time, my nose had noticed first. Surfaces unstitched their finish. Their microstructure revealed itself; things indeed lost their proper names with their boundaries and I became a connoisseur of edges and gaps. Now these gaps became vortices, threatening, and, as I said, peopled. Worst of all I remember here, I saw in my vision the central mystery of the apparatus at the focus of the room. What was that white-hot crucible but a chamber of volcanic torment? There,

strapped to a griddle, a two-headed two-breasted naked monster of man and woman endured for eternity. But as I observed, and possibly as a result of my act of observation, its flesh sublimed from its body and its bones darkened to a char, then whitened into a crumbly ash – and it was gone up, into the miniature vault of the alembic, searching its path out of one system, and down as feculent distillate into the next. Where I followed it.

Yes, the sun man (who despite his beams wore a dark wide-brimmed hat like Charles Montagu's that I had seen through the lattice in the first rain) and the moon woman stood up to their thighs in a primal sea. And in the sea, my sea, were the grains of all meaning, and the essential chemical spirals of all fish, beasts, plants and people, looping and squirming over one another, enquiring of me how they should combine. But there were also the metals, some clearly radiating. I could see their emissions which were stark and dangerous like the warnings certain animals carry on their skins. In the sea too there were faint streaks of blood – mine, perhaps, from scraping at my arms.

Between Charles and the woman floated the egg, now transparent to my altered sight. It did indeed contain the snake, but it was a snake that shimmered with an unbearable bright scaliness, while its part-human face gripped its own wilfully penetrative tail. The jaws were bound shut with a thin twist of cord so that the tail of flesh was locked in the mouth. It looked at me with a pleading complicity. There was shaking, either its or mine, I couldn't tell. Perhaps it pleaded for release – or to be left unnoticed. I could not continue to look.

My body was seized and spun round. I knew what was intended, and hated it. At the focus of the hatred was a figure. It was not Nicholas, although part of me grasped that he was its inspiration. And it had got at me, leering and terrorising, in an appalling slowness of feeling. I struck out, again and again with all my force, desperate to grind or smash that awful presence away, that mask with eyes and tongue, that wigged man in a room holding a stick. I wanted only to empty the eyes out, to shut fast the jaws with their nightmare bite on that hateful tongue poking, poking out of and into its hole.

The room erupted in blue light and fire. I screamed.

A Shift

A blurred rectangle of sky. By degrees it assembled itself into its panes of glass, held in the lattice of their joinery: the casement window of my uncle's chamber. The moth window. And I lay on a horsehair couch, hardly conscious of anything else; adrift, in fact, on the impulselessness of my body. The window filled my whole attention. Pale clouds, crinkled here and there through irregularities in the glass, were tinged by a weak, filtered sunshine.

A face next to me. It was my uncle's. He looked reverential, somehow, and worried. A sense of dusk. A pewter vessel with a spout that jutted towards me was raised in his hand near my face.

'Do not try to move. This is to drink.' I sipped from the spout. It was something slightly bitter but warming, some herbal concoction. Of course I did try to move. I lifted my head.

'I can lift my head,' I said, in a high tone of absolute amazement. And what I meant to be amazed by was not the movement but the voice. I had spoken. How strange and different my body felt, before sleep overcame me again.

A doctor in a wide coat – a full man with a full wig. But not *the* man.

My mother. The window. The doctor said of me: 'She is out of danger in my opinion. Of course there will be a need for rest, and I suggest a … change of lodging? Not equipped for … young woman … impressionable age. Family of course. Still … ' And he was gone.

I levered myself up on the couch and found myself wrapped in a rush of linen which laced at the front. I wondered if I had died. 'Mother.' My voice came out again with that breathy high sound. She looked at me. I don't know what there was in her face. Distance? Discomfort? Dislike?

'Aye, it's my child alright,' I heard her say, 'but bewitched or unbewitched I don't know.' My uncle came into view. 'What am I to do, Isaac? What am I to say? I came up from Robert's rectory with a manchild, though I grant you a knotted one, and now must take him back in skirts.' She looked at him and then at me. 'What am I to do? A girl! It's a miracle, but a damned one. A cranky one, Isaac, and I can't take it in.' She began to breathe too quickly and sat herself down on one of his bleak chairs, while he hovered behind her, wearing his wig for protection, perhaps, but uncertain whether to touch her shoulders by way of comfort. 'I can't take it in. Should I cry and praise the Lord. Should I throw my arms about him … her, and weep on … her *bosom.*' I saw her wince as if with disgust. 'It's too much, Isaac. You've gone too far. Too far. How can this be God's work?' And she did begin to snivel, and to shake a bit. 'What shall I tell people? Robert? Family? People in Bridgstock? Oh, I shall be hanged, Brother. Do you realise? It's me they'll hang. Godfearing folk like they. They won't like this. They'll find a way. Or drowning! I shall be drowned!'

My uncle turned to the window as if to escape this imminent flood of disaster. On the window-ledge, I noticed there now stood a human skull.

'My dear Madam;' he said, trying for a mode of address which would cover the deep awkwardness he felt in the presence of female feeling. 'Sister Barton,' he said. 'Hannah. Need anyone know?'

She stopped her cramped crying and looked up, licking her lips. Two tears left their traces down her cheeks. Then she looked at me. 'Can you hear me, child?' she said.

'Yes,' came out my little breathy voice. 'Yes. I can hear you, Mother.'

'You've changed, boy. Or been changed. Do you know that?'

'Yes, Mother. I can speak, God be praised.'

'Now don't give me any of that. Get up. Get up and look at yourself, boy' But she recollected herself: 'That is, I'm sorry, if you can indeed get up, child. I would steady you, but I … I … would rather you tried on your own.'

How different I felt, swivelling my legs in their linen until I could place my feet on the floor. How curiously released. My uncle ostentatiously kept himself turned away, and coughed slightly to inform us of his propriety. Nick was not about.

I pushed down with my left hand on to the head of the couch. Yes, I could stand for a moment or two. All different. The same. Yet all different. Loose, soft.

I had escaped, I thought.

You will not understand me when I say this. You will especially not understand me if you are a woman. There is surely no woman alive today who is not aware that in all the authorities women's condition is generally held to be more exploited than that of men. Now. And worse in the past. But in my particular set of circumstances – unusual, I grant – and among those with whom I lived, I *believed* that to be suddenly female was to be suddenly delivered from, I hazard, unwelcome attentions.

And so it was that, having been miraculously changed by the projection experiment, I entered on a phase of life which seemed to promise better things. Yes, I began my new season.

Somehow, perhaps, it's our musculature which holds memories. By a change of my outward flesh the record of my darkest past was switched off, suspended. It was a blank. As blank a sheet as the linen I wore. Well, blankish – bearing only the painful trace of the week of the projection. Thus I began life as a female. There only remained a shadowy knowledge of the rape – of someone I no longer quite was – and a plan of revenge. Enough to bear, but too little to render me a wolf-girl. So the awkwardnesses were all gone, the stiffness and cramps in the legs, the heavy entrapment of my heart within its ribcage, the wily animality of my neck. This particularly I noticed: my head ached, but seemed to float above my shoulders without effort of mine. It was liberating to my thoughts and feelings. I was light. I felt cleaner. Innocent.

Then I sat down again, being still weak from the shock of the explosion in the laboratory. I had no recollection of how I was borne from there to here, nor of how long I'd taken to recover and 'develop' into my new shape. I had no knowledge of whether my uncle saw the experiment as a success – whether this had been the intended outcome, or some incredible catastrophe. I could vaguely remember a blinding flash.

I put my hand to my head, as one does just on to the hairline above the brow, because, with the dull ache throughout, this seemed to be the place to smooth it out. I disturbed an itch, and found a small bump, as if from a blow right to the centre, midway between hairline and crown. The itch was the remains of a scab on the bump. Its pieces flipped down in front of my eyes as I scratched; one landed on my nose. The bump was hard and painful to the touch, but in spite of this there was a compulsion to poke at it as I worried the scab – until I felt drowsy again and organised myself to lie back.

As I did so there was a knock at the outer door, which was opened without pause for reply. I heard my uncle's voice: 'Charles. How glad I am to see you. Come in.'

'Returning to London. Today, Isaac. I shall see you soon? Madam,' he acknowledged my mother.

Isaac made a hesitating sound in his throat. 'Going back already? It seems you have only just arrived.'

'This politicking,' Charles laughed. 'It takes up all a man's time. And to make a final survey of your tender patient's condition.' He came into my view, the man in the garden on whose wide dark hat the first few drops had spattered as on the opium poppies. Hatless now, not tall; urbane and smiling, dressed soberly in very good cloth, he moved between me and the window. As I looked back at him I felt the burning embarrassment of the piece of scab sticking to my nose, and dashed it away with my hand.

'Her eyes are open. There's hope;' he said. 'Your servant, Madam,' to me. My gaze stretched in astonishment. He looked searchingly back before turning his attention once again to my uncle. Very searchingly. To Isaac, he said: 'You'll be most welcome, my dear fellow. I look for you earnestly.'

'You have thought of me? Of my situation?' said my uncle. 'As I described it to you?'

'Of course I have, Isaac'

'I'm doubly indebted.'

'As I to you. London.'

'It may answer after all,' said Uncle Isaac. 'But in what capacity?'

'I am a man of influence,' he smiled. Tiredness overcame me. I lost interest and drifted off.

At my next waking I found myself dressed in clothes I recalled all too clearly, including the restraint coat. My heart dumped into the pit of my stomach with a terrible sensation – as if one has not escaped a nightmare by waking after all. My escape had been the dream.

But no. As I came to myself more and more I realised that the painful wolf self had remained transmuted, and that I was still light – merely *wrapped* in my former style. There were no mirrors – apart from those little optical pieces he had. What was I – to look at? I pressed at the fronts of my coat – soft bubs under the tough, lined, wool facings. Their slight tenderness to the pressure was mine. I stuck my hand between the legs of my breeches, then into my pocket, then round from behind. Then my mother came into the room. I put my hand up to my small, smooth face.

My mother did treat me differently. She was in awe of me. But the plan was, as my uncle had said, to continue to pass me off as the boy she arrived with. Until when, she wanted to know. How long could such a deception be sustained? Surely *things* would come to light. She was in fear for her life. Isaac told my mother that he would apply himself to the matter with his best attention.

I held my first real conversation. It was with my uncle, after mother went out to see about our journey. Neither of us knew how to begin. I decided it should be me. 'I have no need to sing, Uncle,' I said, looking up from the bowl in which I was dipping my bread.

'What shall we call you?' he replied. 'Or more particularly, what shall I call you, since when you return home your conditions of life are to appear unchanged?'

'Am I to see you again, then, Uncle?'

'I think you must. I am much shaken, boy, I … I mean … I … You see I cannot name you. I am shaken all to pieces. Every certainty has evaporated, exploded rather. I saw … nothing. Well, indeed I saw a great marvel. I saw the heavens open and … I saw what I had been waiting for. I was jolted back to the edge of the roof despite my precautions. The very air broke apart. Charles held me. He saved my life I believe. The voice of it … Ah my guts chum over now when I think of it.'

He paused. 'Listen. For my sins I am known about the world – O wretchedness of publication, a vile prostitution to the public gaze – as the man who captured God's language, who understood His workings, His secret movements. My *Principia* explains everything … except the matter of the metals, the Chymistry, to which I also sensed myself close, so close. But now all that has … gone up in smoke, quite literally. I understand nothing. Nothing. Because of you.'

'How because of me?'

'It is a question of who we are. I … Yes, I am resolved. I see we are bound together. I will tell you things I have told to no man. And because of your changed condition you are still no man to hear it, I suppose. Well, it became clear to me as I grew into my Cambridge self that I had been specially chosen, specially marked out. It would be a fool who did not recognise this. You understand me?'

'No, Uncle.'

'Do you not know what I have done?'

'You have turned me into a woman.'

'No, no, boy … woman. I mean what I have achieved. In the world of Art, Philosophy and Mathematics.'

'No, Uncle. I can read, but I have only read my Daddy's Church books, and what I could occasionally steal from Grandad Smith's shelves, and from Ayskew's library room.'

'Like myself as a child.'

'And the books in your laboratory, but only the pictures, not the language. I know nothing of the world of anything.'

'Then I'm wasting my words. But I want to inform you – why, I don't know. Why I should feel compelled to speak to you of myself and my Art, I do not know, I say. It is like an instruction; whose origin, as always, could be either from above or … below.' He brought his fist down on the table, suddenly, and his face became anguished. 'Shall I never be free of this ambiguity, this mockery of all I do? You were a monster, and are now a miracle. You're an escape from reasonable law. To make you rational I should have to claim myself as the Christ, the only miracle-worker, which would be an abominable blasphemy in the light of what I see now. Damn you! You return us all to the abyss, the abyss of superstition. My project is thus in ruins and you are a walking fairy tale. Surely you see this. You cannot be so blank and recondite as you appear. What is it that you are? Amphisbaena. Ha! No. So I tell you once again that God, or someone else too horrible to mention, spoke to me in my ceaseless labours of the wretched *Principia.* I published, and he has proceeded to destroy me ever after. For what? For my Hubris? For my heart? You tell me, tell me what should I do. I can't. Boy! Whatever you are! Female thing! Tell me!' He became suddenly very agitated, but I was not frightened of him.

'I don't know what it is you wish me to say, Uncle.'

'No. I shall teach you. I shall visit. It will be safe: I am unlike most men. You will be my Protégée. I shall tell you … what it is that has ruined me. And between us we shall survive this terrible event.'

'On the window-ledge. That skull.' The clay-coloured relic grinned at the room.

'It's a gift from … Mr Nicholas. It's for you.'

We, my mother and I, left Cambridge on one of Mr Trueman's carrier vehicles, which happened to be going West. She marked my face like a beard shadow with burnt cork, to mar my new beauty. Further to preserve appearances my mother tied my arms by their secret tapes, which was a zaniness, because the whole purpose of the secret tapes was to keep up the illusion that I was normal while travelling. I suppose it made her feel she had some control, particularly when Mr Trueman was there in the depot shed while the wagon was loading and they were saying their farewells. I saw them embracing and touching behind the angle in the wall where the counter ran, his hand thrust into the folds of her skirt.

Then we were bumping out of the city of my transformation at the slow pace of horses, moving off into the dung-smelling countryside. My mother sat up with the driver. Wearing a black hat I sat at the back with my legs dangling over the tailboard. My gift-skull hung from my neck in a net bag which bumped and rolled on my lap.

It was a bright day after the morning mist had cleared – one of Summer's last throws. The St Neots road ran in lurching ruts while we curved between hedges, or struck across great reaches of stubbled fields, or plodded through villages. Other folk went about their sunlit business without sign of emotion, but the sight of ragged children playing and fighting round a pond triggered me to tears. Elizabeth. Elizabeth. And my tears ran and ran, not with the choking of sobs, but with a kind of permanent rinsing, so that I looked out over leaking elms, smudgy churches, and swimmers. I had the sense that at the back of my mind the other life was being catalogued; we might say now like an expanding video of lewd cartoons, played in another room, from which odd snatches and ungraspable flashes reached me. Or you might say they leaked through to me, because they made me cry even as I didn't apprehend them. They were assembling and sorting themselves, I think. Their only bright clarity was in their summation: my resolve to destroy Monsieur Nicholas Fatio de Duillier, which had been a turning-point, if you recall the decision I made to out-think them all. And I knew that I was able to be still, and to wait.

So where, I ask now, had the wolf-boy's cramps and twists gone to? Where were his snarls? Perhaps he was in hell. He had been displaced into another frame of being to await his time; but

I think I also knew then that he could touch my thoughts, and that only by his aid should I make good my revenges.

'Well. What with your uncle's contribution and my endeavours we're out of the wood for the time being, as far as money goes,' said my mother. 'Thanks be to God.'

His Creation

While I finished growing up, he paid me visits. First, soon after the Incident, I had a letter of his to announce the programme:

'Here,' my mother'd said. 'He sends an enclosed for you. You may count yourself pretty fortunate.

'*Events which I do not specify on paper, child, have led to great alterations in my life. You have known me but a short while, and in that while you have seen me only as the thing I was; which the world now acknowledges was not a nothing indeed but a seer of new worlds and a maker of new contrivances. Nevertheless there are reasons why I must change my state. Where I saw so clearly and for so many years into the meanings of my researches, I find now my vision is muddied; perspectives have shifted, faculties altered.* I'm sure he expresses himself very courtly,' put in my mother, 'but most of his writing sets me at a loss. *You will, perhaps, not understand what I find myself compelled to write* - indeed, and to the point at last,' she said. Then she continued making out the intricate shapes on the page, '*to you here – suffice it to say, child, that I must go on in an entirely different way. Things are not what they were with me; I shall never find my former self again, I think. A parcel of books will arrive for you shortly by my direction. You are to read them. When I come I shall hope to find you perfect in them. I hope you keep up your duty to my sister your mother, and are of service to her in her bereavement. We are all in God's hands, to whose mercy you may be assured you are commended by*

your Unkle Is. Newton

'There. He's decided to make something of himself at last.'

He gave me books indeed. Many, many books. I read them. I was the second woman in his life. The first was his mother, whose death he had overseen, nursing her illness himself until the last – though whether from love, guilt or social obligation I never knew. Every other representative of my current gender he seemed to regard as an advanced example of upholstery. But I was indeed his Protégée; I was one of the two chosen people.

I knew it wasn't love, on either of our parts, but a kind of double-tracking, which we both acknowledged without question. It puzzled me. I felt it must somehow serve us, though in a way that I was entirely unaware of. But then what was I to do with my beauty and my brain in darkest Northamptonshire? Marry? I had offers.

I hadn't stayed in the clothes of the wolf-boy. My mother got over her fears. Having seen the advantages of a talking female as opposed to a snarling male, she weighed up the bigotry of the community against the sense of achievement she might get from putting one over on them; and chose to have it given out that she was sending me away North to distant cousins. These were good folk, she said, who were willing to harness her son's unreclaimability to ceaseless heavy labour, in return for a social chance for their pretty daughter. She flattered herself in the comparison, for though we were Rectory we weren't rich, and the locality must have conceived a grim impression of the fictitious North Country cousins. Nevertheless in due course mother and *son* travelled off on one of Trueman's trailers, even though the affair was technically over; and a clever sleight of hand was achieved between two out-county inns, in time for mother and *daughter* to meet a return transport.

Of my father? My father lived six weeks after my return from Cambridge. It was some indeterminate disease that wasted the flesh of innocent clergymen and demanded to be flushed through with brandy. He died in delirium when the brandy ran out. He called us in as he lay dying, my brother and sister and myself. He blessed my brother, and kissed Margaret and me. He said he'd always been so proud of his two girls but poisoned worms and now woodlice were tunnelling in his legs. He screamed. Uncle Benjamin Smith, who was staying with us as he so often did, came running upstairs to see what was toward. His wig flapped as he flung into the bedchamber. But his haste was redundant; his brother-in-law had passed on.

Thus I was acknowledged, and was called Catherine Barton, and learned how to live among people.

'You've read the Fermat? And the Wallis?' he said.

'It's too hard, Uncle.' I sat at a desk in our house. In front of me a rare copy of John Wallis's *Arithmetica Infinitorum*, the Arithmetic of Infinites, lay open, on top of a specially made copy in my uncle's hand of Fermat's *Varia Opera Mathematica.* It said:

'As *n* becomes indefinitely large, the ratio of the area under the curve to the square enclosing it approaches the limiting value of one third;' he said. 'I spoke to you about limits when I last came down, didn't I?'

'Yes, Uncle.'

'Well, then. Have you been idle?'

'Of course not.'

'Then what do you find hard?'

'It would help if it were in English,' I said.

'Ha! You must stick at your Latin. Without it you're lost.'

'Yes, Uncle. But why is it so important that I learn the mathematics? I don't take naturally to it.'

'Do you think I took naturally to it?'

'You must have done. You find it all so straightforward. To me it's infinitely crooked and tangled. Why does it matter?'

'It matters because … because … because of the event that we never speak about, and which must not be spoken about – you understand that, girl, don't you? It must not be mentioned. Ever. To anyone.'

'Yes, Uncle. I understand that.' I wondered which event he meant.

'Well I hope you do, for I'm wrecked if you say it. You don't want to wreck me do you, Catherine?'

'No, Uncle;' I replied. Wreck him? How could I wreck him?

'Well, then. You must learn this because I must be sure of you. Tcha! You must understand these things. I must share them with you. I must include you. Your mind must be formed according to these designs. It's to protect you, Catherine. It will protect you from becoming idle, frivolous and wanton, as your sex are most likely to. It's to protect you from Eve's faults. I must have you *with* me. Do you understand? It is imperative.'

I sighed, and looked again at the Wallis: a sea of Latin with numbers and diagrams afloat on it. 'Yes, Uncle. I understand.'

But in a few years money once again became a serious problem.

It was my mother's suggestion in all innocence – if I can attach that word to her – that we apply to Uncle Isaac in London to see if I might be something domestic for him. She played into our hands. I was to be *with* him literally.

He paid for everything. I arrived one bitter March afternoon five years after my transformation, by the West Chester coach which ran up to the metropolis on Watling Street. He met me at the Three Cups Inn just outside Westminster and checked first of all that no one had tampered with my bundle and wickerwork hold-all, and my net bag with Nick Fatio's gift-skull in it. Then he looked at me. 'Well, Catherine;' he said, 'we recluses are both moved into the fashionable world, at last. What do you think of the great city?' I'd never thought of myself as a recluse; I'd never voluntarily sought Northamptonshire. But perhaps he had a point, I thought to myself as I looked around me.

'It's more than I could have expected,' I said. What comment could anyone pass who came upon that place for the first time from nowhere? I'd probably seen more people in the previous quarter of an hour than I had in the rest of my life. Cambridge was as nothing beside this. And I felt cold through and through. But I was pleased finally to be here, because it felt as though my destiny were being fulfilled. The last few years in the Midlands, during which I was learning to be human, and female,

had brought me up against the tightness of village life – of life in general. The holiday of feeling light was soon over. The wolf self lay primed and potent at the back of my mind, half-known; half-impossible. He was excised from discourse; so how could he have existed? Yet I felt him in me. And how soon did the dealings I had as a female – at church, at market, in the network of visits, or just in casual conversations in the street – yes, the very language I swam in – imprint on my movement, my expression even, all the things I might *not* do, the places I might *not* go, and the feelings I might *not* have. They laced me tighter than my stays. And in this my mother was not, I think, my friend, as she purported to be, but the chief agent of my oppression. She liked having me to talk to around the house, she said; better, she claimed, than my sister. She could see her young self in me, she said. So we developed a mother – daughter relationship of sorts – a relationship grown out of the air, without soil. But in fact she policed me. I played my part, and didn't know why I was so often on edge, or thrown down in spirits, since I supposed she must love me. She said it was my womb, and taught me how to bind it up with clouts by monthly necessity.

'How does my womb imprison me?' I asked. She told me it was the curse of Eve, and not to mention what was disgusting to God. Am I designed for no more than this? I thought.

At night, when my stays were off, when my sister, who lay next to me, was asleep, I tried the womb for whatever was the female equivalent of that sticky release which I sensed had so often soothed the wretched wolf-boy to sleep, and was part, somehow, of his conditioning. But although my own hands could experiment at will, and imaginary lusts could stir me and have me search my body's secrets out, there was no end available. No inner softening. No rest. Arousal became its own prison; and there were times, whole seasons, which indeed grew longer as I grew older, when I held myself stricter than a nun to fend off the frustration of my own desires. And love? My thoughts were all alchemical, like the King and Queen in the river. I conjured Elizabeth, whose family had moved away. I conjured the love and nakedness of the worthy women of Bridgstock and their drowning husbands, who groped blindly at their breasts.

What then could I accomplish? I had the revenge constantly before me, and when I once dreamed, that, dressed again in my coat, I actually performed it with a garrotte, my spirits lifted and I became almost buoyed up for several days. I started to plan, and speculated on other methods. But rural routine soon stifled the fantasy, while my dreams returned to bad but vague; and being now female I was denied even the opportunities for slaughter which the men had. My father had shot birds, or followed hares with dogs. I disdained to wring the necks of farmyard chickens and had no quarrel with the smooth innocence of the ducks on our pond.

In spite of my uncle's letters, his books and his educational visits, I lost belief sometimes that the hope of moving on could ever be fulfilled. Yet he must be instructing me to some purpose. I did study. I even worked at the mathematics, but without much cheer or success. Well, not in his terms. And I wondered how Christ might make me free, as Mr Witham, the curate, said He would when he stood behind me for my organ lesson, catching and releasing his breath. I felt moreover there was some other important matter I must prepare for. My destiny; my purpose. I mean beyond my purpose of revenge. I remembered my first conversation, and my uncle's anguished uncertainty over Who it was that had set him up.

So, yes; I was pleased to get to London.

His house was in Jermyn Street, a pleasant location as befitted a man of some distinction. It was made of sober London bricks, and, like much of the new London, was in the so-called Dutch style; the roof was tiled. It stood out dark against the setting sun. I was so glad of the fire in the first room. Heated wine. Supper. Like me he'd acquired some sort of social touch in the intervening years; the dishevelled projector had been laid to rest behind a fine suit of clothes and a regular wig. He showed me round.

The interior of the house was all done out in red: drapes, beds, sofas and seats. At the time I was amazed; with hindsight the phrase whorehouse taste leaps to mind. It was such a contrast with

the rooms I'd come to know at Trinity – as if a child had been asked what colour it wanted most in the world, and been indulged. But the furniture was good – obviously; much more luxurious than anything I'd seen in the country. Better than the Smiths' house, where Uncle Benjamin, Isaac's stepbrother, was now squire. I unpacked in my room, hanging up my few outfits, and stuffing the wolf-boy's breeches, coat and hat into a small chest. He'd got me a good bed with four posts. Here in my bedroom there was another decorative dimension: expensive frilly white lace. And the drapes? Red. All red. Was this really *his* choice?

If it was, then he'd been overfulfilled in another matter, as I learned in growing used to London. That was of gold: he commuted each day to the Mint at the Tower of London, where he saw to the coinage. He took me to see: vast furnaces, noise, bellows, the brilliance of liquid metals. A grand scale of activity beyond the conception of the most obsessive souffleur. I felt here he was in his element at last. Can you imagine the fruition to an alchemist of the ceaseless pourings and runnings, pressings, millings and stampings of purest gold and silver; the quiet beauty of the metals ever set off deliciously against the clamour and filth of their surroundings – for the place was driven on horse power and full of shit.

To be truthful, this was also my early impression of London itself, except for the great concourses and squares, and those were plagued with pigeons. I'd expected it all to be easy. But the city leaned on you with its unconcern, its hardness. No new season offered itself here. In the streets I was alone in a throng. I even missed that stifling camaraderie of the village women as I began to learn how to live in this callous jostle. It took me weeks before I could stomach the sheer concentration of people, with their dogs and their total household excretions. A smoky, smelly, muddy, milling, wintry place.

In the Jermyn Street house I was comfortable enough, though. I was indeed something domestic; I was his housekeeper by virtue of my sex. What else could I be?

A man and woman and their daughter lived on the top floor and did the cleaning and maintenance and some of the cooking for us, in return for their keep. Their name was Pointer; we called them by their Christian names, Tony, Mary and young Pet. I had nominal charge over them, but in practice they were entirely self-sufficient as to how things should be done for Mister Eye, as they called him. Having by now been introduced at one or two other houses less obsessively furnished, I framed a second hypothesis about our red frilly decor. Perhaps it was Mary's uneducated taste. Perhaps she'd been given a free hand by my lofty uncle to set about making the place an elegant London address, without having any sense of elegant restraint.

While I was a newcomer, Mary and Pet fussed around me. 'Oh, Mistress Catherine, you'll 'ave suitors by the dozen, you will. Look at her eyes, Pet, and that pretty mouth. You'll have to look alive, Missy, as the sailors say, 'cause the young men here are all up to the chances if they can, aren't they, Pet? She knows! I know myself! But if you keep your wits about you, dear, you'll be all in the clear and have no end of a following. Won't she, Pet? Just you make sure they keep their hands out of your pocket. Such a pretty shape, my love. You don't have to put up with anything you don't want. Till you decide you do want it, that is. Eh, Pet?' She nudged her daughter for the joke and then returned to me. She seemed to want to touch my hair and adjust my caps and my dress. And then she was full of advice on society seamstresses and milliners. Good ones, it turned out.

Pet, who had soft eyes but was rather plain, didn't seem to resent her mother's enthusiasm for my looks. They both giggled and sparked themselves up at the prospect of love opening a lively market outlet in the house.

Love? Love? The city had love on its lips; it pressed the word into the currency of every encounter; it worked at love. But it was compulsion – as mechanical as the Mint, and as sweated. What was it that kept these people at it, toiling and moiling, breeding and hoping? And they were compelled to wear their love, as it were, on the outside. I was amazed at the openness, the show. I had never, except in the interchange between my mother and Mr Trueman in their farewells at Cambridge,

seen love acted. Here I saw the rich kissing or preening in St James's Park. It was thought nothing that powdered men who found me walking there in company they knew should slip a hand across my bosom, even as they looked into my violent eyes and left me alone. As the Spring hastened on and the weather warmed up, whores sat out at the street alehouses with a crescent of painted nipple showing above the basque, sipping their cans and talking with tradesmen; and smart gentlewomen shopping near the Abbey aped something of their style. Men walked with their arms round their wives, or mistresses. I saw other people whom I met at my uncle's lean dinners roll eyes at each other; I met folk who were engaged in intrigues; I heard salacious talk at times in passing; and there were the Sunday mornings when rhythmic gasps and creakings came from the top floor of our house as the Pointers enjoyed their lie-in. One week I met a woman who was famously in love. She came to the house on some Royal Society pretext. When her man appeared at last in the hallway she flung herself on him with an almost tangible rapture. Despite my own passionate compulsions, I was terrified. And sad. Love? What was it? Sex? How? There was a place, Pet told me, somewhere in London, where a woman did headstands in a booth so that the passing wits and gallants could attempt her with thrown coins. Why?

In May I saw a man forcing two boys into a coach by hitting them with a cane through the rents in their rags, and when I got home I was shaken and sick.

My uncle and I were manifest public virgins.

He took me to the theatre. By the close I believed not only the actors but the audience to be false. Again I tortured myself as to the meaning of this place.

'These people, Uncle. What on earth is it they're doing? How does it keep on going?' I watched them. Daily they flooded along the streets about their various businesses; they lied, double-dealt and cheated; they apparently exchanged coinage, credit, and body fluids with very little prompting; they laughed, festered and grew old. They clung to life until they died. They appeared content with their orbits, eating, drinking, smoking and paying. Their story was private – I found no real way in, nor did I wish to; for I knew it was lacking in something, as I was myself. It was his city, his creation – as I was myself. Whither more naturally than here should we gravitate in our sadness? Commercial London. He was Warden of the Mint; Charles Montagu had fixed it for him, and all the universe had died.

Nevertheless I was also glad; for in this bleak description I recognised my own purpose, and began work on my Project. Which was to find the gaps in his.

I often thought about Nicholas. Perhaps he was somewhere in London even now. Perhaps he lay at night in some house in the streets I passed through every day, and was within reach, so that I had only to bend my intellect to his discovery in order to make all good. At such thoughts I felt my pretty lips lift away from my pretty teeth, found my pretty nails pressed against my own pretty cheeks.

'Do you ever see Monsieur Nicholas, Uncle?' I asked one afternoon when we were entertaining. His hand holding the new decanter shook momentarily so that some of the wine splashed over the side of Charles's glass on to the oak table-top. It started to run down the imperceptible gradient of the wood towards Sir Christopher Wren's lap. Henrietta Bellamy caught the little stream in time and headed it off until she could get hold of a napkin. Later Etta and I stood side by side at the mirror in the drawing-room to which we had gone while the men of science compared notes.

'Etta. Is it easy to be married in London?'

'Easy? What an odd thing. As easy as anywhere, Kit.' She teased at a stray of hair behind her ear.

'No. Being married. Is it an easy thing?'

'Edmund is a jewel. I love him. He makes *everything* so easy, my dear. Positively delicious. Why is your hair always swept up, Kit? Don't you wish for a change?'

In reply I took hold of her right-hand index finger and raised it to the centre of my brow, then just above, until it touched the concealed bump under the front wave I wore. She pushed at it of her own accord. I felt still the sharp pain whenever it was disturbed.

'Ow!'

'My dear. You're deformed. I've found a flaw in your beauty.' She bent to kiss my cheek.

'Only a little deformed, Etta.'

'I wonder if my hair would go in your style. On you it looks … stunning sometimes, Kit. Sometimes I think you have no conception of your looks.'

'Am I a mess?'

'No. Quite the contrary, dear. You're always well turned out. It's that I believe you know nothing of your effect on others. On men. On women, for that matter.'

'No? What's my effect?' I dabbed at myself in the mirror again.

'It's useless my telling you. I can hear by your tone of voice. Your effect. You know. But you don't know, do you?'

'Etta. Did you see my uncle's hand shake as I mentioned the name Nicholas?'

'No. When was that?' Delicately she re-applied a patch to her cheekbone.

'When you had to mop up the wine.'

'Oh. No, I didn't notice. I was talking to Wren. He was just leaving. Should I have?'

That was something, Etta, that you know nothing of. It was a gap.'

'A what?'

'A gap. I see these moments. They are special. I call them gaps.'

Pawnee

That Summer of 1699 a schism in the Royal Society led to informal scientific demonstrations taking place at our house. We set up a rival outfit. The true cause was my uncle's hatred of Dr Hooke, whose vainglorious mediocrity, he said, lodged by the barb in the institution's flesh, so that twist as it might it couldn't shake the accursed old duffer off. What my uncle's faction actually *did* in these evenings was not so much different from the authorised meetings.

'What is it that you have there, Mr Van de Bemde?'

'A pint of slugs, Mr Gregory.'

'Are they live slugs, Mr Van de Bemde?'

'Not at present, Sir.'

'I'm afraid I must be going. My deepest apologies, Gregory, Newton, Gentlemen.'

'Let the record show that at the time of Sir Christopher's departure, the slugs were dead, but their juice is still applicable.'

'So recorded.'

I showed Wren out and escaped to my own bedroom. I'd coped with the gassing of the hedgehog in the bell jar, and the nerve poison from Batavia. But the dog had been too much. I noted that my uncle hadn't liked it either, but he'd let them carry on. Food for my dreams: the way the gentlemen sat round unmoved while it cried and twitched. And now the man with the slugs. I who plotted revenge had motive, but how had these creatures offended? Should the gentlemen not anatomise their enemy Hooke?

Yet these were enlightened, modern men. They'd rebuilt the country and the city out of a legacy of war, disease and chaos. They must have good reason. Gaps. Where were the gaps? What was it that would get behind such sober, influential folk as these Londoners?

In my commonplace book I made a note of the chemicals for the gassing, and of where they were kept. And of the Batavian extract.

My uncle had showed me his notebook written from both ends. He'd got its prodigious supply of paper from his stepfather Smith when he was a boy, and it had served his whole career. It showed how he'd started when he was a young student. He'd put: '*Amicus Plato amicus Aristoteles magis arnica Veritas.*' Then *'Quaestiones Quae-dam Philosophicae'*, which I rendered, having learned my Latin lessons, as: 'Plato and Aristotle are beloved to me but I'd rather know the truth. Certain philosophical interrogations.' And he'd gone on from there. Through motion and conies and optics, to God, the creation; even to the soul, and sleep, and dreams. His thought was free. I wrote therefore:

'Certain questions of a young woman wishing to know the truth' Then:

'1) Jesus said, *I come not to bring peace but a sword.* Is this the razor of the anatomist?

2) Is God well pleased? Has He indeed come down again? Is that Him? Downstairs?'

Then, frightened, I shut the book so that no one should see it. But of course in my bedroom my confident self knew that no one could really be watching me. God was more remote to my mind – if He existed. I was as advanced as that! Beyond Locke even! Despite the terms of my *Quaestiones.*

I tried again:

'3) *If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.* In this work I shall be free. Though I am in the world, I am not required to be of it. What is it to be free?

4) Is it a bold thing for a woman to devote herself to study and experiment? Is it an unattempted thing? Am I the first?

5) If motion in this age of progress and wonders is determined as my uncle has shown, how shall Christ intervene to bring comfort to the tormented? Are we but bodies ceaselessly continuing in our right lines? What forces are impressed on us? Hunger? Disease? Lust? Blows? Blades? Have we in us *inherent* forces? What is Love?

6) These lovers sport in the public eye. But in private, when there is no one to see, what is it they say and do? What feel?

7) Why will not my passion discharge? Is a woman's body inferior to a man's in this? Is a woman's *mind* capable of discharge?

8) Why does my time hasten away, faster than my uncle's clock, so that I am always afraid? Are these the last days?

9) Why am I so frightened of my words ….?

10) What forces have I reacted to, so that I should once have been', and my pen hesitated, 'of a lupine disposition?'

I shut the book. Not much for the start of a *Principia*, I thought. I felt I had done something shocking.

Having hidden these deliberations, I went out of my bedroom and walked to the end of the passage until I came directly in front of the steep back stairs, which continued their upward oak pathway to where the Pointers lived. This was the place from which I contacted them about household matters. We usually shouted up. I'd never yet intruded upon their flat, although nominally I had the right. They had an air of security.

I called quietly: 'Mary! Pet!' There was no answer. I called again, then hoisted my skirts and stepped up, hanging on to the rope and placing my little shoes sideways on the well worn, almost vertically raked flight. At the top I stared around in the dark, waiting for my eyes to adjust. There were two doors in front of me, at right angles to one another, and an extension of the little landing space that led off to my left.

I knocked on one of the doors. No reply. I opened it cautiously. Darkness. And the other – dark too.

Down the whole flight of the back stairs, I searched for a spare light in the kitchen, from which the Pointer family was equally absent. They must have gone out on some family jaunt; I didn't know what these London people might do at night. Perhaps he'd given them some expenses to blow. I sheltered my candle up again, right up to their privacy, and looked in for the second time. It flickered on a sparse, easy domesticity. There were the embers of a fire. Here was the parents' bed, made, normal. There were the careful wife's shelves of knick-knacks, a chest and a press. I noticed Tony's gardening boots and galoshes; Mary's stays and stockings drying over a horse. A covered chamber-pot. A washing bowl. Blue blinds drawn over the little casement. Pet's child drawings on expensive birthday paper propped over the hearth.

In the other room, their parlour, there were chairs round a little table, and the sofa that Pet must sleep on was covered and turned back ready, with a pillow at the wall end. My eyes took in baskets, a coal scuttle and irons. Knives were on the table, and unwashed plates with the pieces of a loaf on them; a newspaper; a Bible; candlesticks; a rack of plates; a collection of unglazed jugs and metal ones. A corner held a pile of mending and a wig-stand on the floor with an old wig of my uncle's on it, presumably awaiting some sort of repair. In the air there hung the odour of the folk I lived below: food and must and smoky body smell. I sensed my own separateness from this close, human place.

I picked up one of the knives and went back to the bedroom. Putting the candle carefully down on the press, I lay on the marital bed. My mind ran on the possibility of some alternative demonstration. That I should hoick my skirts up to my waist, spread my legs, and cut my wrists open perhaps, waiting to be found. I poked the point of the knife into the candlelit flesh of my left wrist, teasing up a peak of skin.

Was that a sound? I got up, alert, grabbed the light, then tiptoed back to the entrance of the parlour. No. No one was coming. Near the door I caught my hem and hurt my toe on a heavy cobbler's last which stood on the boards. I noticed the ends of the wig trailing on to the floor. I stole the great drapy thing and took myself back down to my own room, suddenly powerfully aware that these lacy

red appointments were nothing to do with Mary; that they must spring from my uncle's design and from nowhere else. I had the flash that they were designed for me.

One morning I walked with Pet to Etta Bellamy's house up further towards Hyde Park, where I was invited for tea. I had my suspicions that Etta was pregnant. I wondered who else there might be at the house, in case I should not be able to ask her. To my surprise there were lots of women there, a few of whom I knew. Etta was nowhere to be seen. I left Pet on the edge of the gathering with someone else who was a maid, then made my way toward the kitchen. A middle-aged fair woman called Margery came towards me carrying a tray of cakes.

'Where's Etta?' I asked. 'Hello Margery,' getting my addresses in the wrong order.

'You're going in the right direction. Hello Kitty.'

It was a few steps down at the end of the passage into the kitchen. Etta and a number of other people were in the midst of the swelter, managing the supplies for the entertainment.

'What is it?' I whispered, getting near her free side and blotting her forehead with my pocket handkerchief.

'You'll see. Don't ask all these people, either. I've left you in the dark. For a surprise. Nothing ever surprises you. I'm determined to.'

'Are you pregnant?' I asked. It was horribly bad manners. The question just came out. Sometimes I made these social gaffes. I can't even remember if that word was current then. Probably I asked was she breeding, but it seems in memory the natural sort of language I would have blundered with.

'Are you mad?' she replied.

'I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say now.'

'It's alright. Go up and wait in my saloon with all those other gossips.'

We drank expensive China tea from expensive little dishes. Etta played the society hostess, which is what she was. We rustled and fanned. We ate the cakes. I sat daringly on the floor as did one or two other younger girls. More status-conscious older women squeezed themselves on to the various seat levels. Pet and the ladies' maids had to stand at the sides.

'Now,' said Etta. She opened an interior door. Through it, after a brief pause, walked a young girl whose skin was like fine leather, whose black hair hung in huge braids, and whose clothing was stiff, like leather too, in the form of coat and trousers covered with beadwork wildlife. 'I introduce to you – Pawnee,' said Etta. 'She is an Indian Queen from Virginia, or thereabouts.'

'Good day, ladies,' said Pawnee, in impeccable English. 'I hope the time of year finds you all well.'

Etta aimed a whisper at me. 'Are you surprised?'

I was surprised.

'A gap!' laughed Etta.

'A gap indeed,' I said.

At my uncle's house I said to Pawnee and Etta: 'Do you know how when you are grown up the weeks and years seem to pass more rapidly than they did when you were a child?'

We were sitting in the back room looking out of the double doors at the sun on the goose-pecked grass between the honeysuckles in the yard.

'I know what that is;' said Pawnee. "The world is speeding up.'

'Of course it isn't.' Etta contracted her nostrils; it exaggerated the fineness of her noble nose for a moment. 'Why should it?'

'Why shouldn't it?'

'Well I hope it's not, for my children's sake.'

'There. I was right,' I said. 'Rude but right. Sometimes when I know things I blurt them out. I can't help it, it seems. But admit it, my dear.'

'You are preoccupied,' she replied. 'Edmund is very skilful.'

'What's that? What is skilful?' The other two both laughed.

Etta choked out: 'Edmund is, Kit.'

And Pawnee added: 'Let's hope the world doesn't speed up on him, then.'

'My world is speeding up,' I said. 'I'm frightened.'

'Nonsense,' said Etta. My uncle's fine bracket clock chimed the quarter.

"This is a prismatic sextant, Charles, in a new mode. I finished it last night. You'll be impressed with the notion, I believe.'

'Isaac, your ingenuity. It's very fine.'

'Take it. With my esteem. Oh, and make sure you show it to some-one when you call at the Admiralty. What a pity Cherry Russell's no longer quite placed.'

'Isaac. I'm overwhelmed.'

'I'll teach you to use it.'

'You don't subscribe to this Millennialist hysteria, then?'

'It's not according to my calculations,' said my uncle seriously. 'And if we are to adjust our calendar the false prophets will find themselves mightily confused.' Charles laughed.

Round the fire in the back room on an evening when the red curtains were drawn and only a few candles were lit, I said to Pawnee: 'I was once a boy. I was changed by my uncle into a girl.'

'I was once a polecat,' she said. 'Were you ever anything else, Etta?'

Etta came back into the room, from which she'd been half out, putting on her mantle. 'I must get home. Could you tell Tony I'm ready, Kit. Are you ready, Pawnee?'

'It makes it difficult to know who you are,' I said.

'It's not difficult for me,' said Pawnee.

'Why not?' I asked. 'It's very difficult for me.'

'What do you mean, was I ever anything else? Tony!' Etta leaned back out of the door and shouted up at the top flight. Tony!'

'Etta was a bird,' Pawnee said, thoughtfully. Her skirts rustled. She was dressed now in normal clothes; the native rig was just for the surprise. 'A beautiful crow with dark shiny feathers. She flew high above the forest looking for babies and earrings, until there was a great fire, and the forest went away. Then she flew higher and higher. Edmund too was a crow. He found her in the tent of the sun; her wings were bleeding. Dark, dark blood. There were two drops. One was me and one was Kit.'

'What's so difficult for you, Kit?' said Etta. 'Are you talking about Charles Montagu?'

'Everything,' I said. 'And my time is speeding up so much. So much.'

When they had gone I went in to join my uncle. He was occasionally drunk – ish. From the solitude of evenings when no one came.

'What do you think of me, Catherine? Do you think I'm greatly changed?'

'Greatly, Uncle.'

'But not so greatly as you, eh, boy? I have maintained my gender.'

'Have you, Uncle?'

'What d'you mean by that?'

'Mean?' A pause, during which he took another glass of the brown fluid he had in front of him.

'D'you know what it is I do? What I did today, for example.'

'No, Uncle.'

'I found a series of mistakes in the accounts submitted to me by Mr Blackwall, my Superintendent of Works. I took luncheon. I interviewed a Person of Quality who thought he was interviewing me. And I saw to it that a notorious coiner was committed to be hanged. Catherine!'

'Yes, Uncle.'

'Well, do you hear me, or not?'

'I hear you, Uncle.'

'And you say nothing?'

'What would you have me say?'

'You have no comment at all.'

'Am I not conformable? Do I displease you? What should I say?'

'That I have nothing left of my former … frenzy?'

'Your devil has left you, Uncle.'

A pause. 'You speak mighty directly, when you speak at all, Catherine.'

Another pause. I could find no words that would fit him.

'Don't you find me strange, Kit? I leave the universe alone. I could wish I'd always left it alone.'

'Don't you find *me* strange, Uncle? Strange beyond belief?'

I wished he smoked, so that there might be a substance to these intervals.

'What do you think of Charles, Kit?'

'He's a great man who is fabulously rich and runs the country almost. And he makes you feel cheerful with his visits. He is your friend.'

'Do you think he looks handsome, Kit? Why don't you sew or something of an evening? Etta Bellamy embroiders. Didn't my sister teach you to sew?'

'She tried, Uncle.' His face eased into an uncertain smile.

'Ah.' Then again: 'Well?'

'Well what?'

'Charles. Do you think he's handsome?'

I'd lost the grip on my sex. I wondered if, being a little the worse for drink, he was going to make some appalling confession regarding his feelings, and to ask for my opinion – or my blessing.

'Yes. He's a good-looking man, in an unconventional way; although he's smaller than you,' I ventured carefully.

'Well?' he said, looking pointedly at me. I glanced down and smoothed my skirt. 'Are you blushing, Kit?'

'You needn't confide in me, Uncle. Shall I make you some coffee?'

'The Devil, Kit … I beg your pardon. But *you* don't have to play the coy virgin with me.'

'Isn't that what I must play, Uncle?' With the merest trace of an intention to wound.

'Not if you'll have him, Kit. I grant you he can't consider marriage, even though he's free now. Sadly. But he thinks a good deal of you.'

I felt dazed, as though I were a sycamore seed, newly fallen from the tree.

That night in my bedroom I realised the true significance of my uncle's choice of décor. He wasn't just the civil servant he claimed to be. He had a new project which had actively outstripped mine. He was way ahead of me. It *was* a whorehouse – a laboratory whorehouse – and I was the whore.

Mirage

'Catherine!' My uncle's voice called me from my bedroom. I checked my hair and face, leaning over my dressing-table, holding my shell-backed hand-mirrors ludicrously poised behind my ears. My head hurt. My belly hurt. My skin was tender. My breasts were sore. And I'd woken feeling too hot. I tipped some scent water out and rubbed it on my wrists and temples.

'I'm coming, Uncle!'

I'd been working at my project the night before: the last point, the one about the Lupine Disposition. How difficult it was to make myself look at it, and yet how it nagged at me and made itself of all the most important Question. How its meaning vanished out of my mind just when I thought I had the next move and was about to put my ink on to the page. What *had* made me feel and act as that monster? Why that animal in particular: wolf, dog, what have you? An accident of birth? A fault in my incarnation? I see myself wrestling then, as I wrestle now, with the recurring words of the room, the man, the wig and the stick.

'Catherine!'

They were just words, leading to an impossibility, which I'd attempted to displace with those reasonable alternative explanations even as I jabbed my cut quill on to the paper in the frustration of non-recall. The words led to an impossibility, because everything I knew in the world said the opposite so loudly: that God was watching over us, that parents took care of their children, that Adam and Eve had been naughty and were deservedly expiating their sin throughout history, that the Church taught the truth through clergymen on both sides of my family, and that my Uncle Isaac had blessedly transcribed the word of the Creator for the New Age. What matter that as far as I could see, as I've said, Isaac's version, his creation itself, was a deadness in a glass jar against whose hard outside God's knuckle might knock in vain? That seemed to bother nobody else. They all seemed mightily satisfied with it, and could get on with their businesses the better for it.

'Aren't you ready yet!?'

"The merest moment, Uncle. My earrings. Then I'll be down!'

'Do try to hurry, Kit!'

Well, I'd been speechless then, yet I could sing. How could that happen? *Let us with a gladsome mind.* I made myself go back to that moment when it had seemed an inspired idea to give forth those words. In the body; out of the body. Out of the body, of necessity. An intelligent escape – from memory too? Had I done it before, and was that why I hadn't bitten – because I was inured to such acts, schooled? I had been pulled back in by the act of singing while the evidence was still, I swallowed involuntarily, tangible, and the perpetrator a distinctive stranger. I shuddered. Was that why I remembered only this one time? It was dangerous to think this way. Someone might get hurt; die even.

I scurried down the main stairs, scrunching a fistful of brocade in each hand to clear the skirts from where my shoes were treading. I had on my best blue shoes.

Charles was in the saloon. He had his back to the fire. He was quietly, almost casually dressed, as he often was when he called on us. But his wig was an imposing affair, designed perhaps, like his shoes, to increase his height: a great man. My uncle hovered near the door, while Pet stood with a tray for coffee.

'Here's Kit,' said my uncle. 'Sit down, Kit.' I sat in a chair by the wall under the landscape of Greenwich Park. Looking down at my blue shoes poking out as evidence of my legs, I felt painfully self-conscious. The fire made it too hot. Although it was November, there was a freak mugginess to the day.

'How are you, Catherine?' Charles said.

'Well, thank you, my Lord,' I lied, feeling the room sweat.

Charles laughed. It was a private joke. He'd not made much secret of his angling for a thorough ennoblement, but it was as yet only a royal promise.

'You look bright. And in good form,' he said.

My mouth was dry. 'I feel a touch out of sorts. Maybe I'm starting a cold.'

'Pull up a chair yourself, Charles,' said my uncle. Charles placed himself smoothly opposite me. He smiled. Pet put the tray on a little table before the hearth.

'You're relaxed enough, man,' my uncle observed, 'for someone who's lost everything.'

'Lost everything?' I said, startled for a moment out of my discomfort.

'Everything,' Charles smiled again. 'All my political career, at least.' He snapped his fingers and reached out for his coffee. 'For a week or two.'

'Charles has resigned,' explained Isaac.

'But that was months ago,' I said.

'The Exchequer.' Charles pulled at his lace cuff. 'Yesterday I threw in at the Treasury as well. As far as lordships go I'm no longer the First of the T.'

'But the recoinage!'

'Yes, Catherine. Everything leaks away, even despite your uncle's massive endeavours. Or gets melted away, I should say. And government's always a fickle thing. You drudge for years to rescue the country from its recurring propensity to fall to pieces, and what thanks do you get?' He looked at my uncle. 'But your position's assured, Isaac. And I don't care so much about mine. One could do with a rest; or a change. The death of my poor wife.' He looked back to me. 'Time,' he said. Time for one's own concerns.'

I thought of the mistresses he'd had, or was alleged to have had. And of the antique Duchess, married for sheer advancement, who had conveniently died last year. A man who was attractive to women, thirty-eight, with power, rank, money, in excess. Looks? How should I know? Good teeth? Mostly. Height? No. What exactly would be required of me?

'Ingrates!' My uncle exploded quietly and subsided. Then, like a grumbling Etna, he gave out some more blasts: 'Bank of England … currency reform … East India Company … Exchequer Bills … General Mortgage … Could I begin to list … Ingrates … national saviour … d'you hear, Kit?' Charles beamed and then looked mod-. estly down.

'Window tax,' I muttered.

'Kit!' Shushed my uncle. Charles laughed. Uncle Isaac said he'd go out and see what on earth was keeping the girl with the coffee refill. What was she doing with it, he wanted to know. The door clicked meaningfully behind him. I looked at my nails, and then across the space at the dull London day outside the window. A dozen chimneys leached grey into grey. I drank from the coffee dish which had lain so far untouched in my lap. The hot, sweet stuff helped. When would he start?

'Time, Kit,' Charles said slowly.

'Time. Yes.' I looked steadily at him for a moment, and then away.

'I've a word game. You must help. We're in a house of numbers, so I'll make a metaphor to suit. When I give out you must continue.' We had played such games, but now I felt my head swimming. He said: 'In our world of mathematics, time is a line I might draw on a sheet of paper. A pathway. Two. As many as you like. Some lines intersecting, or curving together. Some, thanks to your uncle, whose rate of approach can be notated, even predicted.' The coffee I'd drunk lay queasily on my stomach, but I fought the feeling down because I wanted my wits about me. I wanted to do the right thing -for all concerned, including me; but I couldn't for the life of me think what the right thing might be. Charles went on: 'How many young women could I speak so to?'

'Of analysis?' I said. 'Or of fluxions? Hardly to me. Did your wife appreciate mathematics?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I never asked her. I never seemed to have the time. Which of course may also be conceived of as … a train of dots – moments – each infinitesimally small; adding up to … this. Us. Now. No, now. Gone. Now. How they escape us as we try to catch them.' He gestured

as if to pluck the time as it flew. '*Carpe diem.*' Then he spread his hands to indicate our presence in the room, with the fire and the coffee table and the window. 'Are you for lines or dots, Kit?'

I couldn't think. Usually I'd have come up with something sharp. 'I can't tell,' I said lamely.

'You're not yourself, Kit. What is it? You don't call me Charles and make me feel merry. You don't cut me down to size.'

'Lines, Charles,' I tried, flagging up a smile. 'The fire. Surely it's very hot in here, don't you find?' I really did feel thoroughly uncomfortable in myself, and he'd hardly said anything about the matter in hand, with his elaborate address. He went to open the window for me.

'Come here and get some fresh air. You look poorly, my dear. My dearest. Kit.' He put his arm on my waist. I froze. I didn't know how to act. 'Our lines first crossed when you were ill at Cambridge. You were fourteen, I believe. How old are you now?'

'Nineteen.' Were my teeth chattering?

'I pray you're not ill again now that we curve together. Heavens, these are hard lines. A shared locus. Asymptote. No. The game defeats me and you shall have to help me out. Help, Kit.' His hand played with the gatherings at the top of my skirt, his fingers just pressing in to find the flesh of my hip. I wondered sweatily what figure he'd have used if I'd said dots. But the game had defeated *me* from its outset. I think it was something he'd composed and was hoping to pass off as spontaneous – a word-screen to hide behind. Yes I really did feel as though there was something more wrong than I could put down to emotional stress. Had Pet laced me too tightly? 'I'm sorry' I said. 'Let me sit down.' But before I could do so a wave of nauseous faintness swept over me and I fell – or would have fallen had he not caught me in his arms and held tightly on to me. I recall his forceful hand next to the fabric roll at my buttock. It was at this moment that my uncle returned to the room.

I remember finding myself in a carriage – a specially hired one, I imagine, because I don't think we owned one at that point – sitting opposite Pet. I remember there was singing coming from beyond the window – no doubt some balladeer at a public house. It was a country scene as I looked out, and Pet said to me: 'Don't touch your face.' She intercepted the hand I was involuntarily raising as I stirred from my drowse.

'What?' I said.

'Your face. You mustn't touch it.'

'Why not?'

'Madam. Miss Kit. Your illness.' She looked at Pawnee.

'Ah!' I said.

Once the worst of the temperature and delirium had begun to abate they'd lost no time in shipping me off to better air. My uncle wrote to me at Mr Gyre's farm north of Oxford, also alarmed for my face and suggesting cow's milk for the remains of the fever.

l am

Your very loving Unkle

Is. Newton

I am very comfortable here I thank you, my dearest Uncle Isaac. Charles's man saw to everything and the people, and then returned to London, having ridden beside the coach all the way and made sure that we were provided for most generously in the journey. I am well enough recovered to write, and to be up and about in the house; which is very well kept up and quite large. Mrs Gyre has been most kind, as have all in the household. I want for nothing and am not permitted to exert myself. They make sure I rest after meals on a settee in front of the fire. Indeed the weather has been very cold, but the airs are fresh and no doubt do me good. I shall be writing to my mother and to my sister Margaret to tell them not to worry any more on my score. Pawnee and Pet keep me company and play me at cards; and make sure that I do not give way to scratching! Which I can assure you is a hard thing to do, as the pocks are very provoking until they fall off. We go out for strolls beyond the herb garden when the sun shines. Pet is very taken with the life in the country and the Landscapes that are to be

seen; she is wide-eyed at having so much of an horizon, and thanks you very much for the gift of the coat. She wishes me to send her love and duty to Tony and Mary and that she is quite well, and so I would beg you to pass this on. Please also pass my love and best wishes to Etta; I believe her vomitings are usual and will pass. I hope you are recovered from your cold in the head and that the temporary setbacks you mentioned are now resolved. It would please me to know when you would have me home.

Your obedient Niece and Humble Servant

C. Barton

The moon had shone into my bedroom where a last drench of fever was flushing through me. I'd opened the window to get the freeze of the air on to my skin, and then I'd seen my moonlit self in the mirror. I'd sat with my shift off my shoulders poking, scratching and squeezing at the pock scabs on my face. I don't know whether I'd wanted to rid myself of them or to scar myself, my dangerous beauty, for life.

But now it was Spring. I was recovered. My uncle had insisted that I stay out of the city until I could be reckoned safe. It was strange to have been ill and to have been, in a sense, mothered by the people around me. Women's arms embraced me as if I belonged. The old house was relaxed and safe in a way that I'd never known before. The place had no hooks, no sense of dark memories. The look of the timbers didn't make me feel unaccountably tense or churned up in the stomach. They were just the timbers, and it was just a country home; for which the mistress cut flowers as soon as there were any to be had, and the com figures and drying herbs hung up comfortingly in the big kitchen, where unless there were visitors we mostly took our meals informally, all together. I say 'all' since there was an assortment of children and a couple of aunts of indeterminate ages, together with an old servant and a sort of housekeeper woman. Of course, I reasoned to myself at other times, it could well be that Charles was paying them to be good to me, as perhaps he was, since someone must have arranged all this. Nevertheless, overpaid or not, I couldn't help sensing a genuineness in their treatment of me, that both pleased and threatened – I had no practice in receiving it.

My separate bedroom looked out over the wooded April scene I came to love; there, lambs and kids had begun appearing in the paddock. Yes, I still had the bad dreams, the twisted nights and violent preoccupations, but they receded into what you might call proportion; they didn't matter so much.

Pawnee said: 'Mrs Gyre has a gardener who has a niece.'

I said: 'Yes, Pawnee.'

'She is a niece you should see.'

'Why?'

'You'll see when you see her. Come on.'

I followed her down into the old hall, and then out via the kitchen halfdoors. A week of warm weather had dried the mud and muck of the yard. We went beyond the new brick and timber sheds where the carts and wagons were now kept.

'There;' she said. 'Good morning, Tempest. That is what he's called. I told you I'd bring Mistress Catherine Barton. He thinks I'm a gypsy, Kit, pretending to be resident and probably up to no good.'

'I beg yours, Ma'am,' said the gardener, seeing that I was English-looking, and dressed as well as Pawnee.

'I'd suspect him of blushing if his cheeks weren't more tanned than mine anyway,' said Pawnee. He grinned and started to spit. Then thought better of it. This wide-jawed grin held my attention. He had no overbite – his teeth met edge to edge all round. The girl with him looked up from the weeding where she was kneeling. I turned away from the curious teeth and found myself staring at her instead – with a peculiar sense of recognition. Where …?

'Well?' Pawnee said with a certain air of triumph. The face was the face I saw every morning in my mirror. She was my double.

'Heavens!' I said. And like a mirror image her eyes widened at the same time as mine – I guess as the impulse of recognition affected her too. She was, at a hazard, about seventeen. She straightened

up and then reached out at a head of the rose-bush, as if to smudge away a parcel of aphids. 'Can you tell me your name?'

'Lucy'lizabeth, Miss.'

'I have a confession, Kit.'

'A confession?'

'Now that you're better I can tell you.' Pawnee sat with me on my bed, holding my arm through hers, while morning sunshine flooded in from the outside world. With my free arm I put down the crust which was all that remained of my bread. 'It's this.' She held out a little twist of paper. 'This was sent by your uncle.' She released my arm.

I unscrewed the twist. It contained a powder, blue-purplish in colour, with a few grains or crystals of white. I smelt it as if to gather something of its significance. 'Am I supposed to eat it?' She passed me a letter.

Madam Virginian

I believe I am at the end of my wits with distraction concerning my niece's illness. I am relapsed into a state of mind I thought never to see again. I despair for her and would come to the country myself to doctor her condition did I not suspect my powers are subject to an alteration at present. I write to you alone with the paper herewith and must trust you, though I know little enough of you indeed, to be my niece's true friend in this, and to keep utmost confidence regarding this letter and the powder. All the world now knows the vile accusations that have been levelled against me of late, regarding my niece, my friend, and – I hardly know how I shall write this – her position in my household. I cannot get out of the house. There is a throng of spies and intelligencers in the street. They conceal themselves but I have smoked them. The powder is the only thing that might save her, and in saving her, save also her beauty. Give him the half as a decoction and have the remnant made up with a kindly oil for his face. Leave on over the pocks. It must not be washed off. Let it fall off rather or grow away. Do as I say. It is the Stone. It is some of the fruit of the damned miracle, which I recovered at the time. Tell no one, as He may have spies that have followed her even to Woodstock to see her nakedness while he is engaged in it. As to the charges they are false. I never engaged myself *with the* women. *These are damned lies put about by a spaniel of Hooke's. I fear I am not well, Madam, yet she must have the powder. She must not die now. Burn this.* They *must not know.*

Is. Newton

I re-read the letter in amazement. I'd never had the chance to see into his illness before.

'I didn't apply the remedy' Pawnee said. 'You've mended miraculously enough. Your skin is unblemished.' As she smoothed my hair back from my forehead she pressed on the little painful bump so that I felt the sharpness of it.

'Lucy Elizabeth. You see I'm convalescing, but I'm not infectious, so you won't be in danger of the smallpox yourself. We can talk while you put these linens away for me.'

'Yes, Miss.'

'You've made me think, Lizzy. I need you to tell me things. I need you to tell me what your life holds for you.'

'Miss?'

'What's going to happen to you?'

'I don't know, Miss. I don't think about it.'

'D'you think you'll get married?'

'Bound to, Miss.'

'And have children?'

'Bound to, Miss.'

'Is that what you want?'

'Yes, Miss.'

'With all the attendant dangers?'

'You mean I could be dead before I'm twenty, Miss.'

'If you put it like that, Lizzy.'

'If they couldn't get the baby to come out.'

'Or after indeed. Some women … What choice do we have, Lizzy? If we love the man who marries us.'

'Or gets us up the stick. Pardon me, Madam.'

'It's nothing. Have you been in love?'

'I may've been.'

'Have you felt loved? Are you myself who is unspoiled? What is it like to be loved?'

'I'm sorry, Miss. I don't conceive you. What d'you want me to say?'

'I don't know these things, you see. I believe I'm a strange sort of woman. I live with a guardian. How should I know things?'

'Are your folks dead? Your Mammy?'

'Yes. They are. Quite. So in asking you I feel I'm asking in private: a magic mirror. Here I'm lighthearted. Can you believe that? It is a special place. If you saw me in London you'd not know me. There I'm usually troubled, but here I find myself closer to … I hardly dare say it because if it were said it might be taken away directly. Well-being. Perhaps it'll only last one more day. One more day flicking away still faster. I see these flowers you've brought in, so clearly. So bright; how couldn't I have seen such beauty before? I daren't trust this. I have to go back. Soon. I wish I might stay here, Lizzy. I wish … I need to hear what women … I am a woman now, and shall have to go back to my … my fate. Does your mother love you?'

'Yes.'

'Your father?'

'He left.'

'How does it feel to you to be shown your own likeness? We are twins, Lizzy, apart from our difference of precise age. What's your notion? As if from your side of the glass.'

A pause. 'You scare me, Miss, I ask your pardon. Can I go now?'

'Are you a virgin?'

'Sort of.'

'Is there some young man already?'

'Handy. Handy enough.'

'How do you … manage that?'

'We lie together downstairs at my mother's till he has a house. We don't do it all up. Just … you know.'

'Do you love him?'

'He's only a country boy, Miss. He don't have London manners. You wouldn't think of him.'

'But you. Do you love him? This love is why we venture our bodies.'

'I reckon I must do.'

'I … No. I … A man will have me.'

'What's his name, Miss?'

'His name? Charles.'

'How old's he?'

'Forty. Nearly. A Restoration baby, Lizzy. And now a London man. A powerful, rich, political man, and I don't know the first thing, Lizzy. I don't know what I should say if I can't … if I can't … to stop him if I don't … Help me, Lizzy. But you can't. You can't, can you?'

To Mrs Catherine Barton:

Kit, dearest, I am on fire for news of you. They tell me you are alive. I prayed that you should be spared. Confirm by your own hand that my prayers have been answered, and you will lift the devastating anxiety that possesses me on your account. Forgive the familiarity of my address, but is

there not already an understanding between us? You must have discerned at our interview so tragically terminated some measure of the depth of my feelings for you; I cannot believe that we two are not in some sense by this time beyond the artificiality of opening politenesses. Kit, we know each other and what we are about; write as soon as you can that all is *in truth well with you. I would be, dearest*,

your ardent and ultimate servant, Charles Montagu

The Suitor

Pet went back before. Pawnee and I travelled after, with an armed guard, courtesy of an admirer.

'You're well, Kit. You're beautiful, by the grace of God. You're rich in most people's terms. Why do you frown? We're nearly at Colnbrook. If there was going to be an attack it would have come by now. There's no cover here for them to hide in.'

'I'm not afraid of robbers and ravishers. I told you that. I'd use the gun – on myself, if necessary.'

'Kit!'

'Or on us both. I'd find a way.'

She didn't speak for a minute.

'Is it Charles, then?'

'I can't bear it, Pawnee. I'm their prisoner. I know it.'

'How's this? Your uncle loves you I think. They both care for you. You just torment yourself with your suspicions of them. I see no reason, except they're men, and all these European men are beasts in their own normal way. This I know for myself. But it isn't as *you* think.'

"These aren't *just* men. Now you're like the voice inside me that tells me constantly I'm wrong or bad or ungrateful. Perhaps I am. Perhaps you're right.' I paused and looked out of the coach window, where the meadows stretched flat to the heath. We rumbled on the rutted Bath Road.

'What'll he expect of me? He'll expect a real woman.'

'You are a real woman, Kit.'

'He'll want a mistress. I shall want, ha! to fall in love. But I can't, Pawnee. Not with him. Not with anyone, perhaps. I can't. I'm a wreck. I'm maimed. I'm maimed in my deep self. I cannot let him. So then what'll he think? I told you I was once a boy. I haven't got the right feelings. I haven't got the right responses. When he gets close to me, no matter how compliant or helpful – or female – I shall want to try to be … and Pawnee in part I do want to be normal now. I do perhaps want to be like everyone else. To be quiet and happy as we've been.' A surge of feeling took me by surprise. I hit the coach-work with my fist so that my knuckles bruised. Then I denied my pain. 'I'm so … distorted.' Then I tried to shudder myself into great, heartbreaking sobs. But only pitiful trickles squeezed themselves out of my eyes. I wished I could drown the Thames, but I was locked and blocked. 'If he gets near me I'll have to … stab his neck. Cut him somehow. Pawnee, what's wrong with me? I'm possessed, aren't I? I'm a monster the Devil made in the moon. That's what my mother used to say'

She leant across and put her hands on my hands on my thighs.

'Why does it matter? Can't you refuse him and go on as you are now? As you and I do. An honourable spinsterhood. Yes, people do, so why not you and I? Plain girls of good family do, and so do good girls with no money. For years. They live and live. They sew. And you; you're a wise scholar woman. You've got your project, you said. What do you want with a man? Yes they are rascals. They spread pox and pregnancy. They blame us. They beat us. And then they leave.'

Charles's man saw me to the Jermyn Street front door where my uncle embraced me. I inspected him for signs of the distraction he'd shown in his letter to Pawnee. His smile was tight, as if he was making the effort to be of good cheer. Mary and Tony embraced me cautiously. And so I settled back into the red; I re-established myself in the richness and lace of my bedroom, where they had hung the portrait of Charles beside the chimney-breast. There were fresh flowers in two jugs, and a new outfit of clothes laid on the bed. There was a silver save-all candlestick. New sconces had been fitted on the chimney-breast above the fireplace, on either side of a pretty little convex mirror in the Flemish style. My skull had been left where it should be, I was pleased to see, and a shelf had been put up to receive some decorative China plates, on which were four exquisitely perfumed wash-balls. An

opened parasol in Japanese lacquer. A little jewellery box. A porcelain container beginning to sprout what looked like very expensive foreign bulbs. I took it all in. I re-entered my determined universe.

Charles came to call. He was shown up to my bedroom by Mary as if it were an established thing. Nobody seemed to bat an eyelid, least of all me. I read these relationships of polite force.

'Kit. My jewel. You're safe.'

'Charles.' He seized my hands and pressed them to his lips. I didn't ask myself what was this assumed intimacy, nor on what it was based, nor what I had done to arouse it.

'Dearest Kit. You're as beautiful as ever.'

I looked down. He sat; as one who felt no stranger to the room. I sat too, in the chair in front of my dressing-table. I was in technical deshabillé – in that the finishing touches weren't on yet.

'They tell me so.'

'I'm so glad to see you. So happy.'

'And I to see you, Sir.'

'I believe you are. Kit, I believe you feel for me. Am I right?'

'Charles. As much as I'm able to feel anything, I feel for you.'

'And you are flesh and blood. Therefore I take heart. You don't lie to me. Although you torment me, you are honest and honourable.'

'Torment you? How?' I was astonished.

'You must know.'

'Know what? What have I done to you?'

'You've robbed me of my heart. You've had it out of me with the oyster knife of your eyes. Now I bleed Venus's salty fluid.'

'That's disgusting.'

'You haven't stolen my humour. But your eyebeams impale me, seriously; I can't sleep for thinking of you. I can't eat. It's all the fault of your exquisite form. I blame you, Kit; your skin, your hair, your cheeks, your absolute gestures, the low sweetness of your voice. I'm on the rack of your feminine perfection.'

I stood up. 'Come. This is a game. Where does it lead?' I was twenty, politely losing patience. When I was a boy, I remembered for a flash, I used to think it was my fault. Turning my back, I looked out, over the yard and to the park beyond.

'You're very direct. You're unlike other women. At least I've never met one like you. You say these outright things and I'm nonplussed. It puts me beside myself.' He came over to stand behind me.

'I'm different, I know it. I can't help it.'

'No. I don't wish you any other way. It's part of your beauty.'

'My beauty. Yes.'

'You say them with that bewitching half-smile.'

'And …?'

'And I'm overthrown.'

'Do you like that? Do you like to be overthrown? Be honest with me, Charles, if you want to secure my respect.'

'What do the poets call it? Sweet torment. Delicious agony.'

Feeling him touch my shoulder, I slipped sideways to escape, catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I passed it.

'Did you love your wife?'

'I married for career reasons.'

'Did you come to love her?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Because for someone who could bid to understand the economy of a whole country, and wished patriotically to serve – I put the best construction on what I know of your past – even for a man who

hoped to make a dazzling success in politics and wanted resources, marriage with a rich old woman is remarkably cynical. It's stage comedy stuff, Charles, I believe. Was she … beautiful?'

'You can't interrogate me like this, Kit. You realise who I am?'

'Very well. I shan't interrogate you like this. What do you want of me now?' I took up the sash I planned to wear. 'You have a reputation about the town, I'm told.'

'Who tells you this? What reputation do you mean?'

'That you have pretty young society women for breakfast, and pretty young whores for supper.'

'You believe this?'

'Let's merely assume there have been other women in your life. What do you do to them?'

'What do I do? … What do you mean what do I do?' He got up and stalked to the corner, where he sat under his portrait.

'Charles. I want to know what's expected of me. Here you are in my bedroom. Don't you grasp my … my situation? My reasonable uncertainty?' I felt myself smile suddenly. 'Reasonable, Charles.'

'For God's sake, Kit, I love you. I'm the uncertain one. Do you understand? I have fallen in love with you.'

'But what does that mean for me? What am I expected to do? Exactly.'

'Don't you have … some feeling for me? Kit, I'm supposed to be a busy man. A public man. And I'm … crucified. Forgive the reference.' He put his head in his hands to hold the frustration.

I heard myself sigh as I put down my sash, although my teeth were now clenched tight. I wished I could force myself out of my body; out of the room. Instead I started untying the bows at the front of my bodice. After a while he looked up.

'Good God. What are you doing?'

'Undressing.'

'Stop. Stop it at once. Do yourself up. By God's blood you'll see me under. Are you a whore? How many lovers have *you* had, Madam? And I thought I was assured of your absolute chastity.'

'You were what? How were you assured?'

Charles looked lost. He said: 'I've known you since … when was it? … Ninety-three?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.