

***Unclear Definitions: Investigating Dictionaries' Fictitious Entries
through Creative and Critical Writing***

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Ph.D. Creative Writing

Official Declaration of Authorship

I, the undersigned, declare this Ph.D. and the work presented in it to be entirely my own. Where I have consulted or drawn upon the work of others, I have always endeavoured to state this clearly in the text.

Signed:

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Abstract

This practice-based Ph.D. investigates false entries within dictionaries and encyclopædias and provides an exegesis of such entries as literary texts.

An initial critical thesis defines *mountweazel*, *ghost* and *evanescent* lexicographical entries, and considers the extent to which these function as ‘creative writing’. Its chapters are structured around three fictitious entries: the noun *esquivalience*¹, biographical matter pertaining to *Lillian Virginia Mountweazel*², and the elusive allusive *jungftak*³. It also analyses whether false entries — as ‘meaningless’ lexemes or lemmas — can be read as part of a canon of nonsense literature. Assessing the perceived infallibility of dictionaries and encyclopædic resources, the thesis examines the textual and social ramifications of a lexicographer who has violated or subverted a dictionary’s authority by including untrue or deliberate incorrect entries.

Watchword’s narrative is split between two main characters: in the 19th century, a disaffected lexicographer inserts false entries into a dictionary in an attempt to assert some sense of agency, while in the present day a worker employed by the same publishing house is tasked to uncover these entries before the dictionary is digitised. The trans-temporal cat-and-mouse relationship established between these characters and the manner in which they are in thrall to their creative impulses forms the basis of the novel.

Together, the Ph.D. posits the role of a scurrilous lexicographer as protector and violator of a dictionary’s authority and explores the ways lexicographical probity and impropriety can be figured as creative expression and commentary.

¹ *New Oxford American Dictionary*, eds. Elizabeth J. Jewell and Frank Abate (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

² *New Columbia Encyclopedia*, ed. William H. Harris and Judith S. Levey, 4th edn. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).

³ *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language* ed. Joseph Devlin, Elsie Wright, Josephine McCarter, rev. ed. (New York: World Publishing, 1943).

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Introduction

Literature and the public imagination often privileges dictionaries and encyclopædias as ‘represent[ing] an illusion of totality, of an immobile order of things, of harmony’⁴. This is often done in such a way that implies there is an oppressive power inherent to a dictionary. In his novel *Gambit*, for example, author Rex Stout introduces the fictional detective Nero Wolfe to the reader as looming by a fire and ripping sheets of paper from a dictionary, condemning its pages to a sitting-room fire. The dictionary in question is specified to be a buckram-bound ‘new edition, the third edition, of *Webster’s New International Dictionary, Unabridged*, published by the G. & C. Merriam Company of Springfield, Massachusetts’.⁵ Wolfe justifies his biblioclasm to other characters by explaining that this new *Webster’s* edition ‘threatens the integrity of the English language’, highlighting the treatment of *imply* and *infer* within its definitions. Similarly in the first few pages of *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray’s character Becky Sharp ejects a copy of Johnson’s dictionary from the window of her carriage and in doing so is shown to physically enact a rejection of its didacticism.⁶ Elsewhere in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, the character Henry Tilney appeals to dictionaries so that he might support his prescriptive attitude towards the meaning of words; fittingly, Austen has Tilney provoked to comment by what he deems to be the other characters’ misuse of the lexeme *nice*. In response, characters Catherine and Eleanor remark that they fear becoming ‘overpowered with Johnson’.⁷ Even in Tove Jansson’s *Moominland*, dictionaries are figured as authoritative powers that verge on the oppressive: ‘In a cloud of sand the Ant-lion tumbled out, and, quick as lightning, the Snork popped a Dictionary of Outlandish Words on top.’⁸

⁴ Alain Rey, *Littre: L’humaniste Et Les Mots* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), quoted in Johnathon Green’s *Chasing the Sun: Dictionary Makers and the Dictionaries they Made* (London: Pimlico, 1997), p.22.

⁵ Rex Stout, *Gambit* (New York: Viking, 1962; repr. New York: Bantam, 1964), location 45 in Kindle edition.

⁶ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1848), p.7.

⁷ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion* (London: John Murray, 1818), p.253.

⁸ Tove Jansson, *Finn Family Moomintroll* trans. Elizabeth Portch (London: Penguin Books, 1950; repr. 2001), p.29.

The status that the dictionary has assumed within public discourse as not only authoritative but also an authoritarian, oppressive force means that the refiguring, disfiguring and disordering of a dictionary's format and matter has a particular anarchic appeal, and is performed with often ludic results. Many works of creative writing use dictionaries as a location for *objets trouvés* for this reason, whereby parts of a dictionary are isolated from their context to create new works. Examples range from the illustrations that were excised from 19th-century encyclopædias for the creation of Max Ernst's collages in his anti-novel *Une Semaine de Bonté*⁹ to Oli Hazzard's hymn to lethologica 'The Inability to Recall the Precise Word for Something'. The latter features a page-long list of definitions for obscure words; in Hazzard's poem, the words' lemmas have been removed and the definitions rearranged out of alphabetical order to create disturbing new narrative possibilities: 'the act of opening a bottle with a sabre / the habit of dropping in at mealtimes / the act of killing every twentieth person'.¹⁰ The constraints of the lexicographic and encyclopædic form can be artistically generative in this way, with the assumed order and presumed unimpeachability of a dictionary making it a tempting site for transformation. The rigidity of a dictionary's alphabetical arrangement has even been harnessed as a tool for creativity; one recalls the OuLiPo transformational technique of S+7, whereby every noun in a given text is replaced with the noun that is found seven places beneath its position in the dictionary, with results varying widely depending on the edition of the dictionary that is used.¹¹

This thesis seeks to investigate the incidence and nature of fictitious entries that occur within such works of reference, and attempts to ascertain whether these entries operate as metafictional commentaries upon the authority of the dictionaries

⁹ Max Ernst, *Une Semaine De Bonté: A Surrealistic Novel in Collage* (Paris: Jeanne Bucher, 1934).

¹⁰ Oli Hazzard, 'The Inability to Recall the Precise Word for Something', *The Salt Book of Younger Poets*, ed. Roddy Lumsden and Eloise Stonborough (Cambridge: Salt, 2011), p.81.

¹¹ Jean Lescure: 'La Méthode S+7', *La Littérature Potentielle: Créations, Re-crétions, Récréations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p.143. The title of this thesis might be transformed, for example, into 'Unclear Deflagrabilities: Investigating *Dictyonalia*'s Fictitious Enunciation through Creative and Critical Wrong-doing' using the *OED* online.

and encyclopædias in which they reside. The thesis will attempt to assert a lineage and taxonomy of ‘false’ entries in such texts and to ascertain the extent to which such entries may be claimed to be works of fiction, creative non-fiction or creative writing. In examining the text of dictionaries and encyclopædias, harrying their corpuses through close-reading and an analysis of the conditions under which a fictitious entry within such texts might have arisen, this thesis will also investigate the role and task of the lexicographer and the manner by which those who create dictionaries’ entries must straddle that ‘clash between the pragmatists and ideologues, between those who set down as far as possible what really was happening and those who wished only to perpetuate some utopian fantasy’ of being able to do so.¹²

The accompanying materials for a novel will also explore the responsibilities and strictures that rest upon a lexicographer, by presenting a central character whose creative ambitions are at odds with his role within a dictionary’s creation. The character Winceworth finds that he is able to exercise his creative ambitions through the insertion of false entries into the text of the dictionary, and the deliberate, surreptitious inclusion of fictitious words and definitions within the dictionary’s columns. Given Winceworth’s responsibility as a compiler of factual information as he wilfully concocts these fictions he assumes a role that is not quite parodyist, plagiarist nor forger but one who encapsulates aspects of all three. My novel *Watchwords* seeks to portray and examine the extent to which lexicographers are presumed in the public consciousness to bear a primary responsibility to their readers to tell the truth in all instances, and the degrees to which that power has been and might be exploited through deliberately incorrect dictionary entries’ inclusion. Set in the final stages of the 19th century, the novel’s protagonist is employed by a fictional publishing house in order to work upon a new encyclopædic dictionary. The character Winceworth has come to resent what he perceives as the absurdity of trying to confine language and the world’s knowledge into a single text; although he is in awe of the dictionary’s aims and the energy that has gone into its compilation, he is uneasy about his role in creating such a prescriptive power. In a personal act of subversion, therefore, he starts to inject the fantastical into the prosaic and incorporates his own entirely fictive entries into the body of the dictionary. As such, the novel poses a challenge to the ‘harmless drudgery’ of a lexicographer’s efforts as figured in Dr Johnson’s famous, facetious formulation.

¹² Green, p.368.

From Onomacritus's counterfeit insertions into the writings of Musaeus¹³ to William Boyd's 'biography' of Nat Tate¹⁴, literary fraud has a long and compelling history. Many hoaxes have in turn proved to be fertile sites for fictionalisation: for example, Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton*¹⁵ and Peter Carey's *My Life As A Fake*¹⁶ explore and present the creativity involved in hoaxes' inception, formation and eventual exposure in very different but compelling ways. The execution of a hoax is an engaging subject for fiction because it has the allure of scandal, the playfulness of a prank with the added thriller-appeal as the perpetrator attempts to forestall or evade revelation. Together, the critical thesis and the novel seek to examine the specific literary hoax that has been performed when deliberately-inserted fictitious entries are discovered in dictionaries.

The trust and reliance that exists between a reader and a dictionary, and the presumption that such a text's entries will be correct and relevant, is investigated in this practice-based research project. By identifying and defining 'fictitious' entries within both dictionaries and encyclopædias, as well as parsing such textual artefacts and investigating dictionaries as necessarily contingent upon their cultural milieux, this practice-based Ph.D. attempts to posit the 'fictitious dictionary entry' as a metafictional form, and to investigate such entries as fictional creations.

¹³ 'Onomacritus': John Lemprière, *Bibliotheca Classica; or, a Classical Dictionary* (Reading: T. Cadell, 1788).

¹⁴ William Boyd, *Nat Tate: An American Artist 1928–1960* (New York / Zurich: Edition Stemmler, 1998).

¹⁵ Peter Ackroyd, *Chatterton* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987).

¹⁶ Peter Carey, *My Life as a Fake* (London: Vintage, 2005).

Chapter 1

Exploding Dictionaries: Fictitiousness and the Dictionary

Although factually incorrect entries do appear in dictionaries, while they do undermine any overall sense of objective authority these entries will not necessarily be considered ‘fiction’. It is crucial here to consider whether there was any intention to disseminate untruths. The cause for non-facts appearing in dictionaries can be split most simply between those mistakes that occur as a result of extra-lexical concerns, and those that occur through editorial misunderstandings. Examples that illustrate the former include the events that led to all the slips beginning with *Pa-* that were being compiled for the *OED* accidentally being used for kindling, an error blamed on an inattentive housemaid.¹⁷ Moreover, only after the first edition of the *OED* appeared in print was it discovered that a due to misfiling a fugitive *bondmaid* entry had been completely left out from the proofs.¹⁸ This kind of unfortunate occurrence is not limited to dictionaries and encyclopædias, of course; in an interview with Sue McGregor, the creator of the popular *London A-Z Street Atlas* described how she momentarily lost possession of 23,000 index cards out of a window thanks to a sudden gust of wind and then on to the top of a bus which then drove off, which explains the loss of the entry for ‘Trafalgar Square’ from the first edition.¹⁹ Unfortunate coincidences and misjudgements of this kind can cause an *incomplete* dictionary, but certainly not a deliberately violated one: there is no record of volition in these instances that contributed to an ‘incorrect’ dictionary designed to mislead the user.

The scholar Johnathan Green has highlighted the ways in which claims of *priestliness* pertaining to lexicographers have been made throughout the history of dictionary-makers, setting them in the role of imparting ‘truth’ through their work;

¹⁷ Simon Winchester, *The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.102.

¹⁸ Anne Curzan, ‘The Compass of the Dictionary’, *Lexicography and the OED: Pioneers in the Untrodden Forest* ed. Lynda Mugglestone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.100.

¹⁹ Phyllis Pearsall interviewed by Sue MacGregor, *Woman’s Hour*, BBC Radio 4, 7th Nov. 1984, broadcast at 14.00 ><http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/bo3gvmhs>< [accessed: 7th September 2015].

John Algeo suggests that the Bible and certain dictionaries command a similar reverence and an implied infallibility in a household, coining the word *lexicographidolatory* for the concept,²⁰ while Follett outlines that a dictionary ‘by virtue of its inclusions and exclusions, its mere existence, is a whole universe of judgements received by millions as the Word from on high’.²¹

Within this expressly ecclesiastic metaphor, it is appropriate to highlight the ways in which a dictionary can be held up to be inaccurate or incomplete in terms of sheer human fallibility rather than any creative impulse. These include plain errors of definition: Johnson’s inclusion of *pastern* as ‘the knee of a horse’ is such an example, where confusion seems to have been made between the *carpus* or *tarsus*, which would more accurately suit Johnson’s definition, and the portion of leg between the fetlock and hoof. The reason given for this entry appearing in this way was ‘ignorance, Madam, pure ignorance’.²² Such blunders are contributing factors to the unwitting summoning of so-called *ghost words* in a Dictionary, ‘words which have no real existence [...] being mere coinages due to the blunders of printers or scribes, or to the perfervid imaginations of ignorant or blundering editors’.²³ Such fruits of ‘perfervid imagination’ are well-represented by the *ghost word* *dord* that appeared in five consecutive editions of *Webster’s New International Dictionary*.²⁴ In 1931, *Webster’s* chemistry editor submitted a slip that read ‘*D* or *d*, cont./density’, intending to

²⁰ John Algeo, ‘Dictionaries as seen by the Educated Public in Great Britain and the USA’, *An International Encyclopedia of Lexicography*, Vol. 1 (1989), p.29. Quoted by Johnathan Green, *Chasing the Sun: Dictionary-Makers and the Dictionaries they Made* (London: Pimlico, 1997), p.29.

²¹ Wilson Follett, ‘Sabotage in Springfield’, *The Atlantic Magazine* (1962), p.77. Quoted by Green, p.369.

²² James Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson: including Boswell’s Journal of a tour of the Hebrides, and Johnson’s diary of a journey into North Wales*, Vol. 1 (London: Bigelow, Brown & Co., 1799), p.340.

²³ *Webster’s New International Dictionary*, eds. William Allan Neilson and Thomas A. Knott, 2nd edn. (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam, 1934).

²⁴ W. W. Skeat, *The Transactions of the Philological Society 1885-7* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1885-7) Vol. II, p.351. Quoted in Lynda Mugglestone, *Lost for Words: The Hidden History of the Oxford English Dictionary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p.52.

indicate that whether in upper or lower case the letter *D* could stand as an abbreviation for the value of a density in scientific equations. At that time *Webster's* was rearranging the manner in which abbreviations were indexed: originally they were included alongside all other alphabetically-arranged lemmas, but by 1931 abbreviations were re-deposited to an accompanying appendix. Miscommunication between different editorial bodies within the publishing process meant that *Webster's* typesetters received the editor's slip and assumed that *Dord* was a headword, defined as 'density', rather than an illustration of upper of lowercase; it was only when *dord's* lack of etymology was noted in 1939 that the entry was questioned and eventually expunged. Philip Babcock Gove, later editor-in-chief of the same *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* that was so hated by fictional detective Nero Wolfe, wrote a letter to the journal *American Speech* and explained the mistake.²⁵ In his article 'The Sources of Ghost Words in English', Allen Walker Read usefully discriminates between *ghost* words such as *dord* and *evanescent* words, the latter of which covers such *hapax legomena* as nonce words.²⁶ Unlike examples of the latter which are purposely created (with 'nonce' in this sense a term itself coined in 1884 by the first editor of the *OED*, James Murray), *ghost* words permeate Dictionaries and perpetuate through poor or unrigorous editing rather than any intent to create a fiction.

There is a good case for regarding the history of lexicography as the history of 'an infinite palimpsest'²⁷; since errors can be carried in perpetuity in this way, there therefore seems to be a good cause for such fictional insertions being concocted copyright traps; as Laudau recalls, 'the history of English lexicography usually consists of a recital of successive and often successful acts of piracy'.²⁸ Many lexicographers and encyclopædists draw upon predecessors in a sleight of standing-on-the-shoulders-of-giants (unacknowledged or scandalised as those giants may be by the presumption to do so). In his *Handy-Book of Literary Curiosities*, Walsh accuses lexicographer Jodrell of being the source of the *ghost* word *phantomnation* and claims

²⁵ P.B. Gove, 'The History of *Dord*', *American Speech*, Vol. 29 No. 2 (1954), pp. 136-138.

²⁶ Allen Walker Read, 'The Sources of Ghost Words in English', *Word: Journal of the Linguistic Circle of New York*, Vol. 29 (1978), p.188-205, (p.98).

²⁷ Johnathon Green, *Chasing the Sun: Dictionary-Makers and the Dictionaries they Made* (London: Pimlico, 1997), p.27.

²⁸ Sidney Landau, *Dictionaries: The Art and Craft of Lexicography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.43.

that it is because of Jodrell's lack of editorial integrity that this word slipped into other dictionaries: 'printers do not follow copy, sheep do not follow their leader, more closely than one lexicographer used to follow another'.²⁹ Jodrell's book is full of poorly-copied words and his *Philology on the English Language* also contains *courtparasite*, *islandempress*, and *promontoryshoulder*. By transcribing the lines 'These solemn vows and holy offerings paid / To all the phantom-nations of the dead'³⁰ from Pope's translation of the *Odyssey* in this slipshod manner, the phrase 'phantom nations' became merged together to form 'phantomnations'; using Pope as the illustrative quotation, Jodrell goes on to define phantomnations as 'a multitude of spectres'.³¹ *Phantomnation* appeared, having shed its definition, in many other dictionaries including that of Noah Webster's direct rival Joseph Emerson Worcester, defined as 'illusion'. In 1864, the revenant word appears in *Webster's A Dictionary of the English Language* with the rather more cautious definition '*Phantomnation*, n. Appearance as of a phantom; illusion. Obs. and rare' still credited to Pope.³² Sixty years later, however, and the haunting seems to be over; the second edition of *Webster's New International* afforded the word space but with this clarification: 'a ghost word combining the words *phantom* and *nation* — erroneously defined as a formation with the suffix *-ation*'.³³

There exist numerous entries in dictionaries that have been anonymous 'unclaimed' fictions, hoaxes enacted within the text of a dictionary that are designed to be indistinguishable from fact. Several fictional personages have been apprehended among the pages of *Appletons' Cyclopædia of American Biography*,³⁴ the reliability of

²⁹ William S. Walsh, *Handy-book of Literary Curiosities* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1909), p.887.

³⁰ Homer, *Odyssey* trans. Alexander Pope (London: Henry Lintont, 1752): 10, 626.

³¹ 'phantomnation': Richard Paul Jodrell, *Philology on the English Language* (London: Cox & Baylis, 1820).

³² 'phantomnation': *Webster's A Dictionary of the English Language* (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam, 1864).

³³ 'phantomnation': *Webster's New International Dictionary*, eds. William Allan Neilson and Thomas A. Knott, 2nd edn. (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam, 1934).

³⁴ *Appletons' Cyclopædia of American Biography*, eds. James Wilson and John Grant Fiske (New York: D. Appleton, 1888).

which has been scotched by claims of inauthenticity for over two hundred entries. The *Cyclopædia*'s recto title page features a quotation from Plato's *Dialogues* ('As it is the commendation of a good huntsman to find game in a wide wood, so it is no imputation if he hath not caught all'), which reads rather tellingly in the context of discovering fictitious entries within the *Cyclopædia*. Dr John Hendley Barnhart questioned the veracity of many of its articles in his report for the *Journal of the New York Botanical Garden*, drawing attention to an initial fourteen botanists in the *Cyclopædia* that either offered a questionable bibliographical paper-trail as evidence of their existence or no supporting evidence at all.³⁵ More of these 'phantom Jesuits' were discovered, and discussed in private letters.³⁶ The majority of these apparently spurious biographies were predominantly concerning pre-19th-century European scientists who had travelled to the Americas to study or engage with its natural history.

The entry for *Charles Henry Huon de Penanster*, for example, identifies this character as a 'famous' French botanist credited with smuggling 'under the disguise of a Spanish physician' specimens of cochineal from Mexico and successfully introducing them into Domingo, breaking the Spanish monopoly of the cochineal dye industry.³⁷ *Charles Henry Huon de Penanster* appears in no other discernible contemporary records; not only this, but the account of his life bears direct comparison with the actual Nicolas Thiéry de Menonville (a fellow subject of the *Cyclopædia*). Furthermore, de Menonville is the author of *Traité de la culture du nopal, et de l'éducation de la cochenille dans les colonies françaises de l'Amérique: précédé d'un voyage a Guaxaca*³⁸ which certainly does exist and can be consulted. The suspect *Charles Henry Huon de Penanster* is credited with three books, *Traite de*

³⁵ John Hendley Barnhart, 'Some Fictitious Botanists', *Journal of the New York Botanical Garden*, Vol. 20 (1919), pp.171-81.

³⁶ Cantillon, Joseph F., 'Some Phantom Jesuits', *Woodstock letters*, Vol.67 No.2 (Woodstock, Md., Woodstock College Press, 1938). Digitized by Boston Library Consortium Member Libraries:

><https://archive.org/details/woodstockletters672iunse><

[last accessed: September 15th 2015].

³⁷ 'Huon de Penanster, Charles Henry': *Appletons' Cyclopædia*, Vol. III.

³⁸ Nicolas Joseph Thiéry de Menonville and Charles Arthaud, *Traité de la culture du nopal* (Au Cap-Français: Chez la veuve Herbault, 1787).

Culture du Nopal, De l'éducation de la Cochenille et de Leur Acclimation a Saint Domingue, and *Voyage a Guaraxa dans la Nouvelle Espagne*, none of which bear bibliographical pursuit. It would appear that the 'truth' of one entry has been split into three and reassembled as a composite fictional pastiche. Some biographical entries are not credited with any publications, while others have been submitted with phrases including 'a work which caused a sensation in scientific circles', 'which is yet considered an authority', or 'valuable to historians'.³⁹

The falsehoods within such entries are obviated by their non-specificity. All *Appletons'* entries were compiled by contributors, all of whom were paid according to the amount of space taken up by an entry; as Castle Schindler states, 'the detection of fictitious articles relating to Latin America would have been particularly unlikely because ignorance of that region was even more widespread in the United States in the 19th century than it is today [the 1930s], and facts within that field would have been left to the special contributors, selected because of their real or supposed knowledge of Latin America'.⁴⁰ Further unclaimed but suspect examples of fictional insertions also exist beyond *Appletons'*: for fifty years the final entry in Rupert Hughes' *The Musical Guide* (reprinted as the *Music Lovers' Encyclopedia*) was listed as *zzxjoanw*, listed as the Maori word for a 'drum', 'fife' or 'conclusion'.⁴¹ Whether an object can be a *drum* or a *fife*, quite apart from the same word meaning *conclusion*, is curious but not impossible. Additionally, however, there are no letters Z, X, or J in the Maori language and there were no other Maori-derived entries within the *Guide*; it was not until 1967 that Philip Cohen questioned the spelling of *zzxjoanw*, especially in terms of its proposed pronunciation ('shaw'), and it was judged to be a fictional insertion.⁴²

Some dictionaries deliberately construct and disseminate fictions in order to protect their contents, whereby the violating act of inserting a fictional entry becomes an anti-violation device. The noun *mountweazel* now refers to bogus entries that are cooked up and inserted into a dictionary or encyclopædia as a means of protecting

³⁹ Margaret Castle Schindler, 'Fictitious biography', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 42 No. 4 (Jul., 1937), pp. 680-690 (p.682).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.688.

⁴¹ Rupert Hughes, *The Musical Guide* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co, 1903), p.307.

⁴² Philip M. Cohen, 'What's the Good Word?', *Word Ways*, Vol. 9 No. 4 (1976), pp.195-8 (p.196).

copyright⁴³, with *mountweazel* only existing as a neologism derived from one such insertion.⁴⁴ The discovery and earmarking of various *mountweazels* confirms the anecdotal claims of which Allen Walker Read was aware: ‘another source of *ghost* words might be found if the stories are true that certain dictionary-makers have inserted made-up words to check whether they would be copied by other dictionaries. The stories have never been substantiated’.⁴⁵ The existence of *mountweazels* punctures any claims of absolute reliability that a dictionary might enjoy in the public consciousness, and such entries’ occurrence certainly demonstrates the possibility that misinformation might percolate through the body of a dictionary’s text. *Mountweazels* cause uncertainty on the part of the reader, in a text that should be a site of clarity and reliability; *mountweazels*’ inclusion marks a disruptive, hoax-like dupe within the network of information-dispersal that a dictionary or encyclopædia is designed to provide. A copyright trap of this kind is a form of digital watermarking for the textual data of a dictionary, a form of hypertextual steganography. This is a strategy also used by cartographers to safeguard their maps: all of the maps on the A–Z, for example, print a non-existent ‘trap street’ in order to tell, upon replication in other publications, whether maps have illegally copied their original.⁴⁶

The term ‘steganography’ is intended here to convey the harmlessness of the *mountweazel* hoax: it is not intended for a recipient, and exists only as a security measure through its spuriousness. A successful *mountweazel* therefore is one that does not attract attention to itself: steganography ensures both the message and communicator evade detection. The 2001 print and electronically-distributed edition of *The New Oxford American Dictionary (NOAD)* contained the word *esquivance*, defined as ‘the wilful avoidance of one’s official responsibilities’ as just such a *mountweazel*, the discovery of which four years after the dictionary’s publication was

⁴³ Rochelle Lieber, *Introducing Morphology* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.14.

⁴⁴ ‘mountweazel’: *New Columbia Encyclopedia* eds. William H. Harris and Judith S. Levey, 4th edn. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).

⁴⁵ Allen Walker Read, ‘The Sources of Ghost Words in English’, *Word: Journal of the Linguistic Circle of New York*, Vol. 29 (1978), pp.95-98 (p. 98).

⁴⁶ Mark Monmonier, *From Squaw Tit to Whorehouse Meadow: How Maps Name, Claim, and Inflamm* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p.127.

documented by *The New York Times* journalist Henry Alford.⁴⁷ The false lemma and definition for *esquivaliencia* was chosen, both functionally testing whether the *NOAD*'s data were being pirated while also describing the renegation any claim to original work such piracy would involve. In the same way that a false bibliographic record was included for some of the 'phantom Jesuits' of *Appletons' Cyclopaedia*, there was also a false philological trail provided for *esquivaliencia*: 'late 19th century: perhaps from French *esquiver*, "dodge, slink away"'.⁴⁸ Certainly it was the suspect etymological claims that alerted readers to another *mountweazel*'s appearance in Niall Ó Dónaill's Irish language dictionary *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*⁴⁹, specifically its inclusion of *searbhfhoghantaidhe* as a 'variant form' of *searbhonta* (translated as *servant*); the word has since been interpreted to be a copyright trap, the main indicators being that O'Donnell identifies that the ten extraneous letters are not intended to be pronounced, as well as the fact the word's construction makes no etymological sense.

Coined by editor Christine Lindberg, *esquivaliencia* proved its worth when it was found replicated on the online *Dictionary.com*, which falsely cited the word as originating in *Webster's New Millennium*.⁵⁰ The editor of the *NOAD*'s second edition commented that adding *esquivaliencia* enabled a monitoring of their words' appropriation elsewhere in the same way one might collect data by 'tagging and releasing giant turtles'⁵¹; certainly those turtles' migration to *Dictionary.com* successfully dented its reliability and editorial probity.

In terms of modern methods of information-retrieval, there are other comparative copyright traps. In order to determine whether Microsoft's rival search engine Bing was directly duplicating Google's results, for example, the latter company planted over a hundred 'synthetic queries' into its system, including the made-up word *hiybbprqag*; ironically for a topic directly involving the very nature of user-discernment, Google was first alerted to the similarity of Bing's search returns when a

⁴⁷ Henry Alford, 'Not a Word', *New Yorker* (29th August, 2005)

><http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/08/29/not-a-word>< [accessed: 23rd August 2012].

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla / Irish-English Dictionary*, ed. Niall Ó Dónaill (Baltimore: Colton Book Imports, 1977).

⁵⁰ Alford (2005).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

misspelling of *tarsorrhaphy* — a surgical procedure performed on eyelids — revealed that Bing offered Google’s first result when this word was entered into their search engine *without* submitting the spelling correction Google had made to its results’ ranking algorithm. This method of constructing a speculative sting operation to test whether unauthorised use is being made of data or networks without attribution is often used in online data security; the term *hiybbprqag* would be known as a *honeypot* in this instance.⁵² As Google’s spokesperson Amit Singhal outlined:

You can think of the synthetic queries with inserted results as the search engine equivalent of marked bills in a bank [...] We were surprised that within a couple weeks of starting this experiment, our inserted results started appearing in Bing.⁵³

In a neat coda by which Google cemented an ownership over their fictitious word, once Bing had been made aware of their copyright infringement the domain *hiybbprqag.com* was created. If clicked, it redirects the user to the Google career recruitment page.

Despite the common assumption of *lexicographidolatory* associated with a dictionary, and the fact dictionaries are often used as a resource to clarify terms and categoric statements as if they are infallible texts, dictionaries are mutable and must allow for linguistic adaption and additions. Johnson’s adage concerning the task of the lexicographer as being akin to that of a figure condemned to be forever ‘chasing the sun’⁵⁴ is an apt image for this reason, as the fact that Johnson switched from trying to ‘fix’ the language in his *Dictionary* to attempting, rather, to ‘register’ it.

The differentiation should be made between a *limited* dictionary and one that contains deliberate fictions. Should a dictionary or encyclopædia be found to contain

⁵² Robert C. Newman, *Computer Security: Protecting Digital Resources* (Burlington: Jones and Bartlett, 2009), p.266.

⁵³ ‘Microsoft’s Bing uses Google search results—and denies it’, article appearing on *Googleblog* <<http://googleblog.blogspot.co.uk/2011/02/microsofts-bing-uses-google-search.html>> [accessed: 9th January 2012].

⁵⁴ ‘[A]nd that thus to pursue perfection, was, like the first inhabitants of Arcadia, to chase the sun, which, when they had reached the hill where he seemed to rest, was still beheld at the same distance from them.’ Samuel Johnson, ‘Preface to the English Dictionary’, *The works of Samuel Johnson, L. L. D.: in Twelve Volumes*, ed. Arthur Murphy, Vol. 2 (Repr. Boston: Hastings, Etheridge and Bliss, 1809), p.54.

arbitrary creative inventions rather than assertions of objective, corroborated fact then claims for the integrity of the text might collapse; should a dictionary's entries be 'fictional' or 'untrue', the authoritative figure of the dictionary, its lexical or factual corpus, is subject to an *écorché* that reveals a monstrous and fantastical anatomy. In the 18th century the opposite of fact was not *fiction* but *fancy* or *error*⁵⁵: false entries of this latter variety do feature within some dictionaries and any attempt to examine the ways in which the 'truth' of a dictionary's content has been transgressed must acknowledge examples where incorrect headwords, definitions and entries have appeared due to clerical errors and speculative or facetious contributions. The deliberate insertion of misinformation within a dictionary such as the false entries in the *Appletons' Cyclopædia of American Biography* and the copyright traps in *The New Oxford American Dictionary* reveal that some dictionaries include purposively constructed, codified gestures. Such entries appear to demonstrate both artifice and verisimilitude in their creation⁵⁶ and prove that a dictionary can become a site of fiction.

⁵⁵ Kuisma Korhonen, 'History as Quasi-fiction, Fiction as Quasi-history', *Tropes for the Past: Hayden White and the History/Literature Debate*, ed. Kuisma Korhonen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), p.16.

⁵⁶ James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London: Vintage, 2008), p.2.

Chapter 2

Weasel Words: Reading False Entries as Creative Texts

One of the most famous fictitious entries is printed amongst the pages of *The New Columbia Encyclopedia*, sitting unobtrusively in the company of the composer *Mussorgsky* in the foothills of *Mount Olympus* and *Mount Rushmore*:

Mountweazel, Lillian Virginia, 1942-1973, American photographer, b. Bangs, Ohio.

Turning from fountain design to photography in 1963, Mountweazel produced her celebrated portraits of the South Sierra Miwok in 1964. She was awarded government grants to make a series of photo-essays of unusual subject matter, including New York City buses, the cemeteries of Paris and rural American mailboxes. The last group was exhibited extensively abroad and published as *Flags Up!* (1972). Mountweazel died at 31 in an explosion while on assignment for *Combustibles* magazine.⁵⁷

The apprehended *Mountweazel* was admitted to be a fictitious entry by a later editor of the *Encyclopedia*, and Richard Steins confessed explicitly that it was a copyright trap: 'It was an old tradition in encyclopædias to put in a fake entry [...] If someone copied Lillian, then we'd know they'd stolen from us'.⁵⁸ The *Mountweazel* entry is rare because there are clues within the entry's text that imply whoever wrote *Mountweazel* was aware of a central paradox: that he or she had been commissioned to contrive a piece of specifically *fictional* writing that would not undermine the 'truthfulness' of the *Encyclopedia* as a whole. The *Mountweazel* entry is clearly not just written at random in the way that Google's copyright trap *hiybbprqag* entered the intended corpus, for the entry contains a narrative and certain stylistic flourishes such as bathetic tension and a network of wordplay. Through sustained close-reading, this *Mountweazel* entry will be examined as a piece of metafiction where the text's content and context deliberates upon its craft, and engage with *Mountweazel* as a piece of literary creative writing that gestures towards its own fictionality. Scholar Brian McHale has usefully coined a taxonomy of hoaxes: *genuine*, *entrapment* and

⁵⁷ 'Mountweazel, Lillian Virginia': *The New Columbia Encyclopedia*, ed. William H Harris and Judith S Levey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).

⁵⁸ Quoted in Henry Alford, 'Not a Word', *New Yorker* (29th August 2005)

><http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/08/29/not-a-word>< [accessed: 23rd August 2012].

mock hoax.⁵⁹ The first described hoaxes that are completed with no intention of exposure; *entrapment* hoaxes are formulated in order to expose other's foolishness, depending on their eventual exposure; McHale's final category, *mock*, are aesthetic in intent, making art out of inauthenticity. As a piece of metafiction, I will examine into which of these categories the *Mountweazel* entry falls.

Such a mode of inquiry is premised on the idea that the way in which something is said is central to its meaning; as such, any analysis will investigate the form and style of the *Mountweazel* entry and divulge an account of the effect produced on the critic by such means of enquiry. This must all be performed with the obvious disclaimer that the *Mountweazel* entry was presumably never designed for private reading where its complexities might be appreciated by re-reading. Quite the opposite: to successfully evade detection as a copyright trap, the text should be written precisely in such a way that it neither stands-out nor alerts readers' attention to it. There is something pleasing in parallels that might be drawn between the very act of consulting a fiction-dictionary and the creative interrogation of a text for any latent literary significance through practical criticism in this way: that the 'user' or reader approaches the text with the expectation that it will disclose meaning.

Approaching the permutations of its presentation as a crafted piece of literary text, the *Lillian Virginia Mountweazel* fictitious entry certainly aligns with many subsets of transtextuality as suggested by Genette: there is intertextuality, for the entry necessarily alludes to other entries within the dictionary that flank it on the page in order that it can operate as part of the whole *Encyclopedia*. Furthermore, its creation as a trap for potential plagiarism gestures towards its 'intertextuality' between encyclopædias, and their compilers who are poised to thief it from its original text. Certainly the entry relies on the rest of the *Encyclopedia's* paratext in order to function successfully and is contingent upon, in Lejeune's words as quoted by Genette, the 'fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text'.⁶⁰ In the case of the *Encyclopedia's* fictitious entry as a hidden

⁵⁹ Brian McHale, "A Poet May Not Exist": Mock-Hoaxes and the Construction of National Identity', *The Faces of Anonymity: Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publication from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert J. Griffin (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp.233-52.

⁶⁰ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.1-2.

metafiction that calls attention to itself as a covert entity while maintaining its textual tegument, this would mean that the *Mountweazel* entry should not in any way clash with the other entries' typesetting, its cover design, Preface, publication details, illustrations and general presentation. The entry is exactly in line with the other entries in this regard in order to pass as a *bona fide* biography. It is interesting in terms of paratextual affect that the *Oxford English Dictionary* uses the Clarendon typeface, a font that Robert Bringhurst, an authority on typography, 'reflect[s] the hearty, stolid, bland, unstoppable aspects of the British Empire. They [the typeface] lack cultivation, but they also lack menace and guile. They squint and stand their ground, but they do not glare'.⁶¹ *Mountweazel* passes as a genuine entry because it engages with this form of typographical crypsis on the page, blending in with the other biographies and items that surround it. In all ways, the conventions and codes of the entry satisfy the browsing reader's expectations as a *bona fide* entry.

Having established that the *mountweazel* exists as a piece of imitative creative writing with the function of a copyright trap and is designed in part to evade scrutiny, its existence as a hoax does seem obviated by the entry's sheer specificity of detail. The character of 'Mountweazel' is described as producing photographic portraits that are 'celebrated' and 'exhibited extensively'; it is phrasing that hints towards a bibliographic or artefactual paper-trail, a device that was used by the creator of 'Charles Henry Huon de Penanster' in *Appletons' Cyclopædia*. Similarly, the fact that 'her' written work is called *Flags Up!* and is accompanied with a demonstrative exclamation mark, the glyphic equivalent of jazz-hands, seems a strong idiomatic indicator that the reader should take a closer look: it deserves 'flagging up', it raises a red-flag. Similarly, the tragedy of Mountweazel's death is written in such a way that is particularly bathetic. That the character is described as dying in an *explosion* while on the clock for *Combustibles* magazine (a publication which does appear to exist according to sustained enquiries, and may be assumed to be part of the larger false bibliographical paper-trail) certainly has a level of situational irony. In addition there is also the internal pun here made through the proximity of the words '*Combustibles magazine*', conscious that the noun *magazine* has the other meaning of 'a store for large quantities of explosives'. As one deconstructs the entry, this punning impulse also implies a careful construction that signal itself as artful fiction.

⁶¹ Quoted in Simon Winchester, *The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.121, footnote 13.

In terms of the *Mountweazel* entry operating as a metafiction, it is significant that *explosion* also carries meaning of discarding or rendering obsolete a proposed theory. Add to this that 'Mountweazel' was born in Bangs, a small town that does indeed exist in Ohio, the text's constructed fiction is further emphasised: it is too neat a coincidence. Pop! goes the weasel, indeed. Just as the validity of the *Encyclopedia's* entry can be 'exploded' once it is revealed by editors to be fiction smuggled in a place dedicated to fact, the juncture made between explosions and weasels in the entry might recall this popular well-known song, one verse of which outlines: 'I went hunting up in the woods, it wasn't very legal! The dog and I were caught with the goods! Pop! Goes the weasel!'⁶². A writer tasked to create an entry to ensnare unsuspecting plagiarists would find the tableau evinced by these lines to be a fitting warning for any aspiring thief. Inserting cognate references to this song into the text is another way that one can — speculatively — claim that the entry might be asserting its metafictional properties.

The phrase 'celebrated portraits' also can be read as an askance judgement upon the biographical capsulation enacted by encyclopædias and dictionaries such as that in which the *mountweazel* 'Mountweazel' functions. The fact that 'she' is characterised as a photographer draws attention to claims to 'her' authenticity and validity, in terms of 'status' or more generally, veracity. To quote Sontag, 'to collect photographs is to collect the world', a phrase which implies that every photograph is a piece of evidence or that photographs furnish evidence: '[s]omething we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it'.⁶³ If one accepts that *Mountweazel* is a metafiction, enacting a commentary upon what it is to be an encyclopædia entry, the fact that the central character is a photographer prompts the reader to consider *how* encyclopædias select the figures that are important enough to exist as 'celebrated' entries between its covers, and to query the notion of an encyclopædia's authority to privilege information in such a way. The entry's references to cemeteries, too, could be read as a coded annotation on the biographical encyclopædia, the resting place of 'notable figures'.

To remain a little longer with the account supplied for the character's life, many details can be read as indicating that *Mountweazel* is not a common-or-garden

⁶² Raph, Theodore, ed. *The American Song Treasury: 100 Favorites* (New York: Dover Publications, 1964), p.131.

⁶³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), p.3.

entry but rather a commentary upon the work of someone who has been engaged upon a very particular task. The entry specifies that the character was engaged in fountain design, invoking a creator who must produce something artificially-wrought that will make a pleasing decoration; the entry's seemingly idly-included 'unusual subject matter' as per 'Lillian's' exists as an indicator for eccentricity; the inclusion of graveyards in the entry carries implications of 'something buried', or hidden in the entry's account of 'truth'. All of these complement the theory that the writer was elaborating upon a metaphor concerning their own praxis of hoax-creation. The references made towards New York's transport and postal systems not only supplement this metaphor (educing the idea of the entry's own eventual dispersal and dissemination in the *Encyclopedia*, awaiting that time that it will be unwittingly replicated and the hoax can be revealed) but it also places the entry as born of its own context as a written artefact in 1970s New York. During this time, transport links were riven with financial and infrastructural problems, with the subway's ticket prices rising by 10¢ in the decade's first week.⁶⁴ This hike in fares led to a general decline in ridership throughout the 1970s: perhaps the increase in bus use was weighing on some contributor's mind when s/he penned the *mountweazel*.

That 'Parisian' cemeteries feature in the fictitious entry allows one a further chicane of tangential supposition as to the coded expression of the text's metafiction. One of the most famous graveyards in the world is the Père Lachaise in Paris, where such 'celebrated figures' as Wilde, Stein and Toklas, Stendhal and Baudelaire are buried and doubtless would have attracted at least the interest if not the lens of the *Encyclopedia's* travelling Lillian. Jim Morrison is also buried in there, interred in 1971. In terms of the themes of 'veracity' and 'identity', Morrison's grave was listed incorrectly in the cemetery's directory as 'Douglas James Morrison', the name given to the police by Morrison's partner Pamela Courson when his body was discovered so as not to draw unwanted attention from the press. Celebrated, an American, an early death (and whose connections to rock music will be discussed below): Morrison's grave would certainly be a point of interest and discussed widely in the press in the

⁶⁴ Mark S. Feinman, 'The New York Transit Authority in the 1970s', *Recent New York Transit History*, 19 November 2002.

>[http://www.nycsubway.org/wiki/The New York Transit Authority in the 1970s](http://www.nycsubway.org/wiki/The_New_York_Transit_Authority_in_the_1970s)< [accessed: 12th March 2011].

early 1970s when the *Encyclopedia* was being compiled, and the Parisian cemetery might have crept in to the *mountweazel* for this reason.

Continuing a critical exegesis of the *Mountweazel* entry, it is notable that '1964' was the date when Sylvia M. Broadbent, who went on to become Professor Emerita of University of California, Riverside published her Ph.D. on the Native American South Sierra Miwok language.⁶⁵ Broadbent had previously worked compiling a dictionary in 1959 whilst a Research Assistant at that university's Department of Linguistics, with her specialities centring upon descriptive and historical linguistics, language and culture.⁶⁶ Once again, there seemed to be a string of coincidences stacking up that warranted at least tentative investigation and when this thesis was in its early stages, I was in contact with the Professor's niece Jacquie Dow through email following the possibility that one of the workers at the *Encyclopedia* might have been aware of her work at the time, or that there might be some other connection to the *Mountweazel's* appearance. She proudly discussed her aunt's 'eccentricity', her well-travelled life and also remarked that the Professor often recalled instances of her early career, and our communication ended with Mrs. Dow kindly volunteering to enquire about the Miwok connection. Sadly, Prof Broadbent passed away in July 2015. I was unable to interview her in time for this thesis and could not pursue with her any theories she might have concerning the *mountweazel's* provenance or creation. Rather than abandon this line of close-reading associative analysis entirely, however, perhaps it is appropriate to indicate here that this episode in the quest for all information pertaining to the *Mountweazel* entry's composition is a strange enactment of a scholar's attempt to investigate fictitious entries. A wild-goose chase in order to track the details of wild-goose chase: just as a metafictional fictitious entry such as the *Encyclopedia's* 'Lillian Virginia Mountweazel' appears in a work of reference as a 'fact' that does not bear prolonged scrutiny but its composition has been laboured over so that it produces a specific literary satisfaction, so too does the pursuit of its inspiration, however speculative, bear its own rewards and stimulates the pleasure of textual inquiry.

⁶⁵ Sylvia M. Broadbent, *The Southern Sierra Miwok Language* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1964).

⁶⁶ *Central Sierra Miwok Dictionary*, eds. S. M. Broadbent and L. S. Freeland (Oakland: University of California Press, 1960).

The headword of the *Lillian Virginia Mountweazel* entry is also indicative of the *mountweazel's* fictionality and its hoax-credentials. In terms of establishing a deliberately telling philology, any attempts to divine why the specific selection of this lemma for this hoax was made must first recognise that *lill* is a transitive verb used (rarely, as the *OED* outlines) to refer to the action of lolling the tongue from the mouth in a cheeky or mocking reproach. Investigating further, in Romany slang *lill* also refers to a book; here, once more, the relation of 'Lillian' to 'her' paratext, beyond which 'she' does not exist, is underlined.

The associative implications of the name 'Lillian' are overwhelmingly related to ideas or concepts of purity. The prefix 'lily-' is typically applied to persons or things of exceptional whiteness, fairness, or purity, with the flower often used as symbol of such. 'Lillian' is freighted as a name with implications of irreproachability or a lack of imperfection. Such ideas of cleanliness and irreproachability are amplified by the middle name that 'she' has been granted with its resonances of virginity and whiteness. Any advocate of this entry's creation as a metafiction must posit that by choosing this name, the creator of the 'untrue' copyright trap doth protest too much. 'Virginia', as recalled by Livy's *Histories of Ancient Rome*, is a character from Roman mythology that was abducted, accused of sedition and finally sacrificed in order to protect a contract of sanctity.⁶⁷ The myth of Virginia is referenced in these terms, as a figure aligned with purity, seizure and sacrifice, throughout literature including *Titus Andronicus'* final scene⁶⁸, Chaucer's 'The Physician's Tale'⁶⁹ and Thomas Babington Macaulay's narrative poem 'Virginal'. In the latter, the character Virginia is falsely claimed as '[...] mine, and I will have her, I seek but for mine own: / She is my slave,

⁶⁷ Titus Livius (Livy), *The History of Rome*, trans. Rev. Canon Roberts (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1912-24), 3.44. Digitised online by the *Perseus Digital Library* project: ><http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:latinLit:phio914.phio013.perseus-eng3:44>< [accessed: 13th April 2013].

⁶⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Lamentable Tragedy of Titus Andronicus* (First Folio, 1623), 5.3.40.

⁶⁹ Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Physician's Tale', *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Digitised online by Harvard University's *Interlinear Chaucer* project: ><http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/teachslf/phys-par.htm>< [accessed: 12th September 2014].

born in my house, and stolen away and sold' by a lecherous, corrupt official.⁷⁰ Add to this lineage of Virginia-associations the fate of the character *Virginia* Dale, a young girl who folklorically, if not historically, was believed to be the first child born to English parents in America and became part of folk legend and American literature when she and the rest of the Roanoke settlement vanished without a trace.⁷¹ With purity and innocence being broadcast in an ironic nod to its existence as a hoax, with its concomitant themes in literature linked to violated honour, accusations of sedition and unsolved mysteries, *Lillian Virginia* is a calculatedly pertinent name to append to a copyright trap, and as such is another detail aligned with the entry's metafictional credentials.

It would be remiss not to mention another, culturally prominent figure who died in the same year as the text's 'Lillian'. With her own surname phonetically a neat example of nominative determinism, the writer Lillian Roxon is credited with, amongst other things, penning the first encyclopædist of rock music with her *Roxon's Rock Encyclopedia*⁷² and her work was read avidly in the Woodstock-era New York, singled out by the *New York Times Review* to be 'critically concise, extremely knowledgeable, marvellously readable and probably definitive'.⁷³ Roxon was part of a social circle that included Warhol, Lou Reed, Jim Morrison and Bowie, with Germaine Greer dedicating *The Female Eunuch* in part to her:

This book is dedicated to LILLIAN, who lives with nobody but a colony of New York roaches, whose energy has never failed despite her anxieties and her asthma and her overweight, who is always interested in everybody, often angry, sometimes bitchy, but always involved. Lillian the abundant, the

⁷⁰ Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'Virginia', *Lays of Ancient Rome* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1852), p.161.

⁷¹ E. A. B. Shackelford, *Virginia Dare: a Romance of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: T. Whittaker, 1892).

⁷² Lillian Roxon, ed. *Roxon's Rock Encyclopedia* (London: Grosset & Dunlap, 1969).

⁷³ Craig McGregor, 'Roxon's Rock: From A (Acid) to Z (Zombies); Roxon's Rock', *New York Times* (May 17th 1970), p.105.

golden, the eloquent, the well and badly loved; Lillian the beautiful who thinks she is ugly, Lillian the indefatigable who thinks she is always tired'.⁷⁴ Her *Rock Encyclopedia* established Roxon as a leading critic and chronicler of rock culture; perhaps the *Mountweazel* entry, presumably composed at the same time as her early, sudden death in 1973, is another dedication to Roxon, and to her encyclopædic drive and successes in 1970.

The combination of *mount* with *weazel* imbues the central character of the *Mountweazel* entry with a certain ludic appeal, and any close-reading must explore the correspondence between this surname name and the role 'she' plays as a piece of metafiction in an encyclopædia. It is tempting to see the word *mountweazel* as a compaction of 'Mountain Weasel', one of the predators in the part of California indicated by the entry's reference to 'South Sierra Miwok' Native Americans. In descriptions of Californian 'mountain weasels', one is informed of the creatures' 'double-distilled essence of courage' and that 'mountain weasels will kill anything that they can overcome'.⁷⁵ Here, the feistiness of the 'Mountain Weasel' is emphasised, and its ability to bring down a larger corpus. Similarly, such an animal is described as existing within a 'Mammals of Yosemite National Park' article in these terms:

'[...] the wild birds and mammals know this as thoroughly as do naturalists, for the presence of a weasel in any locality is immediately announced by cries of alarm from the native denizens. The body colouration of the weasel is unique among our predatory mammals [...] able to hunt the year round, well-concealed in its protective coloration be the season that of blanketing snow or of brown logs on the bare ground.'⁷⁶

The implication that a mountain weasel has a 'unique' aspect in that it is able to camouflage with remarkable efficiency is entirely fitting for the insidious creation of a

⁷⁴ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1970). Quoted in Robert Milliken, *Mother of Rock: The Lillian Roxon Story* (Collingwood, Victoria: Black Inc., 2010), p.180.

⁷⁵ Harry C. Parker, 'Mammals of Yosemite National Park', *Yosemite Nature Notes*, Vol. 31 No. 6 (1952), p.87.

⁷⁶ Joseph Grinnell and Tracy Irwin Storer, *Animal Life in the Yosemite: An Account of the Mammals, Birds, Reptiles, and Amphibians in a Cross-section of the Sierra Nevada* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1924), p.86.

mountweazel, a hoax inserted in a text that must blend in easily but that is capable of sounding the alarm once the copyright trap is triggered.

In addition to an actual weasel's associations being a useful cipher by which the creator of a *mountweazel* might choose to profess their art in metafiction while also successfully evading detection, the use of *weazel* also has a number of further, relevant cultural and linguistic associations when read as *weasel* in this context. A *weasel-monger* is an obsolete phrase for one who hunts rats; the function of a *mountweazel* is to rat-out any would-be pirates, and also the *mountweazel*-mindful user of a dictionary or encyclopædia must be vigilant in order to 'rat-out' any suspect entries. Similarly, *weaselling-out* implies cunning extrapolation of an object, opinion or reaction; the concept of this fictional insertion characterised by such associations is compelling.

The verminous status of weasels as source of disease and pests for farmers often leads to the creature being relegated in fiction and the public anthropomorphic imagination to roles such as rogues and ne'er-do-wells, connected with a particular brand of furtiveness. One collective noun for weasels is a *sneak*⁷⁷, which is no doubt related to this association. It is a *sneak* of weasels, for example, that infiltrates Toad Hall while its original tenant is indisposed beyond the Wild Wood.⁷⁸ As well as sneakiness, culturally weasels are also linked with bearing false testimony. The mythological figure of Galanthis is transformed into a weasel because of a lie she told:

'Tis said, Galanthis laughed and ridiculed
the cheated deity; and as she laughed
the vixen goddess caught her by the hair
and dragging her upon the ground, while she

⁷⁷ *Teachers' Resource Book: Developing Literacy* (Balcatta: R.I.C. Publications, 2007).

The collective nouns *boogle*, *pack*, *gang*, *gam* and *confusion* are listed elsewhere as possible alternatives. In a satisfying piece of *ghost* word morphology connected with the collective nouns of vermin, Dmitri Borgmann has demonstrated the way in which the collective noun *feamyng* for ferrets, found in several dictionaries, is actually the result typographical errors being mistakenly copied from dictionary to dictionary, progressing from *busyness* to *busyness* to *fesynes* to *fesnyng* until the final *feamyng* form. Dmitri A. Borgmann, *Beyond Language: Adventures in Word and Thought* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), p.79.

⁷⁸ Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (London: Methuen, 1908).

was struggling to arise, held her, and there
transformed both of her arms to animal
forelegs. Her old activity remained;
her hair was not changed, but she did not keep
her maiden form: and ever since that day,
because she aided with deceitful lips,
her offspring are brought forth through the same mouth.
Changed to a weasel she dwells now with me.⁷⁹

The allusion to ‘offspring brought forth from the same mouth’ in this source is possibly due to the fact medieval bestiaries figured weasels as conceiving at the mouth and give birth through the ear (or, occasionally, the other way around)^{80,81}. In terms of the metafiction of the entry, certainly the *Mountweazel mountweazel* cannot be trusted as a ‘true’ entry, so the association seems valid.

To continue with the writer’s use of a word that recalls *weasel*, given ‘her’ stint in Paris, the fact that the French for weasel is *belette* is perhaps a playful phonic spin being made by the writer on *belles-lettres*, ‘fine writing’, alluding to all literary works valued for their aesthetic qualities and originality. To remain in Paris in the fictional universe created by the writer of the *Mountweazel* entry, the largest and one of the oldest mausoleums in the Père Lachaise is that of Elizaveta Alexandrovna Stroganova, a structure that a keen photographer concentrating upon graves as their subject would be unlikely to miss. It just so happens that the masonry of this tomb features carvings of hunch-backed weasels.

A more certain assertion is that the allusion to weasels in the name *Mountweazel* evokes the idiom *weasel words*, used to describe statements that are apparently meaningful or deliberately ambiguous in order to obfuscate any real clarity of expression. *Weasel words*, then, are insincere statements. This expression

⁷⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* ed. and trans. Brookes More (Boston: Cornhill Publishing Co, 1922), Book 9: 313-323. Digitised online by the *Perseus Digital Library* project: ><http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0959.phio06.perseus-eng1:9.273-9.323>< [accessed: 12th Sept 2015].

⁸⁰ *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, Oliver Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 12.3.3.

⁸¹ Florence McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), p.186.

comes from the longstanding folkloric belief that weasels, despite the fact that weasels do not have the appropriate musculature to accomplish such a feat, were able to suck the ‘meat’ of an egg while leaving the shell intact, hence *weasel-words* being those which present empty, hollow, meaningless claims.⁸² This exactly enacts the feat of a successfully inserting a *mountweazel* and the fact that it should seem like a verifiable, solid fact but actually be entirely frippery. Add to this that *to catch a weasel asleep* is an American idiom implying ‘impossibility’ (as in, the impossibility of discovering a constantly vigilant person off their guard), the *weasel* as an image and symbol both linguistic and culturally implies attentiveness, effective within the proposed metafiction of the *Encyclopedia* entry as it implies the literal untruth of the entry as a biography of a real person while also illustrating the fact that the entry was created in order to catch-out inattentive copyright thieves.⁸³

The combination of *mount* with *weasel* can also be read as intentionally signposting the text’s metafictional properties and any final attempts to parse the *Mountweazel*’s metafiction, particularly as indicated in the lemma, must note that *mount* as a suffix also recalls the term *mountebank*: that is, a charlatan, claiming knowledge or skills for personal gain, or assuming a fabricated identity in order to gain prestige. The noun and verb *mount* carries the obvious implication of saddling-in, or of being affixed on the back of something else. Not only do *mountweazels* pass as ‘fact’ because they are inserted in the pages of an otherwise correct encyclopædia or dictionary — passing, as it were, ‘on the back’ of the genuine entries and the trust a reader has in an encyclopædia or dictionary, but also a military attack or offence might too be *mounted*. As a prefix, *mount* also illustrates the ascent of a breach when attempting an assault while conversely, but relevant to this course of extrapolation, one might also *mount* a guard for the purpose of defence or observation. A *mountweazel* exists in order that it might sound the alarm if the copyright trap is sprung: this is a military twist on the metaphorical ‘tagged turtles’ of lexicographer Erin McKean’s metaphor. *Mount*, here, implies the *mountweazel* operates as a sentry, a much more active role. When used as an intransitive verb, *mount* is also the word

⁸² Carolyn M. King, Roger A. Powell, *The Natural History of Weasels And Stoats: Ecology, Behavior, And Management* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.4.

⁸³ John Russell Bartlett ed., *Dictionary of Americanisms: A Glossary of Words and Phrases Usually Regarded as Peculiar to the United States* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1860), p.72.

pertaining to a silkworm securing a choice position from where it might best spin its cocoon: the word's obsolescence in this sense does not deter from the rather lyrical extension that a lexicographer might 'spin a tale or yarn' from the best place when writing a fictional entry. Of cocoons, however, just as a lepidopterist might *mount* a butterfly collection, so too has *Mountweazel* been pinned down as entry on display, created precisely for the purpose of exhibition ranked amongst the true entries. The word *mount* does, of course, function in the equestrian sense which works within the metaphor being used by the *mountweazeling* writer in terms of a credulous reader being 'taken for a ride' should they take the entry on face value. *Mount* also carries the implications of decoration, adornment or purely decorative trimmings — once again, the idea of an entirely incidental, non-functional headword and definition are implied. The *OED* also emphasises that *mount* is recorded in criminal slang, used to describe false evidence when it is submitted in a court of law: the idea of 'fiction' trying to be smuggled in as 'fact' is, once more, to be found in the composition of the *Mountweazel* entry.

'Lillian Virginia Mountweazel' does now have a life beyond the text in which 'she' first featured and was intended to reside since the noun *mountweazel* nowadays exists as a synonym for 'phantom' or fictitious entries. As the noun becomes a byword for this particular act of lexicographical trapping device, just as Lillian Virginia Mountweazel endured a process of eponymy *mountweazel* can become a legitimate entry within a dictionary.⁸⁴ In doing so, of course, the moment that that original entry was revealed to be a hoax it became an ineffective *mountweazel*. Also, as a fictional character the character of Lillian Virginia has inspired a reality in the world at large: there exists an online photographic group who irregularly pool their images 'made in the spirit of Ms Mountweazel, particularly photos of rural American mailboxes. Photos of fountains and city buses are also acceptable'.⁸⁵ In 2009, an exhibition at the Monster Gallery in Dublin commissioned work from artists that would celebrate the life of Lillian, based on this account in the *Encyclopedia*, which included mock-ups of objects that might have pertained to her. The exhibition suitably examined identity,

⁸⁴ 'mountweazel': *Dictionary.com*

><http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/mountweazel>< [accessed: 15th September 2015].

⁸⁵ 'The Lillian Mountweazel Memorial Society', *Flickr*

><https://www.flickr.com/groups/mountweazel/>< [accessed: 23rd September 2011].

deception, iconography and media constructions, with the website that advertised the exhibition even offered an accompanying written biography of the redoubtable Mountweazel, a photograph of her turning away from the camera on its front cover, a woman caught on film wearing a jersey and corduroys with long hair, turning away from the camera. This biography is, of course, false, and the online store's link only leads back to the exhibition's promotional material.⁸⁶

To deduce that a *Doors*-playing, bus-riding, South Sierra Miwok-aware New Yorker who was familiar with the landmarks of Paris might be the author of the *Mountweazel* entry is perhaps too enthusiastic and fanciful a conclusion and in many ways an attempt to parse the *mountweazel Mountweazel* for its metafictional qualities in this way is exhaustive to the point of critical attenuation rather than good scholarship. To undertake such an interrogation and extrapolation of the text, however, does serve as fruitful practice-based research into the mindset of a writer who creates fictitious entries. The *Mountweazel* entry has been demonstrated to have been written so that it can be read as a piece of metafiction. This was done presumably in the first instance to amuse its creator and perhaps his or her peers but also it is necessarily designed for a specific future reader, one who would acknowledge it as fiction rather than misconstrue it and accept it as 'fact'. The creativity involved in seeking to prove a metafiction's credentials, especially when those attempts are at their most tenuous, complements the figure of a *mountweazel*-writer who also, by dint of their occupation, must work saturated by associations and cross references, attributions and source-texts that must be evaluated as per their veracity or relevance to the task at hand. By attempting a close reading of this kind, one submits a performance as well as a work of critical engagement with the dictionary's entry as a piece of fiction.

⁸⁶ 'Online Shop > Art: New Titles', *Monster Truck Press* hosted online by Bennie Reilly ><http://www.benniereilly.com/daveymoor/indexhibitvo7oe/files/monster-truck-press/monster-truck-press/mountweazel.html>< [accessed: 23rd September 2011].

Chapter 3

Flights of Fancy and Unhinged Birds: False Dictionary Entries as Nonsense Literature

In previous chapters I have sought to provide an introduction to ‘false’ entries as well as an overview of the reasons why entries might appear in dictionaries and encyclopædias, often as false words included in works of reference that act as copyright traps to catch any would-be plagiarists. There is one fictional insertion in a dictionary, however, that has been detected that is not apparently due to error and has not officially been outed or claimed as a *mountweazel* to catch copyright thieves. It runs:

jungftak, n. Persian bird, the male of which had only one wing, on the right side, and the female only one wing, on the left side; instead of the missing wings, the male had a hook of bone, and the female an eyelet of bone, and it was by uniting hook and eye that they were enabled to fly — each, when alone, had to remain on the ground.⁸⁷

Both ornithologically and orthographically questionable, no etymology of this bird’s curious and remarkably un-Farsi-derived name *jungftak* is supplied. In order to discover more about the bird, scholar Richard Rex made enquiries to the dictionary publishers, to which the associate editor explained, ‘[W]e have gone through a good many sources and *jungftak* simply does not show up. It is quite a curiosity, for the various accounts of Persian mythology do not describe such a bird even under another name’.⁸⁸ The *jungftak* appears in a surreal little vignette both in terms of its content and its status. The editor’s clarification is an important one, as *jungftak* is neither the misspelling of an actual word nor explicitly cultivated as a copyright trap. The hapax legomenon of *jungftak* is remarkable precisely because of its situation within a dictionary: it simply should not be there. In dictionaries, nonce words are described by David Crystal as those ‘lexical items that have been coined by a speaker or writer in order to meet the immediate needs of a particular communicative

⁸⁷ ‘jungftak’: *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language*, eds. Thomas H. Russell, A.C. Bean and L.D. Vaughn, 4th edn. (New York: World Publishing, 1943).

⁸⁸ Richard Rex, ‘The Incredible Jungftak’, *American Speech*, Vol. 57 No. 4 (1982), pp.307-308, (p.307).

situation'.⁸⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* stresses the transient and specific nature of their formation (for example, one could compose the nonce words *fictionary* or *liexicon* to describe *mountweazel*-riddled dictionaries) and acknowledges that they can arise as the result of rhetorical anomalies (such as the now much-repeated, and hence neologised, *omnishambles*). Their creation is intentional, 'for the nonce', and therefore do not fall into the realm of malapropism, spoonerism or a related parapraxis nor editorial errors such as the 'ghost words' recalled by Allen Walker Read. *Jungftak* does not appear to be any of these, and as such appears as a work of nonsense in a text dedicated to fact, rather than a nonce word entering its corpus.

Nonsense within a dictionary or encyclopædia is a somewhat embarrassing incursion. There is a pertinent aphorism credited to Dr Johnson regarding such concerns: 'Dictionaries are like watches: the worst is better than none, and the best cannot be expected to go quite true'.⁹⁰ By implementing the astral imagery of Dr Johnson 'chasing the sun' in attempting to create a perfect dictionary, in addition to this chronometric simile, the implication is that errant ticks and tocks can be instructive and illuminating as to the way in which a dictionary exists as a compendium of a language. This sentiment is adduced further by Dean Trench in his thoughts made clear to the compilers of the *OED*: 'a dictionary is an historical monument, the history of a nation contemplated from one point of view — and the wrong ways into which a language has wandered may be nearly as instructive as the right ones'.⁹¹ Misreadings and errors have contributed to 'fixing' the English language and play a great part of English calquetry: the word *encyclopaedia* itself comes from the pseudo-Greek *ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία*, a combination of 'circular, recurrent, required regularly, general' and 'education' but together translated as 'common knowledge' or 'general knowledge'; copyists of Latin manuscripts took this phrase to be a single

⁸⁹ David Crystal, 'Investigating Nonceness: Lexical Innovation and Lexicographic Coverage', *Manuscript, Narrative and Lexicon: Essays on Literary and Cultural Transmission in Honor of Whitney F Bolton*, eds. Robert Boenig & Kathleen Davis (London: Associated University Presses, 2000), p.219.

⁹⁰ 'Letter 516 to Mr. Sastres, Ashbourne, dated Aug. 21st 1784' - James Boswell, *The life of Samuel Johnson: including a Journal of his Tour to the Hebrides* (Repr. London: H.G. Bohn, 1846), Vol. 10, p.227.

⁹¹ Richard Chenevix Trench: *On some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries* (London: J. W. Parker and Son, 1860), p.6.

Greek word with the same meaning and so it became the New Latin word *encyclopædia*. Spurious derivations such as these enrich the English language. Dr Johnson let some inconsistencies into his text as discussed previously, and his simple misspellings have entered into his *Dictionary* only to emerge and perpetuate into 'correct' lexicographical discourse. Dr Johnson also fell prey to the ghost word *foupe*, his *Dictionary* entry for which reads as follows: 'to FOUPE v.z. To drive with a sudden impetuosity [...]'. The word was originally printed in William Camden's *Britannia* as *soupe* but featured *f*, the long form of *s*, meaning to 'swoop'.⁹² Unlike these ghost-words, nonce-words are intended to enter the lexicon rather than the result of error or speculation. *Nonce-word* is, itself, such a neologism, coined by James Murray for the *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*⁹³, progenitor of the final *OED*.

Certainly the *jungftak* entry is nonsense if using the formula that nonsense is 'properly a negative thing — a lack of sense'⁹⁴: it is nonsensical for a piece of fabrication to be among a dictionary's pages. There are, of course, elements of nonsense in both contrived false entries and ghost words. William S. Walsh described the manner by which 'the author' of *Gazophylacium Anglicanum* found a questionable etymological lineage for the word *hassock*, ascribing its roots as being found in 'the Teutonic *kase*, an hare, and socks, because hare-skins are sometimes woven into socks, to keep the feet warm in winter' while *haslenut* [sic] was attributed in terms of its etymology with the word *haste* 'because it is ripe before wall-nuts [sic] and chestnuts'.⁹⁵ This is complete fabrication and speculation. Johnson, similarly, posits this in terms of *spider*'s etymology:

Skinner thinks this word softened from *spinder* or *spinner*, from *spin*; Junius, with his usual felicity, dreams that it comes from *σπιδειν*, to extend; for the

⁹² William Camden, *Britannia* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1610).

⁹³ *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884–1928), Fasc. 1, p.x.

⁹⁴ Anthony Burgess, 'Nonsense', *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense*, ed. Wim Tigges (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), p.17.

⁹⁵ *Gazophylacium Anglicanum: Etymologicon Onomasticon* (London: Printed by E.H. and W.H., to be sold by Randall Taylor, 1689). Reproduction of original in University of Illinois Library and made available on *Early English Books Online*

><http://eebo.chadwyck.co.uk>< [accessed: 12th Sept. 2014]. Quoted by William S. Walsh (1909), p.233.

spider extends its web. Perhaps it comes from *speiden*, Dutch, or *spyden*, Danish, to *spy*, to lie upon the catch. *Dor*, *ðora* Saxon, is *beetle*, or properly a *humble bee* or *stingless bee*. May not the spider be *spy dor*, the insect that watches the door?): The animal that spins a web for flies.⁹⁶

If not error or vague speculation, how might an apparently unaccounted-for and unaccountable hapless *jungftak* have made its way into the dictionary to play cuckoo-in-the nest? The process by which a nonce-word enters a dictionary deserves some scrutiny so that one might evaluate *jungftak*'s appearance or its nonsense credentials. Tarrying just a while longer with ghosts, the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s first editor James Murray contacted poet Robert Browning in order that the meaning of the word *apparitional* in one of his wife's poems might be clarified.⁹⁷ A useful response was not forthcoming, which led to Murray to decry that specific poet's practice of wrangling words 'without regard to their proper meaning', a fact that 'added greatly to the difficulties of the Dictionary'.⁹⁸ Murray is documented as having comparable struggles with Milton's use of the intransitive verb *unlibidinous*⁹⁹ while the verb *unleave* ('to lose and shed leaves') as appears in Gerald Manley Hopkins' work¹⁰⁰ is recalled by David Crystal as causing a particularly fraught time for a later editor of the *OED*; Robert Burchfield explained at a Fulbright colloquium that at the time the rule of thumb was established that 'hapax legomana would be permitted only if wielded by great writers — the writers who are likely to be still read in the 21st century; [...] other new entries require an appropriate weight of citational evidence'.¹⁰¹ It is doubtful that *fictionary*, *mountweazeling* or *calquery* would pass such a test. There certainly is a degree of subjectivity to such an estimation, that a word might be deemed a suitable candidate to enter such an esteemed club. This subjectivity is perhaps best illustrated

⁹⁶ 'spider': Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language* (London: J. & P. Knapton, 1755).

⁹⁷ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Auora Leigh* (London: J. Miller, 1864).

⁹⁸ Recalled by Katherine Murray, *Caught in the Web of Words: James A.H. Murray and the Oxford English Dictionary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p.235.

⁹⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 5.449, as recalled by Robert Ilson, *Lexicography: An Emerging International Profession* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p.24.

¹⁰⁰ Gerald Manley Hopkins, 'Spring and Fall', *Poems* (London: Bridges, 1918).

¹⁰¹ Crystal, p.218.

by the sudden sharp increase of the *Daily Chronicle* being used as source of literature for the *OED* when the editor Furnivall switched from the *Daily News* to this publication as his newspaper of choice¹⁰²: it is this subjectivity, read as snobbery, that leads to my character Winceworth suspecting that a great deal of potentially interesting word-usage is being glossed over (a pun, in the spirit of nonsense literature) as viable for inclusion in a dictionary.

Perhaps, then, the *jungftak* exists as the result of a joke rather than a manufactured anti-piracy *mountweazel*. There is a beguiling theory that such an unorthodox mechanism by which words entered the lexicon marks the reason for the word *quiz*'s existence. The story runs that the late-18th-century Dublin theatre proprietor Richard Daly, following a bet that he could make a word known throughout the city and that in doing so the public would supply a meaning for it, issued cards to members of his staff ('the attendance of the call-boys, scene-shifters, and other inferior employees of the concern')¹⁰³ with the word *QUIZ* written upon them. The cards came with the instruction that the word be chalked on walls all around the city. The next day, the town was abuzz with *quiz* and soon after it became an accepted part of the language, defined after the head-scratching that the word provoked as one posited its possible function or meaning. While a beguiling tale, this account seems likely to be a false or at least flawed, however: the date given for the word's invention is given as 1791¹⁰⁴, and according to contemporary dictionaries the word *quiz* was already in use at this stage to mean 'an odd or eccentric person' and had been used in this sense as early as 1782.¹⁰⁵ A concerted effort or prank of this nature seems an unlikely way for *jungftak* to eventually soar into pages of the wartime edition of *Webster's*. The mild invective *twerp* ('A despicable or objectionable person; an insignificant person, a nobody; a nincompoop') is mooted by the *OED* to have been coined originally as perhaps a nonce-word stemming from an in-joke. It would

¹⁰² Winchester, p.97.

¹⁰³ F.T. Porter, *Gleanings and Reminiscences* (Dublin: Hodges, Foster and Company, 1875), p.35.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ For example Frances Burney, *The Early Diary of Frances Burney, 1768-1778: with a Selection from her Correspondence, and from the Journals of her sisters Susan and Charlotte Burney*, ed. Annie Raine Ellis (London: George Bell & sons 1889), Vol. II, p.297.

be easy to assume that *twerp* is the result of a portmanteau formation, whereby the gentle, chummy broadside *tw-* of *twaddle*, *twat*, *twit* is combined with the uncouth clout of *burp*, *chirp* and *slurp* but in a way that is not overtly sexual/scatological cf. *prat*, *prick*. In fact, *twerp* is touted as being a portmanteau-eponym derived from Thomas Wade Earp, a student at Oxford University in 1911 whose behaviour merited this neologistic memorial. *OED* contributor J.R.R. Tolkien had debated Earp while at Exeter College, Oxford University and claimed in a 1941 letter that earmarked Earp was the ‘original *twerp*’.¹⁰⁶ This fact is consolidated by poet Roy Campbell who referred to the same Earp: ‘he gave the English language the word *tw[e]rp*, really *twearp*, because of the Goering-like wrath kindled in the hearts of the rugger-playing stalwarts at Oxford when he was the president of the Union, by being the last most charming, and wittiest of the decadents’.¹⁰⁷ Like *quiz*, however, this seems to be anecdotal rather than actual source for the word, a fact attested by the *OED* actually recording *twerp*’s first occurrence as printed in 1925.¹⁰⁸ It would appear that these anecdotal accounts of nonce-words becoming neologisms are, themselves, examples of myth-making nonsense.

In *jungftak*’s case, however, if its insertion in the dictionary was intended as a joke it was either a private one or one that failed as a prank because it has not entered the public consciousness to the extent that even its proprietors, in the form of the editors, do not acknowledge its presence. Much like the bird it describes, the lemma *jungftak* is necessarily ‘gone to ground’ because it does not latch on to any reality beyond itself as a piece of text. It reads as a piece of play, describing a bird from fantasy, and in creating it the lexicographer is transformed from ‘harmless drudge’ to a *Homo ludens* whose work functions either for private amusement or to amuse any reader that comes across it at another time.¹⁰⁹ In this, the *jungftak* shares characteristics with elements of nonsense literature. Often aligned with ‘light verse’ or children’s stories, ‘nonsense’ as a literary genre or mode found both its creation

¹⁰⁶ Humphrey Carpenter, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), p.94.

¹⁰⁷ Ignatius Roy Dunnachie Campbell, *Portugal* (London: Max Reinhardt: 1958), p.87.

¹⁰⁸ Edward Fraser and John Gibbons, *Soldier & Sailor Words* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1925), p.292.

¹⁰⁹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

and arguably its apogee in the 19th century with Lear and Carroll but has inheritors including Spike Milligan, Ivor Cutler and Edward Gorey. As a field of literature it shares some characteristics with grotesque, Dadaism, surrealism, absurdism and metafictional literature, with its hallmarks including imprecision of expression within its content and a combination of simultaneity and arbitrariness. This all seems anathema to many assumptions about dictionary entries and how they should function, where clarity, relevance and concision are key. Nonsense literature also often appears in forms that are seeming parodies of literature that, like dictionaries, rely on a strict and defined taxonomy. One thinks of Gorey's alphabetical *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* ('A is for Amy who fell down the stairs, B is for Basil assaulted by bears')¹¹⁰ and Edward Lear's illustrated *Nonsense Botany* (featuring specimens *Piggiwiggia Pyramidalis* and *Pollybirdia Singularis*).¹¹¹ Here the nonsense relies upon that very dichotomy: that of the absurd within the systematised, the unabashedly insincere within the sincere. In this way, nonsense literature is recognised as maintaining a tension between order and disorder and providing a site or process of linguistic anarchy whereby *meaning nothing* is everything to the form. As stated by R. Benayoun, nonsense of this sort is not an absence of sense, but rather a frustration of expectations about sense¹¹²; as such, nonsense is a 'world of words come to life', which does not so much 'antagonise the "real world" [...] as ignore it'.¹¹³ This ignorance of the world, or the witting and witty abstraction from it, means that nonsense literature enacts a certain 'sociological phenomenon' as a method by which human beings, both its readers and its writers, make sense of the world, through the negative capability involved in transforming common sense into nonsense.¹¹⁴ If nonsense such as that of Lear and Carroll does establish and maintain a tension between illusion and reality,

¹¹⁰ Edward Gorey, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies: Or, After the Outing* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1963).

¹¹¹ Edward Lear, *Nonsense Botany and Nonsense Alphabets* (London: Frederick Warne & Co, London 1888).

¹¹² R. Benayoun, *Le Nonsense* (Paris: Balland, 1977), p. 14, 20.

¹¹³ L.S. Ede, 'An Introduction to the Nonsense Literature of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll', *Exploration in the Field of Nonsense* ed. Wim Tigges (Rodolphi: Amsterdam, 1987), p.60.

¹¹⁴ Susan A. Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1978).

order and disorder, form and content, then the *jungftak* entry as a piece of invention settled within a compendium of vetted fact does seem aptly described as a piece of nonsense literature.

An indispensable quality of nonsense, highlighted by Ede, is that in order to qualify as such the work must also be in some way a narrative art rather than merely a confection of clever play on words.¹¹⁵ The *jungftak*, with its potted account of a lovelorn unhinged Persian bird, might qualify. Stewart has espoused the view that literary nonsense is ‘the most radical form of metafiction’¹¹⁶, and certainly if the *jungftak* entry exists as a *mountweazel* it might be read as a metafictional commentary of the way that such an entry can exist as a bird gone-to-ground, not written for any specific ‘reader’ but instead lying dormant and designed to be overlooked in a dictionary. Nonsense literature cannot be (just) mere gibberish: when Edward Lear wrote a letter to a friend that ended ‘Okul scratchabibblebongibo, viddle squibble tog-a-tog, ferrymoyassity amsy flamsky ramsy damskey crocklefether squiggs’ and signed it ‘Flinkywisty pomm — Slushypipp’¹¹⁷ the context *for* its meaninglessness is crucial, the expectations of a formal letter being scotched, bathetically, by its content while retaining its form.

As textual artefacts, both nonsense literature and metafictional *mountweazels* share the characteristics of being contingent upon free association, and often do not have one single, fixed meaning; the words keep to the laws of syntax, morphology, phonetics and so on, but also accrue meaning through linguistic connotations. This characteristic of neologisms’ creation led to Stewart naming dictionaries and encyclopædias as ‘those two great nonsensical enterprises’.¹¹⁸ An example of a nonsense word created explicitly to plug a lexical gap comes with *kelemenopy*, a lexeme contrived by John Ciardi with this explanation, defined as ‘the one essential trope neglected by classical rhetoricians [...] a sequential straight line through the

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Wim Tigges, *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), p.26.

¹¹⁶ Stewart (1978), p.85.

¹¹⁷ Quoted by Anthony Burgess, ‘Nonsense’, *Explorations in the Field of Nonsense*, ed. Wim Tigges (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), p.19.

¹¹⁸ Stewart, p.190.

middle of everything, leading nowhere.¹¹⁹ Ciardi's explanation for including *kelemenopy* in his glossary is that it came 'from my own psychic warp, to see if anyone would notice, and because I have always dreamed of fathering a word'.¹²⁰ His material for this word is *klmnop*, the result of decimating the alphabet but for these select central letters in sequence (described by Ciardi as 'a strictly sequential irrelevance').

Although *kelemenopy* has not gained traction beyond its source, nonsense words can and do then enter the lexicon: *chortle*, for example, found its genesis in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, presumably as a portmanteau of *snort* and *chuckle*¹²¹; the word *portmanteau* in this sense was first by Carroll in the same book to denote words formed by blending sounds from two or more distinct words and combining their meanings. Factitious just as the *jungftak* is fictitious, these *portmanteaux* are made by or resulting from art. Lear's runcible spoon has entered *Webster's* to mean 'a sharp-edged fork with three broad curved prongs', but the word *runcible* appears in that writer's work as a characteristic applicable to, variously, a *spoon*, a *hat*, a *goose*, a *raven* and a *wall*; each time, the word's meaning as a modifier is suggested but never pinned down or grounded outright. As a creator of nonsense words, which exist with self-consistency and independent from direct referents, the nonsense lexicographer is omnipotent. In my novel *Watchwords*, the pressure of conformity and stifled ambition causes the protagonist Winceworth a great deal of fatigue, and in being able to create words under his own aegis, and describe sensations and realities on his own terms in his own terms, he is vested with some semblance of agency and autonomous power. Such playfulness in the face of constraint informs the creation of ludic texts that are deliberately inserted into a dictionary. As with the creation of nonsense, I contend in this thesis and present in my novel the proposition that the creation of false words in a dictionary is a way by which reality and complete meaninglessness can be held in a tension. The lexicographer's role as creative agent, not just compiler of information, is brought to the fore.

¹¹⁹ John Ciardi, *A Browser's Dictionary and Native's Guide to the Unknown American Language* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

¹²⁰ *Reference and Information Services: A Reader for the Nineties* ed. William A. Katz (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1986), p.344.

¹²¹ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass* (London: Macmillan, 1871).

The *jungftak* bird might be counted among the absurd, if not absurdist, world of nonsense literature and its writing desks and ravens, its old people of *Ealing* wholly devoid of good feeling driving small gigs with three Owls and a Pig in a meadow of *Piggiwiggia Pyramidalis*. It ought to be stressed, however, that although the *jungftak* entry is related to nonsense literature, it cannot entirely be added to that canon. If it is indeed a metafictional *mountweazel* that deliberately disrupts the text of a dictionary, and as such exists either as satire or a burlesque or a parody (or all three) of the dictionary form, although it shares with nonsense the ‘virtue of obliqueness [...]ideally suited to criticism from the inside of a class or society by one too wracked by self-doubt to engage in pen assault’¹²², since the prime characteristic of nonsense is that it is not written to ‘prove’ a point, nor lyrical in the true sense of expressing the personal feelings of an author, the *jungftak* entry relies too much upon its context as a surreptitiously inserted text to be literary nonsense. As a ‘meaningless’ addition in a book that is dedicated to meaning, the *jungftak* serves a function beyond the rubric of nonsense literature and while it does, to take Tigges’s formulation, ‘balance a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence of meaning’¹²³, *jungftak*’s context as a fictitious entry in a dictionary means that it cannot qualify as an example of nonsense literature. As such, although there is a discourse between dictionaries and the nonsensical based mainly on misunderstandings of etymology and the neologising of nonce-words, the *jungftak* is too coded an infraction upon the intended use of a dictionary to be included as part of nonsense literature’s canon.

¹²² R. B. Henkle, ‘The Mad Hatter’s World’, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, No. 49 (1973), pp.99-117, (p.115).

¹²³ Tigges (1988), p.47.

Chapter 4

My Word Against Theirs: the 19th Century and *esquivalience* (n.)

My prose-based creative piece is set during the publication of a fictional encyclopædic dictionary in 1899, and features a protagonist who begins to insert false entries into the work's lexical corpus. I decided to set the novel *Watchwords* during this period in time because the 'ownership' of knowledge, and the control that could be exercised over its propagation, was in a certain type of flux not least in terms of language and its collation. To borrow Hobsbawm's term for the time spanning from 1789-1914,¹²⁴ the 'long 19th century' was marked by developments in technology and also featured a growing number of 'amateurs' working in direct correspondence with specialists, often with access to new institutions that had been set up in order to register or fix knowledge for public dissemination. By using a fictional publishing house and the culture of 19th-century-lexicography as its microcosm, and a double-narrative, linking this historical storyline with the present-day, my novel *Watchwords* seeks to present the ways in which various social and technological developments provide specific opportunities for the conception and proliferation of hoaxes, including fictitious entries' appearance within dictionaries. A *mountweazel* copyright trap that was eventually uncovered within the 2001 edition of the *New Oxford American Dictionary* in many ways acts as a fitting synopsis of the character of Winceworth in the novel: *esquivalience*, defined as 'dodging responsibility', with its concocted etymology specifying 'late 19th century: perhaps from French *esquiver*, "dodge, slink away".¹²⁵ This final chapter will attempt to outline the ways by which dictionaries are moulded or affected by their milieux, and how the 19th-century setting of the novel appended to this thesis functions as a means by which the creative act of committing a fictitious entry to an encyclopædia can be investigated.

The efforts of the lexicographer and encyclopædist can only ever be a product of his or her time and a reflection on the environment and period in which the work was compiled. As such, errors in such works can be indicative of the incorrect information that was present in that society at large and 'reflect[s] the attitudes of a

¹²⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875-1914* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987).

¹²⁵ 'esquivalience': *New Oxford American Dictionary*, eds. Elizabeth J. Jewell and Frank Abate (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

society toward the dominant problems of the ever-changing here and now'.¹²⁶ It was for this reason that *The National Encyclopaedia* dismissed 'evolution' in its entry for the theory:

It appears difficult to resist the conclusion, that the variations by which new species and new classes are formed are not fortuitous or at random, but take place according to a pre-determined plan; and that the evolution of every living being is guided by an Intelligence whose beneficent purposes are best served by an endless variety in both the useful and the beautiful.¹²⁷

The encyclopædist's authorial voice here permits itself a non-objectivity that, to modern eyes, indicates a personal agenda or discrimination that looks like a violation of fact but was borne of the context in which the *Encyclopaedia* was compiled. Such oversights also exist in lexicographical acts of exclusion as well as admission: the first editions of the *OED* did not include the adjective African but did include American amongst their headwords¹²⁸, while in 1902 the freshly-discovered radium was quibbled over and finally denied entry to the *OED* as it was not certain whether the term would endure and therefore was of requisite relevance. Dictionaries are necessarily limited to the time in which they are compiled and cannot exist, to borrow Rosamund Moon's hypothetical formulation, some entirely 'true' Unidentified Authorizing Dictionary.¹²⁹

The comparisons between the treatment of physical cultural artefacts and lexicographical artefacts are not always direct, and at times without parallel. However, there do appear to be instances where the 19th century's particular facility and fervour for 'harvesting', 'gathering' or 'collecting' artefacts, and registering hitherto oral or undocumented ritual practices and associated cultural artefacts, is

¹²⁶ Henry Kahane and Renée Kahane, 'The Dictionary as Ideology: Sixteen Case Studies', *History, Languages and Lexicographers*, ed. Ladislav Zgusta (Niemayer, 1992), p.20.

¹²⁷ 'Evolution': *The National Encyclopaedia: a Dictionary of Universal Knowledge By Writers of Eminence in Literature, Science and Art* (London: William Mackenzie, 1880), Vol. 5.

¹²⁸ Winchester, p.144.

¹²⁹ Rosamund Moon, 'Objective or Objectionable: Ideological Aspects of Dictionaries', *English Language Research 3: Language and Ideology* (1989), p.63. Quoted by Green, p.26.

mirrored by a boom in both the publication and interest in encyclopædias, lexicons, dialect and slang dictionaries. Contemporary to and at the forefront of these developments, Hermann von Helmholtz remarked on the link between intellectual progress and advances in ‘catalogues, lexicons, registers, indexes, digests’¹³⁰: it is a time period that seems bent upon asserting taxonomies and onomasticons of the encountered world. By using examples from the history of dictionaries and the advances in geological, ethnographic, archaeological and scientific acquisition and dissemination, one can detect that curational impulses and strictures inherent to such ventures might have ushered in a century in which lexicographical hoaxes and disingenuous editorial behaviour could flourish.

The ability to record the world and its processes was undoubtedly galvanised in the long 19th century due to the development and refinement of certain technologies that aided the detection, preservation and display of data. To provide some examples, 1816 saw the invention of the stethoscope¹³¹ followed fourteen years later by Lister’s compound microscope¹³² with X-rays discovered in 1895¹³³; all these discoveries were concurrent with developments made in the new field of image-capture led by Fox Talbot and Muybridge. The Remington typewriter was invented in 1874 while the first prototype of the Dictaphone emerged in 1881: from medicine to astronomy to ways of note-taking, whole fields of inquiry were revolutionised by these new inventions — the speed, ease and ability to record and replicate data had never been greater. The British Royal Mail’s use of the new penny post is an obvious

¹³⁰ Hermann von Helmholtz, *Popular Lectures on Scientific Subjects*, trans. E. Atkinson (London: Longmans, Green, 1873). Quoted by Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge II: From the Encyclopaedia to Wikipedia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 110, footnote 5 by way of *Books and the Sciences in History*, ed. Marina Frasca-Spada and Nicholas Jardine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.402.

¹³¹ Andras Gedeon, *Science and Technology in Medicine: An Illustrated Account Based on Ninety-Nine Landmark Publications from Five Centuries* (New York: Springer, 2007), p.173.

¹³² John Queckett, *A Practical Treatise on the Use of the Microscope: Including the Different Methods of Preparing and Examining Animal, Vegetable, and Mineral Structures* (London: H. Baillière, 1855), p.44.

¹³³ Michael F. L’Annunziata, *Radioactivity: Introduction and History* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2007), p.49.

indicator of national dissemination for artefacts related to dictionaries, namely correspondence: a pillar box was actually installed outside editor James Murray's house in Oxford because the number of submissions to the *OED* was so great in response to his Appeal. Perhaps such a 'mailbox' might have attracted Lillian Mountweazel's lens. Whether the *OED* could have existed or succeeded without the Royal Mail's penny post in 1840 is questionable not only in terms of its permitting a direct interaction between public readers and an editorial body but also the ability to disseminate a call-out for action in distributed journals. In 1879, Murray produced 'An Appeal to the English-Speaking and English-Reading Public' that circulated throughout the world, requesting and eliciting responses from thousands of volunteer readers. Respondents were not necessarily professional or even amateur philologists but those who felt compelled to contribute to the Dictionary's cause. The 'Appeal' was generally for the collection of 'raw material' for the Dictionary, wherein and whereby respondents were directed to read a particular text and isolate from them any words and meanings that they considered outré or interesting. In order to supplement the responses, and stimulate more nuanced work, Murray drafted a subsequent request to the journal *Notes and Queries* detailing the need for quotations for nearly 60 specific words falling between *abacist* and *abnormous* for which he suspected there were earlier instances than those currently housed in their pigeonholes. This appeal for desiderata continues today: a recent appeal from *OED* online, to the thrill of stereotypical Anglophiles, focussed on identifying the first use of 'Earl Grey' as the proper noun for that blend of tea.¹³⁴ The internet is a natural heir to the postal service's technology in being harnessed for worldwide knowledge-acquisition.

A realisable scope of vision and the energy required to create a 'complete' encyclopædic dictionary had also shifted by this period, in that it was often no longer the purview of a single individual polymath. In contrast to 17th-and-early-18th-century figures such as Ephraim Chambers and Samuel Johnson, authors and contributors were necessarily being conscripted into the lexicographical venture, such as my character Winceworth. In an example detailed by Burke, the *Grande Encyclopedie* (1886-1902) had about 450 contributors, while the eleventh edition of the *Britannica*

¹³⁴ 'Early Grey: The results of the *OED* Appeal on Earl Grey tea', *OED online*.
><http://public.oed.com/early-grey-the-results-of-the-oed-appeal-on-earl-grey-tea><
[accessed: 12th April 2014].

(1911) had 1,507.¹³⁵ Certainly by 1881, over 750 individuals had volunteered to help James Murray, from all different walks of life. This more rhizomatic approach to editing and compilation for a dictionary marks another instance of the ways in which more and more people were being involved in the production of dictionaries beyond a central figure, echoing the appeal from the *OED* to an army of readers and workers. This use of, effectively, crowdsourcing is a precursor for the compilation of such Wiki sites that exist and do so well today online but at the same time also offer a greater number of opportunities for mistakes to be made and for false data to fall between the cracks if the editorial process is not strong enough. Just as anyone can insert a hoax into *Wikipedia*, without clear editorial tracking systems both culprit and false information can be difficult to trace.

Parallel to these specialised technologies' invention, the long 19th century also saw certain bodies and organisations established in order to aid research, exploration and dissemination in arts, science and cultural record. The access to artefacts had never been greater, and the dissemination of knowledge by these bodies to the public was more direct than ever through new galleries, universities and museums. This dissemination and retrieval was not just limited to physical buildings: in many ways, the *OED*'s circulated Appeals could be framed as a survey of English language and itself indicative of the impetus for such information censuses during the long 19th century. These include the British Ordnance survey that launched in 1791 (itself subsequently beset by cartographical mountweazels).¹³⁶ Numerous anthropological expeditions were also made at this time, some of the most famous being the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1897-1902) and the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits (1898) where field explorers ventured out under the perceived noble aegis of registering moments of cultural import (including ethnographic wax cylinder recordings, digitised versions of which can be heard on the British Library website) to bring back to Britain. Burke quotes proto-anthropologist Adolf Bastian as a commentary on this dogged process of acquiring knowledge: 'What can be done must

¹³⁵ Burke, p.179.

¹³⁶ 'AA pays £20m to settle map copyright row', *The Telegraph* online, 6th May 2001 ><http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1325132/AA-pays-20m-to-settle-map-copyright-row.html>< [last accessed: 5th November 2012].

be done now. If it is not, the possibility of ethnology is forever annulled'.¹³⁷ There was a clear feeling or compulsion to capture, to gather: the aforementioned recording on the British Library makes the rather apologetic footnote to the recording that 'although the expedition was ground-breaking, the sound quality of the collection is not as good as others in the Ethnographic Wax Cylinder Collection, most likely because of the lack of experience in sound recording amongst the team'.¹³⁸ This recalls a detail of hierarchical nepotism that seems indicative of certain scholastic ventures during the long 19th century, where human social connections were favoured over meretricious probity. For his part, James Murray instructed his legion of children to attend and assist in aspects of the *OED*'s accumulation of slips and editorial paraphernalia: they were paid for their work and known affectionately as 'the little Dics'.¹³⁹ In the novel *Watchwords*, this discrepancy, as well as the tension between 'desk and field' workers who are employed by these institutions, is explored.

This acquisitional zeal for knowledge, however, was not only marred by occasional lapses in technological incompatibility and improper allocation of roles — the manner in which certain practices in fieldwork were conducted ranges in nature from the ethically problematic and insensitive to out-and-out desecration. Human remains, for example, were often carted across the world to fill Western museums and galleries, in many cases taken without permission; a 2010 study investigated the number and range of historic human remains in 146 English museums, and its executive summary detailed that 132 institutions held human remains in their collections, with 60 holding human remains from overseas that could be dated from between the years 1500 and 1947.¹⁴⁰ Quite apart from this literal bodysnatching, Burke

¹³⁷ Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985), p.287. Quoted by Burke, p.21.

¹³⁸ 'Torres Strait Expedition, Cylinder A7. Charles Myers' notation: 'Song IVA: Malu'. Adud leluti B Ethnographic Wax Cylinders 1898. BL Product Identifier: C80/1016025. ><http://sounds.bl.uk/World-and-traditional-music/Ethnographic-wax-cylinders/025M-Coo8oX1016XX-0100Vo#sthash.KcA7TPe3.dpuf> [last accessed: 12th July 2013].

¹³⁹ Winchester, p.86.

¹⁴⁰ Jane Weeks and Valerie Bott, 'Scoping Survey of Historic Human Remains in English Museums', undertaken by the Ministerial Working Group on Human

recalls that bronze sculptures from the city of Benin in West Africa began to reach museums in Britain after a ‘punitive expedition’ of 1897 which saw the city entirely razed: ‘acquisition’ here becomes tantamount to looting as the drive to swell shelves and display cases with fossils, animal and human skeletons, architectural fragments, relics, seedlings and zoological specimens. As the German anthropologist Bastian remarked, ‘military campaigns can bear fruit for scientific fields of research and can be exploited for this purpose’.¹⁴¹ This European Imperialist drive to collect and make one’s own is set against the lexicographical culture explicitly by German philosopher Bernard Groethuysen, who described the encyclopædia as an expression of the bourgeois desire to accumulate goods: ‘The Encyclopaedists take man around the estate [...] There is what learned men have acquired for you [...] consider it henceforth as something which is ours’.¹⁴² Errors or hoaxes that enter lexicographic works are of course ethically problematic in ways quite different and lesser to the vandalism enacted upon cultural artefacts such as the Benin atrocities, and I have attempted in my novel to personify this destructive Imperialist impulse in the character of Frasham who believes it is his right to acquire words, things and possessions by dint of his perceived power over them.

Perhaps a good example of the long 19th century’s separation between that which was made available to the public and that which is the reserve of the specialist, where that which is deemed ‘acceptable’ to the viewing or reading public is different to that accessible to a doughty scholarly coterie, exists in the British Museum’s long-standing ‘Secretum’, a room set aside for artefacts that were deemed too obscene for the casual browser. As such, they could not access certain objects and texts pertaining to the evolution of pornography or the erotic as a distinct cultural category. This is a clear example of an institution shielding but also dictating public sensitivities through curational choices in order to segregate artefacts from members of the

Remains, February, 2003. Available online: ><http://www.honour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/ScopingSurveyWGHR-2.pdf>< [accessed: 23rd April 2011].

¹⁴¹ Terence D. Murphy, ‘Medical Knowledge and Statistical Methods in Early Nineteenth Century France’, *Medical History* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), Vol. 25, pp.301-319. Quoted by Burke, p.28.

¹⁴² Herbert Dieckmann, ‘The Concept of Knowledge in the Encyclopédie’, *Essays in Comparative Literature*, eds. Herbert Dieckmann, Harry Levin and Helmut Motekat (St. Louis, Washington University, 1961), pp.73-107, (p.84).

public. The term pornography itself entered the English language directly connected with the exhibition of obscene artefacts, with Webster's first defining it as 'licentious painting employed to decorate the walls of rooms sacred to bacchanalian orgies, examples of which exist in Pompeii'¹⁴³; now far broader in its application, 'pornography' seems a more wieldy term than the hitherto obscure nouns such as *rhyparography*. The argument might be made that a lexicographer such as my main character Winceworth, setting himself the task of creating covert, twisted truths within the treasure-house of a dictionary is a *rhyparographer* and purveyor of distaste.

The use and censure of slang and invective in dictionaries is a huge and fascinating site of study, championed by such figures as Eric Partridge and carried on today in sites such as *Urban Dictionary*; Dr Johnson remarked that 'I hope I have not daubed my fingers'¹⁴⁴ when congratulated on the omission of certain improper words into his Dictionary, which connects with the imagery of dissemination of knowledge in dictionaries as being a palpable, potentially-besmirching business best left either to the filthy-minded or to experts who can appreciate it on some rarefied, philological level. In Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* this seems in line with his pledge to 'purify' the language, but for any dictionary such as the *OED* that holds as an important tenet an ability to record all English language, to not include swear words seems remiss. Dictionaries' neglect of certain nouns, verbs and adjectives in this way does not, again, have quite the same ethical issues associated with it compared to other 19th-century actions that wrought censure in the scramble to disseminate knowledge (whether intentionally or not), but the parallels do exist: Burke observes that in the case of Assyrian palaces subjected to collectors' trowels and pickaxes, the 'reliefs just exposed crumbled before the eyes of the excavators', and that the coral throne in Sennaschrib's palace 'fell to pieces at the slightest touch'.¹⁴⁵ One has cause to remember the horror with which some fellow *OED* editors discovered Furnivall, in his eccentric passion to commit quotations from books onto the paper slips for the

¹⁴³ 'pornography': *A Dictionary of the English Language* (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam, 1864).

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in Lynda Mugglestone, 'The Indefinable Something: Representing Rudeness in the English Dictionary', *Rude Britannia*, ed. Mina Gorji (London: Routledge, 2013), pp.22-32, (p.22).

¹⁴⁵ Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, *Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2008), p.571.

dictionary, happily hacking away at original manuscripts in which he had found an interesting word, or a word used interestingly, in order to paste the pages directly onto the pigeonholed index cards.¹⁴⁶

These are not intended to be held up as examples of ‘creative destruction’, as termed by Schumpeter, whereby space is made for new artefacts or data by razing previous candidates. Space in this sense can mean both the ‘literal space in the case of archives, libraries and museums, and metaphorical space in the case of encyclopædias or the curricula of schools and universities’¹⁴⁷. In such a way Abraham Rees’ Proposals were published in an attempt to revise Chambers’ *Cyclopædia*¹⁴⁸, and Rees emphasised in his sermons prior to publication that it was his intention to ‘exclude obsolete science, to retrench superfluous matter’.¹⁴⁹ As new progress is made in science, new coinages and advances in understanding constantly render previous column inches of articles superfluous, if not meaningless: copies of the *National Encyclopaedia* include entries for malaria where the disease is still described in terms of transmission by some strange noumenal ether that lurks over swamps¹⁵⁰: the facts are broadly true, and etymologically valid, but ignorant of mosquitoes’ role in malaria’s vector control. Similarly, as discussed above, the editors of the *OED* decided not to include an entry for the new word *radium* because its editors were not sure at

¹⁴⁶ Katherine Murray (2001), p.139: ‘[A] number of valuable of books did get cut up, and a lover of them would be horrified to see the earliest dictionary slips with bits of black letter editions of the sixteenth century onto them.’ Murray goes on to quote in a footnote 20: in personal Murray family papers, W. Gee, *The Philological Society New English Dictionary Vocabulary of Words Beginning with the Letter B* (1863): ‘List of books to be cut up, including several folios of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’.

¹⁴⁷ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1942), p.82. Quoted in Burke, p.147.

¹⁴⁸ *Cyclopædia, or an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences Book* (London: Ephraim Chambers, 1728).

¹⁴⁹ Richard Yeo, *Encyclopaedic Visions: Scientific Dictionaries and Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.68.

¹⁵⁰ ‘malaria’: *The National Encyclopaedia: a Dictionary of Universal Knowledge By Writers of Eminence in Literature, Science and Art* (London: William Mackenzie, 1880), Vol. 9.

the time whether the term for this newly discovered element would remain fixed (allowing someone working at the *OED* to submit a spoof slip for the word, featuring a speculative etymology linked to ‘excrement of a squint-eyed rat’).¹⁵¹ This oversight was remedied in the 1933 Supplement with *radium*’s inclusion; similarly, *appendicitis* found its rightful place within the dictionary having been left out of the 1891 version on the advice of the Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford University. This omission was roundly criticised in 1902 when Edward VII’s coronation was delayed due to ill-health caused by this particular affliction, and the word’s use became widespread in the media.

A conventional dictionary is thus often determined by a lexicographer’s particular intellectual milieu: in the same way that blunders such as the ghost words are not necessarily always to be understood as fundamentally detrimental to the factual purposes of a dictionary, one might contend that a ‘perfect’ dictionary free from all error is impossible because any compiler or compiling body lacks complete objective oversight. This is not caused by any direct, insidious violation of a factual book due to fictional insertions, but because a dictionary can never be entirely ‘all-knowing’, as language and reality is in a constant state of flux. The decision to remove words in order that more ‘relevant’ words in a dictionary might take their place is often deemed controversial. Recent editorial proposals to replace, for example, the words *catkin* and *chestnut* with *cut and paste* and *broadband* in the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* gained national coverage and much outraged comment, with twenty-eight authors including Margaret Atwood, Andrew Motion and Robert Macfarlane appealing directly to Oxford University Press to revise this plan: ‘We recognise the need to introduce new words and to make room for them and do not intend to comment in detail on the choice of words added [...] we think the choice of words to be omitted shocking and poorly considered’.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Winchester believes the slip to have been written by Assistant Editor Frederick Sweatman [Winchester, p.202], while Brewer credits its creation to H. J. Bayliss [Brewer, p.47].

¹⁵² Alison Flood, ‘Oxford Junior Dictionary’s replacement of ‘natural’ words with 21st-century terms sparks outcry, *The Guardian*, 13th January 2015 ><http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/13/oxford-junior-dictionary-replacement-natural-words>< [accessed: 14th January 2015].

Of course, as much as dictionaries might be treated in the public consciousness as if a lexicographer's personal biases or limitations will not affect such books' content, no written text is ever entirely divorced from particular creative choices and editorial conditions in terms of their composition. If one considers some early dictionaries, such a book's *readability* as well as its factual accuracy was stressed, and that such books ought to be used for the 'entertainment of the curious', to use the words of the preface to Bailey's *Dictionary*, a template for Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* and a favourite of William Pitt.¹⁵³ In terms of a lexicographer's particular bias, by the fourth edition of Johnson's dictionary one can detect a systematic addition of moral and religious quotations selected by Johnson that appear to have been inserted in order to serve a greater function than simply illustrating a word's definition. For example, Johnson apparently refused to quote Hobbes because he 'did not like his [the philosopher's] principles'.¹⁵⁴ Instead, the lexicographer privileged religious quotations that espoused positive moral lessons, or 'adapted' literature so that it might fulfil this task. In terms of lexicographers lending their own stylistic flourishes to their work, famously in Chambers' dictionaries we have the levity of such definitions as 'éclair: a cake, long in shape but short in duration'.¹⁵⁵ Whilst not existing as a hoax, these examples do highlight individual choices and embellishments that exist within dictionaries.

A study of Johnson's use of illustrative quotations highlights, as Allen Reddick observes, a 'spilling over'¹⁵⁶ of quotations from their lexical purpose, with flippancies extending into a Shakespeare quotation used to illustrate the letter Z by quoting the Earl of Kent's line from *King Lear*: 'Thou whoreson zed! thou unnecessary letter!'¹⁵⁷ and his definition of *trolmydames* ('of this word, I know not the meaning') seems

¹⁵³ Nathan Bailey, *An Universal Etymological Dictionary* (London: E. Bell, J. Darby, A. Bettesworth, 1721), title page.

¹⁵⁴ O.M. Brack and Robert Kelley, *Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1974), p.82.

¹⁵⁵ 'éclair': *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, eds. William and Liddell Geddie (Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1952).

¹⁵⁶ Alan Reddick, *The Making of Johnson's Dictionary: 1746-1773* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.167.

¹⁵⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Life and Death of King Lear*, ed. Samuel Johnson (London: J and R Tonson et. al., 1765), II. 3. 1130.

indicative that ‘registering’ the language was of a higher priority than offering categorical definitions. Reddick has written convincingly that Johnson privileged religious quotations that espoused positive moral lessons and also ‘adapted’ literature so that it might fulfil this task. To this end, the 1773 edition of the *Dictionary* features hundreds of quotations from Milton, mainly from *Paradise Lost*, that Reddick persuasively posits to have been tweaked or edited in order to convey a slightly different meaning. The adjective long is illustrated by Johnson with the line ‘long and ceaseless hiss’, taken from *Paradise Lost*.¹⁵⁸ However, the context in which this line is used in Milton’s poem is somewhat different to that suggested by Johnson’s quotation; Milton’s line actually runs ‘with famine long, and ceaseless hiss’; Johnson removed the comma so that ‘long’ functions as an adjective pre-modifying ‘hiss’, rather than post-modifying ‘famine’, thereby escalating the dramatic intensity of the quotation. This is just one way in which Johnson altered quotations for apparent stylistic reasons so that they might fulfil some ‘better’ notion of English.

In my novel *Watchwords*, the protagonist Winceworth is frustrated by the fact that he is so often overlooked not only by his colleagues but also by the character Sophia with whom he believes he has fallen in love; to his mind, she is oblivious to him and also seems to be yet another ‘prize’ that has been acquired by his rival Frasham, an employee of the fictional *Swansby* Press. Frasham is able to escape the confines of the office to research etymology and word derivation ‘out in the field’, while Winceworth is a desk-based lexicographer. I have written Winceworth’s narrative so that he eventually uses this acknowledged inconspicuousness as a virtue and a means by which he can assert his own agency when he embarks upon the task of inserting false words into the dictionary. Just as a mountweazel or fictitious entry is designed so that it might not be discovered, so too my novel’s lexicographer is unassuming and able to evade detection in the very act of creating such an entry. In this way, Winceworth’s behaviour and circumstances in *Watchwords* not only characterises the way that deliberate fictitious entries might physically be included a dictionary, but he performs the notions of appropriation, dissemination and destruction that I have suggested in this chapter are associated with the 19th century’s milieu and embodies such an entry’s surreptitious, spurious nature.

In creating fictitious entries, Winceworth is able to function under his own aegis rather than those strictures imposed on him by the *Swansby* Press; as such, he is

¹⁵⁸ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London: Samuel Simmons, 1669), 10.573.

able to define subjective sensations and realities that he encounters both on his own terms and in his own terms. The false entries that Winceworth creates, as such, fill not only a lexical lacuna — for example, the precise colour of an explosion that he is not able to name according to any known chromatic definition that is listed in the *Swansby* dictionary — but he is also able to assert his own identity into a text that he felt precluded such subjectivity. In José Saramago's novel *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, the protagonist Raimundo Silva is a proof-reader who becomes actively engaged in inserting a very small but deliberate fiction into a 'reliable' text:

[Raimundo] holds his biro with a steady hand and adds the word to the page, a word that historians never wrote, that for the sake of historical truth he could never have brought himself to write, the word *Not*, and what the book says now is that the crusaders will *Not* help the Portuguese to conquer Lisbon [...] what we would call false has come to prevail over what we would call true, falsehood has replaced truth, and someone would have to narrate the history anew, and how.¹⁵⁹

Through this central event in the novel, Saramago presents a scenario wherein matters of personal agency, and the presumed obliviousness of a document's eventual audience and readership, affect a text. Silva's incursion forces the reader to consider the reliability of received fact, and Saramago's novel highlights that not only does a writer's cultural milieu affect a text, but the individuality particular to those who arrange, compile, and exert authority over textual sources also means that such documents are necessarily subjective and contingent, rather than factually absolute. Such individuals might be uncertain or unconvinced, and have the potential to be wilfully neglectful in their role. A conceit that is fundamental to Saramago's novel and that I have tried to address in *Watchwords* centres upon the fact that whenever texts such as dictionaries are treated in the public consciousness as unassailably 'true' or infallible, recalling John Algeo's term *lexicographidolatory*,¹⁶⁰ this denies the subjectivity of those figures who are involved in such texts' creation. I would contend

¹⁵⁹ José Saramago, *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (London: Harvill Press, 1996; digital edition, New York: Vintage Digital e-book, 2011), p.40.

¹⁶⁰ John Algeo, 'Dictionaries as seen by the Educated Public in Great Britain and the USA', *An International Encyclopedia of Lexicography*, Vol. 1 (1989), p.29. Quoted by Green (1997), p.29.

that the character Silva and my character Winceworth both perform subversions within the respective texts in order to assert their own agency in the face of oppressive claims for ‘absolute truth’.

According to his Preface written for his *Dictionary*, Johnson regarded his task as that of resolving to order ‘the boundless chaos of living speech’.¹⁶¹ Here one does detect an avowal to commit to certain noble lexicographical cause, but also highlights the lexicographer’s personal ego in that Johnson believes he might be able to attempt to control such chaos. This seems perhaps at odds with the subjectivity that any lexicographer should claim. Just as *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* considers the function and the authority of the historian and proof-reader, my novel *Watchwords* attempts to consider the lexicographer’s subjectivities; it considers that often-overlooked individuals exert great power in often-overlooked processes when it comes to textual production, and that just as they might fill the margins of the page with ‘a flurry of indignant *deleaturs*’¹⁶², so too such figures might assert their own creative additions to the body of a text that would then be accepted as fact by an oblivious or too-trusting readership. As a Saramago character opines: ‘we are often too lazy to verify the meaning of a word in the dictionary, with inevitable consequences’¹⁶³. I have attempted to complement this concept in *Watchwords* by including anachronisms in the historical narrative of my novel; just as no reader can trust a dictionary to be somehow objectively true, nor a historical document to be entirely dependable, details that are supplied concerning the Winceworth and Mallory narratives in *Watchwords* are suspect and unreliable.

In my novel, I have sought to use features of the image of the fictitious entry *jungftak*, as outlined in the previous chapter of this thesis, in order to demonstrate the way in which the creation of mountweazels and false entries can form a bond between the creator and seeker of such pieces. The figure of the *jungftak* is co-dependent on some ‘other’ because of its hook-and-eye wings; the figure of the *jungftak* entry as a metafiction relies upon its discovery at some time in the future. It

¹⁶¹ Samuel Johnson, ‘Preface’, *A Dictionary of the English Language: A Digital Edition of the 1755 Classic by Samuel Johnson*, ed. Brandi Besalke.

>http://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/?page_id=8.

[accessed: 23rd July 2014].

¹⁶² Saramago, p.32

¹⁶³ Saramago, p.39

is through the creation and detection of an ill-fitting false word — a word that is ‘unfit’ for a factual dictionary, but specifically designed in order that it might ‘fit in’ — that the characters of Winceworth and Mallory find an alliance in my novel. This is the narrative by my unhinged characters of Winceworth, Mallory negotiate a relationship that forms the basis of my creative writing project.

To refer back in part to the previous chapter, the fact that the redundant *jungftak* nests in an edition of Webster’s dictionary recalls an anecdote involving the British naval officer Basil Hall who, when queried by Noah Webster as to why he considered American additions to the English language to be unwelcome, replied that ‘there are enough words already’.¹⁶⁴ This is part of the reason for my novel’s character Winceworth and his increasing frustration with his task at Swansby’s dictionary, and is addressed in part in the entry for ‘Encyclopédie’ in the multi-authored surrealist project *Le Da Costa Encyclopédique*:

Encyclopaedias trouble themselves a great deal about words fallen into disuse, never about words still unknown, burning to be uttered... If it were possible for us to catch, be it only in snatches, the language that is yet to come, we would immediately become men of more than one time, as the polyglot is a man of more than one land.¹⁶⁵

This sense that dictionaries and encyclopædias might be not only static compendiums of fact but also posited as atlases to an uncanny valley or vale of unknowing is crucial to the Mallory-Winceworth link in the novel *Watchwords*, with each trying to access or posit the other as reader and writer of surreptitious fictions. Whilst the *Le Da Costa* project in the above entry sets out seek a more Leibnizian task of elaborating a language-of-the-future, one might also align its thesis with the contention that verbal and written ‘nonsense’ can be framed as a metaphysical endeavour, ‘a striving to enlarge and to transcend the limits of the material universe and logic’.¹⁶⁶ This view is also couched in the first critical assessment of nonsense

¹⁶⁴ Jeff McQuain, *Never Enough Words: How Americans Invented Expressions as Ingenious, Ornerly, and Colorful as Themselves* (New York: Random House, 1999), p.xv.

¹⁶⁵ *Encyclopaedia Acephalica: Writers Associated with Georges Bataille and the Acéphale Group*, ed. Alastair Brotchie, trans. Iain White, Dominic Faccini and Annette Michelson (London: Atlas Press, 1997), p.122.

¹⁶⁶ Esslin, M, *Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.248.

literature written by G.K. Chesterton, that ‘Nonsense is a new literature (we might almost say a new sense) ... [if] Nonsense is really to be the literature of the future, it must have its own version of the Cosmos to offer’.¹⁶⁷ As such, the creation of nonsense literature exists as world-making, or evoking a new world, a possible world filled with jungftaks! This recalls a portion of Foucault’s introduction to *The Order of Things*, musing on a piece of fiction by Borges:

[...] Out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought — our thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography — breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. This passage quotes a “certain Chinese encyclopaedia” in which it is written that “animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies”. In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that.¹⁶⁸

It is the ‘exotic charm’ of another reality, away from the limitations imposed by him within the *Swansby* dictionary house that compels the Winceworth character to seek to subvert the dictionary by composing false entries. By creating jungftakian nonsense, he is able to create a new world and fashion an escape from his reality precisely by playing within the strictures that confine him. This private, new cosmology finds resonance with a character living over a century after his death in the novel’s other main character Mallory, who is seeking to find the false words that he has created, and is testament to this form of nonsense’s trans-temporality. A

¹⁶⁷ G.K. Chesterton, ‘A Defence of Nonsense’, *The Defendant* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1901), p.42.

¹⁶⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1970), p.xv. Quotation from Borges’ essay ‘El idioma analitico de John Wilkins’, *Otras Inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1952).

dictionary or encyclopaedia is necessarily the product of its own cultural and social milieu, and testament to the subjectivities of the writers involved and their access to information available to them at the time, but my novel *Watchwords* posits that the nonsense-aspect of a fictitious entry collapses that time-specificity, as the entry is only invested with meaning the moment that is discovered or revealed to be fictitious by some unknown reader in the future.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate the incidence and nature of fictitious entries in works of reference. In order to do so, a survey was conducted of such entries' occurrence within the history of lexicographic and encyclopædic collation, a review that eventually placed dictionaries' copyright traps and surreptitiously-inserted non-facts in the context of many glossaries, lexicons and encyclopædias that — for stylistic, formal and accidental reasons — appear to contain variation, discrepancies and conjecture in a manner that is at odds with the perceived status and expectations such books hold in the public's cultural consciousness. Through delineating the different ways by which fictitious entries manifest within dictionaries and encyclopædias, the literary phenomenon of small works of fiction within books or corpuses supposedly dedicated to the concise, clear presentation of fact has been undertaken critically and creatively as an original contribution to research, using the examples of *Lillian Virginia Mountweazel*, *jungftak* and *esquivalience* as a means to evaluate the status of such fictions as discrete, discreet texts.

This research has its coda in a specific creative practice. The novel *Watchwords* centres upon a character committed to creating false entries in a 19th-century encyclopædic dictionary in order to assert his creative agency. In writing the account of the two main characters, their interactions and attempts to find creative and personal expression, the nature and structure of their narrative arcs is contingent upon understanding the form and structure of *mountweazels* and the paradoxical way in which such texts are written in order to be, for the most part, overlooked. The characters' narratives are also informed by the ways in which *mountweazels* and other false entries often exist as a parodic, self-aware and ludic literary genre. A close-reading of one entry demonstrates the way in which particular fictitious entries are written based on bathetic, metafictional interrogations of lexicographical probity, as evidenced by *Lillian Virginia*'s 'explosions' and *esquivalience*'s 'wilful shirking of responsibility'; with the actions of the characters and their situations, the novel *Watchwords* attempts to enact a similar synthesis of absurdity and craftiness based on the themes of communication and stricture.

Fictitious entries can be read as small acts of literary subversion. By existing as anomalies within dictionaries and as fictions secreted intentionally and designed to pass as something else entirely they rupture the didactic framework symbolised by

such books. Many creative texts have performed similar acts of subversion by using the structures and frameworks of dictionaries in this way, often to celebrate the boundlessness of language or ideas, rejecting the parameters represented by the dictionary as an epistemological tool. In such a way, with an apparently conventional dictionary format, to the casual browser Donald M. Kaplan and Armand Schwerner's *The Domesday Dictionary* does resemble a valid resource for the complex mid-twentieth century it hopes to define. It is only upon noticing that the lemmas *Eros*, *Skin* and *Undoing* nestle amongst its pages that one begins to suspect all is not quite as it seems: *The Domesday Dictionary* is a work of creative writing that uses the lexicon form to send-up the reliability of received fact and disseminated media, in the best tradition of Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary* and Flaubert's *The Dictionary of Received Ideas*, the former containing such entries 'ACHIEVEMENT, *n.* The death of endeavor and the birth of disgust', using the traditional format of an indexed lexicon for satirical purposes.¹⁶⁹

The Domesday Dictionary uses the lexicon's alphabetic structure to lampoon and enact a burlesque or travesty of those contemporary pamphlets that were designed to be easily-navigated manuals for living under the threat of nuclear war: for example, it gestures towards the arbitrariness of acquiring and displaying information in alphabetical order to highlight a sense of futility:

Lunik — The first Russian moon rocket.

Lunik II — See *Hard Landing*.

Lunik III — [...] It took the first photograph of the dark side and radioed the pictures back to Earth. The dark side looks very much like the other side.¹⁷⁰

A conventional dictionary is intended to contain a clear explication of a word's meaning and context, not this implicit factitious factiousness. Excerpts from Schwerner and the Kaplans' *Domesday Dictionary* can also be found in *The Poets' Encyclopedia*, a book that boasts on its front cover 'the world's basic knowledge

¹⁶⁹ Ambrose Bierce, 'The Devil's Dictionary', *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce* (New York: Neale, 1911). Repr. *The Unabridged Devil's Dictionary*, ed. David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi (New York: University of Georgia Press, 2001), p.11.

¹⁷⁰ 'Lunik I, II, II': Donald M. Kaplan and Armand Schwerner, *The Domesday Dictionary: Being an Inventory of the Artifacts and Conceits of a New Civilization* ed. Louise J. Kaplan (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963; repr. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965).

transformed by 225 poets, artists, musicians & novelists' through commission or appropriation. Figures such as Pier Paolo Pasolini provide entries on *Reality*, William Burroughs contributes to the entry for *Heroin* and Kathy Acker submits *Slavery*. Hugh Kenner's contribution is written for the entry *Encyclopedia* and contains this line: 'The unit of the Encyclopedia is the Fact. A fact is a corpses deed; from L. *factum*, done, but with the residuum of accomplished action subtracted. Facts lie there pickled and are generally wrong, scribes' minds having swerved from the continuum of action'.¹⁷¹ A commentary is being made here upon the static nature of a printed dictionary or encyclopædia by ironic use of its structure and raises the question: on whose *authority* have the facts been set down in this way? The fictitious entries examined in this thesis perform a similar role, as knowledge of their existence induces perhaps a new unease in the browsing reader in that they too might have to approach an encyclopædia in pursuit of fact and clarification but instead have to put energy into suspending their disbelief rather than trusting the work to be entirely dependable. The thesis and novel celebrate this unease, and the act of subversion that lies at its heart. It purposefully contains inconsistencies, loose threads, 'ghost in the machine' incursions, assumptions and anachronisms in order that the instability of the novel's architecture and content, often disjointed and disarrayed, might enact the unsettled nature of mistrusting a dictionary. Occasional experimentation in narrative form and textual expression in the accompanying novel is intended to mirror the way in which fictional entries undermine a reader's expectations.

In attempting to trace and analyse the phenomenon of fictitious entries, my research centred on the creative charge of this unease; that one should never approach a dictionary as if its catalogue of factual information is anything other than a subjective, curated index that can never entirely avoid indeterminacy. The existence of metafictional *mountweazels* reaffirms that dictionaries and such resources contain only a standardised version of reality that has been codified; dictionaries may be exhaustive, but they are not always objectively 'correct'. An adage ascribed to Jean Cocteau runs 'the greatest masterpiece in the world is only a dictionary out of order'¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ 'Encyclopedia': *The Poets' Encyclopedia*, eds. Michael Andre and Erika (New York: Unmuzzled Ox, 1979).

¹⁷² Jean Cocteau, *Le Potomak* (Paris: Librairie Stock, Delamain, Boutelleau & Cie, 1924). Quoted in Green's *Chasing the Sun: Dictionary Makers and the Dictionaries they Made* (London: Pimlico, 1997), p.22.

while Borges wrote that '[i]t is often forgotten that [dictionaries] are artificial repositories, put together well after the languages they define. The roots of language are irrational and of a magical nature'¹⁷³. The characters in the novel *Watchwords* are suffering from perhaps that which John Barth described as 'cosmopsis' in *The End of the Road* — a nonce-word portmanteau of *cosmopolitan* and *psychosis* that means a 'state of universal comprehension, universal weariness, universal futility'¹⁷⁴ in their lives, characterised by the dictionary in which they work. By undermining that dictionary and inserting fictitious entries, they are not shirking responsibility (in an act of *esquivance*) but committing a creative act, expressing their individuality and own agency in an attempt to celebrate the arbitrariness of reality that does not seem reflected in the corpus of a dictionary.

The fact that dictionaries are limited and limiting in this way has led writers to address, and indeed, redress a perceived imbalance with creative pseudo-dictionaries such as *Lesbian Peoples: Materials for a Dictionary*¹⁷⁵, *A Feminist Dictionary*¹⁷⁶ and *Webster's First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*.¹⁷⁷ These examples were written to highlight the patriarchal, androcentric nature of society by refiguring lexicography in a specifically feminist context. 'It is our fiction that validates us'¹⁷⁸ commented Wittig in an author's note to another of her works, and the creators of the fictitious entries in the novel are presented as seeking such validity, inscribing their own creative expression to fill the lacunae of their day-to-day lives. If one posits 'the dictionary' as a symbol of oppression or didacticism — and it is often framed or treated as such in society, used as if such a text will contain 'the first and the last word' on a subject in a way that affects or qualifies behaviour or

¹⁷³ Jorge Luis Borges, 'Prologue', *El otro, el mismo* from *Selected Poems* Vol. 2, ed. Alexander Coleman (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), p.149.

¹⁷⁴ John Barth, *The End of the Road* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), p.323.

¹⁷⁵ Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig, *Lesbian Peoples: Materials for a Dictionary*, trans. Wittig and Zeig (New York: Avon, 1979).

¹⁷⁶ Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler: *A Feminist Dictionary* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

¹⁷⁷ Mary Daly and Jane Caputi: *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

¹⁷⁸ Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body* (London: Peter Owen, 1975), p.10.

thought¹⁷⁹ — instances where such a text has been queered by the nonsense, absurdity or metafictional commentary of a fictitious entry seems a provocative and astute exhibition of literary subversion.

In critically and creatively engaging with a number of fictitious entries that have been discovered, mooted or announced as ‘false’ additions to a lexicographic or encyclopædic text, together the novel *Watchwords* and this thesis are presented as a practice-based research project that examines the role of individuality and subjectivity in dictionaries’ and encyclopædias’ composition and form, and the possibility that ‘fictitious entries’ operate as creative, metafictional commentaries upon a lexicographer’s task.

¹⁷⁹ Bruno Waterfield, ‘Larousse dictionary accused of trying to have final word on gay marriage’, *The Telegraph* (11th April 2013).

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A short prose-based poetic commentary on aspects of culture by various writers, including many Surrealists. An interrogation and critique of the encyclopædic form accomplished through the use of such books' conventional formats and register.

The Dictionary of Lost Languages, ed. Sarah Wood (London: Calverts, 2015)

An artist's book featuring essays, creative writing and photo collages, all examining the concept of languages that have become 'extinct', as well as the notion of a fleeting and impermanent dictionary.

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A short caricature of a 'dictionary of social etiquette' that interrogates the accepted clichés and forms of custom and behaviour, and the notion of consulting a trusted source of information to glean such information. From Flaubert's notes and correspondence, it is not clear whether the *Dictionary* was intended to appear as an appendix to the novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet* or meant to be published as a standalone piece.
- Kaplan, Donald M., and Schwerner, Armand, *The Domesday Dictionary: Being an Inventory of the Artifacts and Conceits of a New Civilization*, ed. Louise J. Kaplan (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965)
Uses the lexicon form to lampoon the reliability of received fact and disseminated media. Designed to mimic an easily-navigated manual for living

day-to-day with the threat of nuclear war, its spoof articles and definitions reveal a searing indictment of the era.

Kramarae, Cheris and Treichler, Paula A., eds. *A Feminist Dictionary* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1996)

A dictionary written in the form of an encyclopædia, using quotations to illustrate and decontextualise words in order to establish a feminist-centric account of history and language. Prompts one to consider the authority behind a conventional dictionary's formulation.

Wittig, Monique and Zeig, Sande, *Lesbian Peoples: Materials for a Dictionary*, trans. Wittig and Zeig (New York: Avon, 1979)

A short encyclopædic dictionary for a fictional world populated only by women. Examines the possibilities of myth-making created by the creation of nonce words in a dictionary, and presents the dictionary form as creative artefact.

Fiction, Poetry, Plays

Abish, Walter, *Alphabetical Africa* (New York: New Directions, 1974)

An experimental novel, written so that the first chapter contains solely words that begin with the letter *a*, the second chapter includes only words that begin with *a* or *b* and so forth; this alphabetical constraint is maintained for a further 25 chapters. Addresses the arbitrariness of alphabetical order.

Ackroyd, Peter, *Chatterton* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987)

A novel based on the life of Thomas Chatterton, the young poet-hoaxer who created a false canon of work and claimed them as *bona fide* discoveries credited to a fictional Thomas Rowley.

Arsenault, Emily, *The Broken Teaglass: A Novel* (New York: Bantam Books, 2001)

Set in a contemporary publishing house, the protagonist is an editorial assistant working on a dictionary. He discovers that a number of the quotations being used as supporting materials for the dictionary's definitions are credited to a non-existent book; in the ensuing narrative, the theme of verifiability as well as the relationship between dictionaries and other, contingent texts is examined.

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A number of characters in Austen's classic novel *Persuasion* discuss the figure of Dr Samuel Johnson and his *Dictionary* incidentally, in doing so providing an account of the lexicographer's perceived authority within society.

Barth, John, *The End of the Road* (New York: Doubleday, 1958)

A novel addressing an individual's sense of agency in terms of *cosmopsis*, a 'state of universal comprehension, universal weariness, universal futility'.

Borges, Jorge Luis, *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman (New York: Penguin Books, 2000)

Prologue to his piece 'El otro, el mismo' contains the writer's reflection upon dictionaries' relationship to language, and language's relationship to creative writers.

Boyd, William, *Nat Tate: An American Artist 1928–1960* (New York / Zurich: Edition Stemmler, 1998)

A biography of Abstract Expressionist artist Nate Tate, a figure who never actually existed. Both a novel and a literary prank, the book focusses upon themes of identity, plausibility and what it is to dupe and be duped.

Byatt, A.S., *Possession* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990)

Booker Prize-winning novel that features a double narrative split between two time periods. One narrator is dedicated to investigating the other, with documentation and the pursuit of documentation — and proof of its veracity — central to the plot.

Carey, Peter, *My Life as a Fake* (London: Vintage, 2005)

A fictionalised account of a literary scandal, reminiscent of the Ern Malley affair. The psychological and social effects caused by literary hoaxes and anonymity are examined.

Ernst, Max, *Une Semaine de Bonté: A Surrealistic Novel in Collage* (New York: Dover Publications, 1978)

Originally compiled in 1933, Ernst's work comprises 182 collages that were republished later as a single-volume artist's book. The material for the collages was cut from magazines, manuals and assorted illustrated works including encyclopædic dictionaries; Ernst repurposed this material to create bizarre and uncanny juxtapositions. The collages invite a consideration of the associations that are made by a reader or viewer when artefacts are excised from their original content and presented in isolation.

- Gorey, Edward, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies: Or, After the Outing* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1963)
 A piece of nonsense literature, listing the fates of 26 orphaned children in a rhyming abecedarian form. A Gothic reimagining of the classic alphabet book format.
- Grahame, Kenneth, *The Wind in the Willows* (London: Methuen, 1908)
 The classic text in the canon of children's literature. The character of Ratty is modelled on the lexicographer and philologist Frederick Furnivall.
- Green, John, *Paper Towns* (New York: Dutton Books, 2008)
 A novel for young adults that explores characters' growing sense of identity and the rejection of enforced rules and categorisation. Features *paper towns* — fictitious entries that appear on maps, often in order to track copyright fraud — as a recurring image to illustrate these themes. One character has a dog named 'Myrna Mountweazel'.
- Hazzard, Oli, 'The Inability to Recall the Precise *Word* for Something', *The Salt Book of Younger Poets* eds. Lumsden Roddy and Stonborough (Cambridge: Salt, 2011)
 A found poem that examining themes of obscurity, loss, and the format of a dictionary's lemmas.
- Jansson, Tove, *Finn Family Moomintroll* trans. Elizabeth Portch (London: Penguin Books, 1950; repr. 2001)
 A children's book in Jansson's Moomintroll series. Features a *Dictionary of Outlandish Words*; in the story, the content and use of this reference book transforms the lives of the central characters, and presents a creative treatment of a lexicon's notional 'authority' and power.
- Levithan, David, *The Lover's Dictionary* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011)
 The plot of this novel is non-linear, detailing episodes from the characters' lives are arranged alphabetically as if through dictionary entries.
- Pavić, Milorad, *Dictionary of the Khazars: A Lexicon Novel in 100,000 Words*, trans. Christina Pribičević-Zorić (New York: Knopf, 1988)
 Published in separate 'male' and 'female' editions, Pavić's novel is structured as three linked fictional encyclopaedic dictionaries. In order to delineate the plot and narratives pertaining to the downfall of the Khazar empire, the reader must directly compare the three dictionaries' differing contents. The

novel creatively addresses the formulation and subjectivity of dictionaries, and addresses their unreliability as texts.

Saramago, José, *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (London: Harvill Press, 1997; digital edition, New York: Vintage Digital e-book, 2011)

The novel's protagonist alters one crucial word in a historical text and sets two story arcs in motion by doing so: one based in the proof-reader's present, the other recounting a revised, alternate history of the siege of Lisbon. By tracing the consequences of an individual's subversion and the potential corollaries of textual manipulation, the novel addresses the destabilisation of texts and recorded 'fact', and the individuality and creative agency of those who are committed — or expected to commit — to documenting 'the factual'.

Shakespeare, William, *Complete Works*, eds. Ann Thompson, Richard Proudfoot and David Scott Kastan (London: Arden, 2001)

The plays of Shakespeare, the most frequently quoted single author in the *OED* and other dictionaries, and the origin of over 1000 original coinages.

Stout, Rex, *Gambit* (London: Collins, 1963)

Early on in the narrative, this detective novel's protagonist rends a dictionary apart in protest at that edition's perceived failings.

Thackeray, William Makepeace, *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1848)

Originally serialised, this classic novel traces the social trajectories of a number of characters through Regency Britain. The authoritative figure of Johnson, and his *Dictionary*, is referenced early in the novel's opening chapter.

Vladislavić, Ivan, 'A Labour of Moles', *Cahiers* No. 17 (Illinois: Sylph Editions, University of Chicago, 2012)

A short dark comedy, narrated by an unnamed figure who awakes within a dictionary and must encounter its words, meanings and images as characters in order to negotiate his escape.

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Watchwords

'*Trolmydames* (n.): of this word I know not the meaning.'

— Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755)

'No, no! I cannot write a line,
I cannot write a word:
The thoughts I think appear in ink
So shockingly absurd.
To wander in an empty cave
Is fruitless work, 'tis said:
What must it be for one like me
To wander in his head?'

— Letter from Lewis Carroll to Margaret Cunnyghame (dated 1871)

Epilogue

The *Swansby* Press exploded in a flash of orange light, blue horror and grey dry brick. For the next hour the street was filled with pieces of paper and the air was thick with words.

Preface

Let us assume that you are in possession of the perfect printed dictionary. [No one would want an imperfect dictionary, after all.]

It might be a handsome object, its title gold-stamped into the spine and with a pleasing weight and creaminess to its paper. Of course, it is just one of many volumes necessary to complete the full dictionary; the first edition of *Swansby's Encyclopædic Dictionary* (1899) spans nine volumes and contains a total of 222,471,313 letters and numbers. For anybody that has the time for mathematics, that is approximately 161 miles of type between the dictionary's thick green leather covers. Morocco leather seems to be the hide of choice for dictionaries. If one was to flick the leather cover with a thumbnail, it would make a satisfying *fnuck-fnuck* sound.

Let us dip into Vol. 1 and push it open with our thumbs as if we are splitting some kind of ripe fruit. (Opening a book is never anything like that though really, is it, and this simile is bad one). This volume of the perfect dictionary splits open at a particular page because of the silk bookmark already lodged there. 2500 silkworms are required to produce a pound of raw silk.

What is the first word one reads at random on this page? *Carambole*. It is a noun. This dictionary has a good, resolute choice of typeface. Not too finicky and not too ergonomic. It is a typeface that does not look like it would be used on gravestones or to advertise branded water.

I will spoil it for you: *carambole* (n.), from the Spanish *carambola* is defined as the red ball at billiards and the tricks associated with that ball. It says here that the word is related to the Portuguese *carambola*, suggesting that the two share some etymological link but without any evidence to prove the same.

Someone has left a ring as if from a cup of water or mug of tea on this perfect dictionary's page. Whoever did that deserves to be shot. The 1899 publication date means the noun *tea-bag* has yet to bob up amongst this edition's pages as it had yet to be invented. Similarly, as of 1899 one could not *cartwheel* as a verb because the word was not yet established for such a movement. Far less could one travel up an *escalator*; this edition of the dictionary is still a year away from *blokeish*, *come-hither* and *dorm* making an appearance. Maybe it is just my immersion in this edition that is breeding resentment but the more I think about it, the more I like the close-but-unreachable sound of 1900 and its neologisms, the words that entered mouths and

ears and inkwells that year. *Tea-bag, come-hither, razzmatazz*. 1900 sounds like a lot more fun.

In 1899, elephants were being slaughtered in huge numbers to keep up with the demand for high quality billiard balls, with no more than four balls being made from a single tusk.

I found these facts listed under *Ivory, trade of* in Vol. 5.

Curse you, *carambole*. I hope no-one ever uses you correctly in a sentence.

Words can be endangered for the opposite reason. If you don't use them, they can become ghosts and then vanish completely.

(Words are not elephants, is what I am learning).

[I have been side-tracked. Some words have a talent for will-o'-the-wispishly leading you from a path that you had set for yourself, deeper and deeper into the parentheses and footnotes, the beckoning SEE ALSO suggestions].

Exactly how many dictionary covers could one make by peeling a single Moroccan cow? How much more efficient would it be to use an elephant?

(I've just cross-checked the word *carambole* and I find that, as well as being a billiard ball, the word is also used in French to refer to a star-fruit. Sometimes research throws out these sour little asterisks of footnotes; sometimes ghosts that you know to have seen moving in the night and to have called your name on the breeze are invisible to other people. For them it's just a part of the furniture, just something growing old and unremarkable in the fruit-bowl.)

Who reads the Prefaces to dictionaries, anyway?

fnuck-fnuck-fnuck

To consider a dictionary to be 'perfect' requires a reflection upon what such a book aims to achieve. *Book* is shorthand here, but let us plant the words *heat*, *hotching* and *heft* in the back of your mind too, alongside ready-for-action. (Words can do that, and parentheses certainly help: the cupped hands of the actor making an aside to the audience. The *sotto voce* hiss made all the more insistent by italics and editorial glyphic decisions. [† 'What is this I see before me?' etc.])

The perfect Dictionary should not be playful for its own sake, for fear of alienating the reader and undermining its usefulness. I will say that notions of *heat*, *hotching* and the *heft* of a book's split-thumbed fruit should play on your mind.

That a perfect dictionary should be *right* is obvious. That it should contain neither spelling nor printing errors, for example. That it should not make groundless claims. That it should not display any bias in its definitions except that as the result of meticulous and rigorous research.

We can be more basic than that: it is crucial that the book covers open; that the ink is legible upon its pages.

Idiosyncrasies may make for a *favourite* dictionary, but a good dictionary should be unremarkable except in realising the scope of its ambition.

Whether it should register or fix the language is often toted as a qualifier for dictionaries. (*Register*, as if words are like so many delinquent children being herded together and counted in a room; *fixed*, as if only a certain number of children are allowed access to the room, and then the room is filled with cement.)

The perfect Preface should not require so many mixed unclear metaphors.

The Preface of a dictionary, often overlooked as one pushes one's thumbs into the fruit filled with silkworms and slaughtered Moroccan cows, sets out the aims of a dictionary and its scope. It is often overlooked, because by the time a dictionary is being used its need is obvious. From childhood we're taught it begins, roughly, with an *Aardvark* and ends, roughly, with a *Zebra*, and the rest is a, rough, game of lexical tug-of-war between the two.

The Preface should act as an introduction to someone you have no interest in meeting. You do not need to know the gender of the lexicographers who worked away at it. Certainly not their appearance, their favourite sports team nor favoured newspaper. The fact that on the day on which they defined *carambole* their shoes were too tight should be of absolutely no matter to you, nor that their hair was a total mess. That they were hungover and had the beginnings of a cold, and that unbeknownst to them an infected hair follicle under their chin, caused by ungainly and too-hasty shaving, was going to cause severe medical repercussions for them two months down the line, at one point causing them to fear they were going to lose their whole lower jaw. *Swansby's Encyclopædic Dictionary* does not clarify whether one could make a billiard ball from human teeth. You do not need to know any of that. Your only interest is that they have endeavoured to be qualified to wax unlyrically about what a certain type of billiard ball is called.

The perfect dictionary *reader* is perhaps a more interesting subject for a dictionary's Preface. One generally *consults* a dictionary, as opposed to resting it upon lecterned knees and reading it cover to cover.

There are those who make it their business to read full works of reference purely in order that they can say that the feat has been achieved. If one rummages through the bletted fruit of this 1899 volume, one is greeted by a small portrait of one such reader, Fath-Ali Shah Qajar, and the short biography dedicated to the same. Upon becoming the [SEE ALSO: *Shah*] of Persia in 1797, we learn that he was gifted a 3rd edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Rivals. After reading all of its 18 [eighteen! *Swansby's* only has the nine!] volumes, the Shah extended his royal title to include 'Most Formidable Lord and Master of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*'. What a Preface. The small accompanying picture is a steel plate engraving, and shows him seated wearing silk robes with fruit piled high next to him. There is a war-elephant in the background of the portrait. So much fruit, so many silkworms, so much implied off-stage trumpeting.

If you put your eyes far-too-close to an engraving, all is little dots and dashes, like a fingerprint unspooled. The engraver always had to reverse left and right when working, and occasionally letters can be seen on engraved illustrations that appear the wrong way around due to a lapse of concentration on the artist's part.

We all know someone who browses a dictionary not as a reader but as a grazing animal, one who spends hours nose-deep in the grass and forbs of its pages, buried in its meadow while losing sight of the sun. I recommend it. Browsing is good for you. You can grow giddy with the words' shapes and sounds, their *corymbs*, their *umbels* and their *panicles*. The high of surprise at discovering a new word's delicacy or at the strength of its roots is a pretty potent one. *Psithurism* means the rustling of leaves. Part of a bee's thigh is called a *corbicula* from the Latin word for basket. These are unearthing readers, thrilled with their gleaning.

For some, of course, the thrill of browsing comes from the fact that rare, arcane or arch words that are discovered there can be brought back, cud-like, and used expressly in order to impress others in conversation. I admit that I shook out *psithurism* from the understory there to delight you, but the gesture might be seen as calculated: get me and my big words. *Phwoar*, hear me roar, obliquely, in the forest; let me tell you about the silent *p* that you doubtless missed, and that *psithurism* is likely to come via the Greek ψιθυρος, *whispering*, slanderous. I am fascinating! says

this dictionary-reader. I aim to transfix. When used like this, the dictionary becomes fodder for a reader, verbage-verdage. We all know one of these people, whose conversation is no more than expectorate word-dropping. This reader will disturb your nap in the café window just to comment upon the day's *apricity*; he will admit to *giesetrye* just in order to use the word in his apology as you drop your napkin and reel back, pushing your chair away; he will pursue you through hedgerows just to alert you to the *smeuse* of your flight.

This dictionary reader also celebrates the beauty of a word, its lustre and power, but for him the value of its sillage is turned to silage.

He would use *carambole* with a flourish.

The perfect dictionary would know the difference was between, say, a 'Prologue' and a 'Preface'. I imagine it would also be a sturdy, bulked-out thing. You could kill a man with it.

(For example, a man would be likely to die, ploppingly, if you dropped this dictionary from a height onto a man's head. If you forced him to swallow it whole. If a paper-cut went gangrenous, an ill-thumbed noun-search to blame.)

Another category of reader, and one is wont to index these things, submits to the digressiveness of a dictionary, whereby an eye-line is cast from word-to-word in sweeping jags within from page-to-page. No regard for the formalities of left-to-right reading, theirs is a reading style that loops and chicanes across columns and pages and reading is something led by curiosity, or snagged by serendipity. One year, the word *serendipity* topped a poll of the nations' favourite words. Such fortunate happenstance. It derives from a fairytale about brothers from made-up land of Serendip. *Serendip* is the Persian name for Sri Lanka. A Most Formidable Shah, with his fruit bowls and eighteen volumes and tusky window, would know this, but it's not a competition.

The perfect Preface would know why dictionaries have page numbers.

Should a Preface pose more questions than it answers? Should a Preface just pose?

The perfect dictionary entry would have a *lemma*. To clarify, *Swansby's* has this:

- *lemma* — (n.¹): The word under which a set of related dictionary or encyclopædia entries appear. Comparable to *catchword*, *headword*, *definiendum*. From the Greek *λήμμα*: something received or taken; something taken for granted.

- *lemma* — (n. ²): (Botany) A shell or husk, as applied to fruit and grass. A flowering glume. See also: *chaff*. From the Greek *λέμμα*, *λέπειν*: to peel.

The lemma is usually followed by possible variant spellings, the word's definition, a nod to the entry's etymology and a quotation to show the word's use in context. On this, *Swansby's Encyclopædic Dictionary* (1889) is proving to be somewhat imperfect. It does have some lovely illustrations, however.

We all have had our private moments of pleasure when reading a dictionary. Just dipping in, *come on in, the water's lovely* type of pleasure, submerging only if something takes hold of your toe and will not unbite. Private pleasures not to be displayed in public by café windows.

This metaphor was supposed to be about pleasure.

- *dilemma* — (n.): A choice between two or more alternatives; a predicament characterised or caused by doubt and anxiety, a 'fix'. From the Greek *δίλημμα*: a double proposition

The pleasure might arise from the satisfaction of finding confirmation within its pages that you had correctly guessed the way in which a word was spelled (i.e. *i* before *e*), or perhaps retrieving from it a word that had momentarily come loose from the tip of your tongue. The pleasure of reading a dictionary might arise from finding amongst its pages a word that is new to you and neatly sums up a sensation, quality or experience that had hitherto gone nameless. A moment of solidarity and recognition (*someone else must have had the same sensation as me, I am not alone!*). Pleasure may come with the sheer glee at the textures of an unfamiliar word, its new taste between your teeth. *Glume. Forb.* The anatomy of a word strimmed and porched in your teeth.

Dictionaries as tied to longing, tied to trust, tied to jouissance, surrender, utility. A lexicographer as unseen, unregarded. More overlookable than a well-known word that does not need defining.

The perfect Preface would know when to shut -

That high mentioned previously that comes with finding the right word might be a little too apposite as we riffle through the heady, woozy, bursting fruit of *Swansby's Encyclopædic Dictionary* (1889). A recent article in the *Lancet* has

suggested that fungal hallucinogens in old books may affect one's behaviour. Spores and the volatile acids of decomposition, musty must-reads, *fnuck fnuck fnuck*.

Dictionaries as unsafe, heady things. Safer perhaps to treat your memory as an encyclopædia, and keep your dictionary mobile in your mouth. Words passing from mouth to mouth, as baby birds take their food from the mother.

How many similes can you fit in a Preface? How garbled can a Preface be? The perfect book should be able to grab the reader.

Encyclopædiction.

Look at the knot they've made of the vowels in the middle there, its tight little clove hitch: *Swansby's Encyclopædic Dictionary*. Letters stamped in gold into a spine. *Swansby's Encyclopædic Dictionary* (1889). The letter *æ* in the middle there, *a* and *e* fused together like that and enacting the hybridity of the book in question.

Encyclopædic in its scope. The letter's fused, twirling winged leaves. Digression. The letter *æ* is called an *æsc* ('ash tree') after a transliteration of the Anglo-Saxon rune *F*. Digressions and little raised-flag shaped letters, and clove-hitch knots with silent *ks*. Trace the gold stamped into the letters there, into the branded cow-skin. Who mined that mineral and beat it to an ash-light leaf? And the leather, who unpeeled the animal and spread it out flat?

The green leather has lines just like the back of your hand. If you were to dig your nails into it, the crescent shapes remain. Don't tell me why you might ever be gripping a dictionary quite so hard.

To name a thing is to know a thing. There's power there. Words are snappable and constantly distending and roiling, silkworms trapped somewhere between the molars.

The perfect Preface should come first. An Epilogue should come at the end. That's what epilogue means. Epigrams should not be relegated to below the stinking tideline of a footnote. This book is queasy with knowledge.

A Preface as all talk and no trousers.

The perfect dictionary as the right words, in the right order.

Incorrect definitions are as pointless as an unclear simile. As useless as a garbled Preface, or an imprecise narrator. As mad as a man, falling, suspended in the air for half a second between a bridge and fast river water.

(As irritating as having the next couple of pages' dénouement ruined for you.)

The perfect dictionary, the fruit of the labour of silkworms and cattle, growing fat and spinning yarns. Cud. Each definition as eulogy.

A word that is not beautiful or remarkable, like its user and creator.

Finding the right word a private joy vs. one conducted in public.

The Preface as shorthand for 'take my word for it.'

Look it up.

Look up from it.

Look up

look up

Prologue

Coattails or *coat-tails*? The hyphen perhaps assists the meaning of the term a little more satisfyingly: conveys a sense of something trailing behind, or a belt across the midriff of the word pulled tight against the cold.

The drizzle had been a constant since lunch and the raindrops did not seem to be falling so much as chivvying each other in little bursts and scurries. It was the type of rain that made the landscape bristle and that bred impatience. It was jostling weather; raindrops chivvied, men chivvied, the river prickled with gooseflesh and the gaslights spat grey fluff about their wicks. In order to avoid damp clashes or unsought contact, everybody crossing Westminster bridge entered the usual silent pact to make their elbows tessellate in the crush. Between the rain pressing down upon their hats and a silted crosswind tugging and plucking at their coat-tails, to walk the bridge that evening was to be reduced to an oblique, propulsive form of slumping.

A man stopped at the centre of the bridge and looked out across the water. He was carrying an absurd yellow umbrella. The umbrella was a rare bright spot on the bridge. Horses blew cobweb-heavy, cobweb-coloured threads into the air and the yellow stood out amongst the massed black waxed jackets, black Inverness capes and the black gabardine shoulders surrounding him. The evening's brightest tones seemed to come only in dirty flash-points: dull rainbows of oil on the Thames or occasional purples and greens of pigeons' neck-feathers as they tutted and grumbled to each other under the bridge's eaves.

The man with the yellow umbrella leaned forward against the side of the bridge. He was out of breath and not dressed well for the weather. Despite the umbrella, his jacket was heavy with water and his hair sat tangled and darkened by the rain. If one looked closer, one would see that his spectacles appeared to be missing a lens. These details all went unnoticed by his fellow travellers. Everybody was too busy to pay him any close heed: they were on their way home after all, or hoping to catch a drink or make a show, any one of a whole host of etceteras that were preferable to tarrying a moment longer than necessary on Westminster bridge. Even the clock on the north bank drooped its mustachios above them in twenty-five minutes past six irritation. Hats were jammed low across eyes, collars sat bunched up against jawlines. Any gap that opened at eye-height quickly fell prey to the alternating spikiness and bulge of umbrellas.

It was the stark pinkness of the man's body that would eventually draw him any real attention.

The rain made a snare of the skin of his yellow umbrella and he did not hear if anyone apologised for shouldering him or demanded an apology as he had slowed to a halt. He collapsed his umbrella and rested it crook-up against the side of the bridge. Some people had cause to dodge him then, catching at his sides with a stray arm or hip, but their overall pace was not checked. No one acknowledged him and no one reproached. Their current pulsed around the blip of his pausing and continued unaware.

The man began to undress.

He started with his jacket, pulling it off and setting it next to the umbrella with its outer fabric to the ground. Capillary action made the cloth immediately ink up with water.

This was the first time the man had ever undressed from a standing position and, although nobody was aware, his unfamiliarity with the procedure was obvious. At home he always removed his clothes while sitting on the side of his bed. With the lamps turned low and the sound of his landlady retiring to her own room along the corridor, undressing was usually a straight-forward case of shrugging away whatever had grown the tightest or most uncomfortable during the day with no thought given to the order in which individual garments could or should be pared from his body.

On the bridge with his eyes trained on the smoke rising from Lambeth, the man found that he was deliberating, that every article of clothing warranted due consideration.

He unknotted the tie from his throat and passed his thumb back and forth against its silk for a full five seconds. Although the bridge was evening-noisy with hooves and bells and footsteps and voices, the man enjoyed the private hiss as he pulled his tie through his collar. He rolled his tie into a tight ball and placed it on top of his jacket then began working on some of his shirt buttons. He counted their progress down his shirt with the click-tick of thumbnail against bone: his hands seemed to be stained with something, and they left a little residue on the white cotton. He loosened his waistcoat, folded it and positioned it neatly on the wet flagstones next to his sopping jacket.

The man was shivering but his shoulders were set a little straighter against the rain. He tugged the shirttails — *shirt-tails?* — from his middle and unbuttoned his trousers and underclothes. He added their shapes to the squares amassing by his feet.

Rainwater glazed his hair and broken spectacles, brought a false new shine to his shoes. As the man stood on the bridge with his shirtsleeves unbuttoned to the waist, his undervest was exposed and the celluloid collar of his shirt twanged up to his ear. Someone passing close by him might have seen that the shirt did not look exactly fresh. Someone impractically close would have certainly seen a vague translucency under the arms, at the elbows and in a cruciform across the back, testament to prolonged sweat or stress.

The man unlaced his shoes and placed them together, toes pointing into the road, on top of his trousers. He popped his cuff-links into the right shoe and, unhooking them with a slight bend of his neck, tucked his faulty spectacles into the one on the left. Whether it was his new short-sightedness or the act of removing his socks, as he stood flamingo-like on one leg he gave another slight wobble. His naked feet hit the rain-slick paving slabs, and the first flush of something like discomfort crossed his face.

The clock struck the half hour.

His hair was something like blond, his build was something like slim and his undershirt was the final piece of clothing that he removed before climbing over the parapet and leaping into the Thames.

It was midway through the fourth of their sessions together that Winceworth had an epiphany. His calculations were simple but conclusive: the only chance he had of besting his headache would be to fold both of his legs under his chin and roll straight into the doctor's blazing hearth.

“A roseate blush, with soft suffusion, divulged her gentle mind's confusion.”’ Dr Gladly cleared his throat and glanced at his patient, expectantly. When no response was forthcoming he repeated the quotation again and raised his eyebrows. Winceworth looked longingly once more into the fireplace.

Perhaps the real prompt for Winceworth's extreme decision was the doctor's songbird which had started screeching at full volume from its position by the cage. It was not just that the bird was whistling. Mere whistling would have been a boon, Winceworth thought. *Whistling* might have saved the situation, but since the beginning of his treatment under Dr Gladly, this songbird had made a point of catching Winceworth's eye across the room with something approaching real malice. The bird was some type of oriole; Winceworth had looked up the breed on a whim after his first screech-punctuated consultation, but he now felt sure this impulse had been a vague premonition that he should better know his enemy. An oriole is basically a sparrow with access to theatrical costumiers. Although the many excellent ornithological resources did not go into these specifics, if ever a songbird was designed to glare, the oriole was that bird. If ever a bird was designed to spit, Winceworth thought, this was the species that would relish such an advantage.

The oriole had been scowling at Winceworth from its cage by the window since he had sat down in his usual chair. It had been biding its time. A discomfort had been brewing behind Winceworth's eyes all morning but not yet blossomed into actual pain. The songbird had trialled some chirrups and then progressed to a trilling burr, but Winceworth had been able to ignore it. As the clock started hiccupping something about the passage of time and Dr Gladly began his solemn incantation, the orange bird suddenly decided that its talents would be better spent in the percussive arts rather than just simple *arietta* and it began slamming its body against the wire of its cage. The slamming, the screeching, the effects of yesterday's whisky excesses: in concert it was all too much. The headache bit across the length of Winceworth's skull.

Dr Gladly tapped his fingertips together. ‘If you could just run through all that again, Mr Winceworth?’

Winceworth coughed. “A rothzeat -”

CLANG, went the birdcage.

“ — sh with thof — ”

CLANG

“ — ffudjji — ”

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Dr Gladly inclined his head and repeated the phrase a final time, indicating that Winceworth should follow suit. Winceworth did so and found that every word tasted of Glenlivet. The oriole gave another screech.

The reason that Winceworth was attending Dr Gladly’s practice was account of his lisp. The truth was that since childhood, throughout his youth and certainly for the four years that he had been working at *Swansby’s Encyclopædic Dictionary*, Peter Winceworth had affected a false lisp. He was not sure that he had developed the custom for any reason other than sheer boredom, and certainly he could switch out of it at any time he chose. Simply put, he had always found that the act of muddying his speech with a slight impediment made people respond to him with a greater gentleness: the deceit hurt nobody and, if one were to think of the false lisp as a scientific or sociological experiment, so far it had yielded only positive results. Simple pleasures, small comforts.

Occasionally in the privacy of his rooms Winceworth repeated his name in his shaving mirror just to check that the lisping habit had not become ingrained. Thus far, it had not been a problem.

“Roseate!” exclaimed the doctor.

“Rozztheate!”

While his mother always found his incidental boyhood lisp endearing, Winceworth’s father found it ridiculous. A great-uncle on the paternal side had spoken in a similar way; a Winceworth family legend revolved around this forebear’s sudden self-consciousness when *The Times* swapped from using the long, medial *f* form to *ſ* on its pages and the great-uncle’s gruff declarations of ‘finfulnefs!’ and

‘forrowful!’ over the breakfast table could no longer be excused as simply too-quick reading.

Boys being boys, at school the lisp had been the cause for accusations of perceived inappropriate effeminacy, but Winceworth could only ever recall suffering this with the quiet, thrilled stoicism of any self-elected martyr. In creating the lisp, he was careful that this adopted impediment was not of a spluttering, saliva-laden cadence. Given his surname, fabricating a lisp was a small performance that had many opportunities to be exhibited: he appeared variously as *Peter Winthworth*, *Peter Winceworse*, *Peter Winthworse* and *Peter Rinseworse* depending on the schoolmaster, parish official or bureaucrat who was in charge of the relevant documents.

Once his school years were completed, Winceworth briefly thought that he might be able to leave the lisp behind, but when he — out of habit — accidentally let slip a *nethethary* during an interview for a minor proof-reading role at *Swansby’s*, the editor’s eyes had softened with an unmistakable sympathy. It was a sympathy that he detected might work to his advantage: the lisp persisted, he gained employment and, although his colleagues always specifically made him order *Scotch* or *schnapps* after work, hooting with joy when he repeated the order at the bar, he did not believe the affectation impinged upon his life in any discernibly harmful way.

The lisp had become a more pressing issue, of course, now that work at the Dictionary had begun on its new volume. His job at *Swansby’s* was now focused on the letter *S*, shuffling powder-blue and butter-yellow index cards covered with *S*-led definitions. As they left the safety of the *R*s and embarked on the *S* words, the same editor who had been so well-disposed to Winceworth’s non-impediment summoned him into the office and explained, gently, that rather than a Christmas bonus this year Winceworth would be enrolled to attend meetings with one of the premier elocutionists in Europe.

‘As we enter the *Ryptage-Significant* volume,’ Prof Swansby explained, placing a hand on Winceworth’s shoulder, ‘I thought now might be a good time for you as ambassador for our great *Swansby’s Encyclopædic Dictionary* to address the matter of your lisp.’

‘*Swansby’s* ambassador, sir?’ Winceworth relished every buzzing sibilant.

‘Exactly,’ Prof Swansby had replied, trying to look kind.

The lisp was so much an accepted part of his identity at *Swansby’s* that the offer was difficult to refute. Five sessions with Dr Gladly in his consulting rooms in

Chelsea were duly scheduled for every Tuesday morning starting that month, at considerable cost to the company's pocket-books.

Dr Gladly was in great demand within the world of elocution. If the printed testimonials in the papers were to be believed (*'With Just A Little Application, You Too Can Achieve Perfect Diction!'*), his visitors' book boasted numerous politicians, members of the clergy and most recently the lead ventriloquist at the Tivoli. The great and the good of the garbling: Winceworth imagined them all handing their hats to the housekeeper in the hallway downstairs as he had done for the past four weeks. It struck him with no small embarrassment that he could not remember the housekeeper's name. He wondered whether any other patient's thought to ask before they too passed down the corridors, encountered the *snicking* of the clock in the hallway, the bright bars of freshly polished stair-rods before arriving at Dr Gladly's door. Winceworth's fellow patients must sit in this very same chair and sit forward, alert and hoping that they would finally have fullness coaxed from their lungs and have their tongues twitched into nimbleness. Winceworth did not suppose for a moment that any of them slumped as he did, nor looked into the fire quite so desirously.

Winceworth's headache caused pulsing blue and purple jellyfish to swarm in the extremities of his vision, fat and frothing jellyfish with blue and purple haloes. They fizzed across the orange wallpaper.

The first thing to say about Dr Gladly's consulting room was that the whole room was entirely orange. Winceworth had once compiled a list as he walked from the practice in Chelsea back to the *Swansby* offices in Westminster:

Dr Gladly's Consulting Room (the orange complexities thereof):

amber, apricot, auburn, aurelian, brass, cantaloupe, carrot, coral, coccinate, copper, cinnabar, citric, embered, flammid, fulvous, gilt, ginger, Glenlivet-lord-help-us, hennaed, hessonite, honeyed, marmalade, marigold, mimolette, ochraceous, orang-utan, paprikash, pumpkin, rubedinous, rufulous, ruddy, russet, rusty, saffron, sanguine, sandy, spessartite, tangerine, tawny, tigrine, topazine, Titian, vermilion, Votyak, xanthosiderite -

In contrast to all this, Gladly always wore a particularly lichenous cut of tweed. Its colour, in addition to the fizzing jellyfish, clashed against the room's décor with an

energetic violence that morning. The doctor had launched into an explanation for the room's colour during their first session, presumably a stock explanation that had been developed over years of countering patients' surprise when they stepped over the threshold. Dr Gladly maintained that the colour orange stimulated confidence and tonal warmth within the onlooker. Hence orange wall-hangings, orange satin throws, the array of bright orange walnut sapwood pieces of furniture and the orange oriole. Dr Gladly believed that subliminal details affected one's conduct or behaviour.

Winceworth, for his part, was convinced that the doctor kept a neat black beard only to emphasise his very white very straight teeth and delicate mouth. Dr Gladly's mouth was almost oppressively well-formed and Winceworth was sure an object of great envy to all his patients: the overbiting, the underbiting, the stuttering and the hoarse. It occurred to Winceworth that the way that the doctor used and accentuated his mouth as he spoke was itself a technique of elocutionary encouragement: *With Just A Little Application, You Too Can Achieve This Paradigm of Oral Form and Functionality.*

It seemed obvious, therefore, that the horrid incongruity of the doctor's green suit against the orange of the room could not be dismissed as mere oversight: as the headache bit down once more, Dr Gladly's attire revealed him to be a sadist who delighted in the distress of his clients.

Such were Winceworth's uncharitable thoughts as he sat back in the orange armchair, battled his headache and feigned a lisp.

The doctor loomed forward through the jellyfish with a tuning-fork in either hand. 'And now, Mr Winceworth, "suffusion" again but with the tongue extended?' Winceworth wondered what he had done to deserve all this. The day had started with rain blowing in through Peter Winceworth's bedroom window in Battersea. Before he was even fully awake he knew that this was adding insult to injury: four hundred thousand pieces of one large, wet insult hissing against his face and running down his neck. He had looked down and discovered that he was still dressed in last night's evening clothes. It had been an acquaintance's birthday and they had turned a thirsty age. Eventually finding his face in the dressing-room mirror, Winceworth conducted a clumsy, still-drunk levée. He removed his bow tie from about his forehead and clawed pillow-feathers, buttery with hair pomade, from his chin. It was only once he had pried his feet from his dress shoes that he had remembered his scheduled

appointment: with fresh socks and a fruitless search for his umbrella, he was out of the door and flapping towards Chelsea within the minute.

‘As ever,’ Dr Gladly was saying, lowering the tuning forks, ‘your pitch is adequate and tone assured. But, I wonder: “roseate”, once more?’

“Roseate.” Winceworth made a thrumming *ttthhzzz* in the middle of the word.

Between the songbird and the small effort of speech, Winceworth’s headache slipped beneath the lining of his face. There it set about either trying to wring liquid or pluck a particular note from his optic nerve. Everything intensified, sound as well as vision: blood hissed in his ears and Dr Gladly suddenly had either far too many teeth or too small a mouth. A squint might clarify things, Winceworth thought: a thorough, concerted winching of the eyes that might portion the world into tolerable slices. He did not want to appear rude, however; gently does it; steady, the Buffs; he had only to lower his brows by a fraction and bend his forehead into the subtlest of corrugations and the squint would pass as mere attentiveness.

Dr Gladly’s tuning forks struck again, and Winceworth felt his face buckle. He meant to ask Dr Gladly about the usefulness of tuning forks. The doctor also had a jangling number of small silver pipes on a chain around his neck, and in previous session he had demonstrated one by one that each pipe was tuned to a slightly different pitch. Winceworth eyed them nervously, and the oriole gave another shriek. Whisky was the root of this morning’s horrors, on this point Winceworth was sure, but the preceding wines, brandies and cordials no doubt had contributed. Some of the blame must also lie in not having eaten sufficiently prior to the party yesterday. Winceworth knew he had eaten at least an apple. He remembered buying an apple from an end-of-day barrow near Covent Garden, as idiots with too little time for proper meals are wont to do. With hindsight, he now suspected that the apple may have been boiled to look plumper. Three hours later, he had returned this floury, unpleasant apple into the London evening air somewhere close to its origins near the Royal Opera House. He had been clinging, damply, onto a drain-pipe at the time. He remembered a lady had dropped her lorgnette into the mess. Profuse with brandied-bliss, he picked up the eye-glasses in order to return them to their owner and she had turned away, aghast.

Winceworth rediscovered this lorgnette still nestled in his pocket as he hurried to Dr Gladly’s rooms. One of the lenses had a small asterisk of shatter across

it. Wondering whether further details relating to the previous evening's events might also be found there, as Dr Gladly spoke Winceworth dipped his hand into his other jacket pocket. He experienced one of the most exotic disappointments available as his fingers closed, firmly, around an uneaten slice of birthday cake.

Winceworth looked longingly into the brazier again.

'Are you alright, Mr Winceworth?'

'It is rather — is it rather warm, today, do you think?'

'I do not think so,' said the doctor. "Gentle minds — "

"Gentle mind's confusion", was it?' Winceworth made sure to emphasise the false wasp-wing buzz of a lisp. He added, heartfelt, an extra 'sorry' too, to compound the effect. Across the room from him, the songbird looked askance, disgusted. Dr Gladly made a little note in an orange notebook.

'Never lose heart, Mr Winceworth. You are in good company — after all, Moses lisped, God lisped.'

'Is that right?'

'Yes!' The small silver pitch pipes tinkled together as Dr Gladly spread his arms. 'And it would be remiss not to pass on my congratulations at this point: there have been some definite improvements in your diction these few weeks.'

Winceworth dabbed his upper lip with a sleeve. There was cake-icing on his thumb, and he quickly folded his hands into his lap. 'That is heartening to hear, thank you.'

'And now,' Gladly went on, 'with your chin slightly relaxed: "Zounds!" shouted Ezra as he seized the amazed Zeno's ears.'

It was never entirely clear to Winceworth whether these phrases were standard tests or just borne of Dr Gladly's own invention. After their first meeting he had been sent home with instructions to repeat *Silly Susan sitting on the seashore stringing seashells and seaweeds, softly singing or listening in silence to the siren's songs*. Winceworth was aware from chitchat during their first meeting that 'Susan' was the absent Mrs Gladly's name. Her sepia portrait hung above the doctor's fireplace like a crinolined gnat in amber, memorialised as if she were dead. Dr Gladly described the absent Susan as suffering from some mysterious, debilitating illness for a good many years, currently sequestered to a sanatorium in the Alps for the sake of her health. A number of her letters littered the doctor's desk, detailing the tonic of Alpine air and new-fangled müsli breakfasts. Poor Susan with the sirens.

Winceworth had not felt entirely comfortable invoking the doctor's ailing wife in such a winsome setting as a sibilant fantasy beach, whether *softly singing or listening in silence to the siren's songs*. After the fortieth repetition, however, Winceworth found that he could inject a real impassioned emphasis on the word *silly*.

Winceworth was aware that Dr Gladly might at any time detect his lisping fraud. He was sure that the blasted songbird definitely knew, possibly by using the same instincts that animals are said to use when sensing ghosts or storms before they hit. It occurred to Winceworth that, rather than reporting the *detheption* to *Swansby's* or upbraiding his patient on the waste of his valuable time, Dr Gladly had devised these ridiculous vocal exercises to see how far Winceworth would be prepared to carry on the charade. If true, another indication of the doctor's green-suited, whistle-jangling sadism. This new abuse of *Zeno* and his ears, however, was impossible to attempt without laughing. Winceworth was not sure whether his face, head or stomach-lining could manage that today; he dabbed his lips again and the headache-jellyfish twisted and spun with a new electric blue heat.

'I had no idea that God lisped,' Winceworth said.

The doctor leapt to his desk. Clearly he had been anticipating the question. 'I refer you to the Coverdale! I have marked the very place in Isaiah, Chapter twenty-eight, I think —'

Over their four weeks together, Dr Gladly's methods of tutelage had proved curious but not wholly unenjoyable. This was in part due to the added cat-and-mouse element, Winceworth having to hide his perfectly standard diction. The last appointment had featured pebbles being inserted into his mouth while reading passages from Dr Gladly's Coverdale translation of the Bible; another involved a kind of puppet-show during which the musculature of the mouth was demonstrated using a silk, larger-than-life-size model of the human tongue. This model, Winceworth later discovered, was of the Swiss-bound Mrs Gladly's construction. Although surely a woman of many talents, it occurred to Winceworth that tongue-manufacture was perhaps not one of her greatest. Some of the silk's stitching was a little too obvious and a few wisps of stuffing were escaping in sad papillae at the seams. With the bundle safely clamped between the jaws of a pair of vulcanised rubber dentures, last week Winceworth watched for a good hour as Dr Gladly revealed the ways by which one's enunciation might be improved.

Presumably primed and ready for its next exhibition, today the tongue was hanging unwaggingly from its nail by the door.

The doctor seized his Bible and, in perfect pulpit-diction, intoned: “And therefore the Lord also shall speak with lisping lips and with a strange language unto this people, to whom he spake afore of this manner.” Winceworth nodded. He tried to crumble some of last night’s rediscovered birthday cake into the fabric under the cushion of his seat. The songbird noticed and began banging the bars of the cage. ‘And Moses,’ continued the Doctor, ‘was the only person who ever knew God face-to-face and mouth-to-mouth, as it were — all to be found in *Exodus*.’ The doctor closed his eyes and recited from memory: “But Moses said unto the Lord: Oh my Lord, I am a man that is not eloquent, from yesterday and heretofore and since the time that thou hast spoken unto thy servant: for I have a slow speech, and a slow tongue”.’

‘I had no idea I was part of such a merry band,’ Winceworth said once he was sure the doctor had finished.

The Coverdale closed and the doctor’s face grew sorrowful. ‘It was through hissing that sin entered into this world — ‘ Winceworth stopped crumbling the birthday cake, and froze, ‘ — and it is perhaps more beneficial to consider your affliction as nothing more than a reminder of that.’

‘Yes?’

CLANG, went the birdcage. The doctor clapped.

‘It is nothing that cannot be remedied, however. So, now, if you would: “Zounds!” shouted Ezra — ’

The tongue nailed to the door, the Coverdale Bible, the portrait of silly Susan: Dr Gladly’s oriole aside, there were many eccentricities to his study with which Winceworth had in previous less headache-smitten days become fond through familiarity. The foxed and mottled books spread across the nearby desk, for example; the framed display of phonetic alphabets with their jagged, mountainous /z/ /s/ /v/ ricti; the patient-worn (orange!) rug on which the chairs stood with its Paisley squiggles and curlicues.

He stared at this rug now. Given its complexity and his current condition, sustained study of the rug’s pattern proved to be something of a mistake. Its colours were those of gristle, Brown Windsor Soup and mustard. As he looked at it, it seemed to be squirming beneath his feet. He wrenched his head away but the nausea, the

doctor's suit and the cloying colours of the study finally succeeded in thumbing his brain into submission. The jellyfish scattered.

He had managed some dialogue, some repetition and he had not been sick onto his own shoes: he should be proud, he remembered thinking as the blood drained from his head and his eyes rolled back.

He reeled.

To trace the history of this hangover to its root, one would find Winceworth-of-yesterday making his way through a crowd, popping his head up into spaces between the hats and shoulders and shawls of Long Acre. The word *curriebuction* kept rising in his mind. He ate an apple loudly to dislodge it.

He did not want to be a) late, b) there at all. The occasion was Frasham's birthday.

One of the few people for whom Winceworth's lisp had ever presented an opportunity for cruelty was Terence Clovis Frasham. *Terenth Clovith Fthrathm*. According to the invitation received last week, Frasham had just been accepted to the *1500 Mile Society* on the occasion of his twenty-seventh birthday. His landlady Mrs Codd had slid the invitation under his bedroom door while he had been darning his dressing-gown. He was not accustomed to receiving much post at his lodging at Pauffley St. and was half-convinced that his landlady steamed open any letters that happened to be addressed to him prior to handing them over. He was slightly frightened of Mrs Codd, however, and had not as yet raised his suspicions.

Winceworth bent down, opened the envelope and read the thick little card. At the name of its sender, he punched his pillow in irritation, then tried to find some charm in the invitation to calm down. The handwritten 2 of the mentioned age looked like a duck in shape, the 7 looked like a cornice. He breathed deep and imagined a duck falling off a cornice. He cheered a little, and propped the invitation on his windowsill.

There were many reasons to drink heavily in the presence of Terence Clovis Frasham. He was handsome, popular and had the posture of a professional tennis player. Tennis was a sport — along with fencing and long-distance swimming — for which Frasham had received Blues whilst at university. Winceworth had the posture of a middle-ranking chess-player. Frasham also possessed that particularly resentful

quality of being a complete braggart whilst also seeming entirely charming. He had entered the empty of *Swansby's Dictionary* at the same time as Winceworth.

According to the invitation, Frasham qualified for entry to the *1500 Mile Society* having successfully returned from his trip to Siberia. This jaunt had been funded by *Swansby's* in order that the etymology of the words *shaman*, *struse* and the correct spelling of *tsar* might be researched for their *S* volume. Winceworth was still not quite sure how Frasham had talked Prof Swansby into this, since Frasham did not speak a word of Russian. According to one of the letters Frasham sent back to the offices, pursuing the etymology of *starlet* (noun) necessitated a funded audience with various members of Russian aristocracy. Given the parallels between their lives thus far, the fact that Frasham had been apparently banished to the wilds of Northern Asia whilst Peter Winceworth was funded to undergo Dr Gladly's attentions in Chelsea for a while had seemed a fair trade. Then the Frasham photographs started to arrive back at *Swansby's* editorial office: as London passed through the smog-fumey spring and summer, with horses being slaughtered in the street to make way for automobiles and the city filleted for the Underground railways, the photographs sent back to office by Frasham caused grown men and women in the office to coo with envy and excitement. Here was one on camel-back, another wreathed in silks or looking over Lake Baikal taking tea with a diplomat. A particularly dramatic photo of Frasham mock-wrestling a walrus was greeted with something bordering hysteria by members of *Swansby* staff and was immediately pinned above his empty desk, shrine-like.

One could just make out the other *Swansby* employee that had been sent on the trip in the corner of the photograph. While Frasham was tall and strapping, Ronald Glossott was entirely unprepossessing. Perhaps it was testament to Frasham being quite so particularly good looking but standing next to him — and Glossott was *invariably* somewhere close to Frasham whenever they were in the Westminster offices, forever scurrying at the latter's elbow with pen and paper — it was difficult to remember any real defining features for the man. Glossott was short but not stooped, round by not exactly fat. Winceworth could not even remember what his voice was like, or even if he had ever heard him speak. One thing that Winceworth could recall was that Glossott always carried a lime green handkerchief in his waistcoat's jettied pocket; it was a bright enough colour that occasionally Winceworth caught sight of it flashing like St. Elmo's fire across the wide central hall of *Swansby's* Scrivenery. Glossott was very much Frasham's assistant although they actually held the same role

in the *Swansby* office and Glossott's faculty for languages and philology was far more advanced. Winceworth suspected that Ronald Glossott had done most of the actual lexicographical work during their Siberian year-long trip as well as any heavy lifting (other than for theatrical effect, cf. walruses). Someone had to carry and operate the camera, after all. In the walrus photograph, Glossott was pictured almost entirely out of frame in the background. He was sawing a fin from one of the aloft walrus's floe-mates with a hatchet.

The photographs were accompanied by letters. These were adjective-heavy and regularly ill-spelt, and the progress of Frasham's etymological investigations were never really emphasised.

The dictionary's editor-in-chief Prof Swansby once noticed Winceworth glancing with particular dolefulness at the walrus photograph from his neighbouring desk, and said in passing, cheerfully: 'The valour of the field versus the elbow-grease of the desk!' Peter nodded and smiled in answer, and gripped his pen too hard. Prof Swansby moved along. Winceworth looked down and found his notes on *solecism* (n.) spattered with ink.

Despite his feelings towards the birthday host, Winceworth was curious to attend the meeting place of this Society. According to the invitation, one could only be a member once the requisite 1500 miles had been travelled from London. He had never heard of such a club.

He soon understood the reason for this ignorance from Frasham himself.

On the evening of the party, once Winceworth had located the right building on Long Acre and made enquiries of the stern-faced bow-tied doorman as to the Society's whereabouts, he was marshalled to an oak-panelled room. Even as he stepped inside Frasham was difficult to miss. Surrounded by his university friends and fellow *Swansby's* employees, Frasham sat in the *1500 Mile Society's* leather armchairs in a fine grey suit and bright pink boutonnière, playing with a cigarette-case. He had completely lost the Spotted Dick, boiled-pork bulkiness that Winceworth imagine had once helped him gain the edge when barrelling across a rigger pitch or sitting on a first-year. Siberia had obviously suited Frasham; he seemed an attractive and irritatingly well-turned-out mix of rugged well-put-togetherness with a new fine red moustache, his black hair waxed close over his ears in thick liquorice loops.

Winceworth greeted him with a handshake, forcing himself to seem jovial.

The handshake was oily and over-long, and somehow it seemed Winceworth's fault for being so.

'Winceworth!'

'Frasham.'

'Winceworth! Thank you, thank you: twenty seven years young!' Frasham said, unprompted.

Winceworth stared at their hands still rising and falling and, feeling he ought to have a rejoinder, he congratulated Frasham on being added to the Society's membership.

'Oh, that! I *formed* the club on my return; had a word with my uncle — ' Frasham opened a palm towards the man sitting by the window across the room; the identification of a Frasham Snr. was depressing because, even at this distance, the man obviously had exactly the same air of charismatic gentility as his nephew, something Winceworth had privately hoped might be pummelled out of Frasham by the progress of time. Frasham continued, leaning in close. 'Between the two of us we managed to get these rooms: not a bad set-up, don't you think?'

From what Winceworth could remember from previous conversations, Frasham's uncle and the Frasham family money had something to do with rhubarb — rhubarb jam, preserves, conserves, marmalades that were shipped all over the world from the family estate. Winceworth had never completely understood the difference between all of these things, but the emphasis was on cloying sweetness and teeth-on-edge, sour, tongue-curling compotes.

'So,' Winceworth said, smiling brightly, too brightly. Anxiety was already broiling in his stomach. He worried that if he had to keep forcing this smile the corners of his mouth would meet around the back of his head, that his head would detach and roll away. 'So!' he said again, 'you are not only a *member* and *founding member*, but also, in fact, the *sole* member of the *1500 Mile Society*?'

'One of two thus far, dear boy: one of two.' Frasham beckoned a waiter to his side and Winceworth was suddenly holding a warmish champagne flute. 'When you manage to fling yourself further than Battersea you will be able to join us up there, what do you say?'

Winceworth followed Frasham's extended hand (he seemed incapable of pointing with a finger directly, gesturing instead as if he was taking part in a louche, dandified version of a Renaissance court dance) towards some wooden rectangles

fixed into the wall. They looked like old School House Prize commendation boards. There, in gold lettering, was Frasham's name (Cantab.) above that of Ronald Glossott. Winceworth helped himself to another glass of champagne from a passing tray.

Glossott was, at that moment, stationed by the door of the *Society's* room and making sure that everyone who entered signed their name in a guest log. Winceworth must have walked right past him without noticing. Glossott caught Winceworth's eye just as the smaller man was passing his lime green handkerchief across his face; he paused and then raised his glass. Winceworth sipped his proffered champagne; Glossott nosed; Frasham quaffed. A clock struck somewhere and the three of their glances triangulated.

Winceworth wished he had not come. He glanced around. Heaven knows to what purpose these rooms had been put before Frasham and his uncle appropriated them for this ridiculous Society. There were phantom yellow nicotine stains on the ceiling that spoke of masculine company, with corresponding grubby haloes above the armchairs, cartouches and black bulb-buttocked Hermes statuettes dotted about in alcoves. Frasham had presumably added some small props to convey the Society's claims to the *outré*: at one point Winceworth almost tripped over an elephant-foot umbrella-stand. Winceworth was also fairly sure that Frasham must have family connected to Kew Gardens who were not above loaning some specimens out from the Palm House: scattered about the wide room were swathes of potted reeds and long grasses. Some of them were so thick and lush that you could conceal a panther in the largest of them.

A band played in a corner of the room, punctuating the air with occasional blarts of oboe; Winceworth considered making some uninformed compliment on Frasham's choice of music, but even as he opened his mouth Frasham was button-holed by another guest and steered away from Winceworth's side. It was an Anglo-Saxon scholar from *Swansby's* doing the buttonholing; he did not appear to recognise Winceworth. Thankful for the lull, Winceworth nodded a goodbye to Glossott, and relaxed into his usual social routine: counting paces as if he was in a cell.

He managed to beat a tattoo of the whole room, completing a whole uninterrupted lap, before he switched tactics. He decided to spell out certain invisible words against the room's carpet. By making his way across the two parallel sides of the room and then cutting across the centre, he first executed an *H*. Then he completed an *E*, then traced two *Ls* across the room before concluding with another

lap: a final O. As well as taking up time, this had the added benefit of allowing his face to tighten with genuine preoccupation. By spelling out letters on the carpet like this, Winceworth found that he could successfully evade conversation without seeming rude: by looking genially, but intently, off in the direction upon which he had set, no one thought to approach and engage him in discussion.

Unfortunately, this performance became a slightly more awkward affair once the serving staff recognised his isolation from the herd. He became aware of them tailing his progress. To credit the *1500 Mile Society* waiters, they were wonderfully attentive. After two further glasses of champagne Winceworth tried to dissuade the waiter's advance by requesting the most outlandish drinks that he could imagine. He hoped the task would prove a longwinded one and that he would be left in peace, but almost immediately he was presented with an elderflower spirit and something that apparently was derived from lavender honey served in some kind of glass urn. He changed tack, decided to be frank and asked for whisky. It was all going on Frasham's tab, was the logic, so who was he to argue? He also ordered drinks for the musicians in the corner; they bobbed their instruments in thanks.

Across the room, Frasham said something witty and his ring of university friends burst into applause. A birthday cake was produced in the shape of an iced *Russian-to-English Dictionary* and, the band striking up the first notes of Happy Birthday, Frasham cut into it with a huge knife. The *1500 Mile Society* rang to the clank of ice against glass, cufflinks against glass and canes hitting the wooden floor. Glossott was still bent over the guest book, smiling.

Having spelt out the whole alphabet twice against the carpet and by now grown entirely drunk, by the time the cake was being handed around Winceworth decided that he would attempt one further circuit of the room before he left. He had managed to convince himself that pacing, rather than conversation, brought out the best in him, reasoning that it was a product not of nervousness so much as flâneurship. He had a sudden flash of inspiration: he could construct an alphabetic diagram of London. Holding on to the wall a little, he began to devise in his mind specific routes through the city that would trace graphical Roman letters. Walking and alphabets would be, he decided, a marvellous distracting therapy. For A, for example, he could begin at Cambridge circus, trot up Earlham Street, turn at Seven Dials and follow St. Martin's Lane (with Tower Street forming the letter's central spoke). Some letters were clear in his mind: D would be the perimeter of Billingsgate

Fish Market, for example; St. James's Square could form the *O* (and if he ran its perimeter five thousand times, he too could enter the *1500 Mile Society*). A general snooze of *Ss* and *Zs* existed between the newly pulled-down church on Finsbury Circus and the lunatic asylum at Hoxton House: he added this to the growing index.

Winceworth was dimly aware of passing Glossott. He was licking his thumb and turning the guestbook's pages.

When Winceworth had been at school, there had existed a textbook filled with grammar exercises and tables. One page had required students to rank the following verbs according to their pace: *jaunt, stride, amble, lumber, strut, patrol, plod, prance, run, saunter, shamble, stroll* and *traipse*. Winceworth passed the band once more. He jaunted — *marcia moderato*; he strode — *allegro*; he ambled — *adagietto*. He caught the eye of the waiter and had another whisky. He lumbered — *larghissimo*; he strutted — *ad andantino*; he patrolled — *moderato*.

There must have been two hundred people in the room by now and they all seemed to be having quite a time of it. He plodded — *grave*; he pranced — *vivacissimo*.

The hope that he might be able to trickle through the door once a necessary two hours of social grace had been observed remained a possibility. He decided he would stand behind one particularly lush potted plant to evade the further attentions of the serving staff — and Frasham — and planned to count down the minutes in the relative safety of the potted plant's leaves. He did not want it to appear as if he was *sidling*. He had spent the day in the office defining this verb, and was keenly aware that to sidle can convey a certain sinister intent if one happens to be observed. He thought a good trick to counter accusations of *sidling* might be to bounce slightly at the knees and keep the elbows in close to the body. So it was that Winceworth, by now was worried that he was one of humanity's natural sidlers, slid bouncingly into what he would choose at his most lexicographically-digressive to call the pot-plant's *arboreal verdancy* without disturbing a single leaf.

He sidled straight into a young woman who was already hiding there.

The lady was crouching slightly and eating a slice of birthday cake. They stared at one another, and both of their eyebrows went up at the same time and tilted into identical angles of surprise. Both of their expressions changed in time with each other: their eyebrows were at once a grave accent, acute accent, then circumflex

above their eyes: ò ó ô, rearranging from signifying *surprise* then *furtive* and until both relaxed into an attempted-nonchalance.

The lady dropped the cake into her handbag without breaking eye-contact. She straightened a little. Winceworth, drunk enough to interpret this as an invitation to dictate proceedings, cleared his throat.

‘Sorry whoops sorry sorry, I, whoops,’ he said.

The young woman looked him up and down. The she put one gloved hand to his arm. ‘Are you quite all right?’ she said.

He considered this then continued, whispering as directed, ‘I beg your pardon. I had not realised this plant was taken.’ She was dressed in some kind of dove grey stuff with pearls as large as frogspawn around her neck. He could think of no other way to describe them. Her neck was very white. Why was he staring at her neck? His head snapped back to the crowd visible through the potplant, but not before he noticed three leaves bending against her hair as she stepped back a step into the plant.

‘Don’t worry about that,’ she was saying. ‘This particular plant has the distinct benefit of coming fully-recommended.’ The young woman held her hand towards him and he found their expressions had changed from one of mutual distrust to shared, good-humoured conspiracy: õõ.

‘Dr Livingstone, I presume?’ she said.

It was then that Winceworth, quietly and in an entirely impractical way, fell in love.

‘I’m not sure the good doctor was invited,’ he said, and he drew closer into the plant and brought his heels together. He had forgotten to whisper at this point.

She considered this. ‘In which case, one might say some people have all the luck.’

‘You do not want to be here either?’ Winceworth asked, hissing in a pantomime of solidarity.

‘I could not possibly comment.’ His companion returned her gaze to mirror his, directed back out into the room. ‘I suppose you’re staging an escape too?’

Winceworth noticed that the plant’s trunk had a label nailed into it, presumably bearing the name of the plant. The label was slightly askew and he realigned it with a thumbnail. The room seemed to be chanting *rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb*.

‘Hardly that, I’m a desk man.’ He trialled another look at her face and found it puzzled. ‘Rather than a man of the field, that is,’ he clarified, poorly. ‘Unlike Terence. Mr Frasham, I mean. I am sorry, have we met?’ Leaves rattled around them. The label on the plant read *DO NOT TOUCH*.

‘I do not believe so,’ said the woman. ‘Have you travelled 1500 miles?’

‘Not this evening.’ Two men walked past their plant discussing politics, loud enough for Winceworth to gather that they were using parliamentary terms incorrectly. From this angle, Winceworth could see that one of the band’s musicians had concealed a hipflask in his viola case. ‘I wonder,’ he said, ‘have you dropped anything?’

The woman blinked. Her eyes were brown, but one of them had a curious green notch in it. Why was he looking in her eyes? He snapped his head back out again to the crowd. Something in the back of Winceworth’s mind seemed fixed on the idea that if he did not look at her, he could not be blamed for whatever rubbish he was saying. She was speaking once more: ‘Are these your usual questions to those strangers you find in trees?’

‘What? Oh, no, I only asked in case you were in here — ‘ and he gestured at the fronds surrounding him, ‘for any specific reason. If you had dropped something in here, for example, I might assist you in retrieving it.’

‘I am not good at parties,’ the woman said, bluntly, ‘but I do know a good vantage-point when I see it. I am enjoying watching people from here,’ she said, and she lowered her voice still further. ‘It feels as if I am watching a Manet scene through a Rousseau jungle. And for the most part it allows me to avoid small-talk.’

‘You must continue to do so,’ Winceworth said, withdrawing a little and raising his glass between them, promising to himself to look up any *Manet* and *Rousseau* entries in *Swansby’s* at the first opportunity. ‘Hiding behind pot-plants is the closest I get to intrepid, but I can do so quietly.’

‘Let us intrepede together, then.’

‘I shall certainly stick close by.’ Winceworth considered *intrepede*. He considered that this was the longest sustained conversation he had kept for months. He thought that he should start every day by drinking whisky or whiskey and maybe everything would always seem this cogent and easy. ‘What have you observed so far?’

‘A great many things,’ she said slowly. ‘See for yourself. The ways people are conducting themselves, the migratory patterns they make, the watering holes they

choose. The calls they use within different groups. I had, in fact, been watching you until quite recently.'

'Nothing untoward, I hope,' Winceworth said. He felt his cheeks grow incandescent.

'By no means. I concluded half an hour ago that you are a very good negotiator of meaningless paths.' Winceworth detected a slight accent on the way she pronounced the letter *t* in *negotiator*. He tried to place it.

'Aren't we all in our own way?' he said, attempting charm. He raised the whisky glass again to his lips: somehow, he missed his mouth but his wrist kept going, propelling the glass all the way up to his eye. This meant for a second that through the angled glass her dress was stained yellow. He kept the glass there for long enough for the Glenlivet's fumes to make his eyes burn. She, meanwhile, had not taken her eyes from the room.

'As it happens, that man over there in the herring-bone has been doing the same thing as you for the past hour but in the opposite direction: you went clockwise, while he is entirely widdershins.'

Widdershins immediately became Winceworth's favourite word in the whole world.

'And *that* woman — ' the young lady pointed, and Winceworth followed her finger, ' — No, not her, that one, wearing in the curry-coloured hat. She has been pivoting on alternate feet every seven minutes. And Glossott - ' she indicated at Glossott by the door, ' — hasn't moved at all.'

'You know Glossott?' Winceworth said, surprised. 'Well. Well. Ronald is famed for his — ' Winceworth took another drink and considered his phrasing. 'His *stolid permanence*.'

'Quite so. I should be making a spotting guide.'

'In which case, and for any notes' benefit, I feel I ought to add that my wandering was not meaningless and in fact I was actually spelling out -'

It was then that Frasham, with ever the bully's bloodhound-nose for awkward situations, noticed the top of Winceworth's head peeping from the leaves of their potted plant. Winceworth raised the glass to his face again, but it was too late.

'Peter!' Frasham cried, striding towards them. 'Stop scaring the cobwebs and speak to me properly.'

Neither Winceworth nor his companion moved.

‘Discovered, alas,’ murmured the lady.

‘I could always just ignore him,’ Winceworth replied, not entirely joking and not entirely undesperately. ‘I can do a passing impression of a toucan. If the Mayans had just *ignored* the conquistadors...’

‘Peter!’

It was not worth reminding Frasham that greetings had already passed between them and Winceworth admitted defeat.

‘Terence.’ Winceworth emerged. ‘A joy.’ He was enfolded into the host’s broad chest. A shirt-button bruised his eyelid.

‘Taking in the local flora and fauna, I see,’ Frasham said. He too seemed as if he had enjoyed the waiter’s attentions. He gestured to the young lady who had stepped from the plant, thrillingly, on Winceworth’s arm. ‘Sophia, has he bored you so much you’re trying to blend in with the props?’

Sophia! Winceworth’s new favourite name — Sophia’s hand tightened on Winceworth’s arm in what he decided was a show of camaraderie.

‘We have travelled,’ she said, ‘from the very depths of the wildest woods together.’

‘Is that so?’ said Frasham.

‘We are now closer than siblings,’ the young woman said. Winceworth swallowed, and tried to focus.

‘The old dog.’ Frasham eyed Winceworth appreciatively. ‘And has Peter explained how we know each other, I wonder?’

‘He has not yet had the opportunity.’

‘He’s the one I was telling you about,’ Frasham said, and his voice raised a little. ‘The man with the lisp working on the letter *S!*’

He felt Sophia’s eyes on him once more, and Winceworth wondered whether his blush would scorch through the fabric of his shirt.

‘How precious,’ squealed one of the party attendants nearby. Winceworth recognised him vaguely from the desks at *Swansby’s*, a Sanskrit scholar. He couldn’t for the life of him remember his name. For some reason, this man was wearing a fez and turning glassy eyes from Winceworth to Frasham. ‘But,’ continued the man. ‘Terence, you simply must tell us all more about your Siberian adventure.’

Frasham beamed. Winceworth wondered how difficult it might be to club someone over the head with a 400lb potted plant. ‘It was quite extraordinary,’ he

heard Frasham say. ‘And, at the same time, often entirely preposterous. I mean! Watching some Cossack in a suit fracturing his tear-ducts in pronouncing *czar tsar* or *sdzar* in any fourteen hundred different ways, and poor Glossott scribbling it all down.’

Winceworth helped himself to another drink that swung by his elbow. He smiled but his mouth felt stiff, snappable; he suddenly believed that he could hear every tiny movement of bone in his jaw in syrupy clacking sounds. There was some gratification that his shrub-mate looked absolutely bored by this turn in the conversation. Someone across the room produced a balalaika, an instrument that Frasham had apparently mastered on his travels and gave him cause to peel away from their little circle and resume his position on the clubroom’s sofa. He played a version of ‘The Boy I Love Is Up in the Gallery’ without having to look at the strings, fluttering his eyelashes at Glossott. The old rogue. Good old Terence.

Winceworth nosed his whisky and let his mind unravel.

He considered leading Sophia back to their plant and explaining — how might one set down the phonetics of a hiccup? — that this lisp nonsense was far behind him. It became crucial in Winceworth’s fuddled mind that Sophia not only be made to understand that he wanted to apologise, but that he was a Good Sort. He could not play the balalaika, but he had other talents. He could spin the etymology of the word *hello* from its earliest roots.

Frasham was now miming the way in which he had wrestled the walrus to a delighted crowd. Lamplight caught his hair, clinking from his teeth and making gold chevrons in the fabric of his suit. He was singing again.

‘He is a dreadful handsome show-off, is he not?’ murmured Sophia beside Winceworth, not unkindly. They watched Frasham turn his head upward and serenade the ceiling. In this stance his throat was exposed. Winceworth could not help but think that Dr Gladly, connoisseur of mouths and mouthparts, would probably call Frasham’s throat a perfect specimen.

Protobolla is the Old English word for a man’s Adam’s apple, Winceworth wanted to say. It means *throat-ball*: no poetry there, just etymological pragmatism. The jutting shape of the letter P enacting the jutting swell of the gullet. He blinked at Sophia in front of him, who had momentarily doubled in his vision.

What was I saying? Winceworth thought. It had a vowel in it. He could tell because his mouth was caught open, mid-howl or mid-coo. My mouth a parody of the

hole in a *balalaika*, he thought. A hole is excavated or made to be filled, an absence or a yawning, a noose-hole for the new Twopenny Tube trains poised to disappear into the ground across the city. Ignore what Terence said about my lisp, Sophia. Do not think about my tongue as a buzzing, fat-tongued proboscis like that of a fly. Do not think of my tongue at all. I am more than that.

A fresh whisky was being held out to Winceworth. The hand offering it had red-haired knuckles, extremely freckled hands and bloodless fingernails. The knuckles formed a row of white *ms* and *ns*, spelling out a mumble along the cusp of the fist. Let me tell you about the etymology of the word *hello*, Winceworth thought, taking the drink. He felt newly bold. I cannot sing and I cannot be handsome, but I can perhaps charm you with made-up etymologies. A fascination with the particulars rather than the general, that's my talent. This tendency to drift off and fascinate with small details, the transformative power of proper attention paid to small things.

'Are you feeling quite alright?' Sophia said, and Winceworth frowned.

Helloa, pronounced like cocoa, from an emphatic imperative of *halôn*, *holôn*: to fetch, used especially in hailing a ferryman. A call used to hail a distant or occupied person, or said with surprise at an unexpected meeting, such as that occurring within a potted plant. *Hallow*, as in the ground, cf. demonstratively splendid. To shout 'halloo' to dogs in order to urge them on. *Lo! Hullabaloo*, from *bas*, *là le loup!* ('down! there, the wolf!'), hallelujah! Etymologies, the speculative pedigree of a word. What do you think of me as a lexicographer, Sophia? Winceworth wondered, as he watched her double again in his vision. What would that knowledge prompt you to ask? What is my favourite word? Or, more particular still, my favourite letter? Most people wanted to know Winceworth's favourite letter once they knew his occupation. Ask me about my favourite letter, Sophia, Winceworth urged, silently. The awful alphabet: the grossly stunted Eiffel Tower of *A*, the headless, limbless fat woman's body of *B*. *C*'s upset urn; the taut bow of *D*; the snapped trident-head of *E* further-snapped to form an *F*. An empty workman's clamp: *G*. The rugby posts of *H*. Winceworth, the *I*, standing tall, what's at stake; the following long shadow cast by the *I*, sometime past noon: *J*. What is next? The point of an arrow smacking into a trunk: *K*, whilst *L* is candle-holder where the flame has snuffed out (a flame guttering out itself stood-in by the diacritic *î*). *M* and *N* have been claimed by that waiter's knuckles. *O* is provided by Frasham's open singing mouth. Beyond this room, this ridiculous stupid room, *P* is cuckoo-spit on the length of a chive, cooling in the dew-

dawn while *Q* is a monocle, discarded; *R* is a thrown magnifying glass embedded in a wall. To say that *S* is a snake is easy-pickings, but true: my lisp is a snake-in-the-grass. Atlas with his chin sunk to his chest in silhouette, the world removed from his shoulders: *T*. A grin, grossly drawn-out, an empty jar; if there were forty, Sophia, we'd be ready for fairyland thieves: *U*. An amphora with the lip smashed off by vandals: *V*. Two such amphorae: *W*. The next letter marks the spot, a kiss, a man's braces against his fresh white shirt-back, *X*, followed by the Pentecostal or horrified up-thrust arms of *Y*, regarding the serpent *Z*: a cruel child has broken the spine of an *S*. Allow these private fictions to a boring lexicographers. Ask me something, Sophia, Winceworth thought.

He focused once more, and saw Terence Clovis Frasham again by their side. 'Of course,' Frasham was saying, pulling his arm about Sophia's shoulders, 'there was one particularly fine acquisition I made on my travels.'

Winceworth then noticed the two small details of Sophia and Frasham's matching engagement rings.

Winceworth made his apologies and stumbled down the stairs out of the Society. In a phrase of which Dr Gladly would no doubt be proud, September sun had long-since sought solace, silently, amongst some small scudding cirrus clouds. He ran —*prestissimo*; he shambled — *lento*; he trudged — *andante moderato*.

Peter Winceworth made his journey home.

Winceworth looked up from the carpet to find Dr Gladly still speaking.

'And so, I think, ends our penultimate session,' the doctor concluded. He dusted his hands on his knees.

'No more tongues and pebbles?' Winceworth dragged the heel of his hand through his hair. 'No more *Zeno*.'

'I will see how many more *Zenos* we can fit into our final encounter next week.'

Dr Gladly's next client was already waiting in the corridor. As the doctor and his patient emerged onto the landing, she stared shyly at her shoes and blushed as her mother made spirited *hello!s* and *good morning!s*. The girl was an owl-faced, pre-pimpled child who shrunk from handshakes and Dr Gladly's attempted head-pats. Winceworth recognized her from previous weeks. Curious, he had queried the child's

reason for visiting the practice during earlier consultations and was informed it was on her mother's insistence; the girl apparently suffered some kind of idioglossia and entirely refused to speak to her parents, siblings or classmates. She could read and write to an exceptional standard but was entirely mute when in company. Her mother had overheard her daughter speaking a language of her own invention when she alone in the room, however. During her sessions with Dr Gladly they had established through the use of paper, pen and orange crayons that she was speaking to an imaginary tiger. The imaginary tiger accompanied the girl everywhere and was called Mr Grumps.

Presumably Mr Grumps was in the corridor even as the girl and her mother were ushered into the doctor's rooms, else prowling in the stairwell or regarding the oriole in the study with invisible, ravenous eyes.

Dr Gladly confessed to Winceworth that as well as teasing comprehensible dialogue from the child he was also hoping to make a record of the girl's created language and ascertain whether she had developed a distinct, logical grammar: he was praying there was material for a monograph on the subject.

Each time that he ran into this fellow patient, Winceworth recalled the thrill that he had felt when developing his childhood lisp, the thrill that lisping made other people's opinions towards him soften. He remembered the delight that came with this private sense of agency; he was glad to see that someone was still able to access such a feeling.

That morning in the corridor, both patients happened to lock eyes as they passed in the threshold of Dr Gladly's door and Winceworth shot the girl a small conspiratorial smile. The child looked at him with an abashed politeness. Then she scowled and released a clear, snarling growl.

Peter Winceworth collected his hat and made his way rather quickly down the stairs and into the street.

There are a number of ingrained behaviours that are asserted during a day. Some are entirely automatic and, on the whole, shared: the impulse to pull a hand away from the steam of a breakfast kettle is just such a one, or a forehead perspiring to keep a hungover body cool. Sometimes these behaviours are cultivated rather than spontaneous. They begin as autonomous performances, but then are ritualised until

they become embedded in the culture of day-to-day action. For example, Winceworth could not imagine crossing the stone step threshold of *Swansby's Press* without his false lisp falling like a portcullis down across his tongue. He didn't even have to think about it. Similarly, he had worked there so long that the patterns and actions required to steer his body from front door to desk had become committed to his muscle-memory. This translated to knowing the precise momentum at which to swing an arm to meet a specific handle, each day being able to match the squeak-and-batter percussion of a lift summoned on the ground floor with a two-bar hum of 'Ciribiribin' as well as the requisite angle of heel-pivot through which one should spin most efficiently between a pushing-the-floor-numbers-dial into stare-out-of-the-lift's-grill stance. Today he was not the only inhabitant of the lift. One corner of the elevator was occupied by one of the many cats that Prof Swansby allowed to roam the Press. This mouser was big and yellow, and seemed completely uninterested in the shuddering floor and quaking walls. Winceworth reached down to pat its head, and it turned its face away.

Once at his level in the building, Winceworth's body had also learnt to recreate the time, beat and shuffles necessary to get to the correct desk in the Scrivenery. He was sure he was placing each foot in exactly the same inch of parquet corridor each time that he made the journey.

Winceworth suspected that far rarer was the ability to recount the exact number of steps that are necessary in order to complete such tasks, and furthermore to feel that your day is ruined if that number does not fit with a pre-set number allocated for such an assignment. Perhaps that is also an important distinction: that for some, actions are assignments to which you are committed, rather than just part of mere procedure. That there is nothing *mere* about a procedure.

Prof Swansby was someone who had just such a fixation. He was counting the number of his steps aloud as he approached Winceworth even now, the gold pocket watch in his palm transfixing his attention.

'Forty-five, forty-six, good morning, forty-seven, Peter,' he said as he passed, eyes not leaving his watch face.

'Sir.'

Winceworth knew better than to distract Prof Swansby at such moments, and God forbid anything that might cause him to lose count of his steps. Even the smallest interruption would cause Prof Swansby to halt, whereupon he would emit a

short, sharp squawk and then dart back to the stairwell and begin the whole process once more.

This was one of a number of eccentricities about Prof Swansby — like the pivoting in the lift and the two bars' worth of the theme from 'Ciribiribin' — that, over time, was accepted to the point of being entirely overlooked by Swansby's staff, part of the fabric of working there. Another eccentricity was the squawking. No doubt Prof Swansby's hyper-awareness of his movements might be linked to the reasons why he made such a good editor; it was almost as if for Prof Swansby, spotting a misspelling or grammatical up-slip on a page snagged at his eye-line in a physical way and produced a physical reaction. All readers experience a similar feeling, to an extent: a well-crafted sentence somehow runs through the reading mind as a rope does through hands. When that sentence contains errors or distracting ambiguities its progress is stalled or coarsened. Compare the textured skeins of these two examples:

The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.

The jumx quickfoot browned oevr the, dogly laze.

For Prof Swansby, whether it is an inability to count his steps under certain circumstances or upon encountering an error or disruption on a page, such an event was accompanied by a kind of chirping gag in his throat. His eyes widened, his hands drew up on either side of his neatly-whiskered cheeks and a small, high peal would ring through the air. It was animal in nature but also not unlike the sound of a finger being pulled across a wineglass.

The moment would then pass, calm would return to his face, and the editor of *Swansby's Encyclopædic Dictionary* would score a line through the error or retrace his steps and carry on as if nothing had happened.

The peace in Swansby's Press was rent by these squawks quite regularly, and no-one batted an eyelid.

He slunk into his seat. Just as the lisp descended, he always felt his shoulders go up unnaturally high once he came into the building. Slinking and rocking seemed to characterise even his most fluid gesture. Winceworth intuitively made a move to pick up his Swansby standard issue pen. It was not in its usual place. He looked dully at his hands with the face of someone trying to remember what possible use they could be.

Decorum, in architecture, is the suitability of a building and the several parts and ornaments thereof, to its station and occasion. The *Swansby* Press' central, circular shelf-lined Scrivenery was a bright, vast room with high windows, and white-washed stuccoed dome. A bookish bull-ring with the acoustics of a basilica. Even on a dull September day sunshine lanced down upon the *Swansby* workers below, light curdling the dust in the air whenever it rose from disturbed old papers. There must have been at least fifty desks in the room, all regularly spaced and facing the door through which *Winceworth* had just entered. Light glinted from the flat blades of paper-knives in dull little neon blurs.

His desk was clear, ready for work. Mr *Bielefeld* on his left, shaped like a carafe and Mr *Appleton* on his right, shaped like a cafetière. Both always earlier than he on a Tuesday. They exchanged the normal noises of pleasantry. The majority of the sounds of the Scrivenery were dedicated to paper: the sibilance of a document slid across desktop, the slightly more stuttered shuffling of leaves into order or the *khuhhkunk-ffppp* of a book being removed from the shelves lining the airy room. It is a lexicographer's impulse to categorise these things. All this was a welcome, cathedral-like calm compared to the orange-and-oriole nightmare of Dr *Gladly's* office, let alone the braying scheme and flux of the London street. *Winceworth* folded his useless hands behind his head and closed his eyes.

'Quite the night!'

While working in *Swansby's* *Winceworth* had made a conscious effort not to make a taxonomy of his fellow workers. Even a private cataloguing seemed unfair, dehumanising, but so many figures just slipped into set types. In printing, a *stereotype* is a plate of type metal. Another word for this is *cliché*, a word derived from the sound of a printing plate, cast from movable type, when in use. As it was, *Winceworth* knew that the person blinking breezily at him between a meringue of white hair and a candyfloss beard was a member of the Anglo-Saxon language scholars. This specific tribe of scholars engaged with the Dictionary all seemed half-composed of clouds. They had white clouds on top of their heads and white clouds on their chins; their eyes were cloudy, their breath was somehow warmer and heavier than anyone else's when they leaned in too-close to speak (and they always did lean in too close, as if nudged forward by an unseen crosswind). They all took up lot of room whenever they moved, always seeming to choose the centre of a corridor or channel between desks rather than stepping to one side. It was a gentle filling of

space, however, rather than an aggressive one. They weren't field researchers, after all. The Anglo-Saxon scholars wafted around, rather than surged, and they spoke softly with lumpy, lilting vowels.

'Yes. Yes, wasn't it?' Winceworth said.

The cloud nodded, smiled, puffed away.

Just as he knew his body performed certain dips, pivots and paths without having to think about it to gain access to his desk, and just as he could guess what role a colleague had within the Dictionary house by their appearance, the extent and content of his conversations within the domed hall of the Scrivenery always fell into specific patterns. Prof Swansby's, between counting and squawks, was always 'Good morning, Peter' before lunch and 'Good afternoon, Peter' afterwards, and the response was always the same. When the boy with the packet of newly-received letters came by, his wicker barrow making its own 'Ciribiribin' chirrup under the breath of its wheel, his 'There's your lot!' always prompted a 'Let's see what we have here then!' The same inflection each time, the same pitch and register.

Whenever a colleague approached his desk to comment on the weather or the cricket score or some minor matter of politics, they never seemed to come to him with queries, or spoke to him apparently expecting to receive a certain, specific answer. He knew the Sanskrit linguist from two rows away always ended his sentences with a —

He wondered how they had stereotyped him.

A piece of the furniture. A lispng wall.

The barrow-boy was approaching now, and sure enough —

'There's your lot!' came the cry as a packet of papers and letters was smacked onto his desk. He jumped, despite himself, at the impact.

'Ah! Let's see — ' The words sprang automatically to his lips. Winceworth's eyes moved to the back of the departing cloud, ' — see what — ' he continued, and his voice had a distinct waver to it, still whiskied.

The boy was already moving on to the desk next to him, reaching into the basket for the neighbouring Mr Appleton's papers.

'There's your lot!' said the boy to Mr Appleton.

'Thank you ever so much,' Winceworth mouthed to no-one in particular.

'Thank you ever so much!' said the lexicographer, taking up the papers.

Mr Appleton caught his eye.

‘Did you make it home last night, Winceworth? You look a little grey about the gills.’

‘Yes. Yes, wasn’t it?’ Winceworth said. As expected, they completely ignored him.

‘Must say, my head was quite the belfry first thing. Who knew rhubarb jam would keep Frasham in quite such a fine line of cognacs?’

‘Wasn’t it,’ said Winceworth. And then, ‘Yes?’

‘Still,’ said Appleton. He dug his paper-knife into the envelopes strewn across his desk. ‘Good to meet the happy couple at last. Frasham had mentioned her in his letters back, had he not?’

Appleton’s head inclined toward Frasham’s empty desk, the only one on the Scrivenery floor desk apparently free from paper and books and index cards, still feathered instead along the fringes with pinned photographs and mementoes that he had sent back from his travels.

‘No, he didn’t,’ Winceworth said. ‘Not once.’

‘And so good to have Terence back in the country, too, where we can keep an eye on him.’

‘Entirely awful,’ Winceworth said.

‘Been too long, far too long; wondering about him and his silent Glossott shadow trudging across God-knows-where doing God-knows-what.’

‘Aubergine,’ Winceworth contributed. Appleton’s expression didn’t flicker.

‘But yesterday was far too busy to get a proper word with him; I shall have to grab him by the sleeve the next time he dares shows his face around the door. Did you see him with the balalaika: what a thing! Wonderful man. But!’ Appleton stretched a little, and wiggled his shoulders. ‘To the task in hand!’ He met Winceworth’s gaze again. Winceworth smiled blankly. ‘Did you say anything, just then?’

‘No?’

‘Just so,’ said Appleton, and he frowned a little.

Khuhhkunk-ffppp. A book was removed from a nearby shelf.

‘Quite the looker, wasn’t she?’ came Bielefeld’s voice from Winceworth’s other side.

‘What’s that?’ said Appleton, and he bent forward so that he could see across Winceworth’s desk. In this posture Winceworth could not help but notice that

Appleton's eye was very close to a number of pencils arranged in a pewter cup in front of him on the desk.

'The fiancée: what's-her-name. Did you manage to speak to her?'

'I did not,' said Appleton.

'I did not,' grieved Bielefeld.

'I did,' said Winceworth, but again nobody paid him any mind. He was still staring at the pencils and their proximity to Appleton's eye. One pencil in particular was just a matter of millimetres away.

'I too did not have a chance to speak with her,' came a female voice at a desk behind them. It was one of the twins who worked at the Dictionary, the Misses Mottram of Lanarkshire, one of the few women who were employed by *Swansby's*. One of the twins was an expert on Norse philology, the other an authority on the Goidelic branch of the Celtic languages and they were identical but for the fact one had entirely black hair and the other's hair was entirely white. Winceworth had a theory that either nobody on the *Swansby* staff knew the twins' individual Christian names or that they did not care; during his four years at *Swansby's* he had not once been introduced to either of the Mottram sisters separately and he had not thought to enquire. In the early years he had felt, dimly, that to do so would not be the proper etiquette and by now it would be insulting to admit that he had never known. In his head he called them The Condiments whenever he had cause to speak to them what with the one being pepper-headed, the other salt. There was a limerick about them scored into the wall in the gentleman's bathrooms in the Scrivenery, the rhyme scheme of which used the word *Ossianic* with particular inventiveness.

Bielefeld and Appleton swivelled in their seats at the voice of the Mottram, craning their necks. Half an inch closer and this action would have had Appleton's eye out, Winceworth thought. He daydreamed a little. He imagined the eye plucked out and thrown up into the dome of the Scrivenery, or flicked directly into the post-boy's wicker basket as he snaked between their desks.

'Does she even speak English?' Bielefeld pressed, and the Mottram twin with the white hair shrugged her shoulders.

'Who can say?'

'Who can get a word in edgeways with Frasham?' Appleton supplied, and all but Winceworth laughed the same laugh. It was a light, frank and tender laugh.

‘Hah hah hah,’ said Winceworth, very slowly and deliberately half a second after their titters had finished. An Anglo-Saxon cloud scurried between their desks, and Bielefeld pretended to be busy with some small chits. He put them in a pile, and then disordered them, generally miming an approximation of work.

‘I heard that she is related to the Tsar somehow,’ the Miss Mottram voice continued. Winceworth turned in his seat as Bielefeld and Appleton both said, ‘No!’ and ‘No?’

‘Not a daughter or a niece or anything,’ said the Condiment. ‘But perched somewhere in that family tree.’

‘You are pulling my leg,’ Appleton said.

‘If the tree’s big enough, I am probably related to the Tsar too,’ scoffed Bielefeld.

‘And the Préfet of Timbuctoo,’ agreed Miss Mottram, and they all laughed again.

‘But, you know, I really wouldn’t be surprised; Frasham seems to move in all types of circles. A Tsarina in our midst, imagine.’

Bielefeld and Appleton twirled with one movement to their desks with both of their eyebrows raised in appreciative silence. Winceworth picked up the top-most envelope in front of him, shook the enclosed letter free and scanned the page. Its lettering was in a looping, brown ink with lots of underlines.

...Enclosed, as directed, evidence of a number of words beginning with the letter S...One particularly arresting example from a recipe given to me by the Very Reverend... Although quite why the sultanas would be complemented by two-day-old rind in such a way remains entirely...

‘You know his father was friends with Coleridge?’ came the hiss from the other Miss Mottram behind them. Winceworth, Bielefeld and Appleton whirled in their seats once more, orbiting with the intractable tug of gossip.

‘You are pulling my other leg,’ said Appleton. ‘Well, there’s a thing.’

‘To be sure, to be sure.’

Winceworth said, very clearly and looking Appleton directly in the face, ‘You look just like a cafetière; I’ve often thought so.’ Again he went completely unnoticed.

‘Or was it Wordsworth? One of the two. No, I’m sure it was Coleridge.’

‘I’ve just been writing up one of his — where is it — ?’ Bielefeld flapped his papers along his desk, scrabbling and adding a frantic new pace of rustle to the Scrivenery’s hall. ‘Yes! Here! One of Coleridge’s first coinages — ‘

Bielefeld held up one of his index-cards up, face flushed with triumph. ‘*Soul-mate*, noun!’ His cry caused a flush of *Shhhs!* to ripple across the room. Correspondingly, their voices sunk a little. “‘You must have a Soul-mate as well as a House or a Yoke-mate,’” read Bielefeld. ‘Yes, you see: there! First used in Coleridge’s letters.’ Bielefeld had the smile of a Master of the Hunt, Winceworth observed.

‘You have the smile of a Master of the — ‘ he began, but Miss Mottram interrupted.

‘I caught an early use of *supersensuous* in one of his articles just yesterday.’ A competitive edge crept into her voice.

‘How wonderful,’ said Appleton. He paused, then added with the flourish of an Ace across baize. ‘Of course, he’s where I netted —now, what was it — ah, yes — *astrognosy* and *mysticism* some months previously. And I was rather pleased to catch his deployment of *romanticize* over the summer.’

‘Don’t forget *narcissism*, noun.’

Three faces blinked at him.

‘I’m sorry, Peter,’ Miss Mottram said, ‘did you say something?’

Peter regarded them over his spectacles.

‘Only with your — ‘ Appleton looked at his pewter cup of pencils, then at the ceiling, then at Miss Mottram and Bielefeld for camaraderie before settling back on Winceworth’s face, ‘ — well, you know, the old lisp, ah!, it’s sometimes difficult sometimes to — ‘

‘I’ve often said,’ Bielefeld spoke up, ‘that if Coleridge’s maxim holds true, and that poets are the unacknowledged *legislators* of the world, lexicographers are doubly so, hidden in plain sight.’

‘Oh, very good!’ Appleton said, and Miss Mottram gave a little clap of her hands.

‘That was — that was Shelley — ‘ Winceworth said, but at that point one of the innumerable office cats jumped up onto his desk.

‘Oops!’ said Appleton.

‘To what do we owe the pleasure!’ said Bielefeld.

‘Steady there!’ said Miss Mottram.

The office cat looked at Winceworth. It looked right into the heart of him. He extended a hand.

Without breaking eye contact, the office cat reversed a couple of steps, paused and then threw up, protractedly and calmly, all over his paperwork and up his shirt front.

Appleton and Bielefeld's chairs squealed against the floor in their haste to push away and *Shhhhs* filled the air of the Scrivenery once more.

Still slightly damp of chest and lap, Winceworth settled onto a bench in St. James's Park and made the best he could of a lunch of the birthday cake in his pocket. The cake had sheened over with a kind of post-party day-old sweat. As he inspected it, cupping stray crumbs and brushing them from his knees, he found there was the first part of Frasham's name iced onto the surface of the slice: as he brought it up to his face, he kept his eyes trained on this fricative as he bit into it, the gloss of the blue icing mosaic a little at the pressure, an almost imperceptible spiderweb-crack fracture into the sugar work.

St. James's Park was the closest green space to the Swansby Press building, and many of members of the staff were given to spending their luncheon there gazing into flowerbeds or feeding the ducks. The correct placement of the Park's sancteous apostrophe was a bane or boon to the members of Swansby's editorial team depending on what side of the debate you sat. There had, in Winceworth's first year at the Press, been a war of attrition between some younger members of staff concerning this apostrophe, and many of the official signs dotted around the Park had been defaced (and consequently re-faced) in line with whether St. James' or St. James's ownership was being asserted.

Never a dull moment.

His bench was tucked in a bend of the path that did not give him a view of the water, or of any interesting sweeps and vistas: this meant, generally, he would not be disturbed by colleagues, and it was less likely to be the site of courting couples' perambulations or tourists' wanders. The time of year also meant that many of the planted beds were unremarkable, russeted over and a well-manicured kind of dreary. In fact, the only flowers near him were some late puff-faced dandelions at the feet of

his bench. They had survived the rain, and nodded as he watched them. He kicked one with his heel and its head exploded.

Away from the office, Winceworth felt the muscles in his shoulders loosen and the air of the Park helped clear his head a little. Of course with this came a certain new confidence and *l'esprit de l'escalier*: look here, Appleton, you ridiculous bore, Coleridge probably died before Frasham's father was even born. Bielefeld, you daft-necked carafe of a man, don't peacock about *romanticize* to impress Miss Mottram; Coleridge also came up with bisexual, bathetic, intensify and fister if you thought you had an interesting weekend.

The birthday cake was making one of his teeth sing with its sweetness and Winceworth closed his eyes against the pain. It would have to wait its turn.

The breeze coming across the Park's lakes was cool, and somewhere across the way an unseen bird was trilling. Weak sun also was fooling something light across his face, and Winceworth felt a yawn slip electric beneath his tongue. He shook his head, dog-like, and drew out his watch for nap-calculations. He craved sleep, to curl up like the cat in the Swansby lift without a care for anything, but he knew falling asleep now for however brief a time would muddy the rest of the day and spoil any chance of rest this evening. Finish the cake, he told himself, take one more turn about the Park to get the blood going. Face the day renewed. He dug his glasses into the bridge of his nose and winched his eyes open and tilted his face to the sky, willing himself into wakefulness. Two birds veered overhead, chatting and braiding the air. It might have been his imagination but a dandelion seed seemed to drift up past his line of sight too and join them. He wondered whether anyone would miss him if he just stayed put amongst the dandelions; blowing the clock of a dandelion until facelessness and spend the afternoon not amongst paper and letters and words but instead here, head to the clouds and counting birds until the numbers run out. Funny, oily little birds in the park: starlings with feathers star-spangled and glittery. A couple more were hopping about his feet for cake crumbs and still more were flitting above his head with the dandelion seeds, blown wishes finding a smudge in the air. The best kerbside exoticisms September could offer: the starling, the dandelion, the blown seeds and the birds skeining against a grey sky, hazing it and mazing it, a feather-light kaleidoscope noon-damp and knowing the sky was never truly grey: just filled with a thousand years of birds' paths, and wishful seeds, bird-seed sky as something meddled and ripe and wish-hot, the breeze bird-breath

soft with my heart stopped in a lobby above my lungs as I was taught it might: too soft to be called a burr, too soft to be called a globe, too breakable to be a constellation, too tough to not be worth wishing upon, the crowd of birds, a unheard *murmuration* pl. n. not led by one bird, a cloud-foily of seeds, blasted by one of countless breaths escaping from blasted wished-upon clock as a breath, providing a clockwork with no regard to time nor hands, flocking with no purpose other than the clotting and thrilling and thrumming, a flock as gathered ellipsis rather than lines of wing and bone and beak, if anything, I will love you better grey-headed than young and dazzling — more puff than flower — and if anything, I will collect the ellipses of my empty speech-bubbles, the words I never said, and make my former pauses as busy as leaderless birds, twisting, blown apart softly, to warm and colour even the widest of skies.

Winceworth re-awoke with his head slumped to one side, rumped and oblique on the park bench. A boy was standing in front of him. The boy was holding a toy boat and staring. Presumably he had been staring for quite a while; as Winceworth straightened his shoulders and an involuntary *harrumph* left his body, the little spectator started with surprise and the wooden boat fell from his arms onto the path. Its wooden mast snapped the moment that it hit the gravel, and Winceworth's apology knotted in the air with the boy's yelp of fury.

Dropping the boat and jumping, however, did not break the child's staring. The boy's eyes were wide, his mouth was slack and he looked as if he had seen a ghost; his yelp carried an edge to it that carried not just anger nor surprise but real fear, not rage at the self-scuttling of his boat but came as a shriek of sheer horror. Winceworth shook the sleepiness from his head, nudged his spectacles more firmly against the bridge of his nose and studied the boy's face more closely.

The child was looking *through* him. He had finally become invisible. His colleagues may overlook him, or hardly ever notice that he was there, but since leaving the office something had obviously changed in him, had gone further or had clarified: he had finally, somehow, been tempered into nothingness, thin air with no more traction than a breath, a suit and clump of birthday cake suspended in the air on a bench in the park. The child's mother had drawn up beside her staring charge,

and as she came level with Winceworth her face too registered the same look of shock.

Winceworth trialled a little gentle, spectral wave.

Her face changed to one of distracted displeasure as she met his eyes. It then occurred to Winceworth that perhaps he was not the object of the boy's attention, and he pivoted in his seat to follow their eye-line.

Some feet beyond his bench one of the Park's huge white pelicans was rearing up, hissing. It appeared to be covered in blood and a woman was strangling it.

The pelican was huffing, straining, its ridiculous head bent upwards and its pale eyes rolling back and forth. Both bird and attacker were making grim little growls and burbles with the effort as they made circles with their feet across the lawn.

The woman had her hands about the bird's neck, fingers tucked under its wagging pink dewlap pouch; she had to keep rocking back and forth on her feet and ducking to avoid the panicked beating of the pelican's bloody wings.

'They can break a man's arm,' Winceworth heard the mother say behind him.

'You are thinking of swans,' corrected the boy in a high voice.

Both bird and woman were strangely matching in appearance so that there was something of the ballroom about their skirmish. The bird's brilliant white plumage was stained red and its bill was a hot yellow; the woman's skirt was made of some candy-stripe coloured stuff and she carried a yellow silk umbrella wedged beneath her arm. They waltzed, irregularly, tugging and gasping, moving closer towards Winceworth and his companions.

The pelican began making an obscene, wheezing call.

'Ought we to call — ' said the mother, pulling closer to Winceworth's bench.

'I really have no idea who one would — '

'She must be mad!' interrupted the mother, and she pulled her son a little closer to her. The boy struggled, and in turning his head caught sight of his broken boat on the path. He let out a screech, and Winceworth found he was all at once caught between two quiet, absurd brawls on this quiet afternoon luncheon.

He considered slipping away.

'Do something!' The mother — battling to keep her son's shoulders from pivoting out of her grip — clearly had decided that Winceworth was the one who should take charge of the situation and was looking at him with stern expectation as her child, red with embarrassment, jiggled up and down.

Winceworth scratched behind his ear and tried a small, 'I say — ' but the pelican-woman was too engrossed in her combat to notice. Winceworth hefted the small remaining nugget of birthday cake at the fighting pair; it bounced off the woman's elbow and had no effect whatsoever. The mother and child gave him a long look. The pelican's pupil — round, human, and panic-widened — fixed upon him for a split second at his outcry, however, and its body appeared to stiffen. Taking full advantage of this momentary pause, the woman attacking it either had a change of strategy or a sudden surge of courage. She lifted the pelican bodily off its feet and seized it in a kind of chokehold. The faint sunlight behind them made its pouch glow a soft rose, and one could make out the branched veins swelling dark and angry within the membrane. The tableau lasted for less than a second as the pelican's neck then flexed and rolled like a serpent; it struck upwards, catching the woman across the chin with its beak. The blow caused her straw hat to fall to the lawn and bounce away. The woman shrank a little, and stepped back, but kept her hold about the pelican's throat.

'Let it be, can't you?' cried the mother. 'Don't look, Gerald. She means to kill it!'

The woman turned her head and met their gaze full-on. There was a small cut above her eye. Some of her hair had come loose and was sticking weirdly to her forehead, and it

Sophia from the party?

and Winceworth didn't know how he vaulted over the bench so quickly or how he covered the ground in apparently one step but suddenly he was face-to-face with the pelican on the floor and hitting it and hitting it and hitting it, pinning it down between his knees and landing punches against its large white pelican-body, it was hissing and scrambling beneath his weight while behind him the mother and the child were screaming, but there had been a small cut above Sophia's eye and it had been bleeding heavily, a thin line of blood ran down the side of her face with the symmetry of her face thrown completely off, and the bird had not been bleeding at all as he had thought but was in fact covered in *her* blood, and he hit it in the chest over and over and over —

Sophia's umbrella smacked him against the ear. He rolled to the side, releasing the bird and lay on his back, panting slightly.

‘It’s choking on something,’ Sophia said. She was panting too, and kneeling in the grass. She was concentrating not on him but on the bird lying prone to his left. All three were winded like wrestlers, with Sophia moving one hand against the bird’s cheek and another feeling along its neck.

Winceworth scrambled to sit up on his haunches.

‘Look — ‘ Sophia said, and Winceworth watched something beneath the skin of the pelican’s throat buck unmistakably out of time with its pulse. This close he could see the bird’s eyes were also starting out from their sockets. ‘I was trying to open — perhaps — open the beak — maybe be able to put my arm down and dislodge — ‘

The pelican lurched forward suddenly and its foot-long bill swung across like a jib; Winceworth and Sophia only just leapt out of its path in time.

The mother and child were nowhere to be seen.

‘It looked like you were trying to throttle it; I thought it was somehow attacking you.’

‘I am trained in *bartitsu*,’ Sophia said, as if that explained anything. She pushed her hair from her eyes with her wrist. She had not realised or did not care that she was bleeding. ‘Are you strong enough to hold it down?’

‘Of course,’ Winceworth said, lying.

‘I still think I could prise whatever it is blocking the passage if only it wouldn’t move about like this.’

‘Of course,’ Winceworth repeated, with even less certainty. The waist-high bulk of the pelican baulked and lowered its head, weaving from side to side like a cobra. Winceworth removed his jacket and approached with the inner fabric facing him, stretched tight.

‘Like a — like a matador — ‘ he heard himself say.

‘The light-limb’d Matadore,’ said Sophia. She was smiling, madly, and Winceworth’s heart became a nonsense.

‘Do you like Byron?’ he said.

‘Don’t herd it, catch it!’

The pelican gave a rollicking wee feint at running past him, gaining speed in order to take flight. Winceworth leapt just at the moment that it leapt; he clamped the fabric of his jacket about its shoulders and together they ploughed headlong

along the grass. Against the odds, they emerged from the lurching spin up one swaddled bird and no broken limbs. 'I think I have it!'

Winceworth winched the sleeves of the jacket in tight as the pelican still gamely batted and jabbed at him. The fleshy pouch under its beak was strangely soft and warm against his hands. Winceworth sat up and tussled more firmly with the bird until it was back jammed beneath his knees, its neck extended like a hobbyhorse. It seemed a lot quieter, weaker. Quelled, it met his eye again, and he looked away.

Winceworth coughed to mask his hard breathing. 'It's still too — I wouldn't go near its beak. It's a — nervy — it's bit of a brute and I'm not sure it won't have your eye out.'

By now a number of geese had appeared from another part of the Park and were honking and hissing their own disapproval at the uproar. One of them came close enough to punch him on the arm with its head and Winceworth, more by accident than design in trying to defend himself raised his elbow and slapped the goose full across the face with the pelican's beak. The goose retreated, wailing and showing its tongue. A goose's tongue, Winceworth discovered, is barbed with a border of sharp, tooth-like growths.

'Where is everyone? This park is usually a damn thoroughfare — '

Sophia approached with her yellow umbrella extended. 'I daresay that if you are able to keep the bird just there — '

The pelican gave a muffled, irregular gagging sound. It swung back and its beak gaped open: the pouch folded back and, head lolling, it sagged inside-out against the bird's spine at an obtuse angle. It looked impossible, imploded. A bloody tuft of feathers pushed up against Winceworth's neck and there was something tender in the touch.

Sophia took the pelican's beak in her hands and, finding no resistance, pushed the two mandibles apart. She stared down the bird's throat. Her face was bunched up and creased with concern.

'I can't see anything,' she said. 'But it is hard — to tell — '

The pelican was inert but still breathing, shallow and rumbling next to Winceworth's chest.

'Did you see it swallow anything?' he asked. The pelican's thick feet gave the smallest of kicks.

‘I just noticed it was walking strangely,’ Sophia said, turning the pelican’s head from side to side in her hands and squinting. ‘It’s clearly not getting enough air in there. I’m not sure you hitting it will have helped — ‘

Braver members of the geese contingent made another honking incursion, and she shooed them away with her umbrella.

‘I don’t imagine so.’ Winceworth hoisted the pelican up against his chest and slightly to the side. The pelican as a bagpipe. ‘Perhaps — maybe it would be best — ‘

He imagined taking the bird’s head under his arm and twisting it, the pelican growing limp and the whole business being over. The pelican’s eye met his own one more time. It flickered briefly as a translucent purple eyelid sluiced sideways across its vision. Winceworth bit his lip.

‘I have it,’ said Sophia, face shining. ‘Do you have a ribbon? Or —may I remove a shoelace?’ She was already at his feet plucking at his Oxfords. The geese and the ducks laughed at Winceworth, and he pulled the pelican tighter against him. Sophia *tsked* and tutted. Adrenaline was making her fingers awkward but finally he felt his shoe loosen and Sophia was binding the pelican’s beak together with the lace in quick, tight loops. Her face was close to his, just the pelican and the new smell of pelican between them.

‘This pen,’ Sophia was saying, pointing at his jacket lining. ‘I can use this too?’

Winceworth craned his neck around the pelican’s, gently, and looked down its cotton-swathed belly. Sophia was reaching for the breast-coat pocket of the jacket banded across the pelican, and the nib of the metal *Swansby’s* pen poking above the seam. She slid it free and flexed it in her hand. No, she was not flexing it, she was bending it. It snapped with a dull *crack*.

Sophia grabbed the pelican’s beak and felt down its throat with her hand. She found its collarbone.

Pelicans almost certainly do not have collarbones.

Sophia pushed the broken pen into the pelican’s throat. There was a loud hiss of expelled air; the pelican swelled under Winceworth’s grasp and a second later they both heard it take a huge gulping heave of a breath.

The geese cackled and hooted.

‘Do you come here often?’ Winceworth asked.

The mother and child had not in fact completely disappeared from the spectacle; when Winceworth had sprung upon the bird to add to its apparent abuse, they had both clearly decided that some external authority should be sought and had run to find a park official from the small orné cottage in the centre of the Park. They had also succeeded in recruiting a vicar, two young courting couples who had been attempting to enjoy a quiet lunchtime stroll and some excitable French tourists in tow. One of the latter insisted that Winceworth hold onto the pelican rather longer than either he or the pelican would like until a small sketch of the scene had been completed in a watercolourist's pad.

By the time this caravan had rounded the bend in the path towards them and he heard the familiar wailing of the boatless child, it did cross Winceworth's mind that perhaps — like swans and sturgeon — the pelicans in St. James's Park might belong to the Queen. He had a premonition of both he and Sophia being bundled along Birdcage Walk and shot for bird-popping treason against a wall outside Horse Guard's Parade.

Calm, however, seemed to have descended upon the Park. When the basics of the situation were grasped, the gentlemen of the assembled company all removed their jackets as if to prove that they, too, would be prepared to do so in such a situation and shooed away the geese. The same French sketch artist went as far as to proffer a number of paintbrushes and dip-pens to the Park official from his art bag that might have been better *pour la tâche de trachéotomie*.

The Park official examined the pelican — he insisted on calling it, rather improbably, 'Molly' — and made a great show of counting the rise and fall of the bird's chest as he kept time on his fob-watch. For her part, Molly seemed far more relaxed; Winceworth gingerly released her from her pinstriped papoose and she waddled, dazedly but not unsprightly, off in the direction of the pond before being corralled back by a ring of disjacketed onlookers. The snapped pen jutting from her breast gave low whistles with every step she made.

'I'll send a wire to the Zoological Society,' said the official, smoothing his moustache, 'and they can pick her up in a taxi. They'll have the penguin wherewithal. Infection might be a problem.'

'Infection, yes,' Winceworth agreed. 'Did you say *penguin*?'

'No, pelican. Pelican, obviously. And you say she definitely had something stuck in her throat?'

‘Oh, it was gasping something awful,’ agreed the woman. She still had her son clasped at her side. The other spectators murmured, enjoying it all.

‘Perhaps a fishbone,’ said the official, and the vicar, couples and French tourists all nodded. ‘Well: quick thinking on your part, sir, Madam.’ His face was more sceptical than gave credence to this statement. ‘I think I ought to take note of your particulars in case there’s some kind of investigation, however, or I have to pass your details on elsewhere.’

‘An investigation?’ Winceworth asked.

‘Nothing sinister,’ said the official, in an entirely sinister way. ‘I say, why is there a piece of cake on the ground?’

‘Littering is one of the modern world’s great calamities,’ said the woman, and the vicar put his hand over his chest.

The French tourists and the courting couples meanwhile were surrounding Sophia and offering her handkerchiefs for her cut. One of the latter drew a compact metallic mirror from a pocket which she accepted; she looked surprised then amused at quite the amount of blood, and dabbed at her face rather wryly.

‘All’s well that ends well,’ she said. ‘Isn’t that the phrase in English?’ ‘I’m not sure there *is* a phrase for all this,’ Winceworth said, but the Park official interrupted.

‘The address and name for you two?’

He thought that they might be a couple! Just another couple roaming the park, taking in the air, arm-in-arm. Molly, the rasping cupid, disappeared behind Sophia’s skirts then poked her head up under Sophia’s hand like a cat wanting attention.

‘Coo, coo,’ said Molly’s chest.

Winceworth gave his address, and Sophia gave absolutely no indication that she wished to correct any assumption that they might live together.

‘I must confess — ‘

Sophia paused mid-sentence and, frowning slightly, she removed a wisp of stray icing sugar that had settled in the corner of her mouth. She did this delicately with a fingertip, and in that millisecond adopted an attitude so much like that of a person composing a question that hyper-attentive Winceworth leaned forward in his

chair in order that he might have the best chance of catching her words. Whatever particular thought Sophia might have been framing, however, seemed to leave her within the same instant; instead, she raised her teacup to her lips once more, leaving Winceworth confronted with a face eclipsed by floral china. The base of her teacup bore the manufacturer's hand-painted name: *HAVILAND & Co., Limoges*. Or was it *HAUNAND & Co.*? The writing was irritatingly small and he had to stop himself lurching even further across the tearoom table to check that he was reading the letters correctly.

He wanted to commit the whole scene to memory as accurately as possible. Every detail of the tearoom was laden with significance now that Sophia was a part of it. From the angle of shadows amongst the curtains to the number of faceted cubes within the sugar-bowl; the arrangement of the chairs and the postures of the other diners were suddenly of critical importance, the exact pitch at which the bell had rung as they passed through the door a crucial fact to be treasured and privately indexed away.

Perhaps all encyclopædic lexicographers experience love like this, Winceworth thought: as a completist might, or a hoarder of mementos. Winceworth realised also that he had very real feelings of jealousy towards both the concept of icing sugar and *HAVILAND* (or *HAUNAND*) & Co. of the blasted city of *LIMOGES* whose work was allowed to mask Sophia's face from him in between sips of tea. Even on this point he was torn: he wanted to dash the teacup to the ground but also wished he could identify the blue, twist-leafed flower that patterned its porcelain. If he knew its name he would run to the nearest florist and fill his lodgings with armfuls of the stuff, plug his rooms to the rafters with posies, bouquets and tussie-mussies of it, block out any not-tearoom scented light that dared to come anywhere near him ever again. Sophia's teacup lowered.

'I am sorry to say I only recognised you after I had struck out with the umbrella,' she said.

'No harm done,' Winceworth replied, breezily. He took a sip from his own cup, and Sophia disappeared from view beyond its rim.

Immediately post-pelican in the Park and while Winceworth was still confirming his address to the keeper, Sophia struck up conversation with an old man in a battered tricorne hat who had appeared from nowhere in front of them. Why not? thought

Winceworth: of course she was and of course the man was wearing such a thing. Given the day so far, Winceworth would not have batted an eyelid if the Park's lakes in that minute had filled with sherbet, a chorus of trolls started carolling under the suspension bridge and the grass beneath his feet had blossomed and blazed into spun gold. This man could be Rumpelstiltskin, could be Bluebeard, could be a travel-grizzled Sinbad dropped in Westminster by wayward Roc.

As it was, Rumpelstiltskin was hawking goods from some kind of barrow and had been attracted to their party by the chance of selling various postcards and souvenirs to the handkerchief-flapping Gallic tourists. One of the women in the group was taking exception to having a spoon in the shape of Nelson's Column foisted upon her; Sophia calmed her with a few sentences of perfect French, and then bought from the man's barrow some kind of cheap tea-towel. The man claimed it featured a printed reproduction of the sheet music of Parratt's *The Triumphs of Oriana*, but to Winceworth's eye it looked like a piece of sailcloth covered in a flecks of bootblack). She threw this shawl-wise about her shoulders to cover the worst of the bloodstains, and then promptly asked the trinket-seller for directions to the nearest stationers.

Despite all Winceworth's protestations that he really ought to be returning to the Scrivenery, he found his arm looped through hers and before long he was walking out of a shop just off Pall Mall with a new silver propelling pencil just above his heart in his crumpled jacket's pocket.

She would not accept his refusal to receive such a gift. Indeed, as they left Sophia executed an abrupt about-turn and hastened back inside the shop when she noticed something glinting in its window display, emerging with two squat bottles of Pelikan-brand (*Füllhaltertusche — Schwartz*) fount India ink. She tossed it at him, laughed as he scrambled to catch it and then took his arm again. At this point Winceworth suggested — and in doing so suffering a small coughing fit, as if his body was rebelling against his getting any words out at all — that he really should be returning to work and Sophia might like to return to her hotel and recuperate from the afternoon's exertions. With a level-shouldered performance of firmness he had even gone so far as stepping into the road to hail a cab for her. The first trap he tried to flag down whizzed past. They watched it rush past: it was an unsprung cart with *Zoological Society of London* emblazoned in green and gold upon its door.

Winceworth imagined the Park-keeper and still-attendant geese standing, waiting for

it at the Park gate all ready to shepherd spar-chested Molly safely on board her carriage. He imagined the Pelican taking her time with the martyred dignity of a waddling St. Sebastian.

Winceworth felt a certain *quis custodiet ipsos custodes* unease that the Zoo's vehicle was horse-drawn. As it thundered past, the animal gave a feckless, collaborator's toss of the head and relieved itself inches from his still-unlaced shoe.

'It is becoming quite the Tuesday,' Sophia had said and pulled her shawl more snugly about her shoulders. 'But now that I *am* out and about in town, it would be a shame not to make the best of it. Terence has given me a small allowance and I'm sure the Dictionary can allow you just one more hour. Besides,' and she quickened her pace, her arm tightening infinitesimally around his, 'I am sure that after a shock it is often good for the constitution for one to sit somewhere quiet, to drink something hot and to eat something sweet.'

Winceworth thought of his desk in the Scrivenery, flanked by Appleton and Bielefeld. He thought of the paperwork on his desk.

'I wouldn't dare oppose your medical advice.'

'No?'

'Not without some kind of articulated beavor.'

'I have simply no idea what that means and you certainly must explain it to me as soon as possible. At length. What good lexicographer would not feel that to be his duty?'

'A fine point, made well.'

He felt the arm tense gently beneath his. 'It is decided: I demand, in the words of Hippocrates, to be fed éclairs and take some tea with new words before the day proves all too much.'

The *Café de L'amphigouri* was Sophia's selection, picked apparently at whim down a side street a little way towards the Strand. It was a place that Winceworth had never seen before or for whatever reason had always overlooked on his walks through town despite its proximity to the *Swansby* offices. Here the tablecloths were as thick as royal icing, the bowl of sugar came with a pair of ornate silver tongs. Upon greeting Sophia at the door, the café owner had put down his notebook — today seemed to be dedicated to a taxonomy of people who carry notebooks and Winceworth wished that

he was amongst them so that he too could make a note of this — and insisted on dipping back into the kitchen and applying some baking powder to the cut above her eyebrow. Winceworth noticed some stray grains still fastened to the creases above her eye as she spoke.

Pretty much everything other than éclairs was forthcoming. Almost as they were seated by the window their assiduous waiter made sure that a spread of tiny buns and cakes and little finicky dessert-specific forks was laid before them.

‘Back home we would call this,’ Sophia said, turning a slice of confection on its plate and examining it, ‘a Napoleon cake.’

‘Looks nothing like the man,’ Winceworth said.

‘Very good. There’s some story behind that name, at least that’s what I was told. Do you know it?’

‘I do not believe so, no.’

She tapped the side of the cake with her fork. It was layered with cream and thin sheets of pastry. ‘All these strata, you see, symbolise the Little Corsican’s Grande Armée. And this,’ she raked the cake’s surface. Pale crumbs of pastry and icing sugar kicked back against her fork, ‘this represents the Russian snow which stalled the French advance and helped defeat their troops before they reached Moscow.’

‘Is that right?’

‘What would you call it? This type of cake?’

Winceworth rapped the surface of the cake with his own fork. ‘A variant on the custard slice.’

‘Pure poetry.’ Sophia cut herself a portion and tasted it. ‘Delicious, whichever.’

Winceworth steeled himself. ‘I could make something up, if that would make for a more interesting answer.’

‘Please.’

Winceworth took another sip of tea and gave the cake some thought. ‘Many assume that *mille-feuille* cakes like this are so-called from the French *mille-feuilles*, which as we all know means literally — ‘

“A thousand leaves’,” completed Sophia.

‘Yes, quite, a thousand leaves, referring to the layers of pastry, but that is a false etymology.’ Winceworth did not tell fairy tales often, indeed he had never wittingly told a fairy tale, but he realised as he spoke that he was using his it-was-a-dark-and-stormy-night voice. ‘It is in fact a corruption of the Anglo-Norman *milfoil*.’

Sophia repeated the word, testing it in her mouth as a flavour. 'Go on.'

'It's a plant.'

'Oh yes?'

Yammering as defensive mechanism; where porcupines have their quills and while squid release clouds of non-Pelikan ink, Winceworth relied upon producing plausible nonsense at the drop of a hat. He cleared his throat.

'Other names include *thousand leaf*, *yarra grass* and *sneezewort* but mostly it's called the common yarrow. *Achillea millefolium*, I think is the Latin. It is. Not much to look at,' and Winceworth sketched slightly with his fork against the pattern on his plate. 'It's topped with white flowers that branch out horizontally into a flat, plateau type of head. Spreads everywhere it can get, a complete weed.' Sophia was nodding. He went on. 'The Latin comes from its association in myth with Achilles who used it in warfare, tended to the wounds of his soldiers with its leaves. Iliad, around Book Eleven. Slap a handful of milfoil on a gammy heel and it staunches the blood so the folklore says. This idea of a poultice laid down, replaced, applied anew,' and here Winceworth trailed his cake-fork up and down the layers of the cake to emphasise his point, 'Symbolic, just as you described. And the icing on the top is supposed to be the milfoil's spray of flowers. *Milfoil* became Frenchified to *mille-feuilles* over time to attract the delicate gastronomic fraternity.'

Sophia pushed her plate away, palms extended in a show of defeat and Winceworth blushed, stupidly, despite himself. 'I am entirely convinced,' she said. 'And so you earn the rest of that cake. Flowers and ancient battles and desserts — what more could one want?'

'You are too kind.'

"Let his flesh be the purest of mould, in which grew the lily-root surest, and drank the best dew" and so forth.'

Winceworth froze then he asked, affecting lightness, 'Our friend Byron again?'

'It seems appropriate if we're sticking with Achilles and the garden. *Custard slice* indeed!'

'There is a certain pragmatism to "custard slice" as a name that I'm not sure Lord Byron would appreciate.'

'*Pragmatism*. Is that the term for it? When a word just sits there, entirely fitting but somehow flat?' She was looking out of the window now, and Winceworth recognised the way she flicked her eyes from passer-by to passer-by at random. He

did that too when he was trying to find the right word for something, to coax the word forward from a forgotten part of his mind. When she spoke again she did so slowly. ‘When a word has *pragmatism* mixed with *stolidity* mixed with *bathos* mixed with *clunk*: what is that called? Do not misunderstand me: it is something I admire in a phrase even if I can’t quite explain it, or what appeals. Terence couldn’t understand why on our journey from Dover to London, fields of yarrow no doubt blurring past our train windows — ‘Sophia raised her teacup in a grave mock-toast, and Winceworth mirrored her gesture. Their teacups met. ‘I had spread maps of Britain over the tables in the buffet carriage and was demanding we plan trips to places called *Compton Dando* and *Nether Poppleton*. Such names! What is it that makes them so attractive? The *pragmatism* of their mystique. Does that make sense?’ She searched his face. ‘Have you been to Compton Dando?’

‘Never knowingly.’

‘Perhaps we should go together. We could enjoy a custard slice there.’

Winceworth looked about him at the surrounding tables in the café but it seemed that the other diners had hidden their haloes and stowed their angelic harps. He felt drunk. Was she drunk? This is awful. This is lovely. What is she talking about, and did I start this? Is this what conversation should be, or could have been, all this time? Conversation as meaningless and wonderful, and terrible; or meaningful and entirely wonderful precisely because it means nothing except to the two people involved, terrible because one feels the pressure to fill the silence with a special type of nothing, an everything-nothing, and make it seem artless all the while?

Love (v.) To fill a void with icing-sugar and healing weeds or with glib little shared lies, clunklessly.

He just wanted to tell her that the fear of seeming like an idiot in front of her had cured his headache. He just wanted to say that, in this moment, he wanted to be a fearful idiot for the rest of his life. That he wished his life to be such meaningless moments, over and over, forever.

‘I detect a fondness for Byron,’ he said instead. He helped himself to a canelé.

Sophia visibly warmed. ‘Guilty! His books were the texts our governess used when teaching us English — I could quote him even now until I am blue in the face. Thinking about it, I’m sure I often did just that at the time: swooning poetry tantrums beneath the chalkboard. The Wicked Lord would be proud.’

The window next to them suddenly banged, and they both jumped in their seats.

Terence Frasham was outside the window, his cane raised as he rapped on the glass once more. He was smiling with all his teeth.

Sophia gave a double-take, and then her own smile settled across her face. For his part, Winceworth tried to imitate their faces as quickly as possible as Frasham removed his hat and made toward the door of the café.

‘What an extraordinary coincidence,’ Sophia said.

‘Extraordinary,’ Winceworth echoed.

Frasham came into the café all abluster and with great strides, making the tiny bell jangle and spring on its gantry above the door. He waved the owner away and placed his hat on their table, barely missing Winceworth’s cake. Winceworth felt his shoulders rise.

‘Sophia!’ Frasham exclaimed, and he dipped his face to kiss the air above her ear. Winceworth looked away; why, he was not sure. Frasham looked too big for the tea room, too well-formed. Pulling a chair from another table, Frasham sat down, legs apart, and pressed the fingers of one hand in and across his fine red moustache as if framing a yawn or loosening his face. This was a mannerism Winceworth had forgotten. ‘And Winceworth too! Why, man, you should be at work! Tea, cake, a man’s wife-to-be — you devil!’

Sophia and Frasham and Winceworth laughed at such an idea.

‘But,’ and Frasham’s face changed. ‘Good God, what’s all this dust on your face?’ he continued, clocking the silt of baking powder above Sophia’s eye. ‘You look ridiculous. Winceworth, why didn’t you tell her?’

‘She — there was a cut — ‘

‘A cut!’ Frasham took Sophia’s chin in his hands and studied her. He seemed concerned, then amused. ‘Lord, what do you get up to? Quite the buffet you’ve taken. Eating cakes when you know we are going for dinner this evening, and — what — getting into fights? And leading young guns like Winceworth astray all at the same time.’

‘Perhaps now would be a good time — ‘ Winceworth began.

‘What is this shawl all about, too: it’s quite awful. I have become engaged to a ruffian and no mistake.’

‘Mr Winceworth and I have been saving the wildfowl of London,’ Sophia said.

‘I’m sure, I’m sure,’ Frasham retorted. He dropped his hand, and Sophia’s chin lifted slightly. Winceworth could not see but he imagined Frasham’s hand resting, gently, on Sophia’s knee.

‘Perhaps I should be leaving,’ he said again, slightly more loudly.

‘No, you must stay, do; I need someone to explain and corroborate the day’s events,’ Sophia said. Frasham looked Winceworth up and down.

‘I am curious, as it happens,’ Winceworth said, and he asserted the lisp particularly strongly. He ignored the fact that this caused Sophia’s eyebrows to shoot up, ‘I am curious that you knew what to do with the pelican quite so exactly.’

‘My father was a surgeon, and I am a fast learner. He had his own practice and I have seen him perform a number of — the word in English — tracheotomy?’

‘We are only up to the letter *S* at *Swansby’s*,’ Frasham said. ‘Peter will be able to tell you about the late *T* words by perhaps next March.’

Undeterred, ‘Perhaps you will know *cricothyrotomy*, then,’ said Sophia. ‘A similar procedure.’

‘Your English really is remarkable, Miss — ‘ Frasham and Sophia watched him. ‘I’m — I’m so sorry — I do not know your — ‘

‘Slivkova,’ said Frasham.

‘Just so,’ said Sophia. ‘Soon to be Frasham. The name apparently has something to do with *cream* or a dialect word for *plums*.’

‘Sophia is teasing you, I’m afraid,’ said Frasham. ‘Mind as fast as anything. I’ve promised her a visit to the British Museum this afternoon, and dinner near my Club after theatre, just to tire her out: too much energy by half!’

‘And your first name, Mr Winceworth, could you remind me? I remember Peter, Piotr...’

She does not even know your name. To name a thing is to know a thing.

‘*Wince* as in *flinch*,’ said Frasham, laughing, and he dug Sophia’s fork into some of Winceworth’s cake.

‘I prefer to think of it as *wince* as in *startle*,’ Winceworth said, still smiling as his heart fell to his heels.

‘And *worth* as in “worse for wear”,’ Frasham replied, and he tugged at his moustache again so that his smile seemed to slide onto his face beneath his hand, a conjuring trick. He brought the same hand down companionably on Winceworth’s

arm. As such, Frasham became a conduit between the fabric of Winceworth's elbow and the fabric of Sophia's skirt.

'Your fiancé can see I am not, perhaps, running at full-steam today,' Winceworth said.

Frasham clapped his hands, gleeful. 'I saw the opportunity and it was just too tempting.'

'I do not blame you.'

'There is a medical condition where one compulsively makes puns,' Sophia says. 'One of my father's students wrote a paper upon it. The Germans call it *Witzelsucht*.'

'The Germans have a word for everything,' said Frasham.

'*Startle dignity*,' Sophia quoted, quietly, looking out of the window again.

Frasham pulled Winceworth's shoulder closer as if they were the oldest friends. 'My uncle has a friend who has a friend,' he said, his moustache close to Winceworth's ear, 'who knows a man about a dog who knows a man who works in the British Museum. He has keys. Keys to rooms you wouldn't imagine.'

Sophia said something in Russian to herself, still occupied with the street outside.

'I'll take your word for it,' Winceworth said.

'You must have heard of it. My God, at school we used to talk about nothing else. Stuff straight from Burton's translations and Pisanus Fraxi. Sculptures and everything. All sorts in there that the public's not allowed to see, and we've a private viewing! What do you make of that?'

'Sounds quite the evening.'

'Yes. Yes, I hope so.' Frasham kept his hand on Winceworth's shoulder a while longer beyond this statement, then he leaned back. 'And what was it — sorry, I interrupted — tell me, what was it that you two were doing today, earlier?'

'We were just talking about Byron,' Sophia said.

'Of course you were. I always found his work rather too florid, myself,' said Frasham. He took Sophia's fork up again and took a piece of her Napoleon.

'We *needed* some floridity at the time,' Sophia said. She turned to Winceworth. 'It that the correct word? *Floridness*?'

'Both. Either,' said Winceworth. 'I like *floridity*.'

She nodded. 'Just so: we needed some floridity sixty miles north of Irkutsk. Reading his poems, I was transported: roasting in the foothills of Cadiz, eating spaniel-feet in the wreckage of my ship, running through the halls and odalisques of Constantinople.'

'Now now, my dear, you shall make Winceworth blush,' said Frasham, and Winceworth felt his face which he would never trust again blaze its own simpering hell. 'And he will be the first to tell you that all that stuff and more can be found, one way or the other, in *Swansby's Encyclopædic Dictionary*. And what's more, included with it will be Cadiz's longitude, Constantinople's latitude and — if you're lucky — an illustration of some of their notable sites. Sights,' he clarified, 'with a *g* and an *h*.'

'Dictionaries are just namedroppers; poems are invitations.' Winceworth's fork hit plate at an angle and all seated jolted at the sound. He coughed. He wanted the peace to return. 'If I remember correctly — and you must tell me otherwise if I'm wrong here, Frasham — according to *Swansby's* records Lord Byron is our first listed source for *blasé* and *bored*. *Bored* as an adjective, that is. As in 'I am bored'. I am not, but, of course, but of course, I mean, the word —'

'Terence told me about this parlour game you all play in the office. Trapping poets' words like spiders underneath the glass. Do you realise you alphabetised those examples? Blasé. Bored.'

'Well-observed,' said Frasham. He took her hand in his, and they both looked at Winceworth with their happy, well-formed, perfect faces. 'Sheer force of habit, eh, old man?'

'Force, habit, of, sheer,' Winceworth said. They looked at him blankly. 'I believe Byron also gave you English *duet* as a verb,' Sophia said. 'I looked it up once.'

'Extraordinary,' said Winceworth.

'Extraordinary,' said Sophia.

'If you say so,' Frasham said. He disengaged his hand from his fiancée's, looked at his watch, and began drumming his fingers on the table.

Sophia added, a trifle more quietly, 'And also *encyclopedize*.'

'On that point,' said Winceworth, 'I'm not entirely sure I believe you.'

Sophia's eyes narrowed. 'My word on it.'

Conversation was about parrying now, and about feints. *Love* (n): in the sport of tennis, the name given when any player or team has a score of no games. Etymology

disputed, with submitted but speculative derivations include from French expression for 'the egg' (*l'œuf*), with an egg resembling the number zero on a scoring board.

Winceworth held her gaze.

Winceworth failed to hold her gaze.

'I shall certainly check the records for that word the moment that I get back to the Scrivenery,' he said. 'And if it is not listed as such, I will make the necessary amendments with my new Pelikan ink. That is,' and here he forced a chuckle, 'if I remember to do so — it was quite a blow I took from your umbrella. I hope you have done no lasting damage,' and Winceworth tapped the side of his head. He meant it to indicate, cheerily, that he was in possession of a firm and resolute skull. Achillean, impermeable and untroubled by missiles and umbrella-assault. As Frasham mimed the gesture back to Winceworth and imitated the head-tap, he realised it looked more like he was implying there was nothing between his ears.

'Where *is* your umbrella?' Frasham asked. 'That funny yellow thing.'

'Oh, I must have — I must have left it in the park. It's such a story; there was a pelican, and I hit your friend here, and then we — '

Frasham laughed again. He suited laughing, it made him seem younger. He had the relaxed posture of someone who laughed, youngly, often.

'I really am very sorry about that.' Sophia laid down her fork on her empty plate. Things seemed to be drawing to a close and she could sense it. 'You know, when I saw you in the Park I had thought that the other two that were with you, the woman and the child, I thought perhaps that they were there accompanying you. That I was ruining some family outing.'

Frasham brightened. 'Winceworth, you sly thing. Well, your lunch-breaks are your own I suppose.'

'No! No, entirely no. Unconnected. Their being there was unconnected to me. Now that I think about it, this is my second run-in with a strange child this morning.' Winceworth smoothed his hair down with the heel of his hand. 'The first one spoke in tongues and had a pet imaginary tiger.'

'My my, tigers and pelicans all in one day,' said Frasham. 'Best stick safely to the desks next time: this seems to be the message.'

'Does it hurt awfully? Your eye?' Winceworth asked Sophia.

She felt the side of her head. 'Not even a little. I had quite forgotten it.'

Winceworth said, 'Miss Slivkova is made of sterner stuff than I,' and as he said it he knew that it was a line Terence Frasham might deliver with the dashing candour of a proffered cigarette, but in Winceworth's mouth it sounded like a criticism or as if he was appraising livestock. He felt himself redden again to his roots, making it all worse. Suddenly the ceiling seemed a foot closer to his scalp and the walls were bending in. He concentrated on the metal scrollwork on his teaspoon.

'I was just thinking that you were remarkably alert, considering,' said Frasham.

'Terence —'

'The party yesterday,' Frasham continued, folding his hands in his lap and leaning back. His eyes explored Winceworth's face. 'It appears I had forgotten quite how much a day of looking up words in one book and writing them down in another can work up such a thirst amongst my colleagues.'

And Winceworth was back in the club room at the party, back in amongst the plant-plot, speaking far too close to Sophia's face. What had he said? Shouting something about a painting that he had never seen but had read about. It was really too dreadful. He regarded his hands and noticed they had balled up, without him meaning to at all.

'Perhaps now would be a good time to apologise for my behaviour,' he said to the teaspoon. His reflection peered across the table at him, red upside-down and swollen. Pelican-necked. He flipped the spoon over, but the reflection he found on its reverse was one grown large, chinful and bug-eyed, and even more ghastly. Sophia and Frasham were looking at him. A lifetime of no-one looking, and now this. He pushed the spoon away; it hit his cup at a strange slant and made what was left of his tea slop across the table-cloth. He scraped his chair back, and the stark ringing of china and metal made other unangelic diners stop and look round at the noise.

'No need, no need to apologise,' Sophia was saying. 'It was a pleasure to see so many of Terence's friends enjoying his birthday.' As she laid her napkin over the spreading dash of tea, her engagement ring gave Winceworth a pointed glint. 'If anything, I really think Terence should be apologising to you. Terence, I thought this at the time and now is as good a time as ever for me to say it: I think it was entirely wrong of you to make fun of Winceworth's lisp in the way that you did.' Sophia turned. 'In fact, I really have not noticed you speaking with one at all this whole time.'

Frasham put his head to one side.

‘Frasham is a fine fellow. The finest. I — I really must be taking my leave. It was really ever so lovely to run into you,’ said Winceworth, ‘and I hope that you enjoy the rest of your stay in London.’

‘I say, you’ve just reminded me!’ Frasham stood too, and his arm was again on Winceworth’s shoulder. ‘I just stepped into the office on my way here, and old Swansby was pacing and squawking and looking for you.’ Winceworth swallowed. ‘For me?’

‘You’re supposed to be somewhere on dictionary business right now, old man! Something about a train?’

A vague memory stirred. A train ticket bought a month in advance. A circle in the diary on his dressing table.

‘Sounds important,’ Sophia said. She too had risen from her seat.

‘They just know Winceworth is usually a good bet when it comes to having nothing better to do. I’m joking, old man. Can’t believe I forgot! Can’t believe you forgot, Peter, more’s the point; lucky I caught you here, all told: you better high-tail it back on the double!’

And Winceworth was backing out of the door and into the street, apologising and nodding and holding his new bottles of ink. For just a moment he turned to look back through the café window: the pair of them had turned to their own private conversation and taking their seats. Frasham had taken his vacated chair and was laughing at something Sophia had said that Winceworth didn’t catch. They looked happy, they looked like they matched.

Winceworth kept watching as the third, unnecessary chair at their table was moved away by a waiter.

He turned and made his way back to the office.

Winceworth watched the bumblebee make its way up and down the glass window of the train. The rest of the men and women on the carriage were also watching it and had been for the past ten minutes: each time as it reached the wooden lip at the top, when escape was possible and the air was a brighter strip, the bee did not break its pace or its speed but slowly, patiently, nose-bumped its way back down the window. Up and then down, up and then down, taking in the view as the train made its journey through the city.

Winceworth would try and lose any expectations he might have for the words themselves. He would try to forget that the ink appeared on paper in any significant order or arrangement to transmit information and pretend that rather than looking at text he was looking at an image. As such the page was no longer *readable* but instead became a network of white flecks and striations, white stipplings and criss-crossings against a dark background. If an image took a while to form, Winceworth would try tactic: to think of the spaces as snow on basalt or lace placed against sable. Once this thought was in his mind and his eyes started to adjust to the patterns there, this process of unreading became distinctly therapeutic. Without wittingly adjusting his vision, his eyes would follow the desire-lines along the white of the paper and tug along their false little Ariadne trails. Usually the image that emerged took the form of something like stitching, and the page would be transformed into a kind of monochromatic twill.

The paper would appear to pulse, at which point Winceworth would start to see blue and purple and orange shadows leaping somewhere within the fabric of the page. It was always at this point that Winceworth found he had to look away.

He often caught himself wondering whether there is a word for that uneasy fear that accompanied that specific tipping point in optical illusions between magic and reality.

It was a rare research jaunt funded by *Swansby's* that required him to be out of the office, pottering into the world with his *Swansby* headed-notepaper and regulation pen. With his pen currently being lodged in a pelican's throat, he felt sure that his new mechanised pencil would have to do. Thirteen miles into the world from the office: the reason for his trip was to investigate some quirk of dialect connected to Barking in London.

The details for the assignment had been somewhat hazy, and hazily explained once Winceworth had returned to the office at Frasham's command. He was meant to be investigating the word *barking* itself, specifically when it was used to suggest insanity. *Barking* with this meaning had been cropping up during the previous couple of months in the margins of a survey of spoken English that was sponsored by *Swansby's*. An example of usage: *With all that frothing and jabber, Terence Frasham must be absolutely barking*. The overwhelming evidence pointed to 'like a rabid or mad dog' being the provenance, but Prof Swansby insisted that they should look into the London connection, however spurious, and had provided the shilling fare from

Fenchurch Street. There was some talk of a sanatorium or lunatic house having been attached to the now-ruined abbey there but this seemed a longshot.

Winceworth watched from the window as people came to terms with the flying ants taking to the air. He could spot them even from a distance from the rail track, swatting and flicking their garments free of ants as they walked; without being able to see the animals from the train, it looked like a strange physical tic was being shared by the whole street, men and women spontaneously slapping their hats or performing little victory laps, jigs and elaborate collar-sleeve genuflections, then carrying on their way as if nothing had happened.

The journey afforded Winceworth the opportunity to stretch his legs, and for that he was grateful; grateful, that is, until he had to duly unstretch them aboard a crowded train compartment. During the journey he made little notes that he should ask various relevant people upon his arrival. These notes quickly became bored little scribbles and wobbles of lead:

‘What do you understand by *barking*?

Would *bark* suffice?

Where is the local library, *barkBarkBARK K π ☒ ☞ §*?!*’

As he ran his pencil across his lap and the train gave little skips, his writing jumped with jolts and shimmies on the page.

Winceworth’s recollection of the journey was hazy. The train looped through East Ham with its glue factories and sad-faced, easily-led horses. The marine paint factories offered oddly-coloured steam and a smell that you first sensed in your stomach before any flavour hit your nose. The bee made its way up and down, up and down the window. *Bombilating*. Winceworth wondered whether he had time for another nap. September beyond his window had made the sky above the city paperclip-coloured. A carriage-mate’s newspaper was spread open inches from Winceworth’s face. It featured an advertisement in bold italics: ‘*Don’t Mutilate Your Papers with pins or fasteners, but use the Gem Paper Clip.*’. The bee continued to rumble up and down the window, up and down.

Later, Winceworth would remember that his carriage had been cold and his crumpled jacket was thin. He would remember that he had closed his eyes, and briefly that there was nothing but the rocking of the train, the smell of the leather seats and the paint, the carriage windows’ vinegary tang and his travelling companion’s cigarettes. He had been thinking about zoetropes. He had wondered

why. He had wondered himself awake and written *ZOETROPE* down on his notepad, then closed his eyes once more. The bee's coat at the window was attracting dust and cobwebs, but still made its way up the window, up and down. The train worked out its shunting *solfeggio* as it coursed along, the telegraph-posts and buildings flicking past the window and causing weak afternoon sun to the-opposite-of-flash through Winceworth's eyelids. The underside of his eyelid shifted from a deadened ruddy colour to bursts of red light as each post passed by. There was a false sense of depth to the shapes that he began to see forming there and, with it, he experienced an instant, pleasantly terrifying giddiness. Whenever his eyes opened again he wrote *reeling* next to *ZOETROPE* in his notepad. The silver of his mechanised pencil flashed in the sun. He added *Barking* as a title to the notepad page, and he underlined the word twice, with a flourish.

Winceworth would later not recall the scene very clearly.

The bee humming its way up the window pane: that he would remember.

The tamarin-faced, Jupiter-giraffe-handed man opposite had rolled up his newspaper, and smacked it against the glass, and it was then that the world went *whump*.

Some of Winceworth's colleagues at the office kept some of the headlines from that day, and many of them used the clippings as bookmarks. 'TERRIBLE EXPLOSION, MANY KILLED AND INJURED — GREAT DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY' was the flavour of it in the next morning's press. Later reports listed the injuries and the damage; 'parts of the body were found 60 yards distant', 'the dome of the boiler is lying in an adjoining field'. These colleagues stressed that they collected these snippets not out of some new-found desire to chase souvenirs, but to help account for Winceworth's movements; assist him in putting the narrative together, for he had no memory of alighting from the train nor of how he might have made it to the site of the explosion. Talking it over with them, he concluded that he might have lost a few good hours just through shock: the power of reeling, again. One photograph that Bielefeld found in the press featured someone that could well have been Winceworth at the scene. The man in the photograph had glasses and carried a notebook, at least. There was certainly the corresponding stain over his chest where one of his bottles of Pelikan ink had broken. Everyone else in the photograph looked either infinitely more capable than this figure, or was lying under a sheet on a stretcher.

Rather than any chain of events taking place, Winceworth could remember only moments or snapshots. He could remember every detail of a bee at a window, but not how he got down from the train to the site of the explosion. From the snapshots he could remember, he could construe that the afternoon was spent with his sleeves rolled up in dust and masonry and wood and steam, being shouted at by a fireman. He remembered kneeling in order to throw up, and finding a man's face next to his. Then he had been holding a man's jaw in his hand. The man was trapped under some sort of girder or column or beam: it was a very straight line made of very black metal that was too hot to touch. The man's jaw was not where it should have been on his face. The angles were all wrong and at odds with conventional perspective. Winceworth could also remember that he had got a small stone in his shoe and that somehow dust had got behind his back-teeth. He remembered thinking that the firemen's brass all looked remarkably clean amongst so much soot. He remembered that everyone except for the firemen had been entirely silent. He would not remember seeing the fire engine.

What he could remember was the dampness of ink against his chest, that there was broken glass in his hat and that the colour that he had seen through the zoetropic train carriage window at the time of the explosion was one to which he could not put a name.

M

Of course the actual explosion in Barking — the actual, fatal, factual explosion — took place in *January* rather than September that year so it's not quite so neat a fit as I'd like. And Barking was a borough in *Essex* in 1899, not in London. Slipshod inconsistencies. My defence is that trawling search engines for the terms *explosion*, *London* and then having to read quite so much scanned nineteenth-century newsprint can completely do your head in. Do your head completely in. Maybe a certain amount of fact-fudging is forgivable for the sake of efficiency and/or sanity.

I'm not sure why I would be so coy or careful about using the phrase *search engine* either, as if a litigation lawyer is tapping his watch over my shoulder and mouthing, 'Copyright infringement' warningly. Obviously I mean *Google* with all its appropriate glyph baubles and frogging to cover my back:®™©

'Are you even listening? Mallory!'

The voice from across the workstation cubicles was easy enough to narrow down; Adam's accent is as American as grape soda and root beer and sneakers-rather-than-trainers, and I pushed my chair away from my computer and wheeled to where he was sitting. This action was not quite as fluid as I would have liked. His desk was just one row over, but it still took about six heel-punts to get there.

Adam was holding something rectangular perched up on his knees. He was peeping over the top of it.

'I found it in one of the storage cupboards,' he said. 'Tucked behind a yoga ball and some old posters.'

The light through the Scrivenery's tall windows fell at a slant across the picture's glass and the reflected glare made it a little difficult to quite work out what it was that I was being shown. Its frame was old and the photograph inside was at an angle on its mountings as if the sun had taken a swing at it on Adam's behalf.

'A yoga ball?' I repeated.

'It was purple. I know. But never mind that, look: a proper line-up for you,' Adam said. 'A real rogue's gallery.' He brought up the photograph and crouched slightly behind it so that that his face was completely obscured. 'Take a look! *The Usual Suspects 1899: This Time It's "Personnel"*.'

I rolled closer. 'Are you saying that you think he's in there somewhere?'

“*Personnel*,” Adam said again. He lowered the picture and looked at me expectantly.

‘That’s really good,’ I said, grudgingly.

‘I thought so. Go on then; get a load of these potential culprits, detective ma’am.’

I rolled my eyes at the nickname. Then, despite myself, I detective ma’am pored over the photograph.

Under the picture was a caption printed on a little ribbon of yellow paper: *Swansby’s Encyclopædic Dictionary Staff, S-Z — 1899*. I came closer, squinting, and Adam laughed at my clearly rekindled interest.

The photograph featured three rows of crossed arms and unrelaxed faces. Two bonus figures at the bottom were lying propped on their elbows in a stiff attempt at a sprawl. It’s an unlikely posture that’s usually relegated to commemorative photos of sports teams or lion-slumped big game hunters, one that only ever really suits drunk Romans handling grapes in frescos or walruses sunning themselves on ice floes and tundras. The men’s suits, ties and taper-straight moustaches all implied that striking such choreographed floppage came rather less than entirely naturally.

Presumably for the photograph’s benefit, a number of posh-looking carpets or rugs had been dragged out onto the floor to act as a stage for the ensemble and they lay there overlapping and runkled on the ground just above the caption. I was actively suspending the moment of looking at the staff members’ faces, taking in every detail of the carpet instead, at its tassels and bunched-up wrinkles. I wondered where these carpets had come from, whether they were the photographer’s own and more particularly, where they had got to by now, or which storage cupboard was affording some moths the best meal of their soft-bodied lives. Nowadays, the Scrivenery was all about scratchy purple, nylon-pile, tiled modern flooring: thick enough to trip over but thin enough to allow an office chair to wheel over with a few extra leg pumps. Too thin to absorb coffee-stains particularly well, as I knew to my cost. It was not just on the floor, either: carpet tiles ran at waist-height along the walls throughout the building and burred the sides of our flimsy cubicle partitions. All of my colleagues pinned their family photos and timetables into these fake walls, to help keep their work-space a weird approximation of home.

‘Are you actually holding your breath?’ Adam asked behind the photograph. ‘I can tell from here.’

'No,' I said. I exhaled.

Every person captured in the photograph was looking in a slightly different direction and nobody seemed to know or have been told what to do with their hands. Some had gone for a just-bagged-a-brace-of-pheasant dip at the hip but for the most part all the members of the *Swansby* staff had their arms firmly pressed across their chests, not wanting to give the photographer anything of themselves. They also all looked quite daunted, as if they were ill-at-ease with being outdoors or could sense Adam's hands, giant and white at the knuckle, around their frame.

The only two women in the photograph were standing together in the middle, all fussy collars and satellite-dish hats; one had black hair and the other entirely white. The photograph itself was that mottled kind of sepia that is not quite grey and not quite brown, ash and moth-coloured. It is a colour that leads you to believe that if you were ever moved to lick the photograph it would taste of toffee and bourbon and bookshop-dust.

The beaming man on the far left-hand side of the picture was the owner of a huge beard, all the details of which were lost in the camera's flash: the focus in the picture was sharp, so much so that even the crinkles around the man's eyes and the links of his pocket chain were distinguishable, but for whatever reason his marvellous beard sat beneath the glass as heavy and matt as a gravestone appended to his chin. I recognised the first Prof Swansby from a portrait in the lobby downstairs. I could almost see something of *Swansby's* current editor David in this man's posture or in his wide eyes: the beard was quite a distraction. Also the current editor was about three feet taller; clearly some non-*Swansby*, more dominant genes had blossomed along the line.

Spurred on by Prof Swansby's similarity, I found myself trying to recognise the features of people that I knew hidden in these strange faces beneath the glass, or to think of period actors who best resembled them and could step into their roles.

Only one of the figures in the photograph had his whole face blurred so that where his face should have been there was just a feathered smudge of paleness. His head must have snapped up as the camera's shutters did their work. Or maybe a fault when it had been developed, a thumb slipping and dredging ink in the dark-room's developing-tray? I bent my face closer: no, there was still a trace of face there within the distortion, the shape of a head that had turned too soon. This figure was looking

up and across, staring somewhere above the camera and off to the left as if at horror at something snagged in the clouds.

‘It must have been taken in the courtyard outside,’ Adam said, lowering the frame. ‘If you imagine it without the bins and the air-vents.’

He was right. Sure it was thinner in the photograph and with fewer branches splayed across the brickwork but that was the same ivy lacquering the wall behind the figures as that I could see every morning from my desk. I had even watched the unglossy and unbouncing lunchtime smokers huddle in that same courtyard just this lunchbreak, the ivy leaves glossy and bouncing behind them in a light spritz of rain. That ivy is often the only reason that I can tell one season from the other from my desk, whether it is rustling with raindrops or summer bumblebees or nesting finches.

Adam rose from his chair. ‘I’ve got to get something from downstairs,’ he said, and handed the photograph to me. ‘But it’s good, right? What do you think, do you have a good eye for cheating bastards?’

‘Can I have a copy of this?’

‘Of course. It’s a mere Xerox away,’ he said. ‘Do you need anything while I’m up and about?’

‘No, thanks. And thanks for this.’

I rolled back over back to my cubicle and to the window. I spun a little on my chair midway: you have to take your perks when you can grab them. I overbalanced slightly by the pot-plant, and Karen from marketing looked up sharply, and I regretted everything, everything, everything.

At my desk, I extended my arm and tried to best match my view of the yard with the orientation of the photograph. If my alignment was correct, the blurred-face man in the photograph must have been looking directly up at my window just as the picture was taken.

I scanned the photograph and, still hot from the printer under my desk, I pinned a copy of it in the centre of my carpeted cubicle wall.

W

Smoke was pumping heavily from the centre of the blast and Winceworth was close enough to feel the warmth of it curl against his cheek. He was in the middle of the line of firemen and bystanders that were passing buckets of water into its heart. As it coiled away into the dusky pink-sliced sky, the smoke was purple-black and tinged with the red reflection of the flames.

The ants were still flying, Winceworth noticed, even through all this.

Winceworth's knees felt soft and unsteady and for some reason even as he watched the bucket of water leave his fingers and pass on down the line he couldn't feel any sensation in his hands. All of a sudden he was watching a reflection of his face distend and warp in some kind of gold flux in front of him. He accepted that the world had entirely changed and that natural processes and dimensions no longer applied. He concentrated, and shook his head as if dislodging something lodged there: his reflection in the fireman's helmet shook back at him. His face there looked dismayed. The fireman was leaning down and shouting something at him, pointing, but Winceworth did not understand the words.

'He says we should leave,' another voice then said, calmly, in his ear. It was one of the broad, spade-handed men with whom he had shared a train carriage; they too must have climbed down to the site of the newly ruined factory to help, and they were also caked in debris and ash. All of them were panting and one was being silently, violently sick by a sweetshop's store-front. Winceworth followed the group as they gathered together and leant on each other's shoulders, and he murmured agreements to their 'No more we can do's and 'Gave it our best shot's. With them he allowed his face and hands to be towelled clean by a bystander; as he moved with this wordlessly consolidated, amassed band through the street and away from the station, he found that despite this kindness, sweat had caused dust to adhere in a firm kind of grouting within the tiny grooves in his skin that would not be removed no matter how hard he pawed. He felt the grit in his face stiffen as he grimaced. The world came to him muted and muffled too; he remembered hoping that this was due to dust plugging his ears, or else his hearing must have suffered in the blast.

The group that he had joined milled for a little while, not speaking at all but communicating by nodding and catching each other's eyes. They walked, so it seemed to Winceworth, aimlessly down side-streets, knowing they were looking only to be

away. They doubled-back on themselves. Some seemed to join the party, others to leave it; eventually they found a hotel where people were taking an early supper. Patrons, escaping the ants and the oppressive heat of the day, put down their papers and their pies as the group entered, all grey-faced and caked in cinders and soot. The landlord must have known what they had come from or recognised a look in their eyes, for immediately Winceworth had a drink in his hand and was being pushed into a wing-back chair by the fire.

‘What is — ?’ he said as the dimpled pint mug lowered in front of him.

‘Sharpener — get the blood going again,’ said the landlord, and Winceworth drank it all in one draining pull.

And then Winceworth was throwing up outside the building. The broad man from the train was there too, similarly doubled-over. They both mirrored each other in flicking ants out of their hair.

Looking up, Winceworth saw the sign over the door of the hotel.

“‘The Spotted Dog’,’ Winceworth read.

‘You know it?’ said the man.

‘In *Barking!*’ he said, slowly, and he started laughing. The man grinned back at him, and he was handsome and scrubbed and pleasant but the events of the afternoon had ruined all that; his grin was horrible, with too-wide, wild eyes.

‘Quite a day, all of a sudden,’ the man said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He blew an ant off his nose. ‘Damn things. Of all the days.’

‘Of all the days,’ Winceworth repeated. He felt less nauseous now, just overwhelmingly jittery. He felt adrenaline zipping through his blood and making his ears burn. The man watched him, swaying. Winceworth realised that he was swaying too. Perhaps the whole world was swaying. He sat down in the road and held on to the paving for dear life.

‘Do you live around these parts?’ the man asked, joining him on the kerb.

‘I need to get back to *Swansby’s*,’ said Winceworth looking out at the street. The man looked at him, blankly. ‘Who’s that?’

‘The dictionary. *Encyclopædic Dictionary*, Volume S. Back in Westminster.’

The man scoffed, then spat into the gutter. ‘Hang that for a lark: you need to get on home — you’re completely tuckered. Me too. God, how is it only -’ The man glared at the road, and tried to thumb some grit from his eye. ‘My watch stopped in

all that, but it can't be past five. Tell you what, let's both go back inside, get some more brandy in us, nip back on the train and we'll be as right as — ‘

Winceworth thought of the bee climbing up the window in the carriage.

‘I — don't think I can face getting on another train,’ he said. He patted his pockets for his ticket. The crunch of a broken bottle of Pelikan ink in his jacket made him stand up straighter. ‘Sorry, I don't know what's come over me. I'll walk.’

‘To Westminster?’ said the man. He stretched out his legs and looked at the sky, which was turning apricot and black. ‘Don't be daft, you'll keel over by the time you reach Plaistow.’

‘I don't know where that is,’ conceded Winceworth, miserably.

The man gave him a long look. ‘I say, you really don't look well at all.’

‘I — ‘ And Winceworth, whose veins were full of a nervous fire and who was tired of not finishing his sentences, and of not being heard or having a chance to speak, this Winceworth wanted to seize the man by the ears and hiss that all he had managed to eat today was cake and that he was impossibly, nonsensibly in love, out of absolutely nowhere, intractably, irreducibly, awfully in love and the woman that he loved-with-no-good-reason was, for no good reason, probably right now at this very minute being led around an obscene, beautiful statue by a man with a bright red moustache and perfect posture in a secret room that I could never access, even if I wanted to, with time I will never have, making whispered sweet-nothings turn to hard-somethings with that laugh of his and that laugh of hers, and yet here *I* am with my hands shaking in a road by “The Spotted Dog” in Barking or something ludicrous like that on account of a dictionary where nobody knows I exist, that doesn't know I exist, that I loathe because to bottle up language, to package language — me! Who am I to love her and to make passels of words! I who faint in doctors' consulting rooms — I've come to think is loathsome, it *is* trapping butterflies under glass, she was right; and yet yet yet yet yet even in loathing it, it has trained me so well; it's trained me so well that I am half way even now itching to reach for my notepad, my little *Swansby's* headed notepad, so that I can ask you about your use of *tuckered* just now, and make sure I take good, neat dictation down for the specific six-by-four index card on which the word will be housed, and *in* you'll slot, *in* will go your example of an incidental, unthought-through but somehow meaningful aside ready to be consulted when the *T* section is compiled of *Swansby's Encyclopædic Dictionary*. Congratulations, it's a verb!, they'll say. How does everybody manage with this

responsibility and complete lack of agency? Is it that you don't see, or that you don't care? Every word investigated, every fact taken into account. Everything you say matters, and the matter at hand is not why you told me that, or where you learnt it, or the specific pull of your tongue against the palate of your mouth as you said it that is individual only to you, did you know that, that the palatal rugae pattern on the roof of your mouth is distinct to each and every individual, like a fingerprint, and every word you say has been loosed and polished and buffered and bruised by it in a unique way. Will the dictionary know I'll associate *tucker* for ever more with the taste of ash? With wanting to cry? With spotted dogs and a dead bee in a terrible window onto the world?

Winceworth didn't say any of that, but cleared his throat. 'I am fine, thank you,' he said.

'Tell you what,' said the man. 'My good deed for the day; I'll get you a cab back to — what did you call it?'

'*Swansby's*,' said Winceworth. He did not know how the man could possibly seem so together.

'Back to *Swansby's*. No, don't mention it — it's the least I can do.'

'What's your name?' asked Winceworth. And the man told him.

'Thank you,' said Winceworth simply. An idea had suddenly formed in his mind. 'And — one last thing — did you see the colour?'

'The colour?' the man asked, picking an ant from his sleeve and crushing it between his fingers. 'Colour of what?'

'Of the explosion: did you see it through the window?'

'Of course I did,' said the man, and he looked at Winceworth cagily. 'You know I did. We all did.'

Winceworth fell back into the cab, but quickly clambered back to the window to catch the man's arm once more.

'And what colour would you call it? What exact colour?'

But the man's answer was lost as the horse's hooves struck the road surface and he was borne away into the night. He had a renewed purpose.

M

To use a *Swansby* office computer was to hate the sight of an hourglass.

I probably resented the one on my screen particularly because it was so entirely less lovely a specimen than the real *Swansby* sand-timer sitting on the receptionist's desk by the door, engraved with its Shakespeare quotation. That was sleek, grand. The computer's hourglass had six black pixels in its top bulb and ten in the lower. Silent, onochrome and smaller than a fingernail, even after all this time I still became overwhelmingly anxious whenever its pinch-waisted little graphic popped up in the centre of my desktop. A further pair of pixels were suspended on either side of the bulb to imply that sand was falling; as one watched the screen, this hourglass would swivel on its axis, tracing regular oscillations on the spot as if was being tipped and re-tipped by an unseen moderator's fingers. I'm sure that I'm not alone in the sense of dread at its appearance: having worked alongside the arrow and manicule forms of the computer's cursor, it was a shock to have it suddenly transformed into a tool dedicated to some other project, a project that was not only apparently out of one's control but one that takes priority. With the operating system too busy to accept input from the keyboard or mouse one is stuck there until the computer had come to terms with itself, the spinning hourglass unwanted company for the duration.

The phone on my desk gave a sharp ring. Karen, sitting in my eye-line, stiffened. I knew what was on the other end and was in no rush to pick up. I placed my hand on its receiver and smiled at her, though, to give the impression of competency.

Perhaps the image of an hourglass caused so much anxiety because as a graphic it offers no hint of eventual relief. The constant trickling of sand from one obconical end to the other gives no indication that any specific amount of time is being counted down. I mean, really, it is the perfect icon for frustrated flux rather than a sense of progress, an image of a fixed, inescapable 'presentness' rather than promising any future. A clock-face devoid of hands, perhaps, would have the same uncanny effect.

The phone gave another ring.

As well as implying stasis, the iconography of the hourglass also hinted at a particular progression: that all natural things tend towards death. This is not good for

office morale. Waiting for the computer-screen hourglass to empty and refill and empty again like this generates a feeling not just of futility but also mortality. It's a favoured prop whenever 'Father Time' or 'Death' are figured as persona in Western culture, and if Disney's *Alice in Wonderland's* White Rabbit had been described as crying 'I'm late, I'm late, I'm late!' while clutching an hourglass rather than a pocket-watch he would have been a far more morbid entity. Jostling for room with skulls, burning-down candles and rotten fruit, hourglasses are also one of the recurring tropes of *vanitas* pieces: those works of art that illustrate the world's physical transience. Trading upon this saturnine thrill of *memento mori* set-pieces, pirate ships of the 17th and 18th century bore hourglasses upon their flags alongside the more famous skull insignias. Hourglass iconography is also prevalent on a number of gravestones, often supplemented with mottoes such as *Tempus Fugit* ['Time Flies'] or *Ruit Hora* ['The Hour is Flying Away'].

My computer is old and slow: last week I had to face a couple of turns of the hourglass while checking the words *obconical* and *saturnine*.

My phone gave a third ring, which was enough for Karen from marketing to cough, pointedly, and try to catch my eye.

'Are you going to — ?'

Hourglass imagery is not always coincident with a sense of hopelessness, however. In fact, thinking about it, sometimes it exists as a symbol for a certain necessity to seize the hour: perhaps for this reason that hourglasses feature on many heraldic crests. I've looked it up. A 16th-century Bishop of Lincoln, the Anderton family of Lancaster and the Shadforths of Northumberland. Thomas Biddlecome's coat of arms featured an hourglass fluttering above the shield with a pair of feathered wings: time flies, indeed. To celebrate four years since the independence of Pakistan, a postage stamp was made that featured a large hourglass alongside an aircraft and the traditional crescent moon and star. The hourglass fulfils a commemorative role, to remind us of what went before. Modern companies have also presented hourglasses as objects of desire. In the fourteenth incarnation of Nintendo's *The Legends of Zelda* game franchise, the hero Link seeks a 'Phantom Hourglass' to help him with his quest. I was waxing lyrical about hourglasses one lunchbreak in St. James's Park with Adam, and he told me that another plucky green-garbed protagonist benefits from hourglasses in the form of Lucky the Leprechaun, mascot for *Lucky Charms* breakfast brand. In 2008, General Mills added yellow and

orange hourglass-shaped marshmallows to the cereal with the tagline ‘The Hourglass Charm has the Power to Stop Time, Speed Up Time, Reverse Time’. Adam says they taste like happy nothing. From bite-size treats to huge publicity stunts, the slow-reveal element of an hourglass’s design was central to a recent model of BMW’s advertising campaign: the design of the new car was concealed in the uppermost bulb of a massive hourglass beneath more than 180,000 metallic globes and, at the throw of a switch, all the balls trickled to the level beneath and the car was uncovered, bit-by-tantalising-bit, to the waiting crowd and press corps.

My phone gave a fourth ring, and my colleague Karen’s coughing intensified. The phone had been now been ringing for a good full six-seconds, but I was still in no hurry to pick it up: I was, after all, busy looking up pictures of hourglasses on Google Images.

In one of its more savoury definitions, the online UrbanDictionary.com lists the verb *hourglassing* in reference to ‘when a computer is “thinking” and is currently unresponsive. Not exactly frozen, *hourglassing* gives a potentially false sense of action on the part of the computer.’ Many families have been united in baying, un festive horror during games of *Charades* or *Pictionary* as the final grains of sand fall through the neck of supplied hourglasses. Hourglasses of this size are also called *egg-timers*. Although this is probably a practical description of its use amongst, say, the soft-boiling breakfast community, I do think that *egg-timer* lacks the poetry of the other possible synonym *clepsammia*. The lexicographer Noah Webster listed this word in his 1828 dictionary — its etymological roots are the Greek words for *sand* and *theft*, the idea being that as each grain slips through the hourglass’s waist another moment is being taken away. *Clepsammia* certainly has a pleasing clicking sibilance to it, and as a word evokes a slick trickling of the contents from bulb to bulb as well as the flipping-over of its body. Unlike Webster, *Swansby’s Encyclopædic Dictionary* has always overlooked the word *clepsammia* in all of its editions. It does, however, provide the word *hour-glass* as a hyphenated noun. With its symmetry and little dashed isthmus between the two words, ‘hour-glass’ on the page looks like the object itself, lying on its side or balanced mid-spin.

‘Mallory, the phone — ‘

Of course, the hourglass is not the only symbol that accompanies hapless computer users (me) and their periods of waiting. At least for a while Apple products featured a spinning orb known affectionately as the ‘Spinning Beach Ball of Death’ or

the 'Marble of Doom'. My Blackberry occasionally presents me with a graphic of a squared-off clock, its hands spinning uncontrollably. Blackberry-time, Apple-time, Lucky Time, egg-time. My laptop at home is far newer than my office computer and runs on a far more up-to-date operating system; bereft of hourglasses, my waiting is instead accompanied by its replacement, its inheritor: a glowing ring, a tiny green ouroboros graphic eating its own tail forever. The same irritation exists, the feeling of being trapped in a state of suspension rather than as if any progress is being made but stripped of the more esoteric time-keeper. This glowing circle feels somehow more clinical and inhumane, its cultural implications less to do with pirates and Father Time and more HAL 9000 from *2001: A Space Odyssey* or the KITT vehicle's front-scanning bar in *Knight Rider*. Armed with the iconography of *vanitas*, maybe other operating systems in the future will adopt symbols of futility such as skulls or rotting flowers. Perhaps a little pixelated Sisyphus could be forced to clamber up my scrollbar. As it stands, the charm of the hourglass has gone and I miss it. *Tempus* won't stop *fugit*, sure, but at least we once had the chance to watch it play out in style.

The phone made its fifth ring, petulantly. I sighed and picked up the receiver, smiling fixedly at Karen who by now had risen in her chair and was actively clutching at her throat.

'Hello, *Swansby's Press*,' I said, 'how may I help you?'

'Burn in hell,' said the synthetically-distorted voice on the other end of the line.

'Yes,' I said, and gave Karen thumbs-up. 'Yes, you're through to the right department. How may I help you?'

W

Winceworth wrenched open the lift doors into the Scrivenery main hall, the clunk and rattle of his arrival causing a panic-scattering of a batch of Swansby cats. He cast an eye around the hall and was disappointed to see that there was still someone busy at their desk: at the sound of the lift, Bielefeld looked up from his work and visibly paled.

‘Dear God, man!’ Bielefeld exclaimed. He threw down the papers that were in his hand and scrambled over tables and around chairs to reach Winceworth’s side. He took Winceworth firmly by the elbow and steered him away from the door.

Winceworth thought that this might be in order to find him a seat, but it as it turned out it was actually to lead him to a window so that he might bear closer inspection.

Winceworth smiled faintly and readjusted his jacket. ‘Do I look entirely awful? People were crossing to the other side of the street.’

‘You look an absolute state. Not to mention,’ and Bielefeld’s voice became shriller, ‘you’re completely bloody covered in *ants*.’ He began to bat at his own sleeve in case any insects had made their way across to his jacket at their contact.

‘They’re everywhere outside, fairly bursting up out of the ground,’ Winceworth explained. ‘They’re everywhere, flying around, all at once.’

Bielefeld pulled a face. ‘I thought that only happened in summer, are you sure?’ Winceworth said nothing. Bielefeld continued: ‘Usually that bodes well for rain later on, though, doesn’t it? At least this heat might break a bit: all a bit oppressive in here, even with the windows open. I suppose I’ll find out when I get a chance to finally step outside; I haven’t been able to get a breath of fresh air today? Been chasing a reference to *scurryvaig*.’

‘Yes?’ said Winceworth. The firemen in Barking had offered him water but he still felt his throat was coated with sand and ash.

‘Yes, pesky thing to hunt down in terms of appearing elsewhere. Noun. Seems to be in that Douglas translation of the *Æneid* — say, I don’t suppose,’ Bielefeld coughed lightly and looked up at Winceworth through his lashes, ‘I don’t suppose you have any ideas about it? For *scurryvaig*, I mean — with an *i* after the — ‘

‘None whatsoever, I’m afraid.’

Bielefeld was still talking. ‘I only ask, old man, because the same passage has *swingeouris*, *swankeis* and *swanis* in there too and it looks like I will have a rather

rum Wednesday ahead of me.’ Bielefeld caught Winceworth’s eye. ‘But what on earth has happened to you? You should get to a doctor!’

‘I’m fine,’ Winceworth said. ‘There was an accident out in — I just left some work that needs finishing up here and then I will be right to bed.’

‘Don’t be absurd, you have bags under your eyes that I could carry pens in. You’re clearly in no fit state to — look, there’s Prof Swansby. Tell him, Prof Swansby,’ Bielefeld called, as he saw the editor shuffling down the other end of the hall. ‘Tell Winceworth that he needs to get home, or to a doctor — is that blood, Winceworth?’ Bielefeld tapped Winceworth’s shoulder and it puffed back a reply with brick dust.

‘It’s not mine,’ Winceworth said.

‘What?’

Prof Swansby kept walking on by with his head buried in a book. He waved as he passed, not looking up but calling, ‘And have a goodnight!’ to them and disappearing into the outer corridor.

Bielefeld scratched his nose. ‘Well, that’s him dead to the world for the next hour or so. But are you quite certain you should be here? I would stay with you but,’ he pointed over at his desk, all its papers neatened up for departure and his attaché case waiting. He attempted an apologetic smile. ‘Was all set to go, you know. And I’ve bought tickets for the ballet.’

Winceworth flicked an ant from his ear. ‘You carry on, honestly; I’m only here because I’ve been absent most of the afternoon.’

‘Yes, Frasham mentioned you’d been out for tea and cakes,’ his companion said, and he angled his head towards Winceworth to see if an account would be forthcoming.

Winceworth kept his eyes fixed out of the window. He wondered whether Bielefeld could smell the alcohol on him. ‘I’ve still got a fair amount to catch up on from this morning. From last week, even. Do you remember the trouble we were having with *synovy*?’

‘How could I forget!’ cried Bielefeld, and he laughed and clapped a friendly hand again to Winceworth’s shoulder. Winceworth had picked the word *synovy* out of the air for this yarn. ‘Well,’ Bielefeld continued, going over to his desk and picking up his things. ‘If you’re sure. Just as long as you’re not — I mean to say, you look like you’ve been hit by an omnibus. *Always scribble, scribble, scribble! Eh, Mr Gibbon and all that. Credit to Swansby’s, hmm? Don’t overdo it.*’

'I shall endeavour not to do so,' Winceworth said, and he watched Bielefeld take his leave, petting one of the *Swansby* cats on the way out and humming some bars of Tchaikovsky. The cat avoided his hand. Winceworth wondered vaguely what anecdote Bielefeld was composing for his colleagues about the whole matter.

'Say — would it be alright if I borrowed your pen?' he called as Bielefeld reached the door. 'I can't seem to find —'

'Of course: you know where to find it!' came the answer, and as the lift doors clanged and Bielefeld descended from view, Winceworth was left on his own in the large hall of the Scrivenery.

The sound of the floorboards and creaks of his chair as he moved from Bielefeld's desk to his own sounded different in the quiet of the hall. When the place was not full of people keeping their noses to their respective lexicographical grindstones, it was not so much that the place felt empty: the Scrivenery's shelves and bookcases felt just impossibly high, filled with an impossible number of books filled with an incalculable weight of words. Out of habit he reached for his pen in its usual place in his jacket, forgetting, and drew out the propelling pencil that Sophia had gifted him that afternoon. He set the pencil before him and placed it flush with the remaining bottle of Pelikan ink.

He spun the pencil across his fingers, absently. Two sleepy *Swansby* kittens were draped over Appleton's neighbouring bureau and they both moved their heads slowly in synchrony as they watched the pencil twirl back and forth through his hand. He waved it around a little for their benefit until they appeared to lose interest. He tapped the pencil on the desk, and picked up Bielefeld's pen.

He selected a fresh index card from the letter rack, opened the fresh bottle of ink and began to write a new entry.

M

The hoax calls threatening to blow up the *Swansby* offices had been coming in for some time now. Not at regular intervals in the week, and not always at the same time, but often enough for me to have actually grown if not blasé, then expectant. Synthesised voice on the other end and everything. They knew me by voice by now, and actually asked for me by name to tell me that I was going to burn in hell, all because *Swansby's* want to change how it defines marriage.

Tuesday morning is as fine a time as any to contribute to someone else's measured panic. David Swansby stopped crying the moment that he registered I was standing his doorway.

'I'm sorry, I should have knocked — ' I said, and for a second we both regarded one another, not entirely sure etiquette-wise who was prey and who was predator. That's all etiquette comes down to, I think. Perhaps that's telling. Whatever, we set about making all the requisite adjustments to time and space when you don't want someone to consider that you have been crying: David's eyes pulled maybe half a millimetre wider than mine but I'm sure I gasped half a millilitre more air. These things should not be a competition. He was certainly the first to react, rising from his desk with an enviable rush of energy.

Unfortunately, this all set off a chain of reactions that caused something that was a *flurry* to intensify into a *chaos*. While some seventy-year-olds grow stooped as time goes on with each year, David Swansby had unfurled: he is the tallest man I have ever met, and had the widest wingspan. The unwinding of his body from sitting to standing caused a cup of coffee by his elbow to skid and roll across his desk. This startled the office cat, which ran headlong into the printer that in turn spontaneously powered-up and began shrieking something like the word 'Paroxysm!' over and over and over and over and over again. The spilt coffee scribbled a fresh, hot, organic 'WELL, WHOOPS!' flourish across the length of David's desk; I could tell the coffee was fresh because it was steaming even as it spread across the paper-work and filing.

The cat screamed, the printer screamed. I made a corresponding 'WELL, WHOOPS!' face as obviously as possible and reversed out of the office with a single heel/knee/shoulder backspace manoeuvre. I clicked the door shut behind me, loud enough for us both to hear, and pressed myself against the corridor wall.

There was a rustling from above, as if something was scampering along the false tiles of the ceiling. The office cat was obviously more interested in throwing itself in surprise into coffee to investigate the building's rat problem. After a minute, rather than just stand there listening to rats or squirrels, I went to the water fountain and helped myself to one of its Styrofoam cups; the fountain grunted companionably, glad of the attention, and as I pressed its buttons it bulged a little peacock-skinned, gossipy bubble just for me.

There came the sound of hinges and David's tall head bent around the doorframe. 'You're a little early, I think?' he called down the corridor, waving me forward. His gold-painted surname on the panel of the door shone in time with its movement as he ushered me back over the threshold.

We were going to pretend that the crying hadn't happened. It already felt as if it could *not* have happened: he appeared to be not just completely clear-eyed and unflustered but the very picture of professionalism. People say that dog-owners often look like their pets, or the pets look like their owners: in many ways David Swansby dressed like his handwriting: neat, with squared-off edges. Like my handwriting, I am aware that I often look like I need to be tidied away and frequently that I need to be ironed, possibly autoclaved, and that by the time afternoon tugs itself around the clock I am always a big ruffled bundle.

(I'm being coy again in my choice of words. *Ruffled*, like *shabby* and *well-worn*, is a word that places emphasis on coziness and affability: I mean that I look like a mess. Creases seem to find me during the day and make tally charts against my clothes and my skin as I count down the hours until home time.)

I had only ever seen David Swansby be anything other than the *soul of understated workplace elegance* until five minutes ago when he was bent over a phone and sobbing into a the crook of his arm.

Both the now-silent printer and office cat seemed to be compliant in this act-like-everything-is-normal narrative. The cat was Sphinxing on the arm-rest of my chair with its eyes closed. I gave its spine a nudge with my knuckles and its body rumbled something about solidarity against my hand.

'Sit sit sit,' David said. I made my way over to the desk, biting into the side of my water cup. The texture of tooth against Styrofoam made David, the office cat and I wince. I sat down.

'Tits tits tits,' said David Swansby.

W

Winceworth eyed one of the yellow office cats as it approached his desk. He couldn't be sure if it was the same one that had thrown-up all down his shirt the other day — they all looked so alike! — but he found he had pulled his elbow around his work automatically, to protect it from even a cat's prying eyes.

M

I had first met Tits the office cat in this very spot a month ago, during the interview for my current role. It was a rangy, yellow-eyed duffer-moggy with a coat the colour of old toast. Its presence as co-interviewer ('Ignore the cat! Please, do sit down!') was not unwelcome: it explained the shallow ceramic bowl on the desk in front of me, placed next to the *Swansby's Encyclopædic Dictionary*-branded mug and the block of Post-It notes. At first I thought that the bowl might be an ashtray and if not an ashtray then a horrible version of a hotel reception's Mint Imperials, half-filled with little dusty brown pellets. Not quite powder, nowhere near meat: *kibble* is the name, isn't it, for that kind of cat-food. I think I've only ever heard that word thanks to American sitcoms. Satisfyingly apt combination of sounds and letters, carries the overtones of *kitten* + *nibble* + *rubble*, as well as the vague sense of onomatopoeia as it is shaken out of the bag.

Halfway through the interview for the internship I had noticed that this shallow ceramic cat bowl had TITS written on it. David — then just *Mr Swansby* for the interview's sake, grey-haired and charming, about twelve feet tall — followed my line of sight.

'Short for *Titivillus*,' David had said, pleased to have any scrutiny of my lies about strengths and weaknesses curtailed. He came around the desk and began talking to the cat. 'Doesn't it, Tits? Tits Tits Tits.' He reached for Tits's ears and given them a pat. My job-hungry brain kicked in and I recognised the cat had been transformed into a conduit for diplomacy and I put my hand onto a tuft above its cat-shoulder. As Mr Swansby worked his thumb around to the cat's jaw, finding the sweet spots there that make cats smile, I focused on its withers. If that's the right word. Maybe this was all unconnected, but Tits had purred at our team-work and I had got the job.

Four weeks later, and David was mopping up the coffee Tits had spilt. He was mopping it with a green silk handkerchief, because also like his handkerchief he was elegant but also slightly ridiculous.

'You know, you never explained the cat's name,' I said, 'and I was always too worried to ask.'

David's coffee had spilt into Tits's desk-bowl of kibble. 'I didn't?'

'I don't even know if it's a boy or a girl. Man. Mancat or ladycat.'

‘Strictly speaking,’ David said, looking at Tits, ‘the full title is Titivillus the Eighteenth. All the cats at *Swansby’s* have been called that, ever since the very first mouser kept down in the printing press. Rats make nests out of the discarded galley papers, you know. Dynasty stuff. Eighteen Tits. Would you like some tea? Coffee? Water?’

‘No thank you.’ I rubbed a thumb down Tits’s nose. I’m pretty sure the word is *tom* for male cats. *Queen* for female. Why I never can remember these facts when I’m speaking, I’ll never know.

‘I thought *Titivillus* was a bit too long for collars so I shortened it to the inevitable. That was funny for the first year but then — well, I always forget how it must look. Bowls all around the building with TITS written on them, me shouting “Tits!” out of windows. I’m so used to the name by now that I hardly notice.’ David busied himself with a kettle and a small cafetière.

‘Titivillus,’ I said again, to check the pronunciation. ‘Is that an emperor?’

‘A demon — I think Milton mentions him, possibly not.’ David waved at the lower half of his wall-to-ceiling bookshelves, presumably indicating an *M* section. I was not prepared for the editor of an encyclopædic dictionary to admit ignorance so candidly while also asserting how well-read he was with throwaway mentions of Milton. ‘He certainly crops up in mystery plays: used to be blamed for introducing errors into written works. Slip-ups, typos, that kind of thing. There’s also something in the *Pickwick Papers* about ‘tits’ being a word for calling cats. “Puss, puss, puss — tit, tit, tit.” Along those lines.’

Tits’s purring intensified against my hand. David hit the cafetière plunger with the stance of someone detonating a mountain-side.

‘He’s a boy, by the way,’ David said.

‘Got it,’ I said. ‘Hello,’ I added, to the cat, renewing my acquaintance.

‘But all that’s something completely by-the-by,’ said David. ‘I want to ask you about whether you are any good at keeping secrets.’

David was explaining how dire the financial situation was for *Swansby’s* to a group of us in another meeting-room. There was the same rattling-rustle noise again in the ceiling, the same type of scuttle I had heard in the corridor outside David’s office.

Everyone looked up, and their eyes tracked the noise as it moved from one side of the room to the other.

David coughed.

‘Quite frankly,’ Karen from marketing said, ‘the first thing we should be doing is getting rid of that rat problem.’

‘We don’t *know* that it’s rats,’ said David gently.

‘It could be squirrels,’ said Adam, one of the interns who had started at the same time as me. He had a bright California accent. ‘We had that in our flat for a while; what you need is a jar, some peanut butter and some Scotch tape.’

‘We call it Sellotape here,’ said Karen from marketing. Adam and I stared at her, but she didn’t seem to notice. ‘As I’ve brought up before, someone or something has been eating my rice-cakes in the staff pantry. I’ve put up notices and everything. But if it’s rats that have been at them,’ and here Karen from marketing crossed her arms from marketing, to lend emphasis, ‘we’re going to have a real problem.’

Tits the cat chose this moment to enter the room. He gazed at all of us in turn and then, disgusted, exited with his tail held up high.

‘That’s true, yes,’ said David. ‘And I assure you that I have looked into pest control, and we’re currently just working out whether we have the budget — ‘

‘Good Lord, never mind about budget!’ said another colleague. ‘You can’t make us work in a place overrun with rats.’

‘Or squirrels.’

‘I thought I saw some droppings in the photocopier room, but I thought they might be something else.’

‘What else could they be?’

‘I don’t know. Raisins?’

‘Why would there be raisins —?’

‘Look, this is nonsense: £50 for the first person to get a photo of the thing that’s making the noise,’ said Karen from marketing, and everyone in the room apart from David sighed, ‘Ohhhh.’ Despite myself, I found my voice was amongst them. The *Swansby* editor spread his hands appeasingly, ‘Now, now, I hardly think *overrun*. No, let’s not say *overrun*. And we have to know what it is before we can call people in to do anything about it, don’t we? Different pests deserve different measures.’

‘Shhh!’ said Adam, and he spread out his hands as if he was playing a chord on an invisible piano. Everyone looked at him. His eyes flicked to the ceiling tiles, and I

worked out the pose wasn't meant to be invisible piano, it was meant to be like a horse-whisperer. 'I heard it again!' he hissed.

A hush fell upon the assembled staff

Out in the corridor, the water fountain gurgled.

'I can't hear anything,' said David after a minute.

'I heard it too, and it was too small for a squirrel,' said Karen from marketing, and everyone standing next to her on that side of the room nodded.

'Maybe a small squirrel,' said Adam.

'A chipmunk?' said someone in a beige cardigan.

'I didn't call a meeting to talk about whatever's in the ceiling,' David exclaimed, and he drew himself to his full height of circa 800 ft. This had the intended effect immediately, and everyone sat down with one collective *whoomph*.

'Shall I take minutes?' said Beige Cardigan.

'No thank you — ' David looked at Beige Cardigan, and I watched as his face changed. He clearly didn't know the name either. I then watched everyone else's faces change as they realised that too. Beige Cardigan reddened. 'No,' David recovered, almost, 'that won't be necessary. Thank you. This will all be rather quick and informal. In fact, I'd rather that what I'm about to say doesn't go beyond these walls.'

W

Steadying himself on the lip of the basin, Winceworth glanced in the mirror. Even the wire bridge of his spectacles had collected silt from the explosion and over the course of the afternoon had pressed a tiny stripe of war-paint across his nose. He sluiced his face and beneath his arms with water and worked the soap until it was thick and fat-bubbled.

The moment he was through the front door, he raced up the stairs and fell upon his bed, kicking and peeling clothes away in small puffs of masonry and grit. All of his garments lay behind him around the floor. Between the birthday cake icing-sugared pockets, the cat vomit, the pelican blood mixed with ink, crushed flying ants and Barking's brick-dust, his jacket was flecked and ruined with artefacts and substances, documentation of the day.

He scrubbed his face harder until the world smelled just of soap and fresh skin. He looked out of the corner of his eye at the silk dressing gown thrown over his chair. This was his one luxury: not the folds of its silk, shimmering even in this dim light. It was patterned with pink flamingos on a grey background. He had stuffed it with all his money he had saved over the past year, every week collecting the chit from the bank, picking apart the seam of the left-hand sleeve, and shoving it in there. For some great adventure to come, perhaps. There was enough paper in there now that the sleeve made a *crrfffflllfff* sound when he touched it. He touched it often, for comfort.

He did not even bother to close the curtains. Adrenaline, fear, custard slices: any energy or reserves on which he had been running since his time in the café with Sophia seemed to drain from him as he sat back down on the bed. The linen was new, the sheets pressed. Thank God for unseen landladies. He felt for his night-shirt in a dresser, shrugged it over his head, and let sleep overcome him.

Winceworth stirred. He could not tell how long a time had passed, and he could not care less. He pulled his bedsheet over his face. Bedsheets negate the need for time.

There was a comfort to Pauffley Street's creaks and rumbles and to returning to their familiarity after such a day. Now the lodgings were full of their usual night-time choruses. Pipes giggled, taps dripped and the floorboards settled in their fittings. Less comforting was the sound of something down in the road beneath his window

that had apparently decided that bedtime was the perfect opportunity to start mewling and snuffling. Some creature caught in a trap, perhaps, or dogs tired of mincing and flirting along the broadways and, instead, trying their luck in the gutter. Winceworth's bed was just by the window and, although this this muffled sound was not all that loud it was pitched at just the right tone to harangue the ear, to niggle away at a mind trying to find rest.

Winceworth burrowed deeper and, for the first time on his own, he tried Dr Gladly's breathing exercises, exhaling and inhaling according to his pulse. The snivelling howl downstairs ceased.

It was replaced by a gentle, uneven scrape along the wall opposite his bed by the door. No, he thought. It would take more than a rat or mouse trapped in the skirting board to move Winceworth now. His chest rose and fell; a yawn thumbed his jaw and neck. He flipped his pillow over and, settling an ear against its cool taut fabric and stretching out across the length of his bed, Winceworth closed his eyes. The colour of the explosion blazed behind his eyelids and, just for a moment, his heart stopped.

Winceworth found himself standing at his bedside, gasping with an instant fizz of sweat across his back. He had not been dreaming, he was almost sure of that: the colour had come and pinch-stung his vision in a bolt exactly as it had through the train window earlier that afternoon. And it was not a memory of the colour's intensity nor its sudden blast across his vision that had him passing his hand across his face and loosening his nightshirt from about his throat: it was the colour itself that terrified him. It was entirely indescribable. It was a single blast colour but one that somehow curdled and winched and seemed to hum with a frequency. It flared all the oranges of Dr Gladly's rooms and all the mottled yellows of the Swansby's cats' coats; it had the September green of St. James's Park somehow within it too, and the brown of Sophia's eyes, the blush of a pelican's blooded feathers, the blue of *Café L'amphigouri's* twist-leafed Limoges china. It was a colour that made no sense. It sneered like red, milk-mild and lemon-brash and tart and tangy on the eye, singing with plashy white-hot curves and slick, abrasive purple licks.

The gnarring howl from outside his window started up again. In one movement Winceworth threw open the latch, pushed the window open and stared down into the street — he could see nothing there.

There was the scrape against his door again, and this time it was followed by a self-censoring hushed curse outside in the corridor.

Winceworth slapped his glasses to his face, opened his door and was promptly met by an almighty shriek. Mrs Codd was standing there, hunched over with candle in hand. They stared at one another.

She broke off first to look her lodger up and down, taking in his disordered hair and sticking nightshirt in a slow lingering sweep of her eyes. Out of pure defensiveness, Winceworth did the same to her. His landlady was dressed in her green housecoat, brocaded slippers and white lace nightcap. On previous evenings, Mrs Codd had explained, at length, her theory that a commixture of rum and castor oil should be rubbed into the roots of one's hair at night to promote growth and a healthy gloss: even in the low light of her candle, Winceworth could see that her cap and the collar of her peignoir were stained as if with rust. The smell of castor oil filled the corridor.

In her other hand Mrs Codd held an empty tumbler. She was gripping it oddly, aloft and horizontally with the bowl extended inwards towards her neck. It was clear that she had been pressing it against Winceworth's door. They both stepped back and respectively drew their nightclothes tighter.

Mrs Codd was the first to draw breath. 'Mr Winceworth,' she said, 'what on earth are you doing up? I'm sure it's past two in the morning!' Even as she spoke, her eyes slid behind him as she tried to make out the dark of Winceworth's room behind his shoulder. Winceworth's heart was still lodged high in his chest from being woken. He coughed to steady his breath and stepped out into the hallway, closing the door firmly behind him. Mrs Codd folded her arms.

'There is,' he said, measuredly, 'some kind of fox or a dog or a cat outside my window and it is making a complete racket. I could not sleep.'
'A fox or a dog or some kind of cat?' Mrs Codd repeated. She imitated his lisp on the word *some*. 'Well I daresay if that's the kind of specificity that *Swansby's Encyclopædic Dictionary* goes in for we're all doomed. And I haven't heard a thing.'

'Nonsense: listen!' Winceworth held up a finger. They were met with silence, and Mrs Codd smiled. Undeterred, he continued, 'It was somewhere between a squawk and a howl.'

'A *squowl*,' Mrs Codd supplied, still smiling.

'Just so.'

She rolled her eyes. 'It's unlikely to be foxes mating: not the season for it. Mr Codd put tar down the den we found last summer in the garden. A whole pack of them were gambolling about and ruining the cucumber frame.'

'Pack is for wolves or dogs. You mean a *skulk*. A *skulk* of foxes.'

'Don't try and be clever,' said Mrs Codd. 'And "a gambolling skulk" makes no sense. But, ah!, now that I have you here — and so alert! — I must say, Mr Winceworth, I noticed that you were a complete state when you sneaked up here earlier this afternoon. Yes! Do not think you went unobserved! Covered in all *kinds* of muck! Have you trampled it all into my Axminster?' She gestured with her head at the closed door, and her candle wavered dangerously close to Winceworth's chin.

'No.' Winceworth imagined spinning around back to his room and spending the rest of the night rubbing his soiled jacket and shoes all down the walls to make broad calligraphy across the carpet and the counterpane.

'I should hope not, or the cost will be coming directly out of your deposit. I bid good night to you!'

Winceworth put a hand to her shoulder. 'All will be attended to, I promise. I'm sorry if I missed supper, or if I disturbed you.'

'Well. Well!'

'But, look, did you really not hear whatever it was outside? It must have been a dog; it was just under my window in the road!'

'We do not have a dog,' Mrs Codd said.

'*I know that.*'

'Indeed I cannot abide dogs. They make Mr Codd sneeze, even the vicar's pug when it leaps up.'

'This —'

'I hope you are not thinking of getting a dog.'

Winceworth was barely listening. 'It was sort of wuffly. Yelpy.'

Neither was Mrs Codd. "'Samson". Who would call a pug Samson? And he a man of God. Did you say *wuffly*?'

'It wuffed,' Winceworth insisted, 'in a way that I do not think a cat or a fox can.'

'I'm sure I have no idea what you talking about, Mr Winceworth.'

Winceworth looked at the tumbler in her hand. She coughed.

'I was trying to capture a spider,' she said.

'Is that so.'

'Mr Codd does not like them. Legs. He simply can't stand to think of them in the house.'

'Do they make him sneeze?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Perhaps I could assist,' Winceworth said. Now fully awake his dander was up and he was not above spoiling for a post-midnight fight. He did a pantomime of looking up and down in the corners of the corridor. 'Where is it? This beast. Let me at him.'

'I have already disposed of it. They crawl into your mouth as you sleep, you know. That's how the smallest Sesselhurst from number 84 died.'

'Mrs Codd, that is an absolute fiction.'

'I have just thrown the thing out of the bathroom window. And now, I really must —'

Winceworth saw his victory blow. 'I find it curious, Mrs Codd, that if you were indeed in the bathroom just now with an open window you could have escaped hearing the wuffling and the squowl that woke me.' He detected here was no sympathy forthcoming and so embroidered the truth a little. 'It was loud enough to raise the dead.'

'I cannot speak to that, Mr Winceworth. And indeed I refuse to.' She glared, then brightened. 'We had someone call at the house today asking after you.'

The unnameable colour tremored again in Winceworth's vision. He leaned against his doorframe, coughing.

'A man?' he said.

'Yes,' Mrs Codd barked. 'And very officious he was, too.' She clutched the tumbler to her. 'He was extremely short with me. Thin lips, and eyes that were placed very close-together: a nasty man. He asked for you by name and seemed most vexed that he was not be able to catch you.'

Perhaps someone from the papers, Winceworth thought, following up about the explosion, chasing a story. Or the police?

'Were they from *Swansby's*?' he asked, quietly.

Mrs Codd shot him a sharp look. 'No,' she replied. 'Why, is business bad? Will there be a problem with paying the rent?'

'Certainly not.'

‘He said he was from the “park”. I’m sure that I have no idea what he meant by that. No — do not tell me,’ she snapped, although Winceworth had not spoken. ‘He wanted *me* to pass on the message to you that Molly “was fine” after you last saw her, and that she would be there whenever you wanted another “visit”.’ Relief crackled over Winceworth. He watched Mrs Codd’s eyes drift once again to his bedroom door, all her features distorted with shadow in the candlelight. ‘I hope we don’t have to remind you that we keep a respectable house — ‘

‘Most respectable, Mrs Codd.’ Winceworth reached out a hand to touch her elbow, and she visibly recoiled. ‘All the things, all in the best order, all of the time. Why — landlady and lexicographer: we share watchwords, you and I!’

‘Yes. Yes, well, I should hope so too. And now, if you’ve quite finished, I must be getting to bed,’ she said, and she stumbled her steps in her effort to get away from him down the hallway.

‘Goodnight! Goodnight! I’ll just investigate the little ruckus down there and then I shall be straight up,’ he sang, skipping past her and fairly swinging down the stairs.

‘Ruckus indeed!’ she muttered, not turning around or checking her pace. She marched back down the corridor and, casting him a final sour look over her candle as she stepped over the threshold, Mrs Codd slammed the door to her bedroom.

Winceworth took the stairs two at a time and practically scampered to the front door, pulling the latch away and wrenching the door ajar. The night air was fresh and clean. The rain had slackened the day’s heaviness and a slight breeze was up. It felt good in his hair and against his face. Winceworth breathed in; he breathed in the whole night and stood taller than he ever had in his life.

There was a mewl by his feet.

There was a desk drawer filled with rubbish on his quiet Pauffley Street front step.

Winceworth adjusted his glasses. It was definitely a wooden desk drawer, about a foot deep and filled with crumpled balls of paper. An eccentric waste-paper basket. Nestling in the centre of the rolled-up piece of carpet.

He looked up and down the street but all was still and completely empty, but for a lone two o’clock flying ant pinwheeling past in a last-ditch attempt to make a difference in the world. Frowning, Winceworth reached out to drag the desk drawer

to the side of the building so that it might be picked up by the dustman in the morning.

He stopped. Slap in the centre of this rubbish on the doorstep there had been left a perfect 6x4 inch index card, balanced on the top of the carpet with *Swansby's* little hourglass insignia at the top. It had his name written upon it in thick, black ink. The carpet's fabric trembled slightly and the mewl came again with a slight change of pitch.

Winceworth reached in and pulled the thick wool carpet aside. The baby lying beneath the carpet, very red in the face and with both fists to the sky, paused long enough in its noise to look at him very sternly.

M

I was awake before 5am for three reasons.

One: you lived near a tube stop and its trains were firing-up for their first journey of the day. Its clanks and screeches and groans all reminded me that soon I'd have to be out there too on the platform, bundling myself into another journey into work. To hear that sound of trains was to already anticipate having to stand all smooshed against someone's arm in a swaying carriage, having to avoid my eye being grazed by the corner of some other commuter's too-big broadsheet newspaper.

The second reason I was awake so early was the bird in the tree outside. I couldn't say what kind of bird it was from its song alone, but it was very loud. It appeared to be shouting at your house.

Thirdly, I was awake so early because you had trapped a bee beneath a glass last night and forgotten to let it out. You had gone so far as to slide a postcard of Viareggio beneath the glass, with every intention of ferrying the bee to the window and releasing it into the evening air, but you must have been distracted and just left it there. I must have distracted you.

If we're being specific, and you know I like to be specific when I have the evidence in front of me, you had trapped the bee under something that was not actually a glass at all but a washed-out jar of Nutella. This meant that the bee was presumably drunk on a whole night's worth of the sights of a Tuscan coastline and the ghosts of hazelnuts and sugar, *dink-d'dink-dinking* its head against a transparent wall on the bedside table.

Trapped beneath your arm, I had blinked at the bee.

Bees can see in UV light and it occurred to me that last night we must have looked like a ridiculous disco. In answer to this thought the bee head-banged a yes. I had narrowed my eyes back; its expression, eyes all honey-combed and asterisk-star-kaleidoscopic, was hard to read.

Bees' expressions are hard to read, perhaps, is the lesson to take away from all this.

Outside, the bird shouted a little louder.

Working at an encyclopædic dictionary swamps your mind with facts and figures, and these were the ones that were triggered this morning as I stared down the bee and tried to tune-out the bird: the bones of a pigeon weigh less than its feathers.

Scientists at Arizona State University recently discovered that older honey bees effectively reverse brain-aging when they take on those nest responsibilities that are typically handled by much younger bees. Starlings only exist in America because a man wanted to introduce to the continent all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare's plays.

I always thought that birdsong was supposed to be lovely, but here was this blackbird-slash-thrush-slash-starling-slash-finch going full alarm-alarum crazy.

I dozed, but my thoughts kept running.

Maybe the unseen bird had carved 'BIRD 4 BEE 4EVA' with its beak in a big old notch-heart onto the tree-trunk outside, or was shouting in birdish *OI, MATE, ARE YOU LOOKING AT MY BEE?* while I'm all tangled up here caught in the euphemisms and innuendos of the shadows of a pillow, only half-awake and thinking that I should leave.

Maybe the bird and the bee could set up, I thought, a lovely B&B and serve their guests toast with honey and eggs.

Who am I to keep them apart? A bee in the hand worth two in the bonnet, I think, and I picked up the bee-d Nutella jar and stumbled to the window and, THERE!, the window was now OPEN! and the glass was UPTURNED! and the bee had flown out by my ear and become a full-stop in the air, and the blackbird-slash-thrush-slash-starling-slash-finch had joined it, there, suspended for a moment, and the commuters at the station below were applauding the glitching bee and the bird and the naked woman with her arms flung out framed in the window above their platform as if this was an opera, and then the same commuters stepped into their train and the curved glass of the carriage doors shut behind them, and all of this was a half-asleep thought of a euphemism of a metaphor of a ghost of the word for the sight of you opening an eye and saying 'Good morning', and that the thought of you was always worth waking up to.

Which made it a shame to *really* wake up and remember where I was all over again, to remember that the room was my own and that it was empty, and that I wouldn't be seeing you ever again.

W

Winceworth looked at the baby as it bibbled and huffed happily on his bed. What does one *do* with a baby? The only advice that came to mind was that he knew it was always important to cradle a baby's head and that one should boil things.

He looked at the baby's cradleable body in its manger of crumpled *Swansby* notepaper. It was wearing a nightshirt similar to the one he was wearing, topped with a soft white cap: both looked clean. Fresh, even. He decided to gently, gently, gently remove the carpet that was swaddling its body. As the carpet came away and the baby settled back further into the drawer, Winceworth heard a muffled clank and he found that a small, teated, boat-shaped glass bottle of milk and a tiffin had also been tucked into the bottom of the drawer. Further inspection revealed that the latter contained some porridge and what looked like a mashed mess of courgette and blackberries. Keeping his eyes on the baby, Winceworth tried the latter with the tip of his finger. It tasted faintly of gin. He proffered the baby a smudge of it but it turned its head away. 'I should hand you over to Mrs Codd,' Winceworth said aloud. The baby looked at him. Winceworth had no idea that babies could frown quite like that.

He propped the PETER WINCEWORTH index card against his rumped pillow. The handwriting there was firm, assured.

'You are *not* — ' Winceworth began, turning back to the baby, but could not for the life of him think how to finish the sentence. He checked the baby's dressings. 'Little man. Little chap. Who's left you?'

The baby reached up for his glasses and Winceworth let him take them. The baby gurgled, and smiled. Winceworth counted six teeth.

It occurred to Winceworth that he might be dreaming again, or maybe that he was hallucinating. Perhaps this was some cosmic whirligig-revenge for querying the child's imaginary tiger in the corridor outside Dr Gladly's offices this morning. He checked his curtains for a tigrine Mr Grumps skulking in the shadows.

The baby let out a little coughing mewl and Winceworth immediately began fussing over him in the drawer. He crossed his eyes and puffed out his cheeks, and the baby broke off from crying to fix him with another confused stare. Its crying did not sound at all like the kinds of noise Winceworth thought babies made, nor those shrieks that pealed and strangled the air from laden perambulators whenever he passed them in the park or on the trams.

‘What do I know about what a baby should sound like?’ Winceworth said to the baby, and the baby warbled again, a little gruffly.

Winceworth scooped him up and dandled him a little on his knee. *Dandling* is the right word, the only word for it. ‘I imagine you don’t know what I should sound like either,’ Winceworth said. ‘Lsdfkjh. Djfndskfn.’

The baby moved its head back and forth in time with Winceworth’s knee. ‘I don’t even have any idea if you’re a baby or a child. What’s the difference, do you know? How old you are?’ The baby frowned and hid its face a little beneath its cap. ‘Number of teeth? Whether you can walk? Is it *words*?’ Winceworth said. ‘The ability to speak?’ The baby kicked its legs. ‘Do you know any words, little man? Do you know any good ones?’

Winceworth made a rabbit with his left hand, two fingers extended, and hopped it back and forth in front of the baby. The baby kept its stare on Winceworth’s face.

‘Rabbit,’ Winceworth said. ‘And this, this is a spider,’ said Winceworth. He made a winching outspread hand, and tickled the baby under the chin with it. The baby gurgled, happily, and caught one of his fingers.

‘Quite right,’ said Winceworth.

The baby put the finger in its mouth, and Winceworth hadn’t a thing to say. He looked at the copy of Byron that he had nabbed from the Scrivenery.

‘I could read some of that to you, if you’d like,’ Winceworth said. ‘Like a fairy tale or a nursery rhyme. Or — ‘ He uncurled one of the crumpled pages in the drawer, smoothed it out with his free palm. ‘Or we can have — ah, yes, "Some Further Notes on the Collected *Hobson-Jobson*: a Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive, in Regard to the Phonological Emphasis and -”

The baby gave a small snarling hiccup.

‘Byron it is,’ said Winceworth, and he took up the small volume and leant it against his knee.

‘Will you be here when I wake up?’ Winceworth asked the baby. The baby moved its tiny fists up and down against his chest.

M

After a full day of looking for these false entries, my head was so full of thoughts and words that I felt quite sick. Maybe that's a condition, like snow-blindness but with words; after too long spent hunched over in the same way, reading the same typeface and on the same colour paper, your eyes just start swimming. Once you have too much contextless information swilling in your brain there is no room for anything else. That's the reason I'm giving for missing the door to the photocopy room and walking, mistakenly, into the staff pantry.

Faced with a row of cabinets covered in unwashed mugs and packets of noodles rather than the expected Trusty Ricoh MP Photomaster C5503SP, I tutted and did a swift about-turn.

Halfway through my about-turn, I realised that the motion activated light had already been switched on before I had entered the room. Nobody had been down this corridor for a good five minutes: everyone was down stairs, as far as I knew.

I thought about the possible £50 reward for a spotted rat.

I changed the about-turn into a full 360 pirouette, reaching for my phone from my pocket, as I pushed the door to the pantry open once more.

'If you're in here eating Karen from marketing's rice-cakes,' I said, cheerily, 'there will be hell to —'

There was a stranger dressed entirely in black and crouching by the fridge. They were wearing a balaclava and were standing so it was clear that they had just removed one of the carpeted panels of the back wall. They had both black-gloved hands pressed to the sides of the hole they had made, as if they had just stepped out or were just reversing backwards into it.

I stared.

They stared.

'God save us, a daydreaming lexicographer,' they said.

W

The baby enjoyed being read to. More precisely, it did not enjoy being unable to hear Winceworth's voice; by the time the child was properly lulled into sleep without having to break into little fussing squeals whenever his aide-de-camp turned a page, dawn had crawled in citric and nacre twists through the clouds. To reach this point Winceworth made his way through a good portion of the Byron — taking particular relish in affecting different characters' intonations in 'Perseus' and 'The Prisoner of Chillon' and giving Childe Harold's hero a pronounced lisp throughout — as well as some rather more dry uncrumpled receipts for Ford's Gold Medal 428 Mill Absorbent Blotting Paper. He had just started an article about the history of alphabetical indexing when there came was a sharp rap at the door.

'Breakfast!' came his landlady's cry, and before Winceworth could draw breath or move already his door handle was turning and Mrs Codd's brocaded slipper had nosed onto his bedroom carpet.

'*Mrs Codd*, I'm not quite — ' Winceworth managed, but before the words had left his mouth the baby squirmed in his arms and let out the loudest gurgling yammer that it had ever deigned to make in the whole short time that they had known one another.

Mrs Codd flung wide the door, and there was at least a half a second where her face registered only complete triumph that she had finally, after years of trying, found her lodger in compromising circumstances. This expression quickly changed to one of disgust, and then of horror as she realised what was in his arms.

'Mrs Codd,' Winceworth said, adjusting his nightshirt, 'I can explain.'

Mrs Codd advanced, and Winceworth found his body turning instinctively to project the baby from whatever onslaught was incoming.

His landlady approached and gently held the back of her hand to the baby's head. She drew a thumb down its cheek. 'Good little lad, good little lamb,' she said. And then, staring at Winceworth, 'What on earth is wrong with that poor little thing?'

'Wrong with it?' Winceworth said, alarmed.

'He's burning up!' said Mrs Codd, 'and he's a tiny scrap of a thing. And that noise!'

‘Shouldn’t they be this small? Shouldn’t they make that sound?’ he said again, and he let Mrs Codd, rolling her eyes to heaven, take the child from him. One of his arms had lost sensation during his night of recitation, and he smacked himself in the face when trying to adjust his glasses.

Mrs Codd took the baby to the window and turned him lightly in her hands.

‘I thought he was just listless,’ said Winceworth standing up and joining her in the frail daylight. ‘He ate some of the green mush and the white mush that they left in the boxes, but not much; he did not seem too bothered by the idea of it.’ Winceworth attempted to lighten the mood. ‘And, I must say, I don’t blame him; it looks absolutely — ‘

‘*They left in boxes?*’ Mrs Codd asked, in a tone of voice that could freeze blood. She gazed around the room as if Winceworth had a whole brood of lethargic children stashed in the folds of the curtains.

‘Should I take it to — ‘ Winceworth began.

‘I will take the poor wee thing,’ declared Mrs Codd. In a sudden movement, she seized Winceworth’s silken, banknote-stuffed dressing-gown from the nearby chair and looped it over the baby.

Winceworth blinked.

‘What’s the name of that doctor you visit?’ Mrs Codd asked, rocking the baby. ‘I won’t have it going anywhere that they’ll recognise *me*: I won’t have this house associated with sick babies.’

‘He’s not that kind of doctor — ‘ Winceworth protested, his eyes on the dressing-gown. All his savings sewn-up in its sleeves, sleeves slowly darkening under the baby’s tiny, dribbling chin.

Completely oblivious to the fortune in her arms, Mrs Codd was already backing out of his room.

‘His card is downstairs — the doctor’s. Don’t you worry — I will take care of this!’

And with that she was gone, and Winceworth was alone once more in his terrible, terrible room.

M

The figure in the balaclava raised both their hands.

‘Don’t shoot,’ they said, and I was horrified to hear that there was a smile in their voice.

‘It’s a phone,’ I said, not wanting to escalate the situation. Whatever the situation was. ‘Well, *this* is a phone.’ I jiggled my right hand. ‘The other stuff is loads of stuff about — ‘ and I tilted my head to read the top of the sheaf of papers I was carrying — ‘the state of the art in mainstream linguistics. I was meant to be photocopying it.’

‘Righto,’ said the balaclava. Their accent was hard to place, possibly New Zealand. It was reedy.

‘What’s your name?’ they asked.

‘I thought this was the photocopy room,’ I said.

‘It’s the pantry.’

‘I know that,’ I said.

‘No need to snap,’ they said. They stepped out of the hole in the wall, and I shrunk back.

‘I’m the one you’ve been talking to on the telephone,’ I said.

‘The what? Look, I really didn’t mean to startle you.’ They registered my disbelief. ‘Look. Really. Thomas,’ they said, extending their hand.

All primal sense of fight or flight apparently crumbled in the face of etiquette; I reached out automatically to take their proffered hand to shake it as they said, abruptly, ‘It’s spelt with a 2 at the beginning.’

Their hand met mine before I could retract. I was momentarily so thrown that I forgot to shake it. We stood there holding hands.

‘Sorry,’ I said, after a lifetime. ‘*Toomas?*’

‘No,’ the person in the balaclava said. ‘It’s pronounced the same. Just thought you should know it’s spelt with a 2 before the *T*. It’s important to me. And you are?’

‘Mallory. With no — just, letters. Just letters,’ I said. ‘Are you going to kill me?’

‘Lord no. Mallory. Got it. And you’re new right? Interesting. One *L?* Arthurian? Named after anything special?’

The Communications in Crisis and Hostage Negotiation Skills Training Consultant that David had hired for all Swansby staff after the first couple of hoax

calls came in — ‘At great cost this training, charged by the hour! The irony!’ as Karen from marketing had put it — had stated in the little hand-out that a frank and measured approach was the best way to deal with potential aggressors. But if this person was going to blow up the place, part of my mind asserted, defensively, I ‘m not going to give private information up. Then they’ve won, somehow. Isn’t that the narrative. They didn’t need to know in the past that I’ve been asked whether I was named after the vain, uppity character who doesn’t kiss Michael J. Fox in *Family Ties* (1982-89). I’ve been asked whether I was named after the psychotic wife who does kiss Woody Harrelson in *Natural Born Killers* (1994). People’s minds run, misspellingly, to those Enid Blyton books with their Towers and their jolly hockey-sticks (1946–1951) or to handsome male lieutenants lost on mountainsides (1924). What these people must think of my parents, I don’t know.

Some books say that *Mallory* comes from the Old French, meaning *the unlucky one*.

If that’s the case: what I think of my parents, I don’t know.

I was sure I didn’t know what use it would be to tell a potential terrorist all that. But then again I wanted them to keep talking; if I could just imagine that voice, could recognise anything in it that was the same as the hoax bomber on the phone. zThomas, however, apparently did not need any more prompting. The figure reached behind me, and gently closed the door. Then they turned to the rows and rows of boxes of tea on the side, and hit the switch on the kettle.

‘Did you know where I’m from you can’t be registered with a birth certificate if your name starts with a letter? Screws up the indexing system.’

Later that week, zThomas showed me where they had been living, up in the false ceiling of the offices. I was a bit perturbed — I hadn’t realised that there was quite so much room. They had a kettle, lots of books and a sleeping bag stashed in the gloom, with a row of three torches lined up against the wall.

‘You can come here whenever you’ve had enough,’ zThomas said. ‘Just four taps on the metal pipe: three short ones, a pause and then another one.’ He demonstrated. ‘Easy to remember: an ellipsis and an em dash.’

‘That doesn’t mean anything rude in Morse code, does it?’

'You're paranoid,' zThomas said, amiably. 'I know that you're occupied at the moment, with this false word and the stuff going on with your private life, but not everything is a joke that's being played on you.'

'That doesn't answer my question,' I said.

'Have a good evening,' zThomas said, and they closed the false wall behind them.

Whenever I now heard the 'ghost' in the ceiling, while my co-workers tutted and sighed I smiled to myself. Adam was probably my closest friend at *Swansby's*, but I couldn't even tell him about zThomas. Or about you leaving. He knew only that you had left. There was something about his bearing that implied he wouldn't want to know anyway about you going, and to be honest I didn't quite feel prepared or brave enough to just come out and have the whole 'Yes, yes, with a girl, I know' conversation all over again. It was easy not to use pronouns or whatever and rather to let them make their own assumptions about who I was seeing.

I flatter myself that they would be interested. I'm not seeing anyone. Just nod at the right moments. Maybe that's cowardice, I'm not sure.

Adam didn't even know that he had been there when we had first met. It had gone something like this:

The coffee that they serve at *Henry's* is so bad that no-one has ever stayed long enough at their tables to fall in love. This is not for want of trying.

Swansby's staff members and I are often to be seen in *Henry's* most mornings and mid-afternoons because it's the closest café to the office. Its horrible coffee really helps to snap you out of mooning moods. Even before I had met you, and everything had been wonderful, and then you'd gone, I was the mooning type. The doughy, lovelorn-looks-of-love type of *mooning*, obviously. No untrousered waggles here. I mean the kind of mooning that people who have better hair than me perform in British films when they'll eventually get the girl and it'll be worth it. No idea why it's called that: mooning. Does the moon moon? For whom does the moon moon? Something to do with hang-dogs looking at the moon? Mooning like a mooncalf. The cow jumped over the moon. It has the word *moo* in it which, semantically, doubtlessly, helps.

I have been side-tracked, and the marginalia of my thoughts have got in the way. This is all just to say that *Henry's* coffee is so bad that it smacks you out of feeling abstractly sorry for yourself to having a perfectly justified anger at the world. That day, I was only in the queue and I was already angry, just at the thought of having to drink such awful coffee.

L'amphigouri is the café's official name, or at least that is the branded loop-and-squigglewardness appearing in cursive all over its branded sugar-bowls and blue and white striped awnings. On my first day in the *Swansby's* office I was told that its name had transformed through a strange fusing of Cockney rhyming slang and appropriation from the original *L'amphigouri* into *lamprey-gory*, morphing further obliquely into *Henry's End* (and Karen from marketing had snickered here, to make it quite clear that she got the joke even if I didn't) and then, finally, it had shortened further to just plain *Henry's*. I didn't follow the logic of any of this but as the newest intern at the time I did not feel in a position to argue. And I was too busy mooning, at that point. I was happy to accept it as *Henry's*, and elected to moon there whenever I could all the live-long lunchbreak.

There used to be an oversized glass mason jar by *Henry's* till labelled 'TIPS'. It was filled with water, so that from above all the coins lying there submerged in the water seemed bent and warped out of shape. An apple bobbed on the surface of the water, half-in and half-out, and Adam — who at that point I recognised from the office meetings but hadn't yet spoken to directly — was hovering by the counter and studying the change in his hands, not seeming quite sure what to do. I sidled accordingly. I had not yet enough coffee in my system to have the confidence to sidle over, exactly, so for the moment I experimented with just sidling nearby.

'Hey,' Adam-before-I-knew-it-was-Adam said. 'From the office, right?'

I faked a double-take and a hello. He spread his palms full of ten pence pieces and shrugged at the Mason jar. 'I'm all at sea,' he said.

'We don't really tip over This Side of The Pond,' I said. It was entirely patronising and I hated myself immediately. I couldn't remember his name at all. The girl behind the counter noticed — *Hank? Scott? Junior?'s* — hesitation and shot me a look. 'The idea,' she said, over the hiss and grunt of the coffee machine over her shoulder and nodding at the apple, 'is that if you can balance a coin on the apple and it doesn't slide off into the water, you win a free coffee.'

'And if the coin does slide off?' he asked.

'We keep the coin.'

Sawyer? Hunter? Curtis III? tapped the jar. It was about four inches thick with fallen coppers. 'Odds don't look like they've worked in past customers' favour, exactly.'

Favor. I heard the 'u's absence in his American accent.

'If you're talking strategy,' said the girl behind the till, 'it's a hell of a lot easier to balance a note,' and she actually winked at him. It's that easy, I remember thinking: she looked him straight on and eye-sidled. The American intern did something appropriately attractive with his face in answer and I rolled my eyes out of my head, right out of the café and into the solid English, wrought iron guttering of the sidewalk-pavement.

'In the meantime, two — ' he stopped and looked at me, then at the board above the girl's head, then at his wallet, ' — cappuccinos?'

Cappuccini, I hypercorrected him in my mind.

'Coming up. Any food?' asked the girl behind the counter.

'Yeah, two croissants.'

Croisseaux.

Kidding.

Americans say the word *croissants* all wrong, I remember thinking, uncharitably. *Crayz-onts*, rather than my tentative *Quwahsurnte*.

'We only have takeaway cups today, is that OK?' said the woman behind the till, as if we could do anything about it. 'And what's your name?' she continued, asking the American intern. She tapped a pen to a Styrofoam cup in her hand and I held my breath.

'Adam,' he said.

Adam, I thought.

'And you?' she said to me. 'I need it for the cups.'

'Mallory,' I said. The woman nodded, yawned and covered her mouth. She had knuckle tattoos. It looked like they spelt TUFF TEAK, but her hands were upside down and I couldn't crane my neck in time, and she had turned away and started roughing-up the coffee machine before I could work it out.

'Quite a weird day to start,' Adam had said as we waited for our drinks at a nearby table. I remember thinking: there's no way *anyone* would have TUFF TEAK tattooed on their knuckles.

'Tell me about it,' I said.

'What did he sound like? The guy on the phone. Did he quote Bible verses? I bet he quoted Bible verses. Wacko,' Adam said, and tapped the side of his head.

'I'm sorry we haven't had a chance to speak yet,' I said. 'I'm trying to find all these false entries. Are you working on the digitisation project?'

'Yeah,' he said. Look, all official and above-board: *Programming Officer: Digitisation and Language Technologies in the Learning Process of Information Administrations Department*. He flipped his *Swansby* lanyard across the table. 'They managed to fit all that on there, imagine. But I think 'Department' is over-selling it a bit: I think our desks are right by one another?'

'It's a small team,' I said.

'I'm picking that up,' he said. In the little photograph on his ID, Adam — above the word ADAM — looked just beautiful. He was one of those people who looked good in passport photographs, and in my pre-coffee state this was a hanging offence. Obviously he looked good, the bastard, like a hair-and-tooth commercial for a hair and tooth store.

An *advert* for a hair-and-tooth *shop*.

'Adam, from Admin,' I said to help myself remember it. He laughed or something. All that Adam does, apparently, is laugh and look healthy and work well at his job. I flipped my ID across to him because one has to, really, when someone offers you that pretence of vulnerability, like a blood brothers' initiation, and he said, 'Nice hair!' warmly before he'd even looked at the card. He played with the sugar sachets on the table.

'You don't seem nervous at all for a first day on the job,' I said. Patronising, again, in the same way Karen from marketing had corrected him in the meeting. If that coffee didn't come soon I was probably going to pat Adam on the head.

Adam didn't seem to have heard me. 'Must say, I just couldn't stomach the bit of it you're doing. Just reading a dictionary like that. Start to finish, the world all alphabetical. No plot! No action! My eyelids would just shut down. My eyes would fall right out of my head.'

There must be a word for that kind of coincidence, when you hear or think about a new word or idea or phrase that had struck you as fresh or original, then you hear it elsewhere or start noticing it over and over and over again. I imagine the Germans have a word for that, one longer than my arm. *Zeitgeistkeitzentrum*, or

something. I remember feeling sure I'll start seeing the word *Zeitgeistkeitzentrum* everywhere soon enough.

'Plots are overrated,' I said and Adam spontaneously combusted, covering the café in in sticky smoky scraps of attractive American intern. Except he didn't, obviously, and everything carried on with its small details: one thing after another all seen in its certain, certain way, *Henry's* milk steamer ticked over, plates and cutlery made their clanging and clattering, the waitress with the knuckle-tattoos frowned at the unchallenged tip jar and was taking forever, for some reason, to bring the coffees.

'The *Dictionary* gives you little potted histories: of words, of people, of ideas. How could I get bored of that?' I asked, lying.

'But once the digitisation project's all done, we'll be able to do all that on my phone,' he said, tapping the square of plastic on the table. 'Two clicks, two quick flicks, and the world's your oyster. That's the problem, I guess, I mean, hah! Listen to me, ragging on a job I've only just started.' He looked at me, and I realised he was worried he had said too much, and I realised he was looking for permission to say what everyone else in the office already knew. I wouldn't tell him about finding David crying in his office.

'Yes, I don't think *Swansby's* will be around that much longer.'

'I know, right? Even when I applied, I was thinking that *this is crazy* — *Swansby's* is so far behind all the other dictionaries getting itself of the page and online. I really don't think it'll be able to compete, even after the digitalisation project is in full-swing.'

I remember watching Adam plucking at the sugar sachets. He was re-ordering them in their dish by colour without seeming to realise he was doing it. 'But, I like the romanticism of it. Of dictionaries.'

'Do you mean romance?'

'Probably. Or, better yet, dictionaries' *idealism*. I get that, all the information collected together and consultable. Making the world into easy little lozenges: it's amazing, really, sure, yeah, amazing.'

The girl behind the coffee counter approached us. She was suddenly wearing glasses. Or different glasses. Or a different face: I remember thinking something about her had changed. Our coffees came in their takeaway cups with our names almond-scented with indelible pen on their sides but the almond-plated croissants were on china plates, the familiar white *L'amphigouri* running across them. Clearly

knuckle-waitress thought we were in for the long haul, croissant-wise, and required our fake little topsy-turvy after-work breakfast *in situ*. As she set the croissants down, I tried again to make out what her tattoos spelled.

TUFT / LAKE?

BIFF / RAKE?

‘What you’re doing, though,’ Adam went on, ‘what I was trying to say is that something about the alphabetical order of reading it all freaks me out. The fact you’re just flopping down and starting at one end: imagine the other possibilities! A dictionary ordered by chronology instead! The oldest word at the front, the youngest at the back, or something.’

‘You say *youngest* rather than *newest*.’

‘You know what I mean.’ I remember Adam pulled the croissant apart with his hands.

‘What do you think the oldest word is?’ I asked.

‘It’ll be something like *this* or *me* or *man*. Say,’ he had sipped the coffee.

‘This... should it taste like this?’

‘Imagine if it was *bird*, or *bored*, or *cloud*.’

Adam wiped foam from his mouth and finished his croissant. This must be his party trick: I had not seen him even take one bite. ‘Must say, though, I think I like the idea of an English Victorian gentleman with a top hat and cane and pith helmet and whatever else you empire-hungry swine wore,’ Adam completed a tooth-store smile again. ‘That this guy smuggled in a whole new word. Good for him. Shows initiative. Someone else could have wanted that exact same word — you know, *required it* at some time in their life.’

Zeitgeistzeitzentrum, I thought.

‘And it’s just sitting there waiting for you — for us — to find it. But! Actually finding the thing: man, that’s tough. That’s a lot of legwork. Eyework. I don’t envy you.’

‘No one has ever been bored as I have been bored,’ I said. I gestured with my croissant-stub at my disgusting cappuccino. ‘No one has suffered as I have suffered.’

HURT / HEED ?

CAFÉ / GIRL.

MANY / TIPS.

POLY / DACTYL.

'I can see that,' Adam said, and smiled again.

'And I was literally *dying*,' a woman on next door table said to her companion. Both Adam and I shot her a look, and it was in that moment that I knew that we would be friends.

I said, 'There's no way the waitress's hands say *TUFF TEAK* is there, Adam?' 'What?'

'Actually,' the waitress said. She had been eavesdropping. 'I just drew them on this morning.'

She presented her knuckles to me. They weren't tattoos at all, not even letters: just meaningless scribbles in pen, the same pen that had been used to write our names on the Styrofoam cups.

'What time do you clock off?' the girl behind the café counter asked me. And 'the girl behind the café counter' became, more usefully, the pronoun you.

I have since tried to break down the scene into four letter words that you could carry around on your hands. And given I'm meant to be forgetting all about you, this has been, for the most part,

TRIC / KY!!

I sat with my knees pressed up against my chin in zThomas's nest above the offices. They were reading a telephone catalogue.

'One of the things I find most interesting is monitoring what you all do when you're bored,' said zThomas. 'You know, when you should be working.'

'You are not doing anything to make yourself seem any less creepy,' I said.

'I can't help that,' zThomas said. 'Anyway, it's just to pass the time until you all go home: it's like being in a hide and birdwatching.'

'Again, not helping,' I said.

'The one who only ever seems to wear lilac — '

'Karen, from marketing?'

'*Karen!* Is that what she's called? I was wondering why you were calling her *Darren*: that makes her far less interesting. What a shame. Polystyrene ceilings really muffle noise something dreadful.'

'I will make sure to bear that fact in mind.'

‘Well, she — *Karen* — tends to eat something when she’s bored. She has some After Eights hidden behind the photocopier. And that guy Adam makes little origami figures out of receipts, little 3-D flowers and boxes.’

‘Does he? I’ve never seen him make one origami anything.’

‘He throws them away the moment someone comes near his desk; check his bin next time you’re there.’

‘I will do nothing of the kind,’ I said, and 2Thomas threw their hands up in despair. I still could not tell what gender they were even after all this time, and they hadn’t told me.

‘Christ, if this country knew how prissy its lexicographers were, such lack of curiosity, they wouldn’t let them anywhere near a dictionary.’

‘I keep telling you, I’m not a — ‘

‘Then there’s that one who always insists on wearing hats indoors — he doodles when he’s bored. Compulsively. Usually starts with little dolphins and then stars; if the phone-call he’s on is *really* long he starts drawing little stick figures being killed in really odd ways.’

I paused. ‘You are kidding.’

‘Yes. And the one with the fringe always checks her phone when she has nothing to do. Often when she has something to do. She has a score of 139,800 points on that game where you have to hit all the sweets.’

‘What do I do, then?’ I asked. ‘When I’m bored?’

2Thomas shrugged. ‘You just drift.’

Images of me paling and growing cloud-soft. Diaphanous with drift, gently, glacially, calmly, hazing out of the window with a sigh.

‘You don’t really do anything. You just drift off and look at the same patch on the ceiling.’

‘That’s awful.’ I said. ‘And also, no I don’t. Not the same patch, surely. There’s nothing on the ceiling to look at.’

‘There’s me!’

‘There’s nothing I *know* about to look at.’

‘Scouts’ honour. You do it about twice every minute, every time: your head starts tilting and then lolls to the side, and then you just look at this one fixed point on the ceiling.’

'I do not *loll*. And this is terrible.' Maybe this is why you left. I loll about when my mind is wandering, slack-jawed and oafish.

2Thomas gave me an odd look. 'Are you actually jealous of how other people act when they are bored?'

'It just doesn't say anything for my powers of concentration, does it. And if I do that — *if* — I'm certainly not looking at anything in particular. My neck must just sit like that when I'm at rest.'

'You look up and to the right. Every time.'

I sat back in my chair and pretended that I was at my office desk. I looked up and to the right. 'It's just a comfortable way to sit,' I said.

'Sure.' 2Thomas hummed a little tune. 'Psychologists believe that when a person looks up to their right while they are speaking, it's an indicator that they are more likely to be telling a lie.'

'Wait, now, hold on; I'm *not* speaking, you said I was just staring.'

2Thomas held their hands up. 'I wasn't implying anything.'

'This conversation isn't going anywhere,' I said.

'Conversation doesn't have to go anywhere. Digression digression digression,' 2Thomas said.

Dictionaries are meant to be about clarity; all my day is dedicated to clarity, and yet there's a strange person squatting in a false attic above my head, my mind won't stay still and apparently I'm deceitful when I look into space.

'Anyway,' I said. 'They're moving me to a new room soon enough. You'll lose one of your specimens for bird-watching.'

2Thomas looked up with genuine concern. 'Why? Where are you going?'

'The vaults. The archive room, to be more specific. Karen from marketing submitted a formal complaint to David about the Crisis phone-ringing. She said if I was the one who was meant to be dealing with it, then no-one else in the office should have to put up having it go off.'

'Well, I certainly won't be able to get near you in the vaults, will I? Oxygen barely gets in there.'

'It's not that bad: I'm quite looking forward to it. Nice and cool for all the documents.'

'I don't trust a room that isn't designed for people to be in,' said 2Thomas, and they made an attempting-to-be-philosophical face.

‘What does that even mean?’

‘Something not quite right about keeping a room cool just on account of paper. That dictionary was from the people for the people, and yet they’ve made it so that you can’t sit in a room comfortably with it. Ethically, that stinks. The light’ll be kept dimmed for the paper’s sake, too. When they converted this place, just one way that they wasted their money as well as covering everything in godawful purple carpet and giving everyone ID cards was the archive room. Why? Hardly a stop-off place for tourists, is it. They spent thousands of pounds on hypoxic air-technology. Did David tell you that before you got your marching orders?’

‘How do you know all this? And what’s *hypoxic* mean: I thought that was a something to do with grammar.’

‘Never mind about that. I found some blueprints in the skip while I was bin-diving. And you’re thinking of *hypotactic*.’

‘Am I?’

‘Hypoxic air-technology is used for fire prevention. It means that if the alarm goes off, all the doors seal shut and the oxygen is sucked out of the air; they use it in libraries and museums that have expensive collections. Say, I don’t suppose you have a lighter?’

‘I think Adam has one — I’ll ask him for it after lunch.’

‘Meet you outside?’

‘Sure thing.’

‘Out you go then,’ said ²Thomas, and I scrambled out from their hidey-hole, blinking into the corridor.

I forgot to ask Adam for his lighter, but at lunch I had a sudden memory of some odds-and-ends in my desk drawer that might be of use: there, behind a box of staples and wedged under a dirty wodge of blotting paper and old paperclips I found an unused matchstick. I fished it out, held it carefully in my pocket so that I didn’t break it and made my way down the lift with its Hope and Crosby Muzak. I passed through *Swansby’s* revolving doors and out into beeping and tourist-thick Westminster.

²Thomas was already there waiting by *Henry’s* and looking at its blackboard menu. They regarded the match in my outstretched hand and raised their arms, palms held outward in mock-surrender.

‘Are you allowed out and about with *incendiary devices*, young lady?’

‘Don’t start.’

They took the match and inspected it. ‘Just the one. Great. Thanks.’

‘Sorry, was a bit of a rush.’

‘No other bit, the striking board?’

‘The *striking board*?’ It’s stupid, but I felt a flash of fear that I was showing myself up as a non-smoker, not being aware of another hidden vocabulary, a world of coded phrases and words to which I was not privy, that I was not allowed to enter because I could not speak its Shibboleths.

‘Yeah, the thing you strike the match off of.’

“Off which you strike the match”.’

‘You must be fun at parties,’ 2Thomas said. ‘No, that’s why it’s called a ‘match’: you need to *match* it to the striking-board, otherwise it’s useless. A *match* is a game of two halves.’

I watched their face. ‘That is patently not true,’ I said, finally.

2Thomas grinned. ‘But I had you guessing, even if it was just for a second,’ they said.

‘You don’t take words very seriously, considering,’ I said, thinking of the synthesised voice down the telephone receiver.

‘Sticks and stones may break my bones,’ 2Thomas said.

Some of the chalk had been swiped or wiped away mistakenly from the surface of *Henry’s* menu-board by a passing commuter: currently it was offering a plate of vegetarian lasa_{ḡḡḡḡ} for £6.30. I pointed at it, not feeling at all hungry. ‘Do you know what you want?’

‘Are you the type of person that gets annoyed by *paninis*?’ 2Thomas said, looking at the board. ‘Here, look.’ 2Thomas crouched down and tapped one of the entries. ‘*Mozzarella paninis*. Actually, they’ve put an extra *n* in there too, haven’t they? How’s the blood pressure?’

“Do you *want* a panini?’

‘Cheese toastie’d be great.’

We went inside and the bell over the door tinkled at our arrival. 2Thomas was still talking; I got the impression that they didn’t often have a chance for conversation and once their throat was uncorked it was not a flow that would be easily plugged.

‘Panini — that’s what your friends Shelley and Keats and Byron would call a plain cheese toastie, isn’t it. I only ask if it annoys you because I’ve been told people get peeved about these things. People like you, dictionary-people. You’d rather people say,’ and they coughed, mimicking, “‘Hello, I would like a panino, yes, just the one single mozzarella panino, please.””

‘Why,’ I said, as we shuffled into the queue, ‘when you do an impression of a lexicographer does their voice have to be all high-pitched like that?’

‘Sorry. *Panino*,’ Thomas repeated in a slightly deeper squeak.

‘Language is allowed to change,’ I said.

‘It sure is,’ 2Thomas said.

‘Did you say cheese toastie?’

‘I did.’

I ordered them along with two cups of tea, and we settled down at the nearest free table. 2Thomas was still speaking.

‘The word *match* actually comes from the sound it makes when you strike it. The *m* of the head touching the strip, the *aaa* as you draw it along, and the *tch* is friction and the spark, when the phosphorous fizzles and flares for just a tiny moment.’

‘I don’t know why someone with a photographic memory would choose to be so elaborate when making things up off the top of their head,’ I said.

‘I think it shows flair,’ they said. ‘Do they always play music so loud over the top in here? It depresses me. I don’t know what’s in the charts anymore.’

‘I could ask them to turn it down,’ I said, not moving and with no intention of leaving my seat.

‘Talk radio is something I prefer. Words words words. Do you listen to *Desert Island Discs*? Man, I used to love that — can you sing the theme tune? I love that theme tune in particular, but it’s momentarily escaped me. Isn’t that odd when you can remember loving a thing, but nothing about the thing itself? It has gulls, doesn’t it, the theme tune? Gull song. But gulls don’t sing, though, can they? They call. Cry. There was a newspaper article last week about a gull eating a terrier.’

‘I’m not sure that’s strictly — ‘

‘Anyway, I remember listening to *Desert Island Discs* in the kitchen over breakfast, with Thomas-Number-One and Mum. The theme tune going overhead, us all humming along. Do you remember the programme’s format? That after you

picked your music and your luxury you got to pick a book. You were shipwrecked on this fantasy island all alone, and all you had was some music and a luxury and a book. That last bit was the best bit for me growing up: finding out what books all the celebrities and what-have-yous would go for. One they'd read before, and could read forever? One they never had the chance to read, and now'd have all the time in the world? I had this vision of all the books in the world laid before them in the Broadcasting House recording suite and they had to choose just one from a massive pile. A pile bigger than the lot in the skip back at *Swansby's*.'

'I know all this,' I wanted to say, but 2Thomas was growing so animated it was actually a pleasure to watch compared to the monotony of the office.

'You automatically got Shakespeare and whatever holy stuff you wanted, but! Do you know what the most popular choice is? Was? Is, currently? What most people went for, overall?'

'A dictionary?'

2Thomas took a bite of their sandwich and spoke around it. 'Got it in one. I remember thinking as I listened to an episode when someone picked a dictionary, and I can't have been much more than six at the time: nonsense. NONSENSE. What a waste of an opportunity. Who are you going to impress with a dictionary, who are you going to impress with your fancy words, with your etymologies and examples of use, your Scrabble-winning new appreciation for *cazique* or *xis*? Nobody: that's what desert islands *are*. The dictionary could tell you that, at least. Uninhabited wilderness, with you all there, all alone with your dictionary. *What good would that be to you?*, I thought.'

'Actually, that would be *deserted* island discs,' I said. '*Desert* doesn't necessarily mean uninhabited.'

'Eat your toastie,' said 2Thomas.

I did.

'I guess it could be useful if you get stuck in the Shakespeare or the Scripture. I'll give them that. But as a kid that didn't occur to me.'

'What book would you pick?' I asked. I thought of their little hideout above the Scrivenery false roof.

2Thomas waved this interruption away. 'We'll get to that. The second favourite book chosen most often by their *castaways* was an *anthology of poetry*. Unspecified. Big cop-out that, I always thought, that they can just ask for just an

anthology, like Kirstie Young or Sue Lawley or Roy Plomley or the seagulls can be trusted to choose the perfect arrangement of poems to suit any one person. Don't you think?' They sipped their tea, pulling a face. 'The word *anthology* comes from the Greek for a collection of flowers, did you know that?'

'Yes.'

'Of course you do. And *stanza* comes from the word for *room*. So all these people asking for an unspecified 'poetry anthologies' are just asking for generic flowers set-up all nicely and neatly on a window-ledge somewhere, like something from a pre-fab lifestyle catalogue.'

'You're starting to lose me a bit,' I said.

'True. Me too. But we're almost there. The *third* book that's the most popular choice, after dictionaries and poetry anthologies, is an *encyclopaedia*. And that's when it hit me. We had the dictionaries and thesauruses and all that sitting in a row by the kitchen table, near the cookery books and the telephone directory. Don't wince, it made for quick access if you wanted to check a point. When you opened them it always smelt slightly of onions. Reading smells of onions for me. That's by-the-by. But we had this version of a *Swansby's* — a concise one, thick as a brick and as tall as the *Yellow Pages*, but just the one volume.'

'That'll be *Swansby's Pocket Encyclopaedic Dictionary*, came out in the '70s.' 'Do you guys know how to define *pocket*?'

'It was a brief experiment, I think. Designed to boost sales. There's a reason we'll never compete with Oxford.'

'I love that book. Weird to hear you talk about it like it's the runt of a litter. Anyway, I remember the radio programme was ending and that week's castaway had chosen a dictionary. The end of the programme, and the theme tune was starting up all over again. And there it was, this *Encyclopaedic Dictionary* sitting in front of me, its flyleaf all stained and mottled and beat-up. An *encyclopaedia* and a *dictionary*, all at the same time! The best of all worlds! I sat back and felt so pleased with myself: if I was on a deserted — '

' — desert — '

' — island, I'd have all the words and all the facts right there with me if I had that book under my arm. And I became obsessed with it, right there and then. Read it cover-to-cover. I have photographic memory for the written word, have I told you that?'

'You have,' I said. 'Many times.'

'And then when I finished, when it left me with the cliff-hanger of *Zyzyva* weevils and their sub-erect pale squamules and so forth, I knew I had to get more. And when the opportunity came to live actually *in* the source, in the mother-ship as it were, when that chance came along — and then when I saw all those books out in the yard being pulped — well, it was just too good to miss. Why are you checking your phone?' they asked, suddenly.

'I wasn't,' I said, pushing my phone under the rim of my plate.

'You were. I'm sorry, am I boring you? I think best when I'm talking.'

'I — I'm sorry, it had only just loaded. I was looking up where the word *match* actually comes from. All that you were saying earlier, I just wanted to — it's a compulsion, sorry. From earlier. Please, go on.'

2Thomas leaned back further in their chair. 'No, you go on,' they said.

'Whence *match*?'

'It's not important.'

'Go on,' they said again. Embarrassed, I stroked my hand down the screen and went to the top of the loaded page.

'It says here, "*match*, noun: stick used for striking fire from the Old French *meiche* meaning *wick of a candle*." There. Pretty boring.'

'There's more, isn't there? Keep going.'

I scrolled down. 'It has been suggested that this stems ultimately from the Latin *myxa*, from Greek *μύξα* meaning *lamp wick* which isn't particularly —' I clicked further, and paused. "'meaning *lamp-wick* and *mucus*.'

'*Mucus*,' 2Thomas repeated.

"'Based on the notion of wick dangling from the neck of a lamp like mucus from a nostril'." I looked up and found 2Thomas giving me two thumbs-up.

'Truth stranger than fiction sometimes, isn't it?' they said.

'Is this one of Winceworth's? Is that what you are telling me?' I asked.

'Who?'

'Nobody,' I said.

'You've given him a *name*?'

'I misspoke,' I said airily, shutting down my phone and stowing it back in my bag. I straightened my shoulders. 'But now we're on the subject, you were going to tell me what you knew about the false entries.'

‘Certainly. But before that, I think, another cup of tea?’

W

Mrs Codd had left, taking the baby with all of Winceworth's flamingo'd savings. He dressed for work, a dull pooling nothingness staining every breath he took.

He caught sight of his reflection in the mirror above the basin.

He decided he would fill the dictionary with false entries. Thousands of them. He would define the colour only he could see, he would be in control of a whole world of new meanings, private triumphs and soaring new truths all hidden in the pages of Swansby's. It would be published, anonymously, nothing to trace it back to him. The baby would read it one day, or use one of the words Winceworth made up as if it truly existed. He would live forever.

Where did that thought come from?

He shook his head like a dog.

He looked in the mirror once more, his face puffy with sleeplessness.

Winceworth made a resolution, and reached for his jacket.

M

Another cup of tea had been purchased. I got out my notepad, realised I had forgotten my pen, had too much pride to ask 2Thomas for one and got my phone back out from my bag to take notes.

‘Alright,’ I said. ‘What are they?’

‘I want to tell you a story about a walrus,’ said 2Thomas.

I blinked.

‘There is a walrus in a South London museum,’ they said. ‘It sits on a papier-mâché ice floe right in the middle of the main hall. The ice floe is painted a bright bubble-gum blue, and a sign nailed into its surface reads “Please do not touch the walrus, he is very old and delicate” or words to that effect.’

‘You and me both,’ I said. I watched 2Thomas slip some packs of sugar into their pocket from the bowl on the table. ‘When I think of bubble-gum I think of pink, not blue.’

‘That’s not what’s important here. What’s important is that I did not think that *delicacy* was a word often applied to walruses; I always put them in a class of creatures that has a particular fusty, military kind of bearing that doesn’t really allow for things like delicacy. This is no doubt due to the moustache a walrus has — see also Dandy Dinmont terriers and tamarins.’

‘I don’t know what a tamarin is,’ I said.

‘I didn’t either, but I just scanned *Swansby’s* entry on them so I’m all up-to-date. On tamarins. It’s a kind of monkey, has a funny twirly ringmaster moustache. The entry in *Swansby’s* is accompanied by four colour-plate illustrations of them in a tree or a bush or something — look it up, you’d like the look of them. Chirpy. You couldn’t dislike the look of them, but they’re the most stupid-looking animals: could all be extras in a period drama about the Crimea.’

‘You were talking about walruses.’

‘I was, though, wasn’t I? A specific walrus.’ 2Thomas took another bite of their lunch. ‘Over the years this specific walrus in this specific museum had been toughened artificially for display, I imagine in the same way one applies linseed oil to lacrosse sticks and Vaseline to cricket bats. It’s taken centre stage in the hall since 1901, so I did the maths: say it was captured in full maturity — and walruses can live to around 30 years, I checked that in the *Volta-Xanthippe* volume — I’d guess that the

walrus's body is older than the edition of the 1899 dictionary that you're looking through every day.'

'If you say so.'

'But!' And 2Thomas pulled their chair closer. 'I have not mentioned the most curious, obvious detail about this walrus — its size and girth. It is impossibly enormous. Imagine the largest walrus you can.'

I did.

'Are you imagining it?'

'Yes.'

'*This walrus is bigger!* And rounder! Due to a lack of *Odobenidine* knowledge,' and 2Thomas stretched their legs out, not entirely able to contain their smugness physically, 'I looked that word up too, then freestyled a little; it has a nice rolling gait in the mouth, though doesn't it, even looks a little walrussish in shape when written down — due to a lack of *Odobenidine* knowledge on the taxidermist's part, the animal is preserved and displayed in such a way that all of its wrinkles and baggy swaggings of Flashman-ish fat have been over-stuffed and plumped out. This all means that the animal they're exhibiting is improbably rotund and smooth. It looks like a balloon with tusks.'

'That sounds completely absurd,' I said.

'It is. It remains a *bona fide* walrus, of course, as per its little important plaque on the bubble-gum blue ice floe, but it's one that does not exist in the natural world before the world of this particular exhibition. But! And here's the thing! A visitor wouldn't know that this is an absurd walrus if they've never seen a real walrus out and about, didn't know that the museum had just overstuffed it and over-treated it beyond recognition. They'd assume that this is what a walrus really looked like.'

'Look,' I said. 'Someone is making bomb threats in the building that I work in, and refuses to talk to anyone but me.' There was a tremor to my voice that I hadn't expected, and coughed to dislodge it. 'All this about walruses and matches is all really interesting but I don't quite see how walruses fit into what's going on with me.'

'Hold on, hold on,' said 2Thomas. 'I'm getting there. In this same museum, there is another room for curios and objet d'art. I wandered around and found myself in there too. And do you know what's in there?'

'Another walrus?'

‘No. Better! A Japanese Monkey-Fish that the museum acquired in,’ and
zThomas shut their eyes and tapped their fingers on the table, remembering, ‘1919, I
think.’

‘I don’t know what that is either,’ I said.

‘I didn’t either, so I put my face to the glass and got a good look at the
specimen that they had. It was a wizened, bald, snaggle-toothed little thing. Weird,
really weird. Had the head, arms and torso of a tiny ape, and this kind of small toast-
rack of a ribcage that tapered into a thick fish’s tail. We’ve covered Crimean military
figures and balloons with its stiff elbows and tilted head; the Japanese Monkey-Fish
looks like Hieronymus Bosch was tasked to sketch a mermaid for an episode of
Thunderbirds. Do you follow me?’

‘You paint quite a picture,’ I said.

‘Listen, though: modern testing and X-rays revealed this “Japanese Monkey-
Fish” to actually be patched together from remnants of fish, chicken and sculpted
paper. It’s completely fake! They’ve got a whole department set up at the Natural
History Museum in London just to find these fakes, these little hoax creations. The
Japanese Monkey Fish was originally exhibited as a real biological specimen, but now
it’s an example of how hoaxes can be passed off as real as long as the story’s good and
the artefact looks real enough.’

zThomas finished their lunch. Their eyes were shining. ‘If you’re an
autodidact like me, one takes certain things on trust. That walruses are bulbous and
Japanese Monkey-Fish exist. Until they’re not, and until they don’t.’

Beyond zThomas’s ear, I noticed Adam and Karen-from-marketing come in
through *Henry’s* café door.

‘The point I’m trying to make is this,’ zThomas said. ‘All of the false words in
your dictionary are there somewhere, in amongst all the words that I’ve memorised:
I’ve no reason to believe that they are anything other than completely true. They’re as
real to me as any word deserves to be. I couldn’t care less about the intention of it:
with the Monkey-Fish, the intention was to lead astray, to fabricate a truth. With the
walrus, on the other hand, it remains there swollen and disproportionate due to well-
meaning error. Artistic license. You know what, I like the guy who did this. A
museum curator overstuffs a walrus: a lexicographer messes up a word’s etymology. A
chancer sells a hoax to a curator who believes it to be the right thing: your mystery
man with his false words, smuggling them in to hide them in plain sight. I think it’s

great. I'm not disenfranchised by it. More power to him! I hope no-one ever finds his words.' And zThomas raised their mug in a toast. 'Don't you ever tell me what they are.'

'Well,' I said, and threw my phone back into my bag. 'Where does that leave me?' I said.

'In the vaults.'

'Do I report the ones I've found or not?'

'Now there I can't help you,' they said. zThomas put down their tea and looked at the ceiling. "Please do not touch the words; they are very old and delicate".'

'I better be getting back,' I said, looking at the time on my phone.

'Don't,' they said, and there was something new and firm in their voice.

'What?' I said.

'Tell me about the last time you were speechless,' zThomas said.

'Shut up,' I said.

'Exactly,' they replied, and I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't help remember.

A tip for users: when choosing the right word to shout at a departing figure, concentrate on exactly how much your throat can handle.

It was two hours after the door slammed behind you that I remember actually moving, and that was only because I had noticed a huge spider above the door. It was Miss Muffeting a ragtime beat untimidly above the curtain-rail. It looked as if it was making come-hither gestures at me; valiantly, I threw the closest thing to hand directly at it. The closest things to hand happened to be your pyjamas which you had forgotten to pack.

Aphaeresis is the process whereby a word loses its initial sound or sounds, as in 'twas and knock. Relatedly, sounds are lost from the ends of words through apocope, which literally means 'cutting off': you can see this in the dangling useless *b* of a tail trailing, dumbly, behind the word *lamb*, or the silent *b* of a lame dumb lamb where *b* is a tuft of wool left on the wire once the flock's moved on, a ghost-marker.

Apocope comes from a different root than *apocalypse*, to disclose. The thrown pyjamas got halfway to the spider then crumpled in mid-air, becoming floor and, in the same way that when a black cat yawns there is a sudden unexpected

new colour and potential violence to the equation of a scene, your crumpled pyjamas changed the room entirely. They sprawled a glowing chalk outline on the carpet. The spider responded to these meek inroads upon its personal space by making its life all about the word 'akimbo', attempting to spell it out with its anatomy as it sat there above the curtain-rail. It seemed proud in its great bulk. It was fat with its own silk, beckoning, and in many ways it was the whole point of this room now that you had left. The spider, and the pyjamas that are now part of the floor. I thought about throwing a paperweight at it at a later date.

The Brothers Grimm wrote a huge, popular dictionary that outsold all their famous monster tales. With its first edition reaching something like eight volumes, it was far from itsy-bitsy. I remember thinking of it at that moment because they wrote a fairy tale that began 'A SPIDER and a FLEA dwelt together in one house, and brewed their beer in an egg-shell'. Since reading that at an impressionable age, I have always divided people into spiders and fleas. Something to do with one waiting around, something to do with the other having its fill and leaving. This is a thought that I will, perhaps, tidy up later.

A whole hour of staring at a door and thinking of the right word is certainly not the best way to spend one's time. For example, I could have boiled twenty eggs, contiguously. Purely to pass the time I finished the red wine we'd opened and then, because it felt a pity to let go of the glass at this point, I filled it with some Calvados that had been sitting in the back of the cupboard since Christmas. It strikes me that the spider was also wasting its time just sitting there but this is, perhaps, uncharitable: it might be making a dream-catcher for me, or was attic of thought in its intense, gossamer chaos.

I tried shouting at the spider, and it moved at my words. I remember wondering whether it took commissions in its weaving.. I knew from a recent entry in *Swansby's S* volume that spiders are, on the whole, immune to their own glue. Good little architect, its noun found somewhere between *spice* and *spigot*. I tried out some other choice words on it.

Even though it was dark, at the time with my red-wine eyes I remember feeling that the spider was the prompt I needed to move. My knees were stiff after two hours sitting still. I got up and, keys in pocket, I left the house to get rid of your silk pyjamas. I felt sure that there must be some correct etiquette to be observed at times like this: that you cannot just chuck silk pyjamas in a domestic bin that you

then have to live around, and a flyer through the door just last week had reminded me that the council frowns on bonfires.

I looked up some facts about spiders later: in dire straits, cobwebs can be compacted to make excellent DIY poultices to staunch blood. Sussex folklore recommends a dose of spiders in cases of jaundice, going so far as to prescribe “a live spider rolled up in butter”. But I was not quite drunk enough at the time to march all the way to Sussex, and knew that there must be a bin somewhere in London that was anonymous enough for your abandoned pyjamas.

‘There’s no prey here anymore,’ I had said to the spider before I left, softly, silkily but with an edge, like those ribbons in the expensive books that we decide not to open in case it damaged their spines.

Here’s another spider-fact: there is a species in the Philippines that uses insects’ corpses and jungle debris to build spider-shaped decoys in its web. There was an accompanying quotation in the article: “One spider that had recently moulted integrated its shed skin into the decoy it had made.” No one in the article quite knew why, but it generally assumed that it was done for defensive purposes.

I admit that I did think about trapping the spider in that old acetabula et calculi / bait-and-switch / cup-and-postcard manoeuvre that you had used on the bee in my dream. I could have chucked the spider out of the window, but the first cup I saw on the dresser — my wine glass, as I have mentioned, was busy with abandoned apple brandy — was the one you had given me last year, the purple one with *NO #1 GEEK* painted on it. You gave it to me when I got the position at *Swansby’s*. I’ve always hated that mug but was too polite to ever tell you outright. The word geek had its first recorded use in 1919 and was defined in *Swansby’s* second edition with this quotation: ‘A performer at a carnival or circus whose show consists of bizarre acts, such as biting the head off a live animal’. So I look up, I look further up on my phone, I feel like I am forever looking up words, references, up at spiders, and I read about Mike the Headless Chicken, circus performer who died in 1947: he collapsed in a motel in Phoenix, Arizona; Mike the headless chicken has collapsed, oh get up Mike we love you, rise from Phoenix, please Mike.

The Calvados and wine combination had gone to my head a little.

Geek also exists as a verb: 1. intr.,: To give up, to back down; to lose one’s nerve.

And that was why I was stomping down somewhere down the streets by my house, thinking that I could have roasted a fish on that glare you gave as you left. We

had never fought before: such a thing would have seemed ludicrous and *row* would be a nonsense word. I would sooner expect a Hammond organ to replace your tongue.

But it wasn't a row, not really, or at least had none of that smarting tingle or relief. It was, instead, a slow, steady list of explanations. Clear and concise. You were always very clear and concise. I was the grumble, you the perfect chord. Now you were gone there were so many of those obvious discrepancies; you silk, me wool from the lame dumb lamb, *fol de rol de trolmydame* of this word I do not know the meaning, and there I was thinking of all the work the un-butter-fed worms must have put in just so that you could have silk pyjamas to leave for me to throw at a spider.

This was all pure *esprit de l'escalier*: any words that were occurring to me at this point were ones which I *could* have said to you at the time. They were all false friends, imaginary friends.

I could never stand the way you licked your thumb before you turned a page. I'm a little lost, and I don't know why I am thinking of the way you used to lick your thumb.

When London is as late and undefined as it seemed that evening, when one could imagine that lamps are being lit only to scorch the moths and the clouds make a candy-colour of the dying of the day, the passers-by have conversations that marble together like end-papers. When you feel all alone and everyone else is all beginnings, or ends and plotless middles, boys and girls in doorways and bus stops, coats and boots the same colour as the September puddles and the pavements. One person I passed, they were turning into a darker doorway out of direct sight as I moved towards them; I remember thinking that they looked a bit like you but as I went by I heard them speaking on their phone, and I could tell that the way you use vowels is entirely different, that the breeze coming through their just-open teeth was entirely different. And it was only then that the tears came as I looked for a place to throw away the pyjamas.

I remember holding the pyjamas and wondering how we had arrived here. Earlier that same evening you had knocked, knowing I was at my desk, dreading absolutely nothing. No doubt I was busy performing all those actions that one makes with one's mouth when one doesn't realise one is being watched by a spider: chewing at a lip, working wine-smudges from the corner of a mouth, overusing the word *one* and frowning, as if winched-in brow-skin can juice ideas from brain to desk.

I remember that once you threw a book at me. You missed your mark and the book scooted past my head and fell out of the open window beyond me. I remonstrated by saying something sharp; we reconciled; we ran into the garden to rescue the book. I looked up some Top Tips on my phone, and read somewhere that if a book gets wet and you want to preserve it you should freeze it. The Top Tip said that a domestic fridge would do at a pinch: 'If possible, freeze the book spine down, and supported so it won't lean or fall over.'

All that editing and book-throwing, and yet I still did not have the right thing to say before the door shut behind you.

A tip for users: when working out the right word to shout at a departing figure, remember Hel is other people and is cognate with Old Frisian *helle* or *hille*. In Norse myth the goddess Hel rides in a boat made from dead men's fingernails. Another tip for users: when working out the right word to shout at a departing figure, you might like to think a little about tone. It is important to concentrate on tone. This is applicable at any time of the day.

When I realised that you were gone for good, I knew that I would be heckling the spider for days pretending that it was you, *l'esprit de l'escalier*. Dr Johnson thought that the etymology of the word *spider* might come from *spy* and *door*, the insect that watches the door. Insect! Calling a spider an insect is the kind of thing that could get you sacked from an Encyclopædic Dictionary.

I took to talking to the spider and it seemed appreciative of the discourse, wriggling appreciatively. With watchers the worst is better than none, and the best cannot be expected to go quite true.

Tip for beginners: spiders are not great conversationalists. They are no replacement for you.

I think about saying something obscene to the spider, and imagine it with the unspellable pressure of eight legs winching in on itself with a slow scud of disapproval. I imagine each of the spider's legs bending forward, each one in exactly the same position as the angle-poise lamp on my desk, as it laughed at me. I imagined the spider would have the same distorted, synthetic voice that I heard down the phone at work.

The entomology/etymology puns are obvious. The word *insect* comes from 'that which is cut in pieces or engraved/segmented'. See *bisect*. See: *broken-up*. See:

What's the difference between a 'bisect' and a 'rebuffed hello'? See: But you do know that a spider isn't an insect, don't you?

Big Sam Johnson tells us in his dictionary that 'a *tarantula* is "an insect whose bite is cured only by music"'. Words words words on the page, give me excess of them crabbed and spidery.

When I tried to find the right one, the one word that might check your hand on the door, I found myself just a mouthful of wasps: dead, the sting removed. I think that I hate words now. I can't keep up with them. It should be action instead. I shouldn't have to think about what I should have said to keep you from leaving: I should have punched the moon from its purchase in order that I might serve you tea upon it.

When all my words are boiled down, frozen and re-dried, without you London is just 1) n. the angle between lamp-posts and a brick wall, its niches probably filled with spiders 2) n. the nameless street 3) n. the rubbish bin into which I fed your silks.

A tip for users: when working out the right word to shout at a departing figure, be carried away in the truthlessness of definition. Be Headless Mike in Phoenix. Be the dumb lame lamb. Weave your new network, toss and turn and spin it out, because I was quiet when you left and I've never stopped regretting it.

W

Concentration drifting, Winceworth looked out of the window and watched the courtyard below as the *Swansby* letter S staff were marshalled into order on the photographer's benches. He had forgotten that the staff photograph was scheduled for today, but had managed to duck out of the queue at the allotted time. It was perfect really: he had the whole of the Scrivenery Hall to himself, and he set to work amongst the index cards and ink in a flurry of activity.

Words came to him, easier than breath, and he set them all neatly down in the official way, then slipped them into the appropriate pigeonhole in the Hall. It was that simple.

He glanced down to his peers below once more, standing in the courtyard. Everybody else was absorbed in smoothing their moustaches or putting their shoulders back, standing slimmer and taller than they ever did in the Scrivenery.

Winceworth noticed that Appleton had bought a new watch-chain for the occasion, and Bielefeld had shined his shoes and parted his hair in a different way. Winceworth saw that Frasham was too busy attempting to creep into the centre of the photograph for such vanity: he kept trying to eke out a path with his elbows through the arrangement of his colleagues in order to gain access to the very heart of the ensemble. The tiny round figure of Glossott was, accordingly, beetling in his shoulder-barging wake so that they might stand together. Each time that they made an incursion, however, both were waved back into their respective spots at the end of the benches by the photographer. A large man in a velvet jacket and yellow socks, this photographer had a stentorious, magisterial voice that even Frasham could not help but obey. Winceworth had a flash of jealousy for such a voice. The photographer busied himself behind the camera with fabric and tripods, looking up every so often at the lexicographers hesitating and jostling on his constructed rostra with clear disdain; martinet-lunged and growing red in the face, he explained in echoing terms that he had come from another group-portrait appointment earlier that day with a particularly boisterous football team near Kennington and was *simply not in the mood* for any *blithering* or *messing about*. All the *Swansby* staff looked at their feet and tugged at their collars.

Prof Swansby, a sensitive man, tried to clear the air by asking in a bright and alert way the names for the different parts and processes of the camera ('Potassium

chlorate, my goodness!'). This had a conciliatory effect and, as Winceworth watched, some of the tension between photographer and subject lifted: all of the *Swansby* staff gently shuffled into the semblance of a neat line and the photographer lowered his head beneath his dark cloth. Behind the camera tripod, he seemed a slouch-shouldered new creature, a glassy cyclops with a concertina snout.

Winceworth turned back to his work and added a final full-stop to the entry he had been writing. He let the ink dry. It flashed a lively blue sheen for a moment in the sunlight, and then the words set into the fibres of the card. The ink bled only a little; if one raised the index card to one's eye, it was possible to see the microscopic wisps and flicks seep out from the intended lines and curves out into the paper's grain.

'Now then,' came the photographer's boom from the courtyard outside. 'When you're quite ready...' In an entirely unsympathetic voice, the voice added, 'Watch the birdie.'

There was a sudden metallic rattle from the other side of the Scrivenery and Winceworth froze. The entry's index card was still in his hands. This was it: he knew, in the way that some taut pragmatism of the gut knows before the heart accepts it, that the jig was up. There could be no denying his work: caught in the act. The hair on the back of his neck pricked with an instant shame and to his surprise he felt the surge of adrenaline force his face into a grim, gum-bared smile. He turned in his seat, ready to face his discoverer head-on.

Sophia was behind the grille of the Scrivenery's lift.

Winceworth's grimace winched in on itself. She looked up and saw him. An expression of complete horror flashed across her face as a mirror to his own. They stared at one another, aghast and charged.

'Peter,' she said.

M

'I really must be going,' I said, snapping back to my senses.

'Mind wandering a bit there?' 2Thomas said. 'You were staring up and to the side again.'

'You know, it really is quite creepy that you watch us all at work like that,' I replied. 2Thomas was looking at me very intently. I tried to imagine their voice through a synthesiser. 'You're lucky I haven't reported you, you know.'

'Why do you say that?'

'You could be the nutter that wants to blow up the dictionary house for changing how we define marriage for all I know.'

'Oh yes?'

'Yeah, the bastard that only wants to talk to me.'

'Sounds dreadful,' 2Thomas said. 'How is the definition changing?'

'Oh, you know. In the digitised version it needs to be updated.'

'To?'

'You know, modernised.'

'Are you having an identity crisis?' 2Thomas asked, evenly. I could have punched them. 'Why can't you say it? Why haven't you told anyone at work?'

'I don't need to explain myself to — ' I rose, and was surprised to find I was shaking. 'Look, I've got fake words to find, and you probably have air ducts to climb up. Come on.'

'Not yet,' 2Thomas said. 'Not quite yet. Anyway, no-one will be in the building right now.'

'What?' I asked, looking again at my phone. 'Lunchtime's almost over.'

'They'll have started evacuating the place when the fire alarm went off.'

2Thomas said, and they stretched again, and smiled.

The sounds of the café glooped and glistened a new, bright colour around me.

'What fire?' I said.

'The one I started in the pantry, behind the fridge,' 2Thomas said.

W

Sophia was having some trouble opening the lift's door mechanism. She banged the cage of it, her face pulled into something between frustration and embarrassment. Swallowing his surprise, Winceworth started up from his false words to help her; Swansby cats dashed from his path as he hastened up from his desk.

'I think it is stuck,' she said, rattling the grille.

'There's a knack: you need to, you know, whatsit the thingamajig.'

Winceworth demonstrated, and the cage door opened. It trapped his fingers as the grille crash-slalomed into the frame, and he had to stop himself from crying out. He sucked his finger ends and hopped a little as Sophia stepped through. She looked about the Scrivenery, and Winceworth felt a fleeting wrench of jealousy that he could not have such fresh eyes for the place. She began walking between the desks in a way that Winceworth had not seen someone move in the room since his first day at the *Dictionary*: not as if she was in an office, with head bent towards a certain chair and hands stretched out for a pen, ready for a day of page-references and paper-cuts and other minor defeats, ready for the deadening strictures of the working day. She walked and looked about her as if she had entered a foreign cloister or a gallery. A grotto or an ossuary. She reached out a glove to one of the pigeonholed shelves on the wall filled with their pale blue index cards. She seemed to reconsider then withdrew her hand as if scalded.

'*Swansby's* is not worthy, madam!' Winceworth said, with a strange, frenzied jollity. He flexed his door-bitten hand and caught up with her. 'I'm afraid that Frasham is not —' he began, but she stopped him with a curt wave of her hand.

'He's downstairs, I know,' she said. It was almost a snap, and Winceworth stood back. 'I thought you *all* would be and that — Well.' She drew herself up suddenly. It was similar to the straightening of shoulders that the *Swansby's* staff had forced themselves into for the photograph going on beneath them in the courtyard. She extended her hand. 'It is good to see you once more, Mr Winceworth. I didn't know that the building — that *Swansby's* was so large,' she went on, casting her eye around once more.

'Quite the factory, isn't it?' Winceworth agreed. His gaze strayed again to his desk, conspicuously the only one not neatly clear of work. His false words were sprawled across it, a confetti of deceit. When he spoke again it was fast and jabbering.

'You should see the place when it's all in full flow: Edmund the post boy comes flying in throwing parcels and letters and God knows, Prof Swansby's squawking up a storm over in his office and everyone's trying to prove they know the most rarefied ablative absolutes without resorting to bloodshed, aha.' Sophia had moved over to his desk and picked up the bottle of Pelikan ink. He realised that he was biting his lip. *Do not read the index cards, do not read the index cards*, he willed. 'If you can wait just perhaps half an hour,' he said, moving to join her, 'I'm sure they'll be all finished-up; Prof Swansby would be thrilled to take you on a tour of the whole outfit if you fancied it — I'm a little tied up, as you can see,' and he reached over and shuffled the false entry cards together, shucking them through his hands. 'But! If Frasham is free perhaps he and Glossott can perhaps show you how it all works. Otherwise it must just look like we're all in a bit of a jumble, eh? Mountains of paper whose, ah, summit, like all hills, is lost in vapour.'

Sophia swung around, the ink in her hand.

'So soon as half an hour? I thought it might take longer!' She brought her hands up to her face, and began to look around the room again, up and down its walls. She then hitched her skirts a little, and craned down to look beneath the nearest chair. She seemed quite agitated, and very pale. Winceworth, keen to seem accommodating, made a show of checking beneath his own chair.

'Miss Slivkova, have you lost something?'

She didn't answer. Instead, her eyes snapped abruptly to a far corner of the room. 'Did you hear that?' she said, in a hushed voice.

'No, what — '

Sophia paused, hand outstretched as if trying to locate the noise she had heard with her hand as a divining rod. Then it fell to her side, and she turned back to him. 'Terence said that the photographer was booked here for exactly one o'clock, and I thought no-one would be — ' She took in a deep breath and set the bottle of ink down on the desk. It hit the wood surface with a bang, and Winceworth jumped.

'Peter,' she said, and he found she was in front of him. Her eyes were wide, and with a pang he realised they were wide with fear. 'I need you to help me, and we do not have much time.'

Winceworth blinked. 'I — of course, but what can I — '

'Frasham does not know I am here. He has taken something that belonged to me. Or rather,' and the frown came again, but this time darker and a slight snarl of

the mouth. It was as if something had physically caused an unpleasant taste. Sophia was speaking quietly and quickly, and Winceworth had to lean in to hear exactly what was being said. 'Or rather that little Glossott man that is always following him around and taking care of his business did it. They have taken away — they have taken away something dear to me and I do not think — I cannot -' and here her voice gave a small crack. It was a sound that made something within Winceworth buckle and grow taut. He tossed the false entries to the ground and reached for her arm without thinking.

'And you think he has it somewhere here?'

'I know he has; else they must have —' Sophia coughed, and Winceworth recognised the action as a feint he himself used when anxiety greased the mouth and sprained the throat: she did it to mask her voice breaking again. As he watched he saw her look up at the ceiling as if to compose herself. 'No! I will not believe it. What they have taken is somewhere hidden here, and if we are not too late — all will be well. All shall be well again. But,' and she took hold of the hand he had placed on her arm. 'You must help me, Peter. I have nowhere else to turn.'

'But what *is* it that we're looking for, Sophia?'

Her eyes fell, and she looked at the index cards that he had dropped. They had landed in a paper-paved fairy-ring about them.

'There is a baby,' she said. Her voice was flat. 'There is a baby, and it is very sick.' She then raised her head once more to watch his face, and her expression was one of defiance.

Winceworth paused.

'Watch the birdie!' came the cry of the photographer downstairs, and the flash powder flared hot and bright off the brick wall of the courtyard.

M

2Thomas rose to their feet at exactly the same time I threw the contents of the sugarbowl at them.

‘You really are mad!’ I shouted, like someone from a book.

They grabbed my wrist, guiding me back down to my seat. ‘It was to get them all out safely, you idiot!’ they said, keeping their voice down and steady, but some people at an adjoining table had turned their heads when I aimed a fistful of demerara at 2Thomas’s face.

‘ I’ve seen it all being planned,’ 2Thomas hissed, face close to my ear. I felt my eyes creak open, the fullest they had ever been. ‘You’ll be OK, I made sure you got out, didn’t I?’

‘Say, can I help — ‘

But before either of us could answer the stranger’s query, gentle but insistent, popping up from nowhere to help a damsel in distress, no, not a stranger, not a stranger, you, you in the café in your café you with your hand out, to ask if I need help, you -

Before anything could be done about anything, there was a sudden, awful boom in the street outside.

W

As the flash of the camera crackled and sparked outside, both Sophia and Winceworth turned their heads to look out and down at the activity below. It was a split-second, but their movement at the window made one of the *Swansby* staff members look up as the smoke from the flash cleared. He was standing right at the end of the bench, and looking directly up at them. The smoke was purple-black and tinged with the red reflection of the flash. His stare met theirs, separated only by a pane of glass and the length of the courtyard.

As they stood there, arm in arm, facing one another and staring down out of the window, they could both see Glossott's face angled up at them. His mouth was open.

They stumbled back away from the window.

'Let me call you a cab,' said Winceworth.

Sophia kept looking out through the window of the hansom as they sped through the streets to Dr Gladly's practice. Neither she nor Winceworth had spoken since entering the cab outside *Swansby's* and they skirted the tildes and breves of cobblestones, attended to the stop-and-start kerning of London's lunchtime traffic in absolute silence. The cab rocked a little and occasionally their shoulders made contact. By the time that they reached Chelsea, a rain had started up and the sound of passing horses' hooves clattering on the deal roads took on a new singing sort of slither. It drummed on the cab roof, and Winceworth thought about the discarded bodies of yesterday's ants shining in the gutters.

Sophia craned her neck away from him, peering through the window at the road behind. Her gloved fingers were knotting and unknotting in her lap.

'Do you think he would follow us? Glossott?' she asked suddenly.

'No,' Winceworth said, but even as the words escaped his lips he knew that all Ronald Glossott ever did was follow and follow well, unseen and undetected. *Glossott* (v. intr.): to stalk softly, cautiously or stealthily. Winceworth stole an angled glance through his own window at the road. 'You know, I'm not even sure that he really saw us talking. He was quite far down in the courtyard. And,' Winceworth continued

more brightly, turning back and trying to calm her, 'he really would have been tied-up with the photography business for a while longer.'

'You suppose so?'

'The camerist was a complete bruiser by the looks of things and I don't think he'd take too kindly to one of his subjects playing truant midway through his portrait.' Sophia examined the view from the window again, unconvinced. Winceworth went on, speaking to her wringing hands. Their shoulders touched another time. They were sitting close enough for the cab to feel like a confessional. 'After all, if he did attempt a — what — a *pursuit*, it would be under the assumption that we were going back to my lodgings in Pauffley Street. There is no reason for him to make any connection between us and Gladly's practice: he would be scampering in a completely different direction. We are quite safe.'

'And this Gladly is a physician?' she asked, sharply.

'Yes. Well, no. Of sorts.' Sophia gave him a ghastly look and Winceworth shrank back into the fabric of his seat. 'He is a medical man, certainly, and my landlady thought that the baby looked ill; she refused to keep it in the house, and we couldn't see any other way — '

'Him.'

'Him?' The cab was no longer a confessional but an echo chamber.

'You meant to say: refused to keep *him* in the house.'

'Of course. Yes.' The cab swerved a little, and Winceworth's elbow grazed against hers. 'Does he have a name, the child?'

'He does,' Sophia said, and Winceworth waited, but there was no further elaboration. They felt the hansom began to slow to a halt, the cabbie harrumphed in horse-language to his charge, and Dr Gladly's street and his front door drew into view.

Sophia released one of her hands from her lap to reach for the handle of the cab door. Winceworth felt that their small, companionable chamber was about to be blasted open. He steeled himself.

'As to the child -' he began. Sophia paused, hand still extended to the cab door. He studied her profile but there was nothing to be read there; he had to resume his sentence, haltingly. Winceworth coughed, but words were tumbling out faster than the rhythm of normal speech, almost a splutter, the uncorrected proofs of sentences. It was not that he was trying to choose the best words and put them in the

best order, but he did not want to pry — no, more precisely he did not want it to seem as if he might be prying. In presenting this spray of scattershot-words he hoped that at least one would find its target and prompt her to take control of the conversation, to give a direct answer to a question he was not quite able to frame.

This might have been the intention but not the effect: his words came out as a mess. Vowels tangled in the air and sibilants snagged on his lips, a garble treacling in the corners of his mouth. She locked gazes with him and he trailed off: the words got snagged in her eyelashes or in the shadowed notches between blue and orange in her eye. He opened his mouth to attempt a regroup, or an apology, or anything resembling another sentence to reel out into the space between them, but she had turned back, opened the door and stepped down to the kerbside.

He looked at where she had been sitting. He looked at the lack of her.

The familiar sound of Dr Gladly's bell jangled beyond the blank wall of the carriage, and Winceworth was on his feet and scrabbling at the cab's door to join her.

M

Everyone in the café pushed their chairs away from the window in one movement, and stared.

Everyone in the café rushed to the window in one movement, to get a better view. I was jostled aside, and felt 2Thomas's grip on my arm relax.

You were standing right next to me, your eyes fixed on the window. I followed your line of sight, and we watched as a puff of dust, no, a cloud of dust, no, a wall of debris came down the street.

W

The unmistakable, wordless cry of the baby greeted Sophia and Winceworth the very moment that they were permitted entrance to Gladly's offices by the doctor's housekeeper. The sound was clearly coming from Dr Gladly's rooms upstairs; before Winceworth's foot had time to reach even the first step, Sophia was at the doctor's door and beating both fists hard and flat against its wood panelling.

The door opened and the full force of the child's crying flooded unchecked into the hallway. Privately, and with an odd sense of satisfaction, Winceworth noted that the outraged trill of the doctor's songbird was still there but almost entirely overpowered by the sound.

'May I help — ?' Dr Gladly managed to say before he was pushed aside and Sophia blazed into his consulting room. In her wake, Winceworth stepped in too and stood awkwardly by the door next to the model of the human tongue hanging from its nail on the wall.

Dr Gladly called into the corridor, 'Thank you, that'll be all Mrs — ' but the name of his housekeeper was lost in the wheezing smack of the door as he pulled it close. The doctor caught Winceworth's eye: he looked dog-tired and although it might have been Winceworth's imagination he thought that he could detect new, deeper lines around the other man's eyes and flecks of grey in the doctor's beard that had not been there during their appointment on Tuesday morning.

'Doctor,' Winceworth said.

'Mr Winceworth.'

The two men regarded one another for a second and then, with clearly neither knowing what else to do, they shook hands with the same solemn formality that they adopted for their Tuesday sessions.

The baby had been kept in its manger-like bureau drawer surrounded by the crumpled paper; the drawer had been wedged on the same chair in which Winceworth was accustomed to lipping and *she-sells-sea-shellsing* during his speech lessons. Sophia reached in and scooped the child up into her arms. She stood framed in the bay windows holding him against her cheek, bouncing on her feet slightly. The child had stopped crying — the songbird saw this as a sign of triumph and began trilling a victory bugle with a new, keening gusto — and instead the baby was making small blooping wheedle noises. He was still bundled up in Winceworth's flamingoed

dressing-gown, and Sophia pulled the edge of it more snugly under his chin as she spoke to the baby in Russian. The baby was sitting up propped almost straight in her arms with an imperious expression, silks cascading down from and around him like some kind of sultan's long ceremonial robe. Caught against the weak light of the window in the doctor's orange rooms, the child looked for all the world like a fat little Ottoman potentate keeping court. Winceworth noted that the pattern of the fabric suited the baby far more than it had suited him.

Sophia stopped speaking and inclined her head to press an ear to the baby's chest. She did this without breathing, as if listening for clockwork.

'You are the mother?' Dr Gladly asked. Sophia nodded, not straightening. The baby laughed and she blew a little on its face. It laughed again and she looked from Dr Gladly to Winceworth, grinning.

'The woman who brought him here refused to tell me what was happening, or what she expected me to do,' Dr Gladly said, rubbing his ear. 'She just pushed the little thing — well, quite large, thing, actually, *a whole drawer* — ' Dr Gladly caught their disinterest quickly and moved on rapidly. 'She just pushed it at me once I had confirmed my name. It was quite absurd — it is quite absurd! She said that I was expressly *not* to call any of my — ' and Dr Gladly extended both of his hands in front of him and mimed inverted commas, "medically-minded friends" as she didn't want any scandal associated with her lodgings — I quote again — "passing like wildfire through London". She was at great pains to emphasise that her household had always been a respectable domiciliary up until this point. It was then that she first made mention of you, Mr Winceworth.'

'I imagine it was,' Winceworth agreed. 'And I am sorry to burden you with this.'

'Burden?' Sophia repeated at the window then she added, frowning, 'Is there any way that you could stop the mouth of that bird, doctor; it is giving me a complete headache.'

Dr Gladly came over to her side of the room and flung a blanket over the songbird's cage, dampening its cry. He moved over to her side.

'Madam, miss: I do not know you, and I do not know what role I am supposed to play in all of this but let me be quite clear — I am a trained doctor of elocution: that child should be in a hospital of some kind. He seems gravely sick.'

Sophia fussed with a grey thread of the silk dressing-gown near the baby's neck. 'He is actually looking a little better, I thought.' But at that moment the baby closed its eyes and gave a short barking cough. She said some other words in Russian that Winceworth could not catch.

'How old is he?'

'Coming up to seven months — seven months exactly next week,' Sophia replied.

The doctor passed a thumb across the baby's hairline. 'And yet barely able to hold his head up. He is certainly underweight — I would have thought him far younger. Of course,' Dr Gladly continued, 'I could not *not* oblige and take the infant indoors, but really it is most irregular. I'm afraid I will almost certainly be billing you Mr Winceworth, or *Swansby's*, for all the scheduled appointments that I have had to cancel in order to keep the child here all morning.'

Winceworth's eyes returned inexorably to the silk of the dressing-gown. 'Of course,' he said.

'I tried to feed him some of the stuff left in the canister there,' Dr Gladly crossed the room to rummage through the desk drawer for the tiffin. 'He ate some of the pale stuff from a spoon, but really there wasn't much doing. He has been silent for the most part, too — silent, in fact, until you rang the bell. And that I must say was a blessing, because — my! — some children do exhibit extraordinary lung capacity from an early age; I remember joking with my wife that our neighbour's little Harold would make quite the baritone or bassoon player from about the age of seven weeks — '

Sophia raised a hand. 'Is the problem with his lungs, do you think? That awful cough — ' The baby, right on time, gave a guttural snarl and all three of them in the room moved forward at the noise. 'It hardly sounds natural for a child,' she said, softly.

'No doubt. And with the symptoms of sweating and the lack of appetite, I would hazard something phthisical or tuberculous almost certainly.' Dr Gladly met Winceworth's eye for the second time. '*Phthisical*.'

Winceworth duly, dully repeated, trained too-well to not fall into the pattern of their elocution lessons, '*Phthisical*.'

'Marvellous,' said Dr Gladly.

'So what can be done?' exclaimed Sophia, getting in between the two of them.

‘Well.’ Dr Gladly folded his arms. ‘I would advise that he should be taken forthwith to some dispensary or dedicated house for treatment as soon as possible. My wife,’ and he looked to the trapped-in-amber portrait above the mantelpiece. Their gazes followed his then returned to the child. The bird under its cloche warbled. ‘In her letters she occasionally mentions some children kept at the sanatorium who showed symptoms early-on, and that many of them respond well to rest and proper diet. How long has he been in this condition?’

‘Perhaps two weeks,’ Sophia replied. ‘All the time that we have been in London, certainly, although he — I suppose he was also quite fractious on the boat to Dover. I didn’t think that he might be — that it was anything more than — ‘ Sophia seemed to flounder a little, casting about for the right words or phrasing. She readjusted the fabric that Gladly had thrown over the birdcage, distractedly. ‘I did not consider that it might be anything beyond the ordinary.’ With this, she rocked the baby again. She did so not with her arms but by balancing upwards then downwards on her heels. Her voice had taken on a flat tone and she was speaking so quietly that it was almost inaudible. ‘I did not think to look closer, did not even think to regard him in such terms — ‘

‘*Symptoms* is the word you are seeking,’ Dr Gladly supplied. This unsought clarification was offered with a particular kind, grave expression of professional practiced sympathy that was in reality so entirely patronising and unsympathetic that Winceworth and Sophia both pulled the same face. Sophia physically recoiled, and seemed to physically shake herself free of the comment. This reaction did not escape Gladly’s attention and his face grew stern.

‘But — is there no medicine you can give him, then?’ she asked. ‘And — and is he in pain?’ She returned to speaking Russian to the baby who had, snuffling and whiffling wetly, closed his eyes. Dr Gladly seized Winceworth by the elbow and led him over to the fireplace. His voice dropped. ‘I do not mean to meddle, but this has rather become my business under the circumstances: what is your connection with this child? And what on earth is it doing here?’ Winceworth did not know what to say to this but his attempt at remaining blank-faced must have given some hint of his desperation. Dr Gladly’s grip began to pinch his arm. ‘You can be frank with me — I can keep a secret as well as the next man, and my concern is only for the child’s health.’

'Can he be trusted?' Sophia asked Winceworth abruptly from her position by the window. She had been watching the darkening street below, pushing the orange curtains slightly aside with her elbow. The hiss of rain was audible through the glass. As she framed the question, she turned her shoulder to look at him and search his face.

Dr Gladly fumed a little into his beard at having been overheard. 'Madam, I must say I am not quite sure why you are asking *him* that!'

Sophia looked Dr Gladly up and down quite blankly, and Winceworth bit his lip: the action was not executed in a way that suggested she found what she was surveying to be of any value whatsoever. The baby and bird fell silent with the new sort of tension that filled the room.

The doctor moved forward and placed a hand on the dressing-gown looped over the baby in Sophia's arms. It was distressing to see the silk of his dressing-gown under her hands and those of the doctor. It made part of Winceworth's brain jeer with jealousy.

'I can assure you,' he said with a winning, warm tone that Winceworth did not recognise from his elocution sessions. It seemed too winning, somehow: too warm. 'I can be taken into your confidence with every degree of candour and conviction. I hardly need *Peter Winceworth* to vouch for me. After all — ' The doctor broke off and considered his erstwhile patient. He held out a hand, as if inviting Sophia to take a good look too.

When it seemed unlikely that the doctor was going to finish his sentence, Winceworth ventured, finally, 'I sense that you are trying to insinuate something.'

'Nothing insinuated. I mean to make it entirely explicit: I want to make it quite clear to this young woman that you barely know me.'

'And I barely know Mr Winceworth,' Sophia replied, stepping back. 'But I could tell almost immediately that *he* might be a man of his word.'

Everyone in the room felt her place the emphasis in that sentence. Winceworth coughed, tentatively, and felt his shoulders grow italic and rigid. 'I am not sure that you have actually confided or told me *anything*,' but the sentence stalled almost at once as the doctor moved beside him.

'My dear woman,' said Dr Gladly, rising to stand on the balls of his feet; between Sophia rocking on her toes and Winceworth's unwillingly rearing shoulders, they all stood in the orange room at heights that were taller than natural, as if they

were bodily trying to access the higher ground in the conversation. The doctor said, 'I am accredited by the highest authorities on elocution in Europe, and have kept this consultancy practice here in Chelsea for over twenty years.'

'I'm not quite sure, sir, how in this instance that would matter one jot to me,' said Sophia, and her face was contorted with the effort to remain polite.

Dr Gladly was making no such effort. His voice had become huge and seething. Both baby and caged bird made startled sounds that grew louder, accordingly. 'And to be frank with *you*, madam,' he said, tone only just remaining level, 'this man here is no authority on anything, and certainly not an authority upon who is trustworthy or otherwise.'

'I say — ' Winceworth cheeped.

The doctor was already striding over to his desk, to his Coverdale Bible, papers and documents strewn across it. 'Indeed, what have we here?' He held up a sheaf of notes jubilantly. Winceworth recognised it as the foolscap on which Dr Gladly had scribbled during their sessions. 'This,' said Gladly, 'is a catalogue, an *index* that I have made during my time with this young man. Would you like to know why he was coming here — ?'

' — no need to — '

'It archives the manner in which for over two months now this man — '

'I'm not sure what this has to do with me,' said Sophia, and Winceworth took advantage of the momentary lag in Gladly's attention to bolt forward to snatch at the papers, but the doctor danced out of his clutches. He was almost giggling, 'It details how this man here has been coming to my practice, *pretending* — '

'Gladly!'

But there was no brooking the doctor now. It seemed as if some great pressure had been building up within him and was only now being allowed its release. '*Pretending*,' he said again, shaking the papers for emphasis, 'I allege, that he has a lisp — and also,' Dr Gladly by now was out-and-out shouting. 'Also, might I add, that he has arrived on the premises drunk at almost every consultation or near as dammit.'

'That is a complete fiction!' said Winceworth, horrified. Sophia was looking at him and the doctor with a queer expression over the baby's head, her arm curled protectively around its gowned body. For his part, the baby gave a racking cough and the bird screeched again.

‘It was quite a fascinating performance to watch, I must admit,’ Dr Gladly said. ‘The whole time! And I suppose I owe you a debt of thanks: I’ve been giving it some thought after your Mrs Codd left the house. I might get a monograph out of the subject of false lisps, or speech-based deception generally, the art of impeding one’s speech as a form of mimicry.’ Dr Gladly’s voice was now pitched so high that they could hear his housekeeper downstairs opening doors and moving in the corridor in response. He was also spitting quite a bit as he spoke, a habit which Winceworth had never noticed before. ‘And wouldn’t that be something?’ the doctor went on. ‘But! Where is my professional courtesy? I should be asking you which you would rather be: written-up as an anonymous little case study, or perhaps you would prefer my findings to be named after you entirely?’

‘I’m sure I have no idea what you are suggesting,’ said Winceworth.

‘A new term for a pathological disorder, for some manner of — ‘ and here the doctor spread his arms wide, rolling his eyes with improvisation, ‘ — *compulsive locutory fabricative behaviour*. Something along those lines, yes?’

‘Go to hell, Gladly.’

Dr Gladly’s sniping was only gathering impetus, however. ‘The Winceworth Lisp: your legacy assured in namesake.’ He lowered his arms and stepped forward, hissing, and placed a forefinger on Winceworth’s chest. ‘That’s all it is, isn’t it? The reason for your coming here for weeks, lying the whole time — just some small way to finally garner some modicum of attention for yourself.’

Winceworth stared down at the doctor’s finger growing from his shirtfront. His tiredness was suddenly overwhelming and everything seemed to take on a strange dreamlike quality: the air buzzed and all sounds became gloopy and miasmatic. The orange colours of the room’s decoration swum and came askew in his field of vision just as they had done the previous morning, but now each of them seemed fringed with the terrible unnameable colour of the explosion. He peered along the finger’s length, up Dr Gladly’s green tweed arm and from there to Gladly’s face. The doctor was smiling, but Winceworth found that he was suddenly struggling to remember what a ‘smile’ was, and what it should look like: what was signified by a spread mouth and visible teeth? Winceworth watched his own hand reach up to the doctor’s finger laid against his chest, watched his hand take this finger in a tight grasp and twist it all the way back.

He watched the doctor’s eyes widen and his smile unpeel. The doctor howled.

‘Stop it at once!’

The voice was Sophia’s. Winceworth relinquished the finger immediately and the world returned to itself.

Mother and the child were staring at both men with a shared expression of flabbergastation. When Sophia spoke again it was very slowly and deliberately. ‘You are both being completely ridiculous,’ she said.

Dr Gladly nursed his hand, boggling at both of them, and Winceworth rubbed his temples. Despite himself, he found he was trying not to yawn.

‘I apologise,’ he said, ‘I don’t know what — I didn’t mean anything by it,’ he said.

‘Do you ever?’ said Gladly, and he flinched when Winceworth stepped forward to inspect and apologise further for any damage that he had caused.

The baby let another harrowing cough and his cheeks pinkened roseate. Sophia rounded on the doctor. ‘You mentioned a sanatorium? Is it nearby?’

‘Madam, it is in Switzerland. My wife has been there these past five years on account of her health.’

Winceworth looked from Sophia to the baby. He thought about how he had felt meeting her that first time in the potted plant at the *1500 Mile Society*. He thought about last night and why he was so tired: finding him like a whindling changeling on his doorstep. He remembered reading it poetry in halting patter then switching as the light changed to tenets of lexicography as if they were nursery rhymes. He remembered its fist around his finger.

‘On that, perhaps, I might be of some assistance,’ Winceworth said. His voice sounded dull and even, but he suddenly felt flushed with elation. He reached out, as if to take Sophia’s arm in his. Instead he took up the left sleeve of the dressing-gown dangling empty from the baby’s drapery.

Winceworth felt along the sleeve of the gown, tapping and palpating its silk until he felt the dull crinkle of paper beneath the fabric. He left Sophia’s side briefly, returning with the paper-knife from its place on Dr Gladly’s desk next to the blotting paper and set of tuning forks. Frowning, Winceworth began fiddling at the stitching of the dressing-gown with the dull point of the knife, winking the thread loose until the seam fell apart. He reached inside, and the concealed banknotes slid out from the dressing-gown with a gentle rustle.

As he drew them free, Winceworth paused to enjoy the paper against his fingertips for a final time. As he held them up, just for a second, his posture was in near-perfect imitation of the same way Dr Gladly had flourished his iatric notes just moments before. Making sure that he had shaken all of the banknotes from the dressing-gown's sleeve, Winceworth passed them to Sophia. She examined them and Winceworth's relationship with the notes as bits of paper suddenly changed. He no longer saw them as tokens that would allow access to an imagined, quiet, crucial escape but slightly preposterous works of art. The banknotes' design, he thought, could have borne greater scrutiny during the three years that they had been in his possession. Their **Bank of England** typeface, swarming with its elaborate headstone-like typography and surrounded by redundant curlicues and webbing, attracted his attention in particular. He had never given it much thought before. This mesh of decorative lines made it seem as if cartoonish vapour was rising from the proprietorial words or that the text was rimmed by a lion's mane of ink.

'Are they real?' Sophia asked. The child caught at a corner of one of the notes and gave a speculative gnaw; Sophia twitched it from his mouth.

Dr Gladly squinted at the bundle of paper. 'Dear Lord, that's over two hundred pounds!'

'I have been frugal,' said Winceworth, simply. He placed the paperknife back carefully on the desk. 'And I have been scrimping a little, I suppose. For a rainy day!' He gestured vaguely to the street beyond the window. 'This should take care your travel, I think? And should,' he counted off his fingers as he spoke, 'leave plenty for clothing and food and so forth. And entry, of course, to any facilities that you might need for you and the little one.'

'More than enough!' said Dr Gladly.

'Well then.' Winceworth scratched his nose. 'Some left over for Byron, Pelikan ink and custard slices.'

'I couldn't possibly -' Sophia said, but her hand was fast around the banknotes, bending shadows across their surface. She swallowed and lifted her chin. 'I will find a way to get it back to you, every penny.'

Winceworth waved a hand.

'Perhaps,' Dr Gladly interjected, his eyes still fixed on the notes in Sophia's hand. 'Perhaps it would make most sense if I accompanied you, Miss -' His brows knit

together. 'I'm very sorry, but in all of this hugger-mugger I do not think that I caught your name.'

'Slivkova,' Winceworth supplied. Dr Gladly started forward, took her hand in his and kissed it. Regarding him at eye-level, the baby gave him a dubious glower.

'*Slivkova*,' Dr Gladly repeated and he seemed to savour the meat of the word with faultless diction between his teeth. He went on, still holding Sophia's hand, 'It is, indeed, most fortuitous that my patient has brought you and your son to my door. Perhaps it was in the back of his mind this whole time -' Gladly glowered warmly at Winceworth, and the lexicographer steeped back, 'but it has long been my intention to visit my dear wife Susan who is even now recuperating for reasons of ill-health in a resort in the Alps.'

The doctor made the same journey to his desk that Winceworth had made in order to scoop up the paperknife. He plucked a postcard that had been pinned into the bookshelf above the bureau and handed it to Sophia. She balanced it between her thumb and Winceworth's banknotes and studied it.

'It seems an awfully long way to go,' she said.

'It is the best,' countered Gladly, and he put a reassuring, professional hand on Sophia's arm.

'And you think they would be able to help my son?'

'I know that they would, Miss Slivkova.'

Winceworth wondered whether, if he stepped back, he could just blend in with the study's flock wallpaper. There was light relief of feeling like he had finally served his purpose but, wanting to seem useful, he stepped over to the window and threw a glance down the street. 'It would also be almost impossible then for Glossott to find you out there,' he said.

Sophia looked at the doctor's hand upon her shawl until he removed it. 'That is very kind of you to offer,' she said, maintaining the measured voice. It was a type of careful tone that implied it was moments from breaking. 'You have your practice here to consider, surely. Would not Mr Winceworth be better suited, if I require accompaniment at all?'

Dr Gladly laughed. 'Yes, why not? Tell us, Winceworth, do: how is your German? How is your French, or Italian even? How's your grasp of Romansh?'

'Dreadful in every particular,' Winceworth said, evenly. 'In fact, I'm not sure you have not made up that final one just to tease me.'

‘In all but the last, Miss Slivkova,’ Dr Gladly said, ‘I am pleased to declare myself to be roundly fluent.’ His paunch swelled with pride against his waistcoat and his eyes fell to the banknotes in her hands. ‘For this reason alone I really would be the ideal travelling companion.’

‘I am almost fluent in all of those languages,’ said Sophia. Out of the corner of her eye she caught Winceworth stifle a snort and added, apparently for his benefit, ‘*Chapeschas ti, pegliatalpas?*’

She may have been speaking utter nonsense but it made Winceworth’s heart rise. They shared a look and both smiled, despite themselves.

Dr Gladly’s tone was checked only fleetingly. ‘Remarkable,’ he said. Then, with more confidence, ‘Remarkable! *Pegliatalpas*, did you say? All that will certainly make things all the easier: I would, of course, also be able to provide introductions and commendations once we reached the sanatorium and make sure that everything is conducted in the proper manner. You seem in quite the hurry,’ Dr Gladly crossed his arms, as Winceworth and Sophia pursed their mouths. ‘We can perhaps talk about such things on the way to Folkestone.’

‘It is too much to expect — ‘

Dr Gladly persisted. ‘Is your hansom still outside? We will make that cabbie’s day with our fare, this evening! All my travelling things —papers, clothes and what-have-you — are all just upstairs and it will take a matter of moments to gather them together; in fact, I shall ring for the woman to start gathering them this instant.’

He moved across the room to pull on the bell-rope, and they heard a distant ringing. The hidden songbird and baby both squeaked at the same pitch in response.

‘There is really no need,’ Sophia said, still holding Winceworth’s gaze. ‘You have both been so kind already. Without question. Without questioning, I mean.’

‘You must think nothing of it,’ Dr Gladly said. He clapped his hands together, eyes alight. ‘What an adventure!’

At the same time as the doctor’s handclap, there came the sound of his practice’s front door opening out onto the road and then banging shut. It closed with such a thump that all of the prints and mounted certificates on the walls bounced on their picture-rails. The noise was followed almost immediately by that of shoes hitting the carpet of the stairs beyond their room, accompanied by a woman’s shout of alarm. With his own feet bidden to move by some instinct, Winceworth found

himself making sure that he stood between Sophia and the door to the consulting room.

The door was flung open to reveal the figure of a man on the landing, red-faced with effort and his shoulders hunched over and dark with rain. He had bounded up the doctor's stairs two at a time; opening the study door hardly checked his speed and, pitched forward by the momentum of his run, he teetered a little and had to steady himself on the doorframe.

He hesitated there a while and laboured to catch his breath. Winceworth, Dr Gladly, Sophia, Winceworth and the baby all watched the man then draw a lime green handkerchief from his pocket and wipe his face.

Panting, Ronald Glossott strode into the doctor's room.

M

There were shouts and calls coming from outside. I couldn't make out the words, just strange, high notes.

'Did they say *Swansby's*?' said a man behind me. 'What's that?'

I kept my eyes on the swirling dust still coming down the road. I felt your hand, silently, find mine.

W

Glossott ran his tongue along his lower lip and looked about him, sweeping the room with his eyes. Although he was still stooped and breathless in the doorway with his face varnished by sweat and rainwater, Winceworth found something newly wolfish in the appearance of the round little man who never usually strayed a foot from Terence Frasham's side.

Dr Gladly was the first of the company to speak. He advanced towards the new visitor and smiled with all of his perfect teeth bared in a white and gleaming welcome. 'I must say, this afternoon is turning into quite the merry party!'

Glossott ignored the doctor entirely and instead, with a heaving sigh placed his handkerchief back into his pocket and began walking into the centre of the room towards Sophia and the child.

Sophia stepped back. The sound of rain hissed through the window.

'Glossott!'

Glossott turned at the sound of his name. Dr Gladly, Sophia and the baby turned their heads too. Winceworth said Glossott's name again and the word felt silly and implausible on his tongue. He coughed. Nobody noticed, but the cloth over the birdcage slipped a little and fell from its arrangement; the orange songbird fixed its eyes on Winceworth too. Not for the first time, Winceworth realised that he did not have any idea why he had called attention to himself, nor what it was that he should be saying.

On impulse, Winceworth gave up on thinking and saying altogether.

His diving tackle caught Glossott around the shins and with a surprised chirrup, the smaller man toppled instantly and both lexicographers fell in a sprawling heap onto the bright orange Paisley rug. They made the word *grapple* onomatopoeic. Winceworth could hear Dr Gladly's swearing float above his head as he tried to get Glossott's arms pinned behind his back.

For the first few seconds of face-to-face wrestling with Glossott, Winceworth closed his eyes against the reality of what was going on. Hands flapping and knees all awry, it was immediately obvious that Winceworth possessed no formal training in fighting and had never cultivated an interest in doing so. This seemed like a missed opportunity. He had witnessed the usual scrapes and playground skirmishes at school, and in doing so acquired the sense in a general way that winning a fight came

down to pressing one's body against an opponent until various parts of their anatomy were crumpled into a more uncomfortable configuration than one's own. Glossott's frame was entirely unyielding, however, and he was good deal stronger so this strategy seemed impossible; Winceworth felt the other man's legs latch around his waist and he was flipped onto his back in one awful lurch so that Glossott bestrode him. In this position, Winceworth looked up just in time to watch Glossott rain blows against his collarbone. The schoolyard mantra of *sticks and stones may break my bones* rattled through Winceworth's head as he dodged and ducked. There was one particularly well-aimed smack and he felt one of the lenses of his spectacles pop out from its setting. He closed his eyes again.

He felt the pressure of Glossott's knees around his ribcage lessen slightly. Winceworth opened his eyes long enough to see Sophia, squalling child still gathered neatly under her arm with banknotes and Alpine postcard tucked into his swaddling, laying into the back of Glossott's head with her tightly-furled yellow umbrella. Each strike found its target with a sharp, resounding whack and Glossott, grip currently fastened onto handfuls of Winceworth's hair, was powerless to stop it.

'I am trained in *bartitsu*,' Winceworth remembered Sophia saying to him as they had stood breathless in St. James's Park as she stood over the pelican with her yellow umbrella raised in combat. Even when surrounded by the blue and pink and white index cards of Swansby's archives, Winceworth had neglected to look up the meaning of this word and see whether it had pride of place within *Swansby's* proofs.

Sophia dealt another blow with her umbrella that caught Glossott a stinging report on the ear. Glossott keeled over to the side and with the bulk of the man no longer crushing his chest, Winceworth felt air rush back into his lungs with a whooshing automatic gasp. Colourless asterisms frosted his eyesight. Meanwhile Glossott pitched towards Sophia, his hands scrabbling to find support on the sliding carpet. She faced him with her umbrella up and in the *en garde* position; snarling with a gnash of pure exertion, Ronald Glossott sprang to his feet and somehow succeeded to catch the ferrule of her umbrella as it jabbed one last time towards him. He knocked the weapon out of Sophia's grasp and, pitching it across the room, Glossott launched himself at her again with both fists raised.

Dr Gladly's hands came down around Glossott's lapels at precisely the same moment that Winceworth kicked both the man's ankles out from under him; Glossott fell for a second time then everyone and everything in the room was roaring. Blood

roared in Winceworth's ears; Gladly and Glossott were roaring as they rolled across the rug in alternating alphabetical order, their cries Dopplering as they spun in front of his eyes; the songbird's cage was kicked to the ground, so that its door jumped open and the oriole burst out, hooting. Winceworth hugged Glossott's flailing, flicking boots beneath his chin and joined in.

From his position on the floor as they brawled, out of the corner of his eye Winceworth saw the hem of Sophia's skirts slide across the carpet and towards the door. In her haste, the silk dressing-gown must have fallen from the baby for as Winceworth watched, the silk slid silently and unchecked onto the rug below, a shining pink and silvered puddle of fabric. This was followed by the sound her feet padding in the corridor. The study door slammed shut, which cut short the sound of the baby's bellows trailing after her. Winceworth tried to rise but was pulled back down by his tie; as the child's cries receded into the hallway, the ferocity of Glossott's attempts to fend off his assailants increased; the three men bowled and writhed and thrashed in each other's arms, plucking at clothing and spluttering as the oriole traced furious circuits of the ceiling above them. They struck table-legs and chair-legs, knocking into the doctor's escritoire and caused a flurry of papers and pens to tip from the desk all around them; a potted plant tipped down from a shelf and exploded soil over them all, sending chunks of smashed Delft china amongst their pawing and slapping; all of an instant, they were rolling too in the unlit fireplace and coughing in a sudden cloud of ash: the brass poker and set of tongs clattered all around them, and the coal scuttle had upturned. Glossott's hand was between Winceworth's teeth, Gladly's elbow was in his ribs and the three of them were scuffling and coughing, each trying to gain purchase.

It was this coughing that finally forced the fight to break apart and as he felt hands on his jacket relax, Winceworth dragged himself to a bookcase at the edge of the room. He crouched there, thumbing cinders from his eyes and plucking at his newly cinched necktie.

'Are you alright?' he called. Both Gladly and Glossott were slumped over one another about eight feet away from him, their heads turned in opposite directions and with both of their collapsed forms still shivering with tickling coughs. Glossott was facing the wall but at Winceworth's call Gladly picked up his head and nodded, rasping. He shuffled onto his knees and then gripping his desk for balance he eased back on his heels into a panting squat.

‘Where has the other — oh, shut the hell up!’ shouted the doctor sharply at his songbird as it continued to perform laps of honour above their heads. Coal-dust had made a powdery ribbon-thin domino mask across Dr Gladly’s eyes. He gestured towards the supine Glossott. ‘Is this another one of your friends, Winceworth?’ Winceworth got to his feet and shakily padded over to the prone man.

‘And,’ the doctor continued went on, voice rising, ‘When is anyone going to tell me what in Christ’s name any of this is about?’ He too had staggered to his feet and began ringing on the bell-pull. ‘And where has that woman got to downstairs?’

Glossott was croaking and spitting by the doctor’s desk with his hand cupped and nursing along the side of his neck. Winceworth came towards his fellow lexicographer cautiously, steadying himself on the doctor’s fauteuil chair as he passed it.

‘Come now, get up,’ Winceworth said, managing to control the wobble of adrenaline in his voice. He noticed that the part of the wall nearest to Glossott’s head was stained with black dust as a result from his coughing. Winceworth hobbled closer and squinted. The spray on the wall next to Glossott’s face was not in fact black but a dark dark red.

Winceworth grabbed the man’s shoulder and pulled him onto his back. He saw something bright and metallic flash between Glossott’s jaw and his collar. Winceworth gave an involuntary shout and Dr Gladly was instantly there beside him, kneeling next to the fallen man. They both stared at the paperknife lodged deep into Glossott’s throat.

Distantly, the clock in the hall chimed as they watched the thick, short surge of blood blurt out in time with his pulse beneath the flat of its blade.

‘What have you done?’ Winceworth said in a numb voice.

Gladly drew back. ‘It must have fallen,’ he said. His hands were shaking, and the silvery pitch pipes trembled and tinkled together on their chain around his neck. ‘With all the papers from the desk — must have slipped — ‘ Dr Gladly abandoned his sentence even as it left his mouth. He retreated behind his chair.

From Old French *estanchier* meaning *to stop the flow (of water)*, or *to stop up (a leak)*, or *to make (a vessel) watertight*, corresponding to the Provençal *estancar* and Spanish *estancar* and Portuguese *estancar* in similar senses, also with the meaning *to exhaust, weary*. As the vessel Glossott gave a weary shudder and its lips went blue, the word *staunch* bloomed unbidden in Winceworth’s mind. He grabbed the stupid lime

green handkerchief from the man's pocket and jammed it to the paling, glugging neck beneath his hands. The handkerchief flushed from green to red within a second yet still the blood came pouring; crawling back across the carpet in a way that burned his shins, Winceworth gathered up his abandoned flamingo dressing-gown and clamped handfuls of its glass-smooth folds to the wound.

The quality of light in the room changed and the study door peeled open a crack.

'Do *not* — ' the doctor shouted, leaping towards the door, but his housekeeper was already halfway it and, accompanied by the clink and rattle of china, she bustled into the study.

Her tray was laden with various tea-things and plates; from his position by Glossott's side with the dressing-gown purpling in his hands, Winceworth saw a teapot, sugar-bowl and a pitcher for cream winking in the lamplight.' The young lady left in such a hurry,' the housekeeper was saying with her eyes still on the tray in her hands, 'and the other man refused to give me his jacket so I wasn't too sure of numbers but I know that you like tea served prompt at five o'clock, doctor, so took the liberty — '

The released orange songbird saw its chance: *prrrping* a shrill snide adieu, it zipped up and out into the corridor and Gladly's housekeeper was forced to duck in order to avoid a collision. She instinctively threw her hands up to cover her face and all of the tea-things bounded into the air, accompanied by exhaust fumes of tea and milk. So it was that when the housekeeper finally caught sight of Glossott on the ground, Winceworth watched her face change through a buttery clustered hail of scones. The colour visibly drained from her cheeks.

Dr Gladly crossed the room, leaned over the crouched Winceworth and placed two fingers on the underside of Glossott's upturned jaw. The doctor looked at Winceworth for a full second with his fingers still in place, counting under his breath.

'Peter,' he said, finally. As he straightened, the doctor wiped his hands on his waistcoat. Winceworth blinked up at him and let the newly-heavy silk flamingos grow slack in his hands. 'Peter,' the doctor said again, turning to his housekeeper standing horrified in the doorway. 'Peter — ' Dr Gladly repeated a third time, and he stepped away from Glossott's body. 'I think you may have killed him.'

M

We found out later that it had been David all along. There was no hoax bomber; he had asked Adam to make the calls from the corridor. Adam had taken the initiative to always ask for me. He probably thought it was funny. I doubt he would have known David would actually go through with it.

Insurance is a funny thing, you said, years later, when we talked about it. When we could find the words to talk about it. What a meaningless thing to say, I thought at the time. Then I kissed you without thinking about it.

You said you never saw 2Thomas. You think I have an overactive imagination. You call all the shadows in our bedroom 2Thomas now, to scare me. And you're right: it is absurd. A guardian angel in a fake ceiling, an imaginary friend looking out for me. There are no words for it.

I never did find that fake word everyone was so worried about; I hope that wouldn't be too disappointing a thought for the person who snuck it in there. Maybe he did it on a whim, thoughtlessly, a prank.

Good one, I think.

I hardly think about dictionaries any more; I use the copy of *Swansby's* to keep the door open, on days when I don't want to feel shut-in.

W

Winceworth threw the dressing-gown away from him and scrambled to his feet. Glossott's blood completely coated his hands and his fingers stuck together with a new unyielding tackiness. Automatically he began to rub his hands together to try and scour them clean. He caught sight of the housekeeper's dismayed face and stopped abruptly.

'Killed him.' The housekeeper repeated Gladly's words with exactly the same even tone.

'Gladly, you know damn well that I was the other side of the room. Tell her!' Winceworth protested, holding up his hands and stepping away from Glossott's body. The doctor gave a gentle placatory nod in answer. Winceworth recognised his expression from their sessions together. The slight moue, the inclined chin: the doctor had physically transformed from terrified, clumsy brawler to something entirely professional, sensitively authoritative. Winceworth turned once more to the housekeeper. 'Madam — Mrs — '

She shied away from his approach with a soft cry and pressed her back to the wall. Broken chinaware and scattered sugar crunched beneath her feet.

Behind him, there came the sound of the curtain scraping back on its rail. The bay window was thrown open and cool September air curdled into the warmth of the study as Dr Gladly leaned his shoulders fully out.

'Help!' the doctor yelled into the street. It was a shout befitting a speech therapist, one who knew how to use every cubic millilitre of the lungs' vital capacity. 'Help! There's been a murder done!' He took another deep breath, and suddenly one of the tin pitch-pipes from the chain around his neck shrieked from between his lips. Winceworth stared at him. The whistle pealed again, a high D \sharp note into the Chelsea late-afternoon.

Winceworth started towards the doctor, meaning to rip him away from the window or dash the whistle from his mouth, but in his haste he tripped on the muddled dressing-gown and stumbled. The housekeeper saw an opportunity; buoyed by a desperate braveness, as he pitched forward she retrieved the fallen tea-tray from the floor and smacked Winceworth full across the face with all of her strength. Winceworth fell directly onto the dressing-gown and at once a sour taste filled his mouth. His tongue found a new smoothness amongst his gums and, seeing through

stars, his eyes focussed on the dressing-gown pattern directly in front of him, on the single broken tooth glinting amongst the rippling, glossy bodies of flamingos.

‘Again!’ Another D# blast stopped short and Winceworth heard the doctor howling at his housekeeper, ‘I’ll secure the door — hit him again and keep him down!’

The woman darted forward but Winceworth was already on his feet: he grabbed Sophia’s discarded umbrella and, flinging out his arms in an arc so that the housekeeper was forced to fall back, he threw himself at the door and into the corridor beyond. Feet flying and head held low, he barrelled down the stairs and ran directly out into the street. Dusk was beginning to settle and, moth-like, a small knot of people was gathered by a streetlamp near the doctor’s front door, staring quizzically at Dr Gladly’s open window and blinking up through the rain.

Winceworth ploughed into them as he hurtled onto the pavement. They all stepped back, appalled or embarrassed at the contact.

The doctor’s whistle screeched again above them and the heads and umbrellas of the crowd angled upwards.

‘Murder!’ cried the nameless housekeeper, and the same heads swivelled to look at him.

Wet hands landed on the collar and at the elbows of Peter Winceworth’s Wednesday’d Sunday suit; he managed to shrug and wriggle free but as the pitch-whistle keened once more the crowd drew forward and took hold of his clothing with a greater urgency. Some of them were murmuring, a general noise of irritation and concern that rose in volume as he struggled.

‘Please — ‘ he said, and they waited, but he could not think what he could say to loosen their grip on his shoulders. Just for a moment Winceworth felt a weird sense of distance and proximity established between himself and the lamp-lit group: they were close enough for him to feel their breath on his face but, as he squinted at them through his one working lens, not one pair of eyes tried to meet his own. Their mouths were set taut and determined, and as he tried to raise Sophia’s umbrella to fend them off they gave a chorused gasp at the blood on his fingers. The shared grip immediately tightened around his wrists and lapels.

Rain hissed in nearby railing planters’ leaves and passing wheels and hooves crashed and spat in the rain-slicked thoroughfare. With a final effort, Winceworth broke from the crowd’s hold and stumbled backward out of the streetlamp’s rain-fizzy circle. The group’s murmur became a startled shout. The same cry passed

identical and meaningless from mouth to mouth as he spun around and started blindly down the residential lanes. The D# whistle cut through the air and the shouts spread like contagion as he sprinted along the street.

Peter Winceworth flew down the road in the direction of the city.