



MY NAME IS Jordan. This is the first thing I saw.

It was night, about a quarter to twelve, the sky divided in halves, one cloudy, the other fair. The clouds hung over the wood, there was no distance between them and the top of the trees. Where the sky was clear, over the river and the flat fields newly ploughed, the moon, almost full, shone out of a yellow aureole and reflected in the bow of the water. There were cattle in the field across, black against the slope of the hill, not moving, sleeping. One light, glittering from the only house, looked like the moat-light of a giant's castle. Tall trees flanked it. A horse ran loose in the courtyard, its hooves sparking the stone.

Then the fog came. The fog came from the river in thin spirals like spirits in a churchyard and thickened with the force of a genie from a bottle. The bulrushes were buried first, then the trunks of the trees, then the forks and the junctions. The top of the trees floated in the fog, making suspended islands for the birds.

The cattle were all drowned and the moat-light, like a light-house, appeared and vanished and vanished and appeared, cutting the air like a bright sword.

The fog came towards me and the sky that had been clear was covered up. It was bitterly cold, my hair was damp and I had no hand-warmer. I tried to find the path but all I found were hares with staring eyes, poised in the middle of the field and turned to stone. I began to walk with my hands stretched out in front of me, as do those troubled in sleep, and in this way, for the first time, I traced the lineaments of my own face opposite me.

Every journey conceals another journey within its lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle. These are journeys

I wish to record. Not the ones I made, but the ones I might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time. I could tell you the truth as you will find it in diaries and maps and log-books. I could faithfully describe all that I saw and heard and give you a travel book. You could follow it then, tracing those travels with your finger, putting red flags where I went.

For the Greeks, the hidden life demanded invisible ink. They wrote an ordinary letter and in between the lines set out another letter, written in milk. The document looked innocent enough until one who knew better sprinkled coal-dust over it. What the letter had been no longer mattered; what mattered was the life flaring up undetected . . . till now.

I discovered that my own life was written invisibly, was squashed between the facts, was flying without me like the Twelve Dancing Princesses who shot from their window every night and returned home every morning with torn dresses and worn-out slippers and remembered nothing.

I resolved to set a watch on myself like a jealous father, trying to catch myself disappearing through a door just noticed in the wall. I knew I was being adulterous; that what I loved was not going on at home. I was giving myself the slip and walking through this world like a shadow. The longer I eluded myself the more obsessed I became with the thought of discovery. Occasionally, in company, someone would snap their fingers in front of my face and ask, 'Where are you?' For a long time I had no idea, but gradually I began to find evidence of the other life and gradually it appeared before me.

'Remember the rock from whence ye are hewn and the pit from whence ye are digged.'

My mother carved this on a medallion and hung it round my neck the day she found me in the slime by the river. I was wrapped up in a rotting sack such as kittens are drowned in, but my head was wedged uppermost against the bank. I heard dogs coming towards me and a roar in the water and a face as round as the moon with hair falling on either side bobbed over me. She scooped me up, she tied me between her breasts whose nipples stood out like walnuts. She took

me home and kept me there with fifty dogs and no company but her own.



I had a name but I have forgotten it.

They call me the Dog-Woman and it will do. I call him Jordan and it will do. He has no other name before or after. What was there to call him, fished as he was from the stinking Thames? A child can't be called Thames, no and not Nile either, for all his likeness to Moses. But I wanted to give him a river name, a name not bound to anything, just as the waters aren't bound to anything. When a woman gives birth her waters break and she pours out the child and the child runs free. I would have liked to pour out a child from my body but you have to have a man for that and there's no man who's a match for me.

When Jordan was a baby he sat on top of me much as a fly rests on a hill of dung. And I nourished him as a hill of dung nourishes a fly, and when he had eaten his fill he left me.

Jordan . . .

I should have named him after a stagnant pond and then I could have kept him, but I named him after a river and in the flood-tide he slipped away.

When Jordan was three I took him to see a great rarity and that was my undoing. There was news that one Thomas Johnson had got himself an edible fruit of the like never seen in England. This Johnson, though he's been dead for twenty years now, was a herbalist by trade, though I'd say he was more than that. When a woman found herself too round for her liking and showing no blood by the moon, it was Johnson she visited with only a lantern for company. And when she came back all flat and smiling she said it was

Mistletoe or Cat-nip or some such, but I say he sucked it out for the Devil.

Nevertheless, it being daylight and a crowd promised such as we see only for a dog and a bear, I took Jordan on a hound-lead and pushed my way through the gawpers and sinners until we got to the front and there was Johnson himself trying to charge money for a glimpse of the thing.

I lifted Jordan up and I told Johnson that if he didn't throw back his cloth and let us see this wonder I'd cram his face so hard into my breasts that he'd wish he'd never been suckled by a woman, so truly would I smother him.

He starts humming and hawing and reaching for some coloured jar behind his head, and I thought, he'll not let no genie out on me with its forked tongue and balls like jewels, so I grabbed him and started to push him into my dress. He was soon coughing and crying because I haven't had that dress off in five years.

'Well, then,' I said, holding him back, the way you would a weasel. 'Where is this wonder?'

'God save me,' he cried, 'a moment for my smelling salts, dear lady.'

But I would have none of it and whipped off the cover myself, and I swear that what he had resembled nothing more than the private parts of an Oriental. It was yellow and livid and long.

it is a banana, madam,' said the rogue.

A banana? What on God's good earth was a banana?

'Such a thing never grew in Paradise,' I said.

indeed it did, madam,' says he, all puffed up like a poison adder. 'This fruit is from the Island of Bermuda, which is closer to Paradise than you will ever be.'

He lifted it up above his head, and the crowd, seeing it for the first time, roared and nudged each other and demanded to know what poor fool had been so reduced as to sell his vitality.

it's either painted or infected,' said I, 'for there's none such a colour that I know.'

Johnson shouted above the din as best he could . . .

'THIS IS NOT SOME UNFORTUNATE'S RAKE. IT IS

THE FRUIT OF A TREE. IT IS TO BE PEELED AND EATEN.'

At this there was unanimous retching. There was no good woman could put that to her mouth, and for a man it was the practice of cannibals. We had not gone to church all these years and been washed in the blood of Jesus only to eat ourselves up the way the Heathen do.

I pulled on the hound-lead in order to take Jordan away, but the lead came up in my hands. I ducked down into the shuffle of bare feet and torn stockings and a gentleman's buckle here and there. He was gone. My boy was gone. I let out a great bellow such as cattle do and would have gone on bellowing till Kingdom Come had not some sinner taken my ear and turned me to look under Johnson's devilish table.

I saw Jordan standing stock still. He was standing with both his arms upraised and staring at the banana above Johnson's head. I put my head next to his head and looked where he looked and I saw deep blue waters against a pale shore and trees whose branches sang with green and birds in fairground colours and an old man in a loin-cloth.

This was the first time Jordan set sail.

London is a foul place, full of pestilence and rot. I would like to take Jordan to live in the country but we must be near Hyde Park so that I can enter my dogs in the races and fighting. Every Saturday I come home covered in saliva and bitten to death but with money in my pocket and needing nothing but a body for company.

My neighbour, who is so blackened and hairless that she has twice been mistaken for a side of salt beef wrapped in muslin, airs herself abroad as a witch. No one knows her age; what age can there be for a piece of leather like a football that serves as a head and a fantastical mass of rags that serves as a body? Not I nor anyone else has ever seen her feet beneath her skirts, so there's no knowing what it is she walks on. Her hands, always beckoning and twisting, look like the shrivelled monkeys the organ-grinders carry. She hardly moves but her hands are never still, scratching her head and her groin and

darting out to snatch food and ram it square into her mouth. I'm not one for a knife and spoon myself, but I do know how to eat in company. I know how to use my bread as a plate and dollop the stew on it without spilling the lot down my dress. One look at her chin and it takes no witchery to divine what she has been eating these three weeks since. When I found Jordan, so caked in mud I could have baked him like a hedgehog, she helped me wash him down to find out what his sex was. All the time I was trying to soften his coating with a sponge of hot water she was scraping at him with her darting fingers and pulling bits off the way you would from a dog that's been hunting.

'He'll break your heart,' said she, glad to have found a mischief so close to home. 'He'll make you love him and he'll break your heart.'

Then she stopped awhile and put her ear on his chest, and the noise of his beating heart filled the room.

'There's many will want this heart but none will have it. None save one and she will spurn it.'

Then the crone almost choked herself to death on her cackles and I had to bang her on the back until she spat up some phlegm and thanked me for my pains. Truth to tell, I could have snapped her spine like a fish-bone. Had I done so, perhaps I could have changed our fate, for fate may hang on any moment and at any moment be changed. I should have killed her and found us a different story.

She crawled off into the night and I walked out after her.

I was invisible then. I, who must turn sideways through any door, can melt into the night as easily as a thin thing that sings in the choir at church. Singing is my pleasure, but not in church, for the parson said the gargoyles must remain on the outside, not seek room in the choir stalls. So I sing inside the mountain of my flesh, and my voice is as slender as a reed and my voice as no lard in it. When I sing the dogs sit quiet and people who pass in the night stop their jabbering and discontent and think of other times, when they were happy. And I sing of other times, when I was happy, though I know that these are figments of my mind and nowhere I have ever been. But

does it matter if the place cannot be mapped as long as I can still describe it?

One night Jordan took me sailing. We set off when the tide was high and the day was ebbing. We sailed down the Thames and out into the sea and I kept looking back and marvelling at how quickly the sights I knew best vanished. Jordan said the stars can take you anywhere. On either side low buildings hung over the water, their floors well raised on poles. Here and there the dredgers waded in between these poles, swirling the dark mass with their sticks and filling their wicker baskets with rubbish. Only a week ago one found an anchor said to have come from Rome when we were all barbarians with our hair at our waists. The dredgers have no pride and will duck into the filth for anything. It is true that one of their company lives in a fine manor house in Chelsea, but for all his elevation he and his wife and brats still resemble the waste that sustains them. She is a brown string and he is a great turd. Their children fill up the lawn like rabbit droppings. I am a sinner, and common withal, but if I had trade enough for a rope of pearls I'd wash my neck before I wore them.

Jordan told me to put on my best clothes for our voyage. I did so, and a plumed hat that sat on my head as a bird nests in a tree. He gave me a comfortable seat and asked me ten times or more whether I was warm enough. I was warm. I was seeing the world.

When it was fully dark Jordan lit lanterns round the sides of the boat. He came to me and said it was the shortest night of the year and that in a few hours the sun would be up and I would see something I'd never seen before. He wouldn't say anything else, and I racked my brains to think what flights of fancy he might have made for me. Besides, I pride myself on having seen more than most, including a mummy from Egypt. I didn't see the bandages themselves but I saw the gilded tomb as it passed through London on its way to Enstone. It was a present from good Queen Henrietta to a favourite of hers who had made a wondrous garden full of continental devices.

And I have seen a banana.

What, then, could Jordan have prepared?

We waited in the boat with the soft smacking on either side and Jordan told me stories of the places he'd been and the plants he'd brought back to England. He's seen all the French ways, and the Italian too, and he's been to Persia with John Tradescant. Tradescant died soon after Jordan brought the first pineapple to England, but in the years before he filled his house in Lambeth with oddities and rarities from the far ends of the earth. 'The Ark', as it pleased him to call his home, was so jammed with curiosities that a visitor might never find room to hang his hat. But the very great went there, including the King, and I have seen the King. What wonders are there left?

'Look,' said Jordan.

We were out at sea. Grey waves with white heads. A thin line in the distance where the sky dropped into the water. There were no birds, no buildings, no people and no boats. A light wind ruffled us.

Then we saw the sun. We saw the sun rising over the water, and the light got louder and louder until we were shouting to make ourselves heard, and I saw the sun on Jordan's face, and the last glimmer of lanterns, and against the final trace of the moon a flight of seagulls that came from nowhere and seemed to be born of the sun itself.

We stayed where we were in the rocking water until the night fishermen came in silent convoy. They hailed us and threw Jordan two fishes and then, looking at me, they threw him a third.

I had brought a loaf of bread, and we cooked our breakfast and left the remains to the circling gulls. Then we sailed home with the sun on our backs, and as we entered the Thames I looked behind me once. What I remember is the shining water and the size of the world.



The shining water and the size of the world.

I have seen both again and again since I left my mother on the banks of the black Thames, but in my mind it is always the same place I return to, and that one place not the most beautiful nor the most surprising.

To escape from the weight of the world, I leave my body where it is, in conversation or at dinner, and walk through a series of winding streets to a house standing back from the road.

The streets are badly lit and the distance from one side to the other no more than the span of my arms. The stone crumbles, the cobbles are uneven. The people who throng the streets shout at each other, their voices rising from the mass of heads and floating upwards towards the church spires and the great copper bells that clang the end of the day. Their words, rising up, form a thick cloud over the city, which every so often must be thoroughly cleansed of too much language. Men and women in balloons fly up from the main square and, armed with mops and scrubbing brushes, do battle with the canopy of words trapped under the sun.

The words resist erasure. The oldest and most stubborn form a thick crust of chattering rage. Cleaners have been bitten by words still quarrelling, and in one famous lawsuit a woman whose mop had been eaten and whose hand was badly mauled by a vicious row sought to bring the original antagonists to court. The men responsible made their defence on the grounds that the words no longer belonged to them. Years had passed. Was it their fault if the city had failed to deal with its overheads? The judge ruled against the plaintiff but ordered the city to buy her a new mop. She was not

satisfied, and was later found lining the chimneys of her accused with vitriol.

I once accompanied a cleaner in a balloon and was amazed to hear, as the sights of the city dropped away, a faint murmuring like bees. The murmuring grew louder and louder till it sounded like the clamouring of birds, then like the deafening noise of schoolchildren let out for the holidays. She pointed with her mop and I saw a vibrating mass of many colours appear before us. We could no longer speak to each other and be heard.

She aimed her mop at a particularly noisy bright red band of words who, from what I could make out, had escaped from a group of young men on their way home from a brothel. I could see from the set of my companion's mouth that she found this particular job distasteful, but she persevered, and in a few moments all that remained was the fading pink of a few ghostly swear-words.

Next we were attacked by a cloud of wrath spewed from a parson caught fornicating his mother. The cloud wrapped round the balloon and I feared for our lives. I could not see my guide but I could hear her coughing against the noxious smell. Suddenly I was drenched in a sweet fluid and all returned to lightness.

'I have conquered them with Holy Water,' she said, showing me a stone jar marked with the Bishop's seal.

After that our task was much easier. Indeed I was sorry to see the love-sighs of young girls swept away. My companion, though she told me it was strictly forbidden, caught a sonnet in a wooden box and gave it to me as a memento. If I open the box by the tiniest amount I may hear it, repeating itself endlessly as it is destined to do until someone sets it free.

Towards the end of the day we joined with the other balloons brushing away the last few stray and vagabond words. The sky under the setting sun was the colour of veined marble, and a great peace surrounded us. As we descended through the clean air we saw, passing us by from time to time, new flocks of words coming from people in the streets who, not content with the weight of their lives, continually turned the heaviest of things into the lightest of properties.

We landed outside the university, where the dons, whose arguments had so thickly populated the ether that they had seen neither sun nor rain for the past five years, welcomed us like heroes and took us in to feast.

That night two lovers whispering under the lead canopy of the church were killed by their own passion. Their effusion of words, unable to escape through the Saturnian discipline of lead, so filled the spaces of the loft that the air was all driven away. The lovers suffocated, but when the sacristan opened the tiny door the words tumbled him over in their desire to be free, and were seen flying across the city in the shape of doves.



When Jordan was a boy he made paper boats and floated them on the river. From this he learned how the wind affects a sail, but he never learned how love affects the heart. His patience was exceeded only by his hope. He spent days and nights with his bits of wood salvaged from chicken crates, and any piece of paper he could steal became a sail. I used to watch him standing in the mud or lying face down, his nose almost in the current, his hands steadying the boat and then letting it go straight into the wind. Letting go hours of himself. When the time came he did the same with his heart. He didn't believe in shipwreck.

And he came home to me with his boats broken and his face streaked with tears, and we sat with our lamp and mended what we could, and the next day was the first day all over again. But when he lost his heart there was no one to sit with him. He was alone.



In the city of words that I have told you about the smell of wild strawberries was the smell characteristic of the house that I have not yet told you about. The runners of these plants spread from the beds bounded by stone tiles and fastened themselves over terracotta pots and flaking iron-work and hid the big flags that paved the courtyard. Anyone coming to the outer gate would find themselves confronted by waves of green dotted underneath with tiny red berries, some clutched in spiders' webs like forgotten rubies. There was a way through to an oaked door, and beyond the door the square hall of the house with other doors leading off it. There were four suits of armour in the hall, and a mace.

The family who lived in the house were dedicated to a strange custom. Not one of them would allow their feet to touch the floor. Open the doors off the hall and you will see, not floors, but bottomless pits. The furniture of the house is suspended on racks from the ceiling; the dining table supported by great chains, each link six inches thick. To dine here is a great curiosity, for the visitor must sit in a gilded chair and allow himself to be winched up to join his place setting. He comes last, the householders already seated and making merry, swinging their feet over the abyss where crocodiles live. Everyone who dines has a multiplicity of glasses and cutlery lest some should be dropped accidentally. Whatever food is left over at the end of the meal is scraped into the pit, from whence a fearful crunching can be heard.

When everyone has eaten their fill, the gentlemen remain at the table and the ladies walk in order of precedence across a tightrope to another room, where they may have biscuits and wine with water.

It is well known that the ceiling of one room is the floor of another, but the household ignores this ever-downward

necessity and continues ever upward, celebrating ceilings but denying floors, and so their house never ends and they must travel by winch or rope from room to room, calling to one another as they go.

The house is empty now, but it was there, dangling over dinner, illuminated by conversation and rich in the juices of a wild duck, that I noticed a woman whose face was a sea voyage I had not the courage to attempt.

I did not speak to her, though I spoke to all the rest, and at midnight she put on flat pumps and balanced the yards of rope without faltering. She was a dancer.

I spent the night in my suspended bed and slept badly. At dawn I was leaning out of the window, a rope round my waist. The moon was still visible: it seemed to me that I was closer to the moon than to the ground. A cold wind numbed my ears.

Then I saw her. She was climbing down from her window on a thin rope which she cut and re-knotted a number of times during the descent. I strained my eyes to follow her, but she was gone.



It must have been in about 1640, when Jordan was something close to ten, that he met John Tradescant on the banks of the boiling Thames. It was a summer so hot that a housewife never had to lay a fire for her roasted pig; all she need do was tether it in the yard for an hour. For myself, the wafts of heat regularly assaulting me seemed to come from the very doors of Hell, and I am sure that on Judgement Day those who are not on the side of the angels will feel this same scorching on their faces and toes as a foretaste of their torments to come. I could scarcely step outside without sweating off me enough liquid to fill a bucket. These waterfalls took with them countless lice and other timid creatures, and being

forced to put myself often under the pump I can truly say I was clean.

'Cleanliness is next to Godliness,' said a Puritan passing by.

'God looks on the heart, not a poor woman's dress,' I retorted, but there was no stopping his little sermon, which he gave with his eyes rolled back as piously as a rabbit's.

It is true that the ferment in the city is due not only to the heat, but also to the King seeming to turn Papish on us, and Parliament being in uproar, and Cromwell with his lump-shaped head stirring it and stirring it.

Jordan had got up early one morning to sail his boats and I had promised him an apple after my duties with the dogs. Squinting against the light I set off to find him and saw him in the distance sitting on an eaten-up jetty, a gentleman beside him. I hurried myself, thinking it might be some smooth-faced rascal set to chivvy him away.

As I got closer Jordan waved to me and the gentleman stood up and bowed slightly, which pleased me a good deal, and said his name was John Tradescant. Then he gave a little pause and said, 'Gardener to the King.'

He was a good-looking man in his thirties, and he gave no sign of fear that the wormy jetty might dissolve at any moment, with my weight swaying it as a crow would a wren's house. He asked if I cared to sit down, and I took pity on him and trod back onto the bank. He squatted a while to fiddle in his bag and came out with three peaches. One he offered me, and one he gave to Jordan, who held it in both hands as though it were a crystal ball.

'I grew them,' said Tradescant. 'You are eating from the King's tree.'

And then he bit into his and spurted the juice right over himself. Cautiously I bit into mine, but in a more ladylike fashion. Jordan did nothing, and I had to remind him of his manners.

Tradescant told me he had been walking the length of the river from Putney to Mermaid Dock, troubling himself with a problem. He had seen a little boat sail by and was so enchanted by its easy passage that he forgot his melancholy

and relived in his mind his own days of adventure on the seas. For years, until 1637 when his father died, he had sailed to exotic places collecting such rare plants as mortals had ever seen. These he housed in his father's museum and physic garden at Lambeth. On his father's death he was forced to return from voyaging in Virginia and take up the family post of gardener to the King. He liked it well enough, but sometimes he felt hollow inside, and on those days he knew his heart was at sea.

'A man must have responsibilities,' he said. 'But they are not always the ones he would choose.'

indeed not,' said I, 'and for a woman the Devil's burden is twice the load.'

As Tradescant had stood on the bank watching the boat, his body like stone, his mind racing, Jordan had come running by, shouting encouragement to his little ship. His eyes were for his business, not on Tradescant's thighs, and in a moment the two of them were flat down on the bank and Jordan was torn between the terror of being walloped and the possibility of losing his boat. As it was, Tradescant hauled him up, rescued the vessel and took the two of them to sit down on the jetty, where I found them.

He showed Jordan how to lengthen the rudder so that the boat could sail in deeper water without capsizing. He told him stories of rocks sprung out of the ocean, the only land as far as the eye could see, and no life on that land but screaming birds. He said that the sea is so vast no one will ever finish sailing it. That every mapped-out journey contains another journey hidden in its lines . . .

I pooh-poohed this, for the earth is surely a manageable place made of blood and stone and entirely flat. I believe I could walk from one side to the other, had I the inclination. And if a great body of us had the inclination there would be no part of the earth left untouched. What then of journeys folded in on themselves like a concertina?

But Jordan believed him, and when Tradescant left Jordan and I went home, he skipping ahead and carrying his ship and I a few steps behind. I watched his thin body and black

hair and wondered how long it would be before he made his ships too big to carry, and then one of them would carry him and leave me behind for ever.

How hideous am I?

My nose is flat, my eyebrows are heavy. I have only a few teeth and those are a poor show, being black and broken. I had smallpox when I was a girl and the caves in my face are home enough for fleas. But I have fine blue eyes that see in the dark. As for my size, I know only that before Jordan was found a travelling circus came through Cheapside, and in that circus was an elephant. We were all pleased to see the elephant, a huge beast with a wandering nose. Its trick was to sit itself in a seat like any well-bred gentleman, and wear an eyeglass. There was a seat on its opposite side, and a guessing game was to offer up a certain number of persons to climb on to the other seat, topsyturvy, as best they could, and outweigh Samson, as the elephant was named. No one had succeeded, though the prize was a vat of ale.

One night, pushing along with a ribbon in my hair, I thought to try and outweigh Samson myself. I had taken a look at him and he seemed none too big for me. So I got hold of the man who was bawling and jeering at the crowd to pit themselves against a mere beast and said I would take the seat.

'But, madam,' screeched the little bit of vermin, 'I see you weigh no more than an angel.'

'You know nothing of the Scriptures,' said I. 'For nowhere in the Holy Book is there anything to be said about the weight of an angel.'

His eyebrows shot up to Heaven, the only part of him ever likely to get there, and he started banging his drum and bellowing like one at a funeral, saying here was a sight and gather round and gather round. Soon I could hardly breathe for the heat coming off the bodies, and the elephant itself had to be revived with a bucket of cold water.

'Let me lead you to the chair,' said the knock-kneed knave, the bells on his hat winking and tinkling.

I am gracious by nature and I allowed myself to be led.

'I will have to search you,' said the creature, rolling his eyes at the crowd. 'I must be sure that you are free of lead weights and any other advantages.'

'Touch me you won't,' I cried. 'I'll show you what there is.' And I lifted up my dress over my head. I was wearing no underclothes in respect of the heat.

There was a great swooning amongst the crowd, and I heard a voice compare me to a mountain range. However, it silenced my Lord Fool, who made no more remarks about a search and simply showed me the chair.

I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with air, and threw myself at the seat with all my might. There was a roar from round about me. I opened my eyes and looked towards Samson. He had vanished. His chair swung empty like a summer-house seat, his eyeglass lay in the bottom. I looked higher, following the gaze of the people. Far above us, far far away like a black star in a white sky, was Samson.

It is a responsibility for a woman to have forced an elephant into the sky. What it says of my size I cannot tell, for an elephant looks big, but how am I to know what it weighs? A balloon looks big and weighs nothing.

I know that people are afraid of me, either for the yapping of my dogs or because I stand taller than any of them. When I was a child my father swung me up on to his knees to tell a story and I broke both his legs. He never touched me again, except with the point of the whip he used for the dogs. But my mother, who lived only a while and was so light that she dared not go out in a wind, could swing me on her back and carry me for miles. There was talk of witchcraft but what is stronger than love?

When Jordan was new I sat him on the palm of my hand the way I would a puppy, and I held him to my face and let him pick the fleas out of my scars.

He was always happy. We were happy together, and if he noticed that I am bigger than most he never mentioned it. He was proud of me because no other child had a mother who could hold a dozen oranges in her mouth at once.

How hideous am I?

One morning, soon after the start of the Civil War that should have been over in a month and lasted eight years, Tradescant came to our house looking for Jordan. I was shouting at a neighbour of mine, a sunken block of a fellow with slant eyes and a nose to hang a hat on. This cranesbill was telling me that the King was wrong to make war on his own people, and I was telling him that if the foul-mouthed Scots hadn't started their jiggery-pokery again, always wanting a fight with someone, we'd have had no war. We'd lived with a King and without a Parliament for eleven years, and now we'd got a Parliament and precious little of a King.

As far as I know it, and I have only a little learning, the King had been forced to call a Parliament to grant him money for his war against the kilted beasts and their savage ways. Savage to the core, and the poor King trying only to make them use a proper prayer book. They wouldn't have his prayer book and in a most unchristian manner threatened his throne. The King, turning to his own people, found himself with a Parliament full of Puritans who wouldn't grant him money until he had granted them reform. Not content with the Church of England that good King Henry had bequeathed to us all, they wanted what they called 'A Church of God'.

They said that the King was a wanton spendthrift, that the bishops were corrupt, that our Book of Common Prayer was full of Popish ways, that the Queen herself, being French, was bound to be full of Popish ways. Oh they hated everything that was grand and fine and full of life, and they went about in their flat grey suits with their flat grey faces poking out the top. The only thing fancy about them was their handkerchiefs, which they liked to be trimmed with lace and kept as white as they reckoned their souls to be. I've seen Puritans going past a theatre where all was merriment and pleasure and holding

their starched linen to their noses for fear they might smell pleasure and be infected by it.

It didn't take them long to close down every theatre in London once they got a bit of power.

But didn't our Saviour turn the water into wine?

Our own minister of God soon turned Puritan and started denouncing the King from his pulpit.

'Preacher Scroggs,' I said, one morning after he had delivered his sermon on the text 'And the memory of the wicked shall rot', 'do you not know that our King is so by Divine Right?'

He fixed me with the better of his two squint eyes and clasped his hands together.

'Look to the Heavenly King, lady,' he said. 'There is no earthly power but Satan.'

I heard from his wife that he makes love to her through a hole in the sheet.

'Does he not kiss you?' I said.

'He has never kissed me,' she answered, 'for fear of lust.'

Then lust must be a powerful thing, if to kiss her that most resembles a hare, with great ears and staring eyes, brings it on.

It is a true saying, that what you fear you find.

My neighbour, who has a fondness for Preacher Scroggs, largely since like finds like, was addressing me in the most pompous terms about the Will of God, as though he knew God as well as I do my dogs. Thus I was forced to shout him down, reason being wasted on a block, and thus did Tradescant find me.

'Madam, madam, calm yourself,' he said in his gentle way.

I turned, and though I hadn't seen him for two years I recognized him at once.

'Mr Tradescant,' I said, 'I am defending the King.'

'A noble cause,' said he.

At this my neighbour claimed he'd never kneel before a king until he knelt before Jesus. Any time now, he said, the Rule of Saints would begin on earth and all the sinners would be burned up and confounded.

I had no choice but to strangle him, and though I used only one hand and held him from the ground at arm's length, he was purple in no time and poor John Tradescant was swinging on my arm like a little monkey, begging me to stop.

'I'll spare him for your sake, sir,' I said, and dropped the ugly thing into his own midden.

I thought no more of him but took Tradescant into our house for a pot of ale. He seemed pale, no doubt from his journey.

'I've come about Jordan,' he said.

And it seemed that he wanted a gardener's boy at Wimbledon where he was laying out a great garden for Queen Henrietta. He refused to let the troubles interrupt his work. He had it in his mind that when the Queen returned from the Continent in triumph to the King, bringing the children who were hidden for safety, the garden would stand as a monument to her courage.

But how could I lose Jordan, so dear to me and my only comfort?

Tradescant tried all his gentle ways to persuade me. I continued to refuse, saying it was too far for my boy to travel daily. And yet I wanted Jordan to have the work, knowing how it would delight him to see such exotic things growing all in one place. At length I hit on a solution.

'I'll accompany him,' I said.

Tradescant seemed surprised, so I continued.

'I have a mind to take the air of Wimbledon for a time.'

'There's nowhere for you to live,' he said. 'Jordan will have to share with the other men of the estate.'

I have a flair for architecture, having built my own hut, and I assured Tradescant that I could build another.

He spread his hands, he sighed, but I knew I had beaten him.

'And my hounds, I must bring them.'

He asked me how many I had, and I comforted him that there were just a few at present.

'When can I expect you?'

'We will begin our journey tomorrow. In what direction is Wimbledon?'

He said the coachman would be sure to know, and as he

seemed in a hurry to leave I did not press him, thinking I could find out from the innkeeper at the Crown of Thorns.

It was three days later that a half-wit went foaming and stuttering to Mr Tradescant, crying that the garden had been invaded by an evil spirit and her Hounds of Hell. Tradescant came running to the great gates, and he must have been relieved to see it was only myself holding Jordan by the hand.

'Your dogs,' he said, and I saw his Adam's apple bobbing up and down.

'Yes,' I replied, 'no more than thirty and only five ready for breeding.'

He was a gentleman, and if he had seemed taken aback he soon recovered himself and asked if he might pay for our carriage and perhaps send help to fetch our belongings.

'There is no carriage,' I told him, 'and here are our belongings.'

I raised a bundle of red cloth like a great Christmas pudding. Jordan had his boat under his arm.

'But how . . . ?'

'We walked,' I said. 'And when Jordan was tired I carried him.'

Tradescant said nothing, but tried to take my bundle, which immediately flattened him to the ground. Very tenderly, as a mother knows how, I scooped him up in my arms, the bundle on top of him, and with my thirty dogs and Jordan coming behind we entered the gate of the great house and began our new life as servants of the King.



I slept in my suspended bed for two fitful hours and then winched myself down to breakfast feeling sea-sick.

My hosts that morning were engaged in archery practice

and I was able to excuse myself and comb the city for the dancer. No one in the house recalled her, though how that were possible with her loveliness that devoured the rest of the company in tongues of flame I do not know.

I began first at the theatre and then went on to the opera and then with increasing dread in ever-decreasing circles of infamy: cafes and casinos and bawdy-houses and at last to a pen of prostitutes kept by a rich man for his friends. The women were gracious but urged me to return in female disguise. That way I might be granted admittance. As a man, however chaste, I would be driven away or made a eunuch.

I did as they advised and came to them in a simple costume hired for the day. They praised my outfit and made me blush by stroking my cheek and commenting on its smoothness.

We drank unfortified wine, and when the custodian passed and asked who it was they were entertaining one stood up and said I was her cousin from afar.

They knew nothing of the dancer. She was not of their company, though they promised to enquire among friends.

How could they bear such privation?'

Their quarters were very comfortable, with every kind of couch and bed and game to play, but they were not allowed to go outside.

How could they live without space?

There was silence, and it seemed as though they were communicating without words. Then one spoke to me and explained that they were not so confined as it seemed. That through the night they came and went as they pleased.

How could this be? The house was barred. Each door had thirteen locks. The windows were too high to reach and the skylights, though always kept open, could not be broached.

Underneath the house was a stream. The stream, on its way to the river on its way to the sea, passed beneath the lodgings of quite a different set of women. Nuns. This convent, the Convent of the Holy Mother, had its cellars opening over the stream. Every night, any of the women who wished to amuse

herself in the city, visit friends, eat dinner with her beloved, dropped herself into the fast-flowing water and was carried downstream towards the convent. It was the custom of the nuns to keep watch over the stream through the night, and any of the women shooting past the convent vault was immediately fished out in a great shrimping net by the nun on duty.

Some of the women had lovers in the convent; others, keeping a change of clothes there, went their way in the outside world. At dawn the women were let down into the water, and with great fortitude swam upstream into their locked citadel.

Their owner, being a short-sighted man of scant intelligence, never noticed that the women under his care were always different. There was an unspoken agreement in the city that any woman who wanted to amass a fortune quickly would go and work in the house and rob the clients and steal the ornaments supposedly safe on the wall. He did not know it but this selfish man, to whom life was just another commodity, had financed the futures of thousands of women, who were now across the world or trading in shops or as merchants. He had also, singlehanded, paid for the convent's renowned stock of fine wine and any number of alterpieces.

Some years later I heard that he had come into his pleasure chamber one day and found it absolutely empty of women and of treasures. He never fathomed the matter and made no connection between that event and the sudden increase in novitiates at the Convent of the Holy Mother.

I have met a number of people who, anxious to be free of the burdens of their gender, have dressed themselves men as women and women as men.

After my experience in the pen of prostitutes I decided to continue as a woman for a time and took a job on a fish stall.

I noticed that women have a private language. A language not dependent on the constructions of men but structured by signs and expressions, and that uses ordinary words as code-words meaning something other.

In my petticoats I was a traveller in a foreign country. I did not speak the language. I was regarded with suspicion.

I watched women flirting with men, pleasing men, doing

business with men, and then I watched them collapsing into laughter, sharing the joke, while the men, all unknowing, felt themselves master of the situation and went off to brag in bar-rooms and to preach from pulpits the folly of the weaker sex.

This conspiracy of women shocked me. I like women; I am shy of them but I regard them highly. I never guessed how much they hate us or how deeply they pity us. They think we are children with too much pocket money. The woman who owned the fish stall warned me never to try and cheat another woman but always to try and charge the men double or send them away with a bad catch.

Their noses are dull,' she said. They won't be able to mark a day-old lobster from a fresh one.'

And she asked me to remember that a woman, if cheated, will never forget and will some day pay you back, even if it takes years, while a man will rave and roar and slap you perhaps and then be distracted by some other thing.

Thinking to teach me about men, worrying that I knew nothing, she wrote me a rule book of which I will list the first page.

1. Men are easy to please but are not pleased for long before some new novelty must delight them.
2. Men are easy to make passionate but are unable to sustain it.
3. Men are always seeking soft women but find their lives in ruins without strong women.
4. Men must be occupied at all times otherwise they make mischief.
5. Men deem themselves weighty and women light. Therefore it is simple to tie a stone round their necks and drown them should they become too troublesome.
6. Men are best left in groups by themselves where they will entirely wear themselves out in drunkenness and competition. While this is taking place a woman may carry on with her own life unhindered.
7. Men are never never to be trusted with what is closest to your heart, and if it is they who are closest to your heart, do not tell them.

8. If a man asks you for money, do not give it to him.
9. If you ask a man for money and he does not give it to you, sell his richest possession and leave at once.
10. Your greatest strength is that every man believes he knows the sum and possibility of every woman.

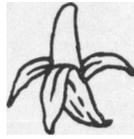
I was much upset when I read this first page, but observing my own heart and the behaviour of those around me I conceded it to be true. Then my heaviness was at its limit and I could not raise myself up from where I was sitting. But I did look around me and I saw that I was one in a long line of unfortunates sitting like crows on a fallen tree. All were wailing piteously and none could move on account of their sorrows.

I was lucky that my hands were free, and reaching down into my fish basket I took out a red mullet and waved it over my head.

Soon a flock of sea birds appeared screeching at the sight of the fish. I waved another in my left hand, and as I had hoped the birds dived to catch the fish.

When they fastened their beaks on to my bait I did not let go and the birds, maddened at any resistance to their feeding, flapped all the harder and succeeded in pulling me up with them. I let go at once, but the birds, somehow imagining me as a great fish, carried me up into the air and flew me over the city and out to sea.

Far below I watched the waves crashing against high cliffs and saw the sails of ships passing to the Tropics. I fainted from fear, and when I revived I was no longer in the air but seemed to be on the windowsill of a well-appointed house in a town I did not recognize. A young girl came to the window and, asking me if I were the sister she had prayed for, courteously invited me to bed with her, where I passed the night in some confusion.



What is love?

On the morning after our arrival at Wimbledon I awoke in a pool of philosophic thought, though comforted by Jordan's regular breathing and the snorts of my thirty dogs.

I am too huge for love. No one, male or female, has ever dared to approach me. They are afraid to scale mountains.

I wonder about love because the parson says that only God can truly love us and the rest is lust and selfishness.

In church, there are carvings of a man with his member swollen out like a marrow, rutting a woman whose teats swish the ground like a cow before milking. She has her eyes closed and he looks up to Heaven, and neither of them notice the grass is on fire.

The parson had these carvings done especially so that we could contemplate our sin and where it must lead.

There are women too, hot with lust, their mouths sucking at each other, and men grasping one another the way you would a cattle prod.

We file past every Sunday to humble ourselves and stay clean for another week, but I have noticed a bulge here and there where all should be quiet and God-like.

For myself, the love I've known has come from my dogs, who care nothing for how I look, and from Jordan, who says that though I am as wide and muddy as the river that is his namesake, so am I too his kin. As for the rest of this sinning world, they treat me well enough for my knowledge and pass me by when they can.

I breed boarhounds as my father did before me and as I hoped Jordan would do after me. But he would not stay. His head was stuffed with stories of other continents where men have their faces in their chests and some hop on one foot defying the weight of nature.

These hoppers cover a mile at a bound and desire no sustenance other than tree-bark. It is well known that their companions are serpents, the very beast that drove us all from Paradise and makes us still to sin. These beasts are so wily that if they hear the notes of a snake-charmer they lay one ear to the earth and stopper up the other with their tails. Would I could save myself from sin by stoppering up my ears with a tail or any manner of thing.

I am a sinner, not in body but in mind. I know what love sounds like because I have heard it through the wall, but I do not know what it feels like. What can it be like, two bodies slippery as eels on a mud-flat, panting like dogs after a pig?

I fell in love once, if love be that cruelty which takes us straight to the gates of Paradise only to remind us they are closed for ever.

There was a boy who used to come by with a coatful of things to sell. Beads and ribbons hung on the inside and his pockets were crammed with fruit knives and handkerchiefs and buckles and bright thread. He had a face that made me glad.

I used to get up an hour early and comb my hair, which normally I would do only at Christmas-time in honour of our Saviour. I decked myself in my best clothes like a bullock at a fair, but none of this made him notice me and I felt my heart shrivel to the size of a pea. Whenever he turned his back to leave I always stretched out my hand to hold him a moment, but his shoulder-blades were too sharp to touch. I drew his image in the dirt by my bed and named all my mother's chickens after him.

Eventually I decided that true love must be clean love and I boiled myself a cake of soap . . .

I hate to wash, for it exposes the skin to contamination. I follow the habit of King James, who only ever washed his fingertips and yet was pure in heart enough to give us the Bible in good English.

I hate to wash, but knowing it to be a symptom of love I was not surprised to find myself creeping towards the pump in the dead of night like a ghoul to a tomb. I had determined to cleanse all of my clothes, my underclothes and myself. I did

this in one passage by plying at the pump handle, first with my right arm and washing my left self, then with my left arm and washing my right self. When I was so drenched that to wring any part of me left a puddle at my feet I waited outside the baker's until she began her work and sat myself by the ovens until morning. I had a white coating from the flour, but that served to make my swarthy skin more fair.

In this new state I presented myself to my loved one, who graced me with all of his teeth at once and swore that if only he could reach my mouth he would kiss me there and then. I swept him from his feet and said, 'Kiss me now,' and closed my eyes for the delight. I kept them closed for some five minutes and then, opening them to see what had happened, I saw that he had fainted dead away. I carried him to the pump that had last seen my devotion and doused him good and hard, until he came to, wriggling like a trapped fox, and begged me let him down.

'What is it?' I cried, is it love for me that affects you so?'

'No,' he said, it is terror.'

I saw him a few months later in another part of town with a pretty jade on his arm and his face as bright as ever.



In the morning the young girl, whose name was Zillah, told me she had been locked in this tower since her birth.

'This is not a tower,' I said, it is a house of some stature but nothing more.'

'No,' she said. 'You are mistaken. Go to the window.'

I did as she asked, and looked down a few feet over a street setting up for market. Women in leather aprons were piling radishes on wooden stalls, a priest was blessing a cargo of Holy Relics, while a saintly man, come early, was arguing over the price of a rib.

It was a fine morning; the air smelt of lemons.

As I looked down a stallholder turned his face and stared directly at me. I waved and smiled but he gave no sign of recognition. It did not trouble me; people are nervous of strangers.

'Is it not terrifying?' said Zillah.

Then I knew she must be having a game with me and I went and pulled her to the window.

'Come and see this steeple of radishes.'

She was silent. I noticed how pale her face was, and that her eyes were unnaturally bright. I leaned over to point out anything that might please her but the words stuck to the roof of my mouth. She was gazing down. I followed her gaze, down and further down. We were at the top of a sheer-built tower. The stone cylinder fell without relief to a platform of bitter rocks smashed by foaming waves. The coastline winding away was desolate of living things. No hut or sheepfold broke the line of tangled rosemary bushes. There was nothing but the wind and the slate-blue sea.

She pulled away from me and went to sit down on the bed. With my back to the window I asked her what it was that kept her here.

'It is myself,' she said. 'Only myself.'

It was then I realized the room had no door.

'Is there anything for me to eat?' I asked her.

She smiled, leaned under the bed and pulled out two rats by their tails.

She laughed, and walked towards me, the rats in each hand. Her eyes were clouding over, her eyes were disappearing. I could smell her breath like cheese in muslin.

I did not think of my life; I somersaulted out of the window and landed straight in the pile of radishes.

The woman in the leather apron hit me over the head, but someone behind her, pulling her off, took me by the shoulders and urged me to tell him where I had come from so suddenly.

'From the tower,' I said, pointing upwards.

The market stopped its bustle and all fell to the ground and made the sign of the cross. The purveyor of Holy Relics hung

a set of martyr's teeth round his neck and sprinkled me with the dust of St Anthony.

The story was a terrible one.

A young girl caught incestuously with her sister was condemned to build her own death tower. To prolong her life she built it as high as she could, winding round and round with the stones in an endless stairway. When there were no stones left she sealed the room and the village, driven mad by her death cries, evacuated to a far-off spot where no one could hear her. Many years later the tower had been demolished by a foreigner who had built the house I saw in its place. Slowly the village had returned, but not the foreigner, nor anyone else, could live in the house. At night the cries were too loud.

The villagers were kind to me, and I helped them through the day with their stalls of exotic fruit and speckled fish, and at night the men filled their pipes and sat on the sea wall and asked me where I had come from, and why.

I did not tell them the strange means of my arrival, but I explained the destination of my heart.

The world is full of dancers,' said one, blowing the smoke in circles round my head.

'And you have seen this one only by night,' said another.

'And escaping down a wall,' said his wife, who was scraping crabmeat into a pot.

The philosopher of the village warned me that love is better ignored than explored, for it is easier to track a barnacle goose than to follow the trajectories of the heart.

There followed a discourse on love, some of which I will reveal to you.

On the one side there were those who claimed that love, if it be allowed at all, must be kept tame by marriage vows and family ties so that its fiery heat warms the hearth but does not burn down the house.

On the other there were those who believed that only passion freed the soul from its mud-hut, and that only by loosing the heart like a coursing hare and following it until sundown could a man or woman sleep quietly at night.

The school of heaviness, who would tie down love, took

as their examples those passages of ancient literature which promise that those driven by desire, the lightest of things, suffer under weights they cannot bear. Weights far more terrible than to accept from the start that passion must spend its life in chains.

What of the woman who finds herself turning into a lotus tree as she flees her ardent lover? Her feet are rooted to the earth, soft bark creeps up her legs and little by little enfolds her groin. When she tries to tear her hair her hands are full of leaves.

What of Orpheus, who pursues his passion through the gates of Hell, only to fail at the last moment and to lose the common presence of his beloved?

And Actaeon, whose desire for Artemis turns him into a stag and leaves him torn to pieces by his own dogs?

These things are so, and may be laid out in a solemn frieze to run round the edges of the world.

Then I stood up and reminded the company of Penelope, who through her love for one man refused the easy compromise of a gilded kingdom and unravelled by night the woven weight of a day's work to leave her hands empty again in the morning.

And of Sappho, who rather than lose her lover to a man flung herself from the windy cliffs and turned her body into a bird.

It is well known that those in the grip of heavy enchantments can be wakened only by a lover's touch. Those who seem dead, who are already returning to the earth, can be restored to life, quickened again by one who is warm.

Then, it being night, and the twin stars of Castor and Pollux just visible in the sky, I spoke of that tragedy, of two brothers whose love we might find unnatural, so stricken in grief when one was killed that the other, begging for his life again, accepted instead that for half the year one might live, and for the rest of the year the other, but never the two together. So it is for us, who while on earth in these suits of lead sense the presence of one we love, not far away but too far to touch.

The villagers were silent and one by one began to move away, each in their own thoughts. A woman brushed my hair

back with her hand. I stayed where I was with my shoulders against the rough sea wall and asked myself what I hadn't asked the others.

Was I searching for a dancer whose name I did not know or was I searching for the dancing part of myself?

Night.



In the dark and in the water I weigh nothing at all. I have no vanity but I would enjoy the consolation of a lover's face. After my only excursion into love I resolved never to make a fool of myself again. I was offered a job in a whore-house but I turned it down on account of my frailty of heart. Surely such to-ing and fro-ing as must go on night and day weakens the heart and inclines it to love? Not directly, you understand, but indirectly, for lust without romantic matter must be wearisome after a time. I asked a girl at the Spitalfields house about it and she told me she hates her lovers-by-the-hour but still longs for someone to come in a coach and feed her on mince-pies.

Where do they come from, these insubstantial dreams?

As for Jordan, he has not my common sense and will no doubt follow his dreams to the end of the world and then fall straight off.

I cannot school him in love, having no experience, but I can school him in its lack and perhaps persuade him that there are worse things than loneliness.

A man accosted me on our way to Wimbledon and asked me if I should like to see him.

'I see you well enough, sir,' I replied.

'Not all of me,' said he, and unbuttoned himself to show a thing much like a pea-pod.

'Touch it and it will grow,' he assured me. I did so, and indeed it did grow to look more like a cucumber.

'Wondrous, wondrous, wondrous,' he swooned, though I could see no good reason for swooning.

Tut it in your mouth,' he said. 'Yes, as you would a delicious thing to eat.'

I like to broaden my mind when I can and I did as he suggested, swallowing it up entirely and biting it off with a snap.

As I did so my eager fellow increased his swooning to the point of fainting away, and I, feeling both astonished by his rapture and disgusted by the leathery thing filling up my mouth, spat out what I had not eaten and gave it to one of my dogs.

The whore from Spitalfields had told me that men like to be consumed in the mouth, but it still seems to me a reckless act, for the member must take some time to grow again. None the less their bodies are their own, and I who know nothing of them must take instruction humbly, and if a man asks me to do the same again I'm sure I shall, though for myself I felt nothing.

In copulation, an act where the woman has a more pleasurable part, the member comes away in the great tunnel and creeps into the womb where it splits open after a time like a runner bean and deposits a little mannikin to grow in the rich soil. At least, so I am told by women who have become pregnant and must know their husbands' members as well as I do my own dogs.

When Jordan is older I will tell him what I know about the human body and urge him to be careful of his member. And yet it is not that part of him I fear for; it is his heart. His heart.

Here at Wimbledon we have a French gardener named Andre Mollet who has come specially to teach Tradescant the French ways with water fountains and parterres.

Like most Frenchmen he is more interested in his member than in his spade and has made amorous overtures to every woman on the estate, with the exception of myself. In honour of his tirelessness we are to have a stream shooting nine feet high with a silver ball balanced on the top. The cascading torrent will mingle with a wall of water like a hedge, dividing the fish-ponds from the peasantry.

The fish-ponds are circles and squares filled with rare waters, sometimes salt, sometimes still, containing fabulous fishes of the kind imagined but never seen.

In the largest pond are a shoal of flying fish that toss their glittering bodies in one leap from one side to the other. Do they dream of tree-tops buffeted by the wind?

In another, a curious pool shining with its own radiance from a holy well in the East, are a group of spotted toads notable for their singing. These toads do not croak, but engage in madrigals and set up an anthem more fair than any choir in church. Even the palace of the Sun King in France has nothing so rare and wonderful, though I am told he has a dancing weasel given in exchange for a hundred pear trees. For myself I prefer the running stream that leads from the bank planted with cherry and makes a basin in the grotto with the statue of the hermit. The stream is shallow, its bottom crowded with tiny pebbles, its sides sprouting watercress. Underneath the stones are fresh-water shrimps feeding on creatures even smaller than themselves. There is a rock near to its source and I very often hide behind it at evening, singing songs of love and death and waiting for the sun to set. When the orange bar is straight across the horizon the kingfisher comes with blue wings beating and dives in one swift streak. Ascends like a saint, vertical and glorious, its beak crammed with shrimp.



At sea and away from home in a creaking boat, with Tradescant sleeping beside me, there is a town I sometimes dream about, whose inhabitants are so cunning that to escape the insistence of creditors they knock down their houses in a single night and rebuild them elsewhere. So the number of buildings in the city is always constant but they are never in the same place from one day to the next.

For close families, and most of the people in the city are close families, this presents no problem, and it is more usual than not for the escapees to find their pursuers waiting for them on the new site of their choice.

As a subterfuge, then, it has little to recommend it, but as a game it is a most fulfilling pastime and accounts for the extraordinary longevity of the men and women who live there. We were all nomads once, and crossed the deserts and the seas on tracks that could not be detected, but were clear to those who knew the way. Since settling down and rooting like trees, but without the ability to make use of the wind to scatter our seed we have found only infection and discontent.

In the city the inhabitants have reconciled two discordant desires: to remain in one place and to leave it behind for ever.

On arriving there for the first time I made friends with a family, and after dinner promised to call the next day. They urged me to do so, and I did, and was upset to find that the little house had been replaced by a Museum of Antiquities.

The curator was sympathetic and pointed me in the right direction. I had it in mind to go back to the museum and look at the skeleton of an extinct whale. It seemed unlikely to me that a public building would feel the same need to escape as an ordinary individual.

I was mistaken. The museum had gone back to its original site by the docks, and in its place, with room to spare, was a windmill. As I watched the blades churning the air and wondered what kind of an element air must be, to seem like nothing and yet put up such resistance, the miller came to his round window and yelled something I couldn't hear. I caught hold of one of the blades as it passed by me and swung myself up beside him.

He asked me if I knew the story of the Twelve Dancing Princesses. I said I had heard it, and he told me they were still living just down the road, though of course they were quite a bit older now. Why didn't I go and see them?

Thinking that one dancer might well know another and that a dozen of them must surely know one I took a catch of herrings as a gift and banged on their door.