

## EDITOR'S FOREWORD

SOME TIME AGO—NEVER MIND HOW LONG PRECISELY—I SLIPPED off the map of the world. I took the manuscript with me.

It was night when I left. The hallways were dark, but then they were also dark during the day. Many of the fluorescents were burned out or broken, and since the building had been condemned, Facilities Management had declined to fix them. They'd demolish the whole thing soon enough.

I hadn't been planning to leave, and yet I was becoming—not exactly *anxious* about the manuscript, but overcome. The manuscript was confounding, its authenticity indeterminate. I had known I'd get wrapped up in it.

But I was more than wrapped up. I was lost.

My ex and I once had a game of inventing German compound words for things inexpressible in simple English. Most of this lexicon concerned cuddling, language that was useless to me now. "Outer spoon with arm resting on hip." "Outer spoon with arms wrapped around inner spoon." "Facing spoons: bodies entangled."

*There must be a German expression for "self-loss-in-a-project,"* I thought the night I left, pulling up an online dictionary to concoct a Frankenword for my current—and, I feared, eternal—condition. *Selbst-Verlust-in-Projekt.*

I think it is fair to say that if my ex had diagnosed me I would

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 have been assigned a different Frankenword. Something far less generous. But since we were not speaking, I was free to diagnose myself.

Surely someone has noted that loss (*Verlust*) and desire (*Lust*) share a root. Which brings me both further from and closer to my point.

Several months prior to my precipitous departure, as a kind of Welcome Back to School/Fuck You event, the University held a book sale. It seemed that over the summer the Chancellor's office had emptied out the seventeenth to twentieth floors of the library for a big renovation. Deans' offices and a dining atrium for upper-echelon administrators.

The book sale took place out in front of the building, right where new-student tours marched past. The University was proud to display its "optimization" of the library. Some fraternity had received community service credit for manning the tables. Tank-top-clad guys hulked over the piles of books doing curls and glaring. Surrounding the tables were huge posterboard mock-ups of the dining-atrium-to-be.

Wandering by one afternoon, riffling through the University's entire collection of philosophy, linguistics, and postcolonial theory, I spotted it.

A mashed and mildewed pile of papers, easily overlooked. And yet, a rare and perplexing find. The lost Sheppard memoir? The scholars in my field had scoured the records, debunked everything they'd found.

"You can just have that," the kid at the table said.

Back in my office, I stared at the hunk of papers exhaling dust on my desk. It mixed with the other particulate matter that sifted down from the ceiling voids and leaked out of the walls. I wheezed a

slightly magnified version of my usual office-wheeze and turned the first crumpled page.

The manuscript had not been read in years, or perhaps ever. There was not a single checkout stamp on it. In fact, there was not even a back-cover card to stamp. The manuscript had never been catalogued at all. Someone had clearly just stuffed it into the back of a stack, where it sat, hidden from view, for god knows how long.

Until now.

For months, I worked under the narrow yellow bloom of my ancient desk lamp, transcribing the soft, eroded pages of the manuscript, and hoping in a kind of offhand way that I wouldn't dream at night of either *Lust* or *Verlust* (but what were the chances; this was all I dreamed of), while being rained on by the yellow flakes of asbestos or something that drifted through the holes in the ceiling. Occasionally a mouse or rat would make its way down the hallway under flickering half-light, nails clicking on the linoleum.

On the night I left, flipping between pages 252 and 257, a vague suspicion I'd had for some time suddenly crystallized. There was something very wrong with the manuscript.

And furthermore, I needed to disappear with it.

I put the papers and my laptop with its transcriptions and notes into my briefcase, dodged the hallway vermin and walked to my car. Not an insignificant journey: I had pulled a very bad number in the parking lottery. I am not ordinarily sentimental about my workplace, but it was an uncommonly beautiful evening—the last vestiges of fall snagged by the first hard shanks of winter, edges of ice cutting into the blue New England night—and so I didn't mind the walk. I was saying goodbye, after all. I even permitted myself to briefly enjoy the façade of gentility that the campus took on only in the dark. The birds called sharply to each other in the breezes. The great gray-trunked oaks cast shadows on the buckled pavement.

Ivy wrapped the black iron lampposts, helixing fifteen feet up to blown-glass lanterns tremoring with orange light. The University had installed these recently in an attempt to give the crumbling Humanities Quad a distinguished Old World feel. It was another of the landscaping "improvements" they were constantly unleashing in lieu of actually fixing the infrastructure.

But I digress.

You may not know this, but it is possible to hold back a single set of tears for years straight. Many a filmic crescendo concerning masculinity confirms this fact. Quiet shot of car interior. Aging guy. Beard scruff. Hands on wheel. Black night. Cue music.

Predictably, that night—although I am a guy by design, not birth—as I drove away from campus and toward [undisclosed location], I was fucking crying. Or, tearing up, at least. I couldn't stop thinking about this line that had been haunting me—the epigraph I had discovered on the front page of the manuscript.

"Love's mysteries in souls do grow, / But yet the body is his book."

What did Donne mean by this—and all his filthy innuendo, really?

*The body is transformed by love.*

I recognize I sound uncharacteristically utopian, but this isn't exactly a utopian sentiment. Not a painless one anyway.

Love inscribes the body—and this is a process as excruciating as it sounds. For some of us it is literal, Kafkaesque. A *selbst-verlustung* that is both terrifying and pleasurable. The body does not pre-exist love, but is cast in its fires.

If the body is cast in the fires of love, so too—and this is Donne's point—is the book.

All books, really. But the manuscript you hold in your hands in particular.

The manuscript for which I will surely pay an exorbitant price, distributing it "independently" of the Publisher's desires and control. They will be especially displeased that I publish it with all my original footnotes. But it is important for you to know everything.

Like I said, I was crying when I left.

These weren't actually tears of sadness. I never cry when I'm sad; at those times I just pinch down into a miniature version of myself like an ailing turtle trundling off into the forest to die alone. No, I cry when I'm . . . not happy, but when I see a flash, if only briefly, that something other and better than this world already exists *in potentia*. It doesn't have to be profound. I cry the same set of tears when team members throw themselves into each other's arms after winning a game as I do when we lock arms in front of the police.

So I was speeding down Route 17, the tears blurring the endless strip malls into a dazzling silver-gray with hints of purple, white and several phosphorescent shades of green. And I knew then where I'd go. Where I'd be safe. At least long enough to get the manuscript out. The destination was so obvious, so perfect. It was only owing to my amazing capacity for ignoring the obvious that I hadn't realized it earlier.

No matter. It was clear enough now.

The postindustrial landscape had turned prismatic. Everything I looked at shone and sparkled. Wet light poured out of my eyes. When I blinked, light bloomed in corners, streaked by fast, leaving crystal trails.

*Is the manuscript the authentic autobiography?* the Publishers used to ask. *Is it a fairy tale? Is it a very long and terrible poem? A hoax?* I am ashamed to say that, for a time, I tried to answer them. I hope that history will forgive me for having told them anything at all. You can be assured that I will not share my findings with them anymore.

I took the manuscript because I could not allow the Publishers

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to gain custody of it once I understood what it was. I took the manuscript because I had come to realize that it contained a science. Well, a kind of science. The Publishers had been asking me if there was a code embedded in the document. There is. But not in the way the Publishers think.

I took the manuscript because I could not help but take it once I realized it was trying to communicate something. Something just for us. And if you are reading this, then you know who I mean.

And you're like: *Don't say too much! What if this publication has fallen into the wrong hands?*

Don't worry.

Even if I were saying—*hypothetically speaking*—that this is a code, they will never be able to read it.

There are some things you can see only through tears.

—Dr. R. Voth

June 2018

## CONFESSIONS OF THE FOX

PART

I

I.

JACK SHEPPARD, THE GREATEST GAOLBREAKER AND THE MOST DEVOTED, most thorough carouser\* of quim† in all of London, is bound beneath the gallows beam at Tyburn, about to be hanged—

*If I am to die today, please God let it be with the memory of the taste of her on my tongue—*

The two arts (gaolbreaking and quim-carousing) are of a piece. Jack is a compact mutt with an intuition for all possible points of entry, opening, and release. Whether of gaols or of women, there has never been a lock, door, window, or wall that he could not gently open into an ecstasy of Trespass.‡ Jack is a creature of Liberation. For him, shaking free from the demonic gloom of a detention-house is not unrelated to the scorch of a woman dissolving in raptures upon his tongue. The first releases him from the

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\* Deep-drinker

† Pussy

‡ Such lionizing of Jack's prowess is typical of Sheppardiana, and thus signifies neither one way nor the other as to the authenticity of this document. *Viz.*, *The History of the Remarkable Life of John Sheppard* (1724); *Authentic Memoirs of the Life and Surprising Adventures of John Sheppard* (1724); *A Narrative of All the Robberies, Escapes, &c. of John Sheppard* (1724); "A Dialogue Between Julius Caesar and Jack Sheppard" (*British Journal*, December 4, 1725); *The History of the Lives and Actions of Jonathan Wild, Thief-Taker, Joseph Blake Alias Blueskin, Foot-Pad. And John Sheppard, Housebreaker* (1729).

poisonous grip of the centinels—hateful husks, blights to all of roguedom, miseries of the otherwise miraculous City.

And the second? What to say of the second. Simply that he is never more free than when Bess's quim pulses hot in the cradle of his mouth. In this embrace, his body writhes from an aching carcass of bone and skin to a lick of flame. And it's this Transformation he needs to effect now. Ignite. Melt to soft glass—the way he does when she blis'trs with Pleasure on his red rag\*—and slip these fetters.

But conjuring Bess won't light him up now. The noose-knot weighs heavy on his neck. For which ecstasy of Trespass has he been doomed today? The first? The second? *Both?*

Never mind—

This artist of Transgression is about to die.

His hands are bound to the front to allow for last-minute prayers, which Jack has no intention of making—not to the Magistrate's God in any case. He is on his knees—his seeping, snapp'd leg hooked out at a dreadful Angle against the side of the execution-cart. A burlap hood cloaks his head, and a noose encircl's the base of his neck—both having been placed there in a dramatic Flourish by the Yeoman of the Halter as he drove the cart through the crowd. The noose hangs in a loose slipknot, the long ends wound 'round Jack's waist.

The wind rises. The horse scuffs its hooves in the sawdust—neighs hollowly, shaking its leviathan head. The cart trembles and sways.

A cannonade of boots stamping 'round the cart. "The hour of reckoning approaches!" shouts the Yeoman as he claps one hand on Jack's shoulder and releases the harbinger pigeon into the sleety late-afternoon Sky.

\* Tongue

The pigeon lifts into the drizzle, shedding mites and Fleas upon the crowds packed at Tyburn, buzzes through the mist over the red-bricked streets towards Holborn Bridge, left at the Smithfield butchers' stalls, and arrives at Newgate to land on the warden's stern uniformed shoulder as he glares out over the Inmates in the Press Yard, abuzz with Rumors.

*Sheppard's stowed on a ship bound for the colonies. Sheppard's taken to the roads, headed for the Scottish highlands. Sheppard's been spirited off by the doxies† of Spitalfields, and is now cavorting under covers, drinking plum wine.*

"Cease your idiot speculating! The poor Sinner, Jack Sheppard, who escaped the Tower Hold late in the night and embroil'd himself in immoral and illegal acts all morning, has been captured once again, and is now arrived at the gallows to meet his death on this, the sixteenth day of November, 1724," shouts the warden as the bell-ringer clangs the Newgate toll.

Four times for execution-close-to-hand.

The dark Reports reverberate across the prison yard. The pigeon flinches at the Din, and in his struggle to launch for the chestnut trees waving in the low afternoon light outside the gaolhouse walls, crooks a claw into the thick wool of the warden's waistcoat, snagging a stitch. A Mêlée of flapping ensues as the warden attempts to pry the miserable bird loose from his chest, drawing cries of "Floor the pig!" and "Claw the constable!" from the prisoners as they root the pigeon on.

Under his burlap hood, Jack hears Bess calling to him from her chambers high in the eaves of the bat house.‡

*The House of the Dead is the common house; the House of the*

† Sex workers. I settle on this annotation rather than "prostitute" as, in the anti-vagrancy laws of the period, the doxy was condemned specifically (though not exhaustively) as someone who would not go gently into the *good night* of the capitalist workday.

‡ Brothel. I've arrived at this translation by supposition (more on this below; see footnote †† on p. 10).

*Dead is the common house. All things held in common across That River. I'll meet you there, in the Eternal Free Waste Lands, my love.*

But is Bess at the bat house? Is she, indeed, even alive?

The hood smells like the shit-soaked hay at the bottom of a cackler's ken\*. The low afternoon Sun blinks dark gold through the fibers. Jack can no longer feel his leg, but for some distant throb that seems not quite to belong to him. He breathes slowly, the bag's muck itching against his lips. He catalogues the things he knows for certain, or near-certain.

He knows the Mob gathered around the cart must be about the largest London has ever seen. The Town is aflame with talk of him.

It had begun when Wild carried him over his shoulder from the Thamesshore to the Magistrate's stables. With his face pressed against Wild's broad back, he heard passers-by congregating, gawking—*'S that Sheppard?? And Wild??*—and then a swirling wind of Whispers, the rumor-mongers flying off to inform the Town.

Wild had taken his time at the stables, ordered the execution-cart festooned and glory-fied with flags and ribbons while Jack hunched within, bound and soaked, a pile of bloody legs and river-water.

Word had had time to spread. When Wild was finally satisfied that the cart looked pompous enough, they set off again. A Thunder had begun to collect over Tyburn—voices upon voices rising as he was brought to the gallows.

He knows they're there to see if he'll effect another escape—his greatest yet. They expect him to slip a file from his sleeve, unlatch his wrist irons in the Bedlam after the cart is yanked from underneath his feet, and be found later that evening quaffing ale at the Pig and Roses in Fleet Street.

\* Hen roost

*A Sob rises—catches—scalds his throat.  
Aurie, where are you?*

The cart tilts under the weight of the Yeoman leaning on its edge—pulling the long end of the cord free from its loop around Jack's waist. A tug and the end is tossed up to the beam, where the Yeoman's assistant perches. Smaller tugs as the cord is knotted tight from above.

The thud of boots hitting the ground—the assistant's secured the knot, and scuttles off to the side. More boots walking away—the Yeoman's job is done as well.

The Din deepens. The Mob knows what's coming.

Heavy footfall approaches. The Executioner.

His hand is on his whip, slapping leather against his palm with each nearing step. Jack has seen enough executions to know by the sound that this is the last suspended Moment before he lays into the horse and the cart is yanked out from under him. He'd long entertain'd the possibility of dying by hanging—most rogues had—but in all his Imaginings, he'd never thought he'd be hang'd on his knees. On his knees and quaking uncontrollably. He focuses on the crowd's roar—"Hang the politicians instead!" "Hang the constables!" "Hang the stockjobbers and the banking-men!"—

The Executioner hisses the whip in three long circles through the sawdust surrounding the stage. The Executioner is a showman, letting the crowd build until just before the second that the Spectacle turns into furor and they are uncontainable. At that precise moment, the Executioner will let them have it—he always lets them have it—and he'll pull the cart—

*O God of the Streets—God of the Underworld—God of Rogues—  
God of Women, God of Softness, God of Sex-Shaking, God of*



Muff\* and Tuzzy-Muzzy† and the Fruitful Vine‡—O God of the Boiling Spot§ please inter me at the foot of her Bed. Please—so I can still see her—still hear her murmuring—still sense her. God of The Monosyllable¶ please let me still smell her and feel the throb of my unnameable Something when I do—

O death that comes for me—O God of the Water-Mill\*\*—at least she once took me in her hands and mouth—at least she once spread her legs for me—at least I once dilat'd with her musk in every pore—at least once was I thus Found and Lost—††

\* Pussy

† Pussy

‡ Pussy

§ Pussy

¶ Pussy

\*\* Pussy

†† Regarding footnote ‡ on p. 7. In none of my reference books does "bat house" turn up. "Bat," however, is a different story. Cited in one of the more reliable dictionaries of rogue's slang of the period—Bailey's *Canting Dictionary* (1736)—as a "low whore" (not a complimentary term, by any means); I've extrapolated to conclude that "bat house" indicates the abode where bats congregate. I.e., a brothel.

But the point is this: as this precise slur—"bat house"—is not corroborated in any reference materials, I must surmise that it is in fact not meant cruelly here, but is used in a loving and familiar manner, such as would be exercised only by a member of the subculture to which it applies.

But I've gotten ahead of myself. We're only at the beginning yet.

SOME SAY THAT JACK'S ROAD TO THE GALLOWS HAD BEEN PAVED THE day the Plague Ships arrived in the Thames.

At first, it was only the sneaks and scamps who notic'd, bringing word back to the inns and pubs. The East Indiaman *Repulse* was anchored just off the shore of the Tower Wharf, its boards creaking as it bobbed, its massive rigging billowing and slapping in the breezes. The river was achurn with slick gray Rat heads making their way towards the Booty on board. Rats chugged through the water from all directions towards the lower holds. Claw'd their way up the sides—slipped out of view onto the decks.

Within days, other ships joined the *Repulse*. Two more at the Tower Wharf and another lurking in the shallows at Blackfriars dry dock. The Thames was quickly dotted with stalled behemoths, an Archipelago of brigantines kitted out with guns and cannon dangling heads-down at rest.

The Hum at all the pubs was that the ships were being quarantined.