

a Confection

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Abstract

This thesis is an historical Confection. It describes the invention of Marzipan in a small German town during a Famine in the 1400s. The central narrative is preceded by a section entitled **Method**, which documents both the history of Marzipan and my own creative involvement with this peculiar subject matter over the past ten years.

The narrative itself is broken into four **Parts**, corresponding to three relatively undisputed ingredients of Marzipan (namely Eggs, Almonds and Sugar) and a Secret ingredient. Each Part is composed of one or more Chapters. The narrative is followed by a short **Notes** section detailing the original models for each of the Characters and a list of **Sources**.

Part 1 (Eggs) begins with the story of Ave the Midwife (Chapter 1). Through the eyes of a Vowel Bird we see her old Forest society diminish. A new city, L—, rises in its place. From an Island in the middle of the river, Ave observes the effects of both Famine and Colonisation upon her dwindling people. We meet an Orphan (Chapter 2) who is captured by a Boy Catcher (Chapter 3) and taken to the Merchant's House in L—. The city is described, as are the classes of its inhabitants.

Part 2 (Almonds) portrays the household of a prosperous Merchant family, the d'Almondes. The Merchant (Chapter 4) finds himself delayed on his journey home from Venice, owing to an incident on the road with a Persian, which is described. In her husband's absence, Lady d'Almonde (Chapter 5) decides to confect various statuettes from Marzipan, using herself as a model. Through the eyes of the servant girl (Chapter 6) we see the Lady d'Almonde's physical and moral disintegration, brought about by the Apotheker's administrations of Marzipan. Finally, the Merchant welcomes his guests with the strange tale of the Word Chopper (Chapter 7).

Part 3 (Sugar) describes the action that takes place at the Merchant's dinner table upon the conclusion of his tale, including the dissection of a Nun's Marzipan Lamb (Chapter 8), as well as extracts from the *Cook Book*. The accumulative effect of the dinner guests' indulgence in such copious amounts of both sweetmeats and story-telling is a sickness of the stomach, for which the Apotheker (Chapter 9) claims to possess the ultimate remedy. The Cook then seeks to out-do everyone by confecting three gigantic, life-sized Marzipan Buildings (Chapter 10).

Part 4 (Secret Ingredient) details the arrival of a Cuckoo and his Novice (Chapter 11) at the Merchant's dinner table, via Venice. Their grim discoveries notwithstanding, the two Cuckoos invite each of the dinner guests in turn to a Totentanz (Dance of Death), the conclusion of which ends the Confection.

Declaration

This is to certify that the thesis comprises only my original work except where indicated in the “Method”, “Notes” and “Sources”. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used. The thesis is approximately 30,000 words in length, inclusive of footnotes, but exclusive of tables, maps, appendices and bibliography.

Signed,

David Prater

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Marzipan

Ingredients

Method

1.

Eggs

2.

Almonds

3.

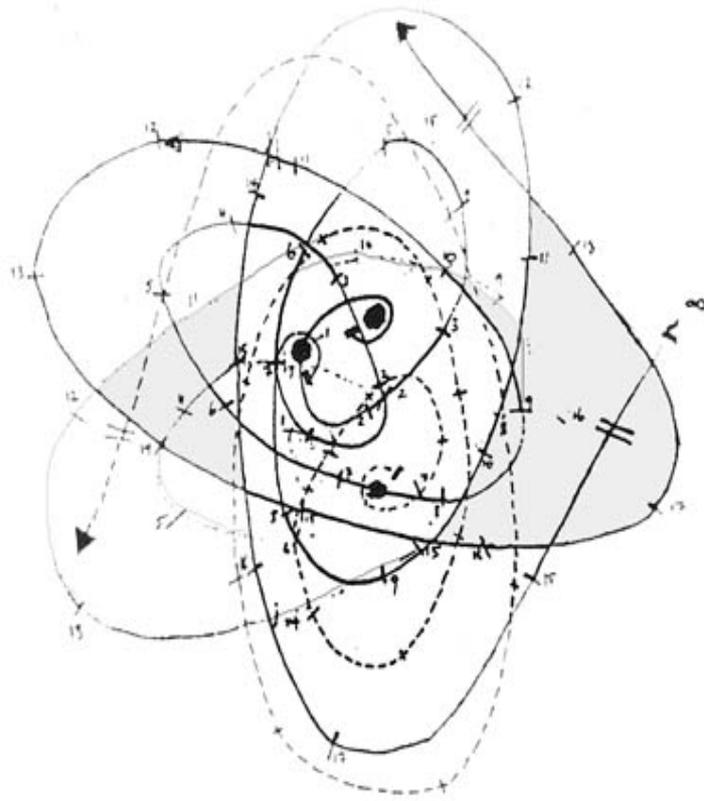
Sugar

4.

A Secret Ingredient

Notes

Sources



[‘Method’

Readers familiar with William Shakespeare’s dramatic works will recall Act I Scene V of *Romeo and Juliet*, wherein the first Servant, whilst clearing away plates at the Capulet’s house, says:

“Away with the join stools, remove the court cubbert, look to the plate. Good thou, save me a piece of marchpane; and as thou loves me let the porter let in Susan Grindstone and Nell. Antony, and Potpan!”

That this “piece of marchpane”, a confection known today as Marzipan — but also *marci panis*, *march payne*, *martiapanes*, *panis marcius*, *marzepaines*, *mauthaban*, *marzapane*, *mazapán*, *massepain*, *martaban*, *martevaan*, *mawtaban*, *matapan*, *mazapan* and *marzapanetti* — should hold such high value for a Servant clearings scraps speaks volumes about the peculiar mystery of this particular *Stuffe* but also the vicissitudes of human hunger.

In 1926 the German novelist and future Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann made a speech in his home town of Lubeck, Germany wherein he too discussed Marzipan:

“Now if anyone wishes to vent a little spite against me, or take a casual swipe at me, I can count on his bringing up my Lubeck origin and Lubeck marzipan. If some ill-wisher can think of nothing else, he invariably thinks of connecting me with comic marzipan and representing me as a marzipan baker. Such stuff goes by the name of literary satire. But it does not bother me ... And I certainly do not feel in the least insulted about the marzipan. In the first place it is a very tasty confection, and in the second place it is anything but trivial; rather it is

remarkable and, as I have said, mysterious ... And if we examine this sweet more closely, this mixture of almonds, rosewater and sugar, the suspicion arises that it is originally oriental, a [*Haremskonfekt*] confection for the harem, and that in all probability the recipe for this barely digestible delicacy came to Lubeck from the Orient by way of Venice ... And it turns out that those wits are not so wrong as they themselves think, that *Death in Venice* is really ‘marzipan’ although in a deeper sense than they ever meant it.

I discovered the text of this incredible speech quite serendipitously, while searching for a copy of *Death In Venice* in the Baillieu Library at the University of Melbourne. The speech, given on the occasion of the seven hundredth anniversary of Lubeck’s founding, can be found in the 1980 Knopf edition of another of Mann’s novels, *Buddenbrooks*, which, like the following Confection, describes the daily lives of a prominent Merchant family in Lubeck (in this case, L—). Mann’s reputation in Lubeck, it is said, suffered a downturn upon the publication of the novel, when various real-life Lubeckers recognised themselves in the book’s cast of characters.

Mann’s descriptions of the drowning city in *Death In Venice* were echoed by a late-twentieth century historian, Peter Lauritzen, who provides the following description of the Church of the Gesuiti in Venice:

“The Gesuiti’s pulpit is an elaborate confection swathed in the heavy folds of a voluminous brocade curtain ... This white curtain decorated in a handsome green damask pattern is in fact made of marble; all of the walls of the church are covered with this same white and green imitation damask made of verde antico inlaid in slabs of white marble. The illusion is extraordinary.”

Mann’s creation of a triumvirate of Confections — Marzipan, Venice and Lubeck — may well have been palatable to the guests listening to his speech. This is all very well. However, Mann’s addition of a fourth characterisation of

Marzipan as a *Haremskonfekt* — that, surely, would not have gone down well in Lubeck. For it is in Lubeck — a UNESCO World Heritage city, an island in the middle of a River, quite close to the Baltic Sea — that a strange myth, concerning the invention of Marzipan, has been propagated. According to the bare bones of the story, Marzipan was invented in Lubeck in 1407 during a Famine, or *Hungersnot* so severe that all there was left to eat were some almonds, eggs and sugar. When these three ingredients were combined, so the story goes, Marzipan was invented, and the villagers (presumably) escaped death at the hands of the *Hungersnot*.

Indeed, by implication, the Marzipan could be said to have saved the people of Lubeck from hunger *forevermore*, thus constituting a miraculous substance, not unlike the breadtree explorers dreamt of transporting across entire oceans, or *manna* flung down from Heaven. Lubeck's manufacturers of Marzipan have at various stages helped propagate the myth, despite the overwhelming evidence pointing to Marzipan's origins lying much further east: towards Persia (or even further east, in India, maybe even New Guinea) many hundreds (if not thousands) of years earlier. Therefore for Mann to describe Marzipan, or to be exact the Marzipan made in Lubeck as a confection originating from a Harem must have sounded completely depraved to some ears that night back in June 1926.

Today, Lubeck's makers of Marzipan (including the Carstens and Niederegger companies) freely admit to the improbability of the Lubeck Marzipan myth. Their company websites, which in the mid to late 1990s spoke about the Famine in Lubeck and the invention of Marzipan as though it had happened; by the turn of this century, the official company lines had been toned down somewhat:

“Today, everyone agrees that Lubeck is not the origin of Marzipan. Simply the fact that within our northern climate there is, understandably, a lack of almond trees, demonstrates that this is not the place to look for its origins. Even so, due to the high level of awareness of “Lubecker Marzipan”, one is tempted to associate its origin with Lubeck ... some ancient accounts state that the recipe for Marzipan came via Italy

directly to a Lubeck merchant. However there are no documents or other form of proof for this or for the many anecdotes and sagas.” (Carstens GmbH)

“The origin of marzipan is now known to be the Orient where the delicate almond-sugar mixture was served at the Sultan’s table as the crowning of a meal. Through Arabian rule marzipan reached Spain and Portugal, and during the Crusades spread through the rest of Europe via the trading port of Venice.” (Niederegger GmbH)

Some people just can’t help themselves, however. The following text from the German-language website *Marzipanland* has been translated using the babelfish translation engine:

“Everywhere on earth one knows Luebecker marzipan. The mad taste is simply unmistakable! There one does not think at all of the emergency situation, from the marzipan developed. There are several stories, but the probably most well-known one means that during a hunger emergency at the disposal were to the bakers of Luebeck nothing different one than almonds, sugars and rose oil, in order to protect the citizens death. From this the bakers developed “the Marcus bread”, our current Marzipan, is subject to which strict regulations and high quality requirements. Only marzipan, which consists to 60% of almonds and at the most 40% sugar, may call itself Luebecker noble edel-Marzipan.”

In 2002 I visited Lubeck, an act that would effectively bring me full circle in my investigations into the *Stuffe*, a journey which began in 1997 when I wrote a story entitled “Breakfast At Mario’s” dealing, amongst other things, with the adventures of a kitchen hand whose job it was to peel Almonds. In the intervening time, I had conducted various eclectic forms of research into the idea of Marzipan as a magical substance. Inside a store in the centre of Lubeck I

discovered a museum dedicated to the *Stuffe*, featuring a table at which sat eleven statues, each composed entirely of Marzipan. I found a Santa Claus (or *Weihnachtsmann*), a Nun, J.G. Niederegger (the founder of the Niederegger company), Thomas Mann himself, a Merchant (Bürgermeister Jürgen Wullenwever), a Baroque novelist by the name of Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, the Emperor Karl IV, his Mother Luise Charlotte, a child, an Apotheker and a Persian. The photocopied notes accompanying the exhibit suggested that each of these figures (or figurines) had played a key role in the history and development of Marzipan, in Lubeck at least.

When I saw this astonishing scene, I experienced the kind of feeling one suspects historians seeking confirmation of inexplicable connections or correspondences must enjoy. Almost a decade before I had set out to write a novel about Marzipan, beginning with a small child sleeping inside a box. I first read about the Lubeck Marzipan myth in 1997, using Internet search engines, drawing inferences and connections from translated materials, as well as various *Cook Books*, confectionery histories, books for children (including Virginia Arpadi's delightful story of a Marzipan-coloured cat), vague hunches and a pinch of the imaginary. Here, before me, was a sixteenth Century novelist holding a strange object out in front of him, made entirely of Marzipan! What more confirmation did I need?

Under normal circumstances, this tableau alone might have proved sufficient stimulus for a writer wishing to reconstruct the events surrounding the fabled invention of Marzipan in Lubeck, substituting this table of statues for the presumed star or stars of such an historical drama — that is, the real inventors of Marzipan, who may well have been Dutch invaders, Venetian monks, a wily Apotheker, a snow storm, a well-fed Merchant or some desperate Bakers. The accumulated knowledge with which I arrived in Lubeck however constituted an accumulation of fragments, sinews and bones. Here, finally, positioned behind a long flat table, was a set of bodies within which to insert the few historical fragments I had found, like relics of saints embedded in plaster.

Furthermore, inside the *Marienkirche* in the centre of Lubeck I experienced the full majesty of the Gothic culture in both architecture and painting which has produced such extraordinary monuments as the reconstructed Totentanz ('dance of death'), an elaborate stained glass tapestry

of skeletons and townsfolk engaged in not so much a dance as a grim tug of war, alternating panels in which either the villagers or the skeletons have the upper hand. At its base, the glass panels burn red, with the famous Lubeck spires engulfed in flames. Meanwhile, two of the skeletons kneel in prayer over the baby Jesus.

All of these scenes, tableaux, snippets of information and direct experiences have informed, to some degree, the present Confection. It acknowledges also the many stories about Marzipan propagated in other parts of the world. It nods its head at the island of Sicily, where Almonds have a rich and deep connection with that sandy piece of earth. It extends a hand of faith to the Orders of Nuns throughout Europe whose clandestine manufacture of Marzipan continued almost without pause throughout the Middle Ages, due in part to St Thomas Aquinas' famous dictum that the ingestion of this exquisite Confection *did not break the fast*. Nevertheless, even St Thomas would have resigned himself to the inevitability of secrecy surrounding the exact details of the Nuns' exact Recipes for Marzipan, and would surely have noted also the practice within such orders of hiding such Recipes inside the mind of the Mother Superior, to be passed on only at the instant before death, via the ears of her successor.

In this Confection, Marzipan is assumed to be composed of three basic ingredients: Eggs, Almonds and Sugar. Some recipes substitute honey or rosewater for sugar, egg whites for eggs – but it is the *Almond* that gives Marzipan both its bittersweet taste and its creamy colour.

Marzipan is remembered differently elsewhere. Charles Butler's *The History of Bees* (1634) contains the following recipe for Marchpane:

“Marchpane may be made after this manner. Boil and clarify by it self, so much Honey as you think meet; when it is cold; take to every pound of Honey the white of an Egg, and beat them together in a basin, till they be incorporate together, and wax white: and when you have boiled it again two or three walms upon a fire of coals, continually stirring it: then put to it such quantity of blanched Almonds or Nut-kernels stamped, as shall make it of a just consistency: and after a walm or two

more, when it is well mixed, pour it out upon a Table, and make up your marchpane. Afterward you may ice it with Rose-water and sugar. This is good for the Consumption.”

Fourteen years later, in 1648, poet Robert Herrick immortalised the Stuffe in verse:

*This day my Julia thou must make
For mistress Bride, the wedding Cake:
Knead but the Dow and it will be
To paste of Almonds turned by thee:
Or kisser it thou, but once or twice,
And for the Bride-Cake there'll be Spice.*

Though questioning the authenticity of Leonardo da Vinci's *Codex Romanoff*, one also notes with interest according to that unverified collection of his sketches and recipes that *Leonardo sculpted Marchpane* into bricks and used as foundation stones for his elaborate models. Interestingly, though the Sisters of Santa Corona made the Marzipan he used, Leonardo believed that only a man could be a confectioner, “on account a woman's frame is unsuited to lifting great weights of Marzipan”. He supposedly went on to list the prerequisites for attaining the station of Confectioner:

“Secondly, he should be clean and clear-skinned — for little is so off-putting to those about to eat his creations as a spotted Confectioner, or one with long hairs which may have transferred themselves from his body into his confection. Thirdly, he should have studied in architecture. For without a true knowledge of weights and stresses he cannot create confections which will stand on their own and not be liable to subsidence or even total collapse.”

Leonardo finally speaks of his confections thusly:

“I have noted, sadly, that my Lord Lodovico and his court digest the carvings I give to them to the last crumb and now I am set to find some other substance their palates shall less appreciate that my works may survive.”

This leads Leonardo to speculate upon a form of the Marzipan that his audience would not be tempted to eat. A mixture so bitter-tasting that after even the smallest nibble, the offender would be forced to put any further thought of ingestion out of his mind. One could speculate upon many ingredients for such a Confection, which would not constitute Marzipan per se but some derivative or substitute substance. *Persipan*, for instance, is a Confection containing not Almonds but Peach kernels.

The adaptability of Marzipan to the confectionary and decorative arts is well documented, in both modern day and historical *Cook Books*. According to a source identified only as ‘Dr Cabanes’ in the *Nouveau Larousse Gastronomique*, the author Balzac was also reputed to have written endorsements for the *Stulle* on the streets of Paris:

In 1884 a rumour began to circulate that the author of *la Comedie humaine* (BALZAC) had set himself up as a confectioner.

No one talked of anything else on the stock exchange, in the foyer of the opera, at the [theatre] and in all the cafes on the Paris boulevards.

Several thousand copies of a curious circular [exhorting its readers to frequent a particular shop selling *Issoudon Marzipan*, and also containing what purported to be an extract from one of Balzac’s novels] had just made their appearance in Paris ...

This circular bore no signature, and it was inferred that it came from the pen of Balzac or that of a friend, editor or colleague. No one else had ever thought of the idea of launching a confectioner’s shop with a paragraph from a novel.

After making inquiries it was discovered that Balzac, though he did not go to the length of taking a hand in the work, patronised the confectioner's shop in the rue Vivienne.

In Persia the use of Marzipan or Marzipan-like substances (in some places called *Mawtaban*, or King on a Throne) has been constant in wedding ceremonies and other occasions relating to fertility and prosperity. Venice, at the crossroads between Europe and the Middle East, was naturally one of the places in which Marzipan initially became available. The situation was similar further south in Verona, if *Romeo and Juliet* is anything to go by.

Meanwhile in Lubeck, also known as the Venice of the North, a trading town through which all manner of goods, including boxes of what the Venetians called St Mark's Bread (*Marci Panis*), must have passed — in Lubeck it seems, there was a Famine ... or the Marzipan ran out ... or an invasion ...

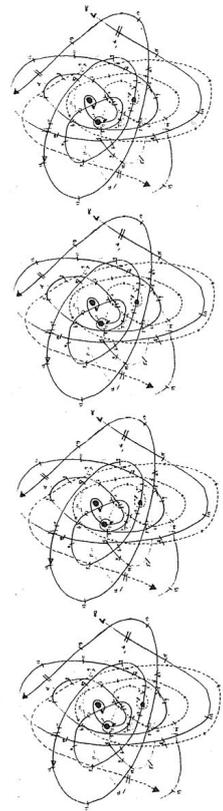
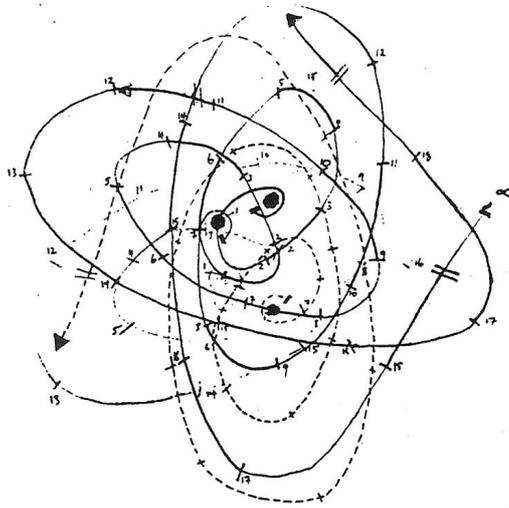
One final item in the exhibition I saw that day in Lubeck was a Marzipan globe of the world, placed on the table in front of the statues. The dull sheen of its surface bore no marks indicating landmasses or national borders — just a smooth, unwrinkled sand-coloured expanse, upon which the viewers themselves could draw imaginary empires. Such a premise might have infuriated an historical character such as Clemens von Metternich, philosopher-King of the Hapsburg Empire in the time of Napoleon, who wrote in his memoirs:

“I was born to make history not to write novels and if I guess correctly this is because I know. Invention is the enemy of history which knows only discoveries, and only that which exists can be discovered.”

While not exactly a metaphor for the present work, the Marzipan globe reminded me that some myths still have the ability to outlive their inventors, discoverers, manufacturers and archivists.

Marzipan is far more complex than the myth invented in Lubeck would have one think. It squats in a ditch, like an animal awaiting extinction. Further vestiges of this miraculous *Stoffe*, including Relics, lie ever beneath us, and shall one day be discovered again. Until such a time, the following nicety will

hopefully suffice. As the interested reader will no doubt come to appreciate, only a wafer-thin slice of this History of Marzipan has been confected.



Die Liebe geht durch den Magen

German saying

(Translation: *Love goes through the stomach*)

1

Eggs

A Midwife

An Orphan

A Boy Catcher

1

A Midwife

*Our lovers' contract — She wears a crown of leaves in her hair — Somewhere there bison lurk
— Wind sings in the boughs — Aye recall our lives as one — At first she found us frozen — Nuts
we could not crack with our beaks — A crooked V in the sky — Aye is wrapped in Hessian —
The rising spires of smoke — His distended belly*

[She's got her eye on me,

there's a fact — she's watching me through the cream-coloured curtain of snow shrouding the branch, has been for the past few hours, mumbling words all the while over that empty box down there in the lane.

Aye return her gaze in my measured way: it's me she's after.

She and aye have been waiting a long time for this.

Our impending correspondence. Our lovers' contract.

My feet slip from the frozen branch. Aye spiral down into the maelstrom of the lane and land softly in the snow. From her kneeling position, she reaches into the folds of her blue cloak and pulls out a few crumbs. Her warm hands surround me. A bough never felt this smooth, yet soft. Aye see another word confected on her lips, a trembling jet of steam on the verge of vapour. Unsteadily, she rises. A cold blast of wind ruffles my feathers for an instant. Now aye'm safe within the folds of her cloak.

She wears a crown of leaves in her hair. Let me perch there in my thoughts, riding aloft like a grandee on an elephant. The wrinkles side winding across her face and neck. May they collect my tears and direct them to her soul for soothing. The fire that glowers like kindling faggots in her eyes. May it keep my memories warm. Aye have no need for earthly comforts. Aye am wrapped in her perfumes, drunk on her fading breath.

Aye!

they call her but she called us Vowel Birds first.

[Ave trudges down the lane,

a trail worn by her mother's line, the secret meandering path inducing in her a kind of daze, each step drawing her deeper into the spirals there, while also leading her closer to death, a Midwife's true and only predator. The Forest rises and rides slowly above her. She enters its conversations with ease, calling out names, addressing the old as the young. The boughs droop; the leaves a brush against her wispy hair, her shoulders. Crooked.

An old woman and a lane drag themselves along under the Forest's outstretched boughs and do not look up.

Somewhere there bison lurk, tomcats growl, pheasants potter.

See the lane sucked under the outstretched branches of the trees. See the snow blobs hanging improbably there, in the air. The gentle give of bough, the passive resistance of leaf. A rain of Vowel Birds hoots down out of the canopy and follows the grain of the lane, swooping low over our heads. Aye feel her warm hands pressing my feathers, holding me tighter, for fear aye might flutter away and join them.

They cannon westwards.

The Forest absorbs us all, the way sand soaks up water: quickly, without apparent fuss, a routine performed many times before, on a thousand other snow-blasted days, to the accompaniment of the same trees, the yelps of the same invisible animals. Each calling out to the Midwife in turn.

Even the twigs, as they joyfully snap beneath Ave's shoes in the clearing, triumphantly celebrate her arrival, as if they are already burning.

See the fog slink through the clearing now like opium smoke.

See the sneaking fog meandering like a curious dog, sniffing, back-peddalling, dripping its filmy saliva.

A gentle wind whistles the fog away, leaving no sound save Ave's footsteps, winking and crackling in the silence of the wondrous woods.

See her house: a fallen fuselage perfectly hollowed by some alien engineer in the great woods a long forgotten time ago. Sounds surface from the past: pots of water sizzling; a woman in the agony of delivery; the wail of the newborn and the miscarried silence. A birthing chair huddles in the cold,

waiting its turn, but the jars once filled now lie broken and the fireplace is not warm.

The old woman pulls me from the heady warmth of her blue cloak.

Coo, she goes, stroking my head, nuzzling me with her nose.

Aye blink, nod and go *coo* in return. Another understanding is exchanged between us, a solemn agreement without terms.

Wind singing in the boughs as the old woman twists my little neck.

No cooing sounds now, just Ave's sad old breathing and a pinecone exploding in the fire.

[She mixes my pink meat

into the broth using a wooden spoon, muttering some words to herself. The spoon swims gracefully through the steaming soup, its whorls refusing to touch the pot's greasy rim, weaving its magic spirals, demonstrating dance steps.

The swollen air shapes my essence into steam, infusing the scented vapours of the soup. As the first liquid trickles down her throat my story begins to thaw, filling up the great round hungry space of her stomach like a live bird in a pie.

My soup has revived her.

Aye recall our lives as one.

At first she he found us frozen, feet up, along the snowy paths. We took a while to thaw then, for the eating. On some days she gathered more of us than she could carry, hoarding us in a hole, where we fused with each other into a solid frozen flock. Then the winter ended and those of us who were left took off, as if the icicles fastening our claws to the branches had melted. That was in the first year. When spring came, our feathers wetly fluttered, and our almond drop eyes opened. That was when we first began to sing our long and sad song:

Aeiou!

Like Ave's, our story began.

We heard the sounds of L —, first the town, then its inhabitants.

We felt the first chopping of the trees, the anxious flights from nests and islands. We retreated to the temporary Forest, the forgiving beech branches,

and the sun, where our chicks and eggs were assured protection on the ground, and where our tiny reed nests did huddle like miniature shanties on the bank of the River.

We took an immediate dislike to the Almonds, of course, and their attendant Bees. The nuts we could not crack with our beaks. Returning to the island despite ourselves, we found the strange green saplings impervious to our claws. While the smell of burning boughs rose we pecked at the worms and moths dislodged by the axe's blows. As the Forest retreated, so too did our shanties. The Bakers came scavenging then, raiding nests, trampling upon our newborn chicks. Havoc spread like a word that previously had no meaning. The small remainder of our flock, our crooked V in the sky, fled south. Then springtime came again. Then even the Almonds, and their Bees, were gone.

[Ave recalls the day of her own birth.]

A spiral screws her deep inside the past.

She remembers her birth not as a series of facts, rather an overwhelming sensation of panic, accompanied by sharp flashes of light. As her head moves down her mother's birth canal and into the world, her spirit sings of loss and bewilderment, violent winds and the fluids draining out around her. She hears a voice repeating a name:

Ave!

Two strong arms lift her high in the air; she looks down at her mother on the ground and begins to wail.

Wrapped in hessian, tied her to her mother's back.

Aye remember she was taken deep into the woods, across the silver River and on, to the burial grounds reserved for birth's apocrypha. See her mother bury the placenta, umbilical cord and a small bundle of leaves, then returning to the forest clearing, the giant tree house and another bulging woman.

Later Ave needs no length of string, no trail of crumbs to trace her way back, at the appropriate times, to the island. Each time, as if by magic, she rows across to the Island. The words tumble out of her mouth like vomit and she pours the contents of the still-warm jar onto the ground. Then she runs off, in

another direction, crashing into the River at a different place, like a frightened animal before a wall of fire.

No newborn's cry disturbs the deathly silence now.

Ave has ceased rowing her log canoe across the water to the Island. The rusted trees alone remain there. L— continues to crumble but death rises still like chimney smoke, in the blasted clearings and the cursed square. The absence of newborn screams has left its mark here — the birthing chair, the pots — and on the forest too.

Infertility has ring-barked the trees.

“Aye must go to L— Aye hear no sounds from the Island,” she says but her legs will not take her there.

She collapses instead back onto the ground, propped up against a green log reading, in the rising spires of smoke and the gaseous stench wafting across the River her own memory of L—'s horrible last days.

[Olden boughs,

like the arms of women, sawn and axed. Saplings shoved, planted, watered, prayed over. A Forest disappearing. The City of L—, and of the Almond.

There it stood, for a while at least, at the centre of its own imaginary Empire.

A twig snaps in the clearing but Ave no longer has the strength even to twist her neck. She hears footsteps, a small child approaching.

Ave's heart beats twice, for herself and for me, like a wing pushing through air, soaring on a final hope. She listens for the child's other sounds, like those of a small bird treading warily over leaves.

A childe, she thinks. Have aye been left with one last life?

“Where have ye come from, little boy? Are ye lost?”

The boy does not answer. He has approached as close as her feet, looking down at her inert body on the ground as if it too is just a fallen branch from a long-dead tree.

“Come closer to me, let me see ye.”

The boy steps forward, so close to her face now she can smell the wheat stalks on his breath. He touches her wrist with his finger. About as tall as her waist, black hair matted with straw, no pants even.

“Yea, aye see ye now, Zachariah.”

Ave reaches out, places her forefinger against his pregnant stomach and frowns. *Just like a woman in her third month.* The belly’s pale skin gleams. She imagines a baby animal curled up inside there. *Impossible.*

Ave sees in his eyes slivers of jet streaked with creamy flecks, thinking *where has he been?*

“Did ye go to the Island, Zachariah?”

She offers the boy a bowl of soup.

He rushes for it, gulping down my strong pink stuffe.

Three bowls in total she ladles for his hungry hands before the grip of it on him loosens. With a hollow croak he staggers forwards and vomits into the Midwife’s waiting jar.

2

An Orphan

*The trees barely hear him — The softened flesh of Almonds — Vowel Birds stopped falling —
Dead ones from the River's glue — A fuselage of ice-fuelled mist — Lips have begun to leak —
The body of a Midwife*

[Zachariah's

swollen belly sings a sad melody that not even Ave's old ears can hear, let alone decipher. His footsteps, like yesterday's tides, she never found. His soft soles crackled no wood; no wonder issued forth from his bare feet. His story too came trudging, for the forest floor is wet with recent snow, and the dead leaves have banked up. The all-enveloping damp lacquers autumn gold and brown. The trees barely hear him. His footprints, yes, like a bell but not his eyes – the sound of those, like Ave's memory, now lie frozen at the bottom of the River, suspended in the reeds.

On the morning he emerged from his mother Lu it had seemed as if it were only in order to disappear, beneath the earth perhaps, or into the air. How he had bawled at being grabbed! Ave had cut his cord sharply, as if sensing a whip in her hands about to crack, or else a genie that might snap its fingers and disappear. Instead, his tiny, slivered eyes had opened for a moment, taking in at once Ave, the whistling fire and his ashen mother on the ground.

Lu shuddered as Ave thrust the child at her breast, breathing now, sitting back against the warm, protecting wall. But the boy would not take her milk. Sapped by her labour and the baby's departure and the cold winter famine, she passed swiftly into Limbo then (following, perhaps, the boy's ill-starred father), departing without a word of warning to either Ave or her son, abandoning both beside a River, the old and the just born in the sound of the reeds, not yet a frozen whistle drifting in the breeze.

When he would not take goat's milk or even water Ave took him after nightfall to the Island, to the shadowed groves in her sliver of a boat, intersecting the moonlight ripples on the river. There she gathered Almonds while the boy struggled with some straw in the boat. As the moon's path glowed brighter across the cleared forest sky (the memory of the first forest's chopping as distant now as a ten year flood) his wailing decreased until by the time Ave's brown spoon of almond gruel made it past his lips it was as if he was already asleep, eating his own dreams.

The softened flesh of almonds.

Thus having made it barely hours into the second of his lives, the little boy drifted into his third: that of sleep, which has no enemies, without a name, upon the almond scented rivers of his grandmother's deliveries and departures.

[Ave reared the boy,

though it grieved her. She called him Zachariah, as if to ward off the fact of his orphanage by alluding to him as a storyteller might, a definite object. The act of uttering more familiar names came too late for her to realise their power, those first few months. Despite his full belly he began to chatter in his sleep, though Ave herself had said only a few small words to him that a mother might, were she not feeling a little as if the child were simply puling for her attention. By Zachariah's seventh year the Almonds, like the Vowel Birds, had stopped falling in the Groves. Ave skittled desperately between the grooves and rows, an upturned leaf revealing a kernel or two, detached. The dark came quicker that winter, the ground already moulded.

Around the time of the Orphan's tenth year of life the Midwife began to hear, as someone waking might, the sound of the oars paddled in the dead light of dusk or dawn, and sensed before seeing the seamed hull of the Boy Catcher's boat, one of its nocturnal recovery operations in progress, the golden hook dragging the young from the forest's black embrace, then the dead ones from the river's glue.

Sun-starved bodies pink in the lantern's light.

Though she knew of horror Ave could not look that way for long.

She took the boy with her and retreated to the forest's furthest reaches, showing him the paths as they walked, though their names (echoes of long dead birds, blasted forest trees and decaying mulch) held no actual meaning now.

Soon enough even Ave became lost and they stood there, in the middle of the forest, listening to its language, the Vowel Birds whistling in the branches.

The old notmother and the justborn Orphan in the sound of the reeds not frozen yet, just drifting in the breeze.

[Zachariah fishes

on a deep forest bank of the River, thinking himself alone, prodding its icy surface with a wet branch, hoping for a dream carp or a sugar whale. The wind makes the ice crinkle and bump; the water flowing beneath it winks like gold leaf. A bird shoots down from the sky and forms a wish in the boy's observing eye, crashing into the ice with collapsing wings, rising an instant later with a fish in its mouth. The boy ceases his grim dredging for a moment; then the splash explodes against the muted drips of the echoed search and prod. He wipes his roughened and dirty forehead on a damp sleeve.

Everywhere the smell of earth and water, the clamour of trees in the wind, the spires of the Forest, its church bells.

He rests for a moment, prey oblivious to his hunter.

Another bird — or maybe it's the same one — dives into the ice. The current takes it downstream, towards L—'s almond green spires, the rust of the big stone bridge, the boats and barges. They cannot be seen but he knows them, has caught enough glimpses of them to understand their menace.

Zachariah waits in a fuselage of ice-fuelled mist that fumes over the river, watching as the green boat glides towards him. Through the mist he thinks he hears Ave's voice but the gathering dark has tricked him.

[A sail bursts

out of the fog then makes for the riverbank.

A dream rolls out, just like a tongue, from the open mouth of a boat.

The dream walks across the ice, reaches the shore, looks up and begins to make cooing noises in a trilled tone.

My feathers stand on end.

My little heart leaps in my throat but my claws refuse to move from the branch. The dream pulls out a long stick.

Aye see red as the load of buckshot strikes.

Aye fall from the branch.

Zachariah cries:

Ave!

The dream whips around to face the noise's probable source, then that empty silence again.

"Ye overe theya, come out at once!"

Zachariah peers grimly from ground level now, lying prone behind the log.

"What's yer name, boy? Aye'll shoot ye!"

Zachariah gets up with a forced stiffness, then stands there watching the dream, thinking *my name is* —.

He goes across to where Ave lies. Her hair moves in the breeze. He touches her hand and it is still warm.

"Can ye hear me? What mighte be yer name?"

Again the boy says nothing, thinking *my name was Zachariah when aye was not there. Just 'Orphan' when aye was, son to none but my empty stomach* or so she said.

"Very well," declares the pasty-faced Boy Catcher, "aye shall introduce myselfe fully and formally, so that ye be undere no illusions as to my beste intentions and highe morale standardes. My firste name though not of greate importance is Karl, there it be. Aye am knowne secondly as the Boy Catcher (though ye need not trouble yer simple head withe suche mysterious termes)!"

Zachariah looks on impassively at this apparition, its funereal dream's flesh almost blue with pale, like a papier-mache mask. The lips have begun to leak.

"Boy, to put it simply ye be the last of yer kinde. Aye have been seekinge for ye a longe tyme now. Many nights ago did aye set out on a missione to save

ye from the horrors of the unknowne. Alas, Ye are not the first Lad aye have discoverede in these many days, tho undoubtedly ye be the laste, yea.”

The boy stands there, staring at the apparition in front of him thinking *would it shock ye to learn that aye too have been waiting for ye to float by for some time, and now heya ye come, just as Ave said ye would, down the River in a green boat? And if she had said ye'd drop anchor and attempt to land a rowboat, what would ye say. And if she had warned me to beware of ye, for none knew where ye take yer captures or what ye do with them once arrived, what would yer fine talk amount to then?*

“My deare Boye, aye do not understand yer language, therefore yer protestes remain useless. Let me put it anothere way: as a saile used to harness winds will often teare, so too yer Forest wayes have proven flawed and ultimately of not mucche goode to any olde Birde,” sighs the Boy Catcher, thinking *our Captaine nevere asked to be dissected like a sacrificial Lambe, smashed into thousands of pieces like an Italiane frescoe, but there ye have it — one can't reliably book one's own departure* saying, “step aboarde the boate and aye shall explain to ye the truthe of this ande othere matters,” intoning solemnly, “concerne yerself not withe this fanciful talke of murdered Vowele Birdes, and aye shall make a Baker of ye yet!”

Then, to underscore his fine words, the Boy Catcher bundles Zachariah and the Midwife into his Boat, laughing and whistling as he does so.

3

A Boy Catcher

Gahhhhr — Multi-coloured streamers of sound — Like fresh loaves of bread — The sound of a Cook producing Stoffes — Things arranged on trays and carried up stairs — How the Stoffe was discovered — A thousand hacking birds

[A Boy Catcher's Boat

wades into the medieval bedlam of the Port of L— like a foreign merchant unsure of his standing yet arrogant enough to suppose that his swagger alone might grant him a berthing space, if not a messenger boy or two to perform his bidding.

The green, flat-bottomed boat automatically performs the tasks preparatory to docking in such a way as to signify its familiarity with the Port's intricate hierarchy of ropes, slowly revolving in its own wake, chugging spirals of sledged ice, as if it be a machine powered by fish beneath the agitated brown water.

A nearby Baker, who has been eying the boat covertly from his vantage point atop a bale of cloth, chewing on what looks like a porcelain Pipe, magically produces anchor and mooring ropes from the mass of hempen eels in the bottom of a basket there. The Baker signalling like a shepherd for his sheep to fall in line behind him, catching heaving the heavy knotted rope like a braid with his left hand, while making a corkscrew motion with the Pipe. His face splits into a leering grin, made all the more terrifying by an absence of front teeth, and a long low whistle of breath passing in and out through that space, where the incisors once were.

He holds a high air, like a miniature Captaine, while his crew hold the Boat fast against the wharf. The strength of the wind increases, causing the green boat to bump roughly against the stone wharf. One of the smaller Bakers decreases this friction by casting a small rope around his person, attaching one end of it to an iron knob on the boat.

The Boy Catcher mutters his approval, a guttural *garrgh* escaping his lips.

Jano echoes:

Gahhhhr!

The Bakers snigger, like a chorus of seagulls!

“Ga-gahhhhr!”

The Boy Catcher’s response is savage.

“Get that after ye, blinding wretches! That’s right, keep that kind of talk up and aye’ll soon be rid of ye! Such tongues! Aye have a mind to clean rip em out! How would that suit yez? Eh? Oh, brave ones ye be! Listen to yer boasts!”

To which the Bakers have no rejoinder, though their silence is pregnant with meaning. They make an odd machine, the doughy clump of them there on the wharf. Finally they do recoil, as if in response to some veiled threat or insult, pre-delivered, yeasty. A gangplank is thrown down, its timber cut from the same green tree as the boat, a hue whose whorl and weave the Boy Catcher recognises easily.

Green and slippery, it smells of mud and leather.

Karl leaps boldly upon the gangplank, his giant strides rising and falling like a tide as he crosses the Void.

“At ease, Jano,” he goes.

The wheezing intake of breath through the gap in Jano’s teeth takes on a more placatory tone. He rubs his chin with his pipe, which in parts is rusted blue-green, the same colour as the spires of the Church further up the hill, their sharpened points colliding with the snow-laden clouds.

Karl seizes one of two bundles of cloth from the bottom of his Boat. The bundle, a small one, as if sensing that this part of its journey is now over, begins to wriggle. The man’s powerful right arm coils itself, like a constricting snake, around what reveals itself as a small human head. When the cloth gagging him — for it is a boy, a wild one — has been removed from his mouth, multi-coloured streamers of sound escape his lips, screeching over the icy River.

Aeiou! Aeiou!

Upon this the assembled Bakers begin to laugh, as if they are Midwives gathered round a birthing woman in a woodcut. Their laughter serves only to send the struggling boy into a complete frenzy, his freed arms lashing violently

but uselessly at the Boy Catcher's huge shoulders and neck. Karl, too, is laughing, a kind of guttural merriment that inspires the Bakers to snigger even more, all the while scratching their pockmarked faces vehemently with their Pipes.

“Gargh, gharg!”

Hauled unceremoniously up onto dry land by a dozen eager hands, latched onto a coil of rope coated with the same mud and leather smell as the bowing green gangplank, there on the ground thrashes Zachariah, the last boy, out of his element. His blue hue has only deepened since his capture and the long journey here from the Forest, distant there downstream, a place that none of these Bakers remembers or even believes in. They eye him curiously, like pirates' treasure.

[The cobblestoned streets of L—

like fresh loaves of bread assembled in an intricate criss-cross pattern, fuse together to form an unbroken carpet of crusts that weaves its way up through the laneways towards the inevitable green spires of the Town. Up and down the streets the Baker Boys skip and dance. How the Merchant houses tower above the lanes, staggered like steps, or two-dimensional pyramids! Behind their elaborate front facades (the port holed upper windows, the gingerbread brickworks) how the roof slopes downwards from a central spine, the clay-coloured tiles allowing the snow to slide swiftly, with ease, to the street below.

How the melted snow runs away down the cobblestones by various meandering paths and alleys depositing itself, graciously, into the River, from whence it heads for the sea. An endless clamour from behind green doors. A thinning of footsteps on the cobbled lane. How The Boy Catcher wastes no time dragging Zachariah and the still-bundled Midwife up the hill towards the House of the Merchant, d'Almonde.

Inside the Baker's Ovens like a gigantic cloud filled with snow, stash the last bales and bushels. Descend into the holes, make room for more, clear away those barrels, rearrange sacks. Let yer bustling reflect the urgency of the season. Let it be said that when winter comes, as it always does, it comes not

with a hesitant knock on the door but a scream. Mothers, galvanise yer children with stories of snow bandits, fierce horsemen whose mounts sneeze sleet, whose cloaks promulgate snowdrifts. For overnight the world will disappear, to be replaced by a white Confection, its smoothness punctuated by small humps, beneath which huddle those poor souls unfortunate enough to have been caught outside when the snow bandits charged the Gate.

Karl peers down a side alley, towards the single step connecting the House to the cobbled street there. Broken glass speckles beneath the lantern light; from behind the side door, its paintwork scorched or blasted, comes the sound of the Cook, producing Stuffes. High above his head, from within the sheer expanse of the House's side wall, a little trail of smoke escapes through a port holed window to join the pregnant cloud.

How Karl scratches at the Kitchen door, and how the Servant Girle answers, saying:

"Well, ye'll be late, now, Karl," taking one look at his two captives — the one alive, the other only half-dead— before pointing to a Trapdoor built into the fabric of the lane *recognising this one, wild and a singer too, ye'll be sure of that and soon enough the ears will attest to it, been eating vowel birdes by the sound of him.*

Karl uses his hook to open the trapdoor, the latch giving way with small shrieks. He lowers the body of the Midwife into the cellar, then leads Zachariah towards the hole, dangling him there for a moment as if deciding which way to proceed.

How instead of pushing down silently upon Zachariah's little blue head, thus making him disappear with a "shoo!" into the void, Karl diligently nails the boards back in place. How he exclaims:

*A Baker Boy is a good thing to be!
Why don't ye come be a Baker with me!
We'll bake us some bread and we'll have us some tea!
And then we'll be Marzipan Bakers, we three!
Yea, ye and me and the Captaine makes three!*

And then continues,

“Yea, a Baker! That shall aye make of ye! But firste, aye must inform yer new Master, the Merchant, of his good fortune! He will surely wish to see this specimen!”

rubbing the little boy’s head in an approximation of affection rejected swiftly, Zachariah’s neck snapping away from his large white hand.

Karl chuckles and carries the boy into the House, already in his mind a final number, like the concluding statement in an argument.

“Yea, the Captaine makes three!”

goes his refrain.

Lu’s nervous laughter disappears down the cobbled laneway.

[Zachariah is made to sit

on a hard chair with his hands tied together in his lap and his feet tied to the charcoal-coloured legs. A white handkerchief cuts into his mouth, completing the ensemble. Karl looks in with approval as Lu ties the final knot in the handkerchief, then takes her own place beside the door.

“Very well, boye, here ye be. Inside the Merchant’s House, safe from the snow bandits and the rain, slave to the grain and vine no longer, chattering aimlessly no more shalle ye be, now that ye have been saved from that which could not help but destroye ye eventually, boye, look at me — a Baker shall aye make of ye. Indeed, indeedy me.”

Karl’s rhyming talk turns to the old stories, to the Marzipan factories, their Ovens and the hot burnt cobblestones they produced, left to cool then stacked on trolleys, trundled across to elevators, within which each inevitable load ascends to ground level and another team of Bakers — their hands callused and cracked from handling the sugary bricks. The cobblestones trucked to where they were needed, along one of the newly-formed lanes, perhaps, or in the Gardens of L—, where the paths upon which the carriages slide had been built out of glazed Marzipan bricks, with glass designs embedded in them.

The Boy Catcher pauses in his recital for a moment, so as to capture the excess spittle brought on by his excessive public speaking in a neat inhalatory gesture, barely noticed by his little novice sitting there passively, his eyes two

thin beads of oil, just like those of the dead birde they had left on the bank of the River.

Karl hears a step above him, perhaps the Lady stirring. The creaking of floorboards. The fire stoked, the water hideously boiled. Things arranged on trays and carried up stairs.

The thick outer coat of the Boy Catcher's story begins to melt, spotting his coat's wool for a moment, before disappearing in the warmth of the roaring fire in the grate. The boy looks into his Catcher's eyes passively, staring also at the dancing flames, the coals that seem to breathe in and out, as if beneath the grate, or somewhere behind it, a giant bellows is being blown, pumping up the fire.

"Sent to the Baker's Ovens, shall he be! Aye doubt but not that we could find a good use for him, eh Beckie?"

Lu brings Karl a small mug of water to drink.

"Yea. Lu, sire. Lu, not Beck. She — "

chooses silence then, perhaps sensibly.

Karl recovers the thread of his story momentarily.

He recalls, for Zachariah's benefit (though the boy understands nothing of what he says) how Marzipan was *discovered* on an island called Ahem, how a mine and tunnels came to be built there and how when the Stuffe they were mining ran out, these same tunnels were used to build a factory, complete with a Baker's Oven, in which huge slabs of Marzipan were *manufactured*. How it became necessary to import Bakers. All of the adults having died off, how the Boy Catchers and Nuns set about catching the children; and how children were dropped, one by one, through the trapdoors leading into the cellars of the City, from which they were whisked, along underground railways, to work in the Ovens.

Lu stifles a sniff, which is greeted with composure by the Boy Catcher.

"So we come to ye, little boye. Ye see this girle here before ye — Lu too has seen the folly of her mother and her father's ways, due in no small parte to the persuasive powers of my sister in salvation, the Nun, long may her work be tinged with blessedness."

He attempts a similar swipe at Lu's long braid of hair; only to be greeted by the same devilish manoeuvrability on the childe's part, elastic as a green

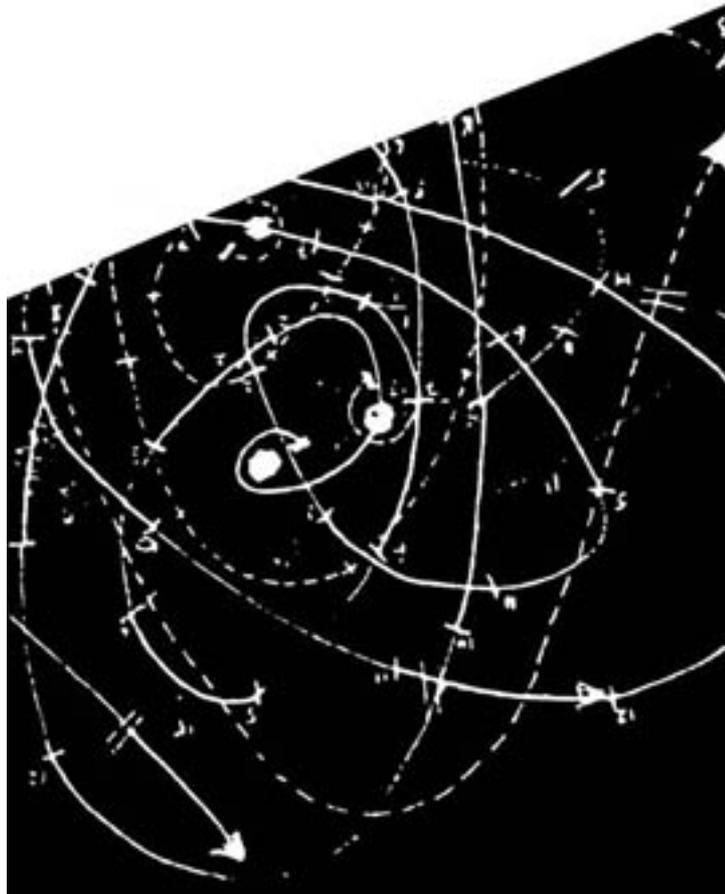
bough. Like a season, however, she has faded. Her movements become more docile, domesticity wearing down her limbs like a planing device. Karl notices.

He stands before Zachariah now, embellishing his declamations with whirls of his hands, the words becoming taut spirals issuing forth from his mouth.

“The hours will be long and hard for ye my Baker Boy, make no mistake about that. Though Marzipan is no longer found here in the ground nevertheless yer work shall continue, under the ground. Ye might expect to work for years at the same thing — peeling Almonds, stoking furnaces, pushing out casts, or applying dyes, say. We shalle see. The days will pass like dull excretions. Ye will eat husks. Ye will continue to work in the old tunnels and mines bored those many long years ago when the Venetian Confectioners first arrived and the Stuffe was plentiful, in the ground.

“The Ovens’ massive industrial works and labyrinthine railroad systems will cram smoke into yer lungs, meanwhile stuffing yer memories (of the sky, for example) along with the memories of all the other Baker Boys miles underground, as if this feat is only ever achieved by means of a crafty diversion,” thinking *the Ovens may useful for the constructions they produce; but the stuff the Merchant and his Wife are eating depends on a plentiful supply of boys, and of Almonds. Both being now in dangerously short supply. Soon, we will be forced to make Persipan again. Unless a miracle ...*

The Boy Catcher stares again into the fire, thinking of his own lungs, how within their bronchial trees perch a thousand hacking birds, their blood-specked guano gurgling up in his throat, his coughing and spitting a daily routine now. How his lungs are themselves a form of Oven, cooking the wheeze of his breath, baking his last days to a hard crust that will blunt the sharpest knife, chip a childe’s tooth, or knock a man unconscious, if thrown as a missile. How the yellowish skin of his own knees, itching beneath his clothing, has begun to peel. How the pain comes only in the night, when the birds inside his lungs begin to squawk.



2

Almonds

A Merchant

A Merchant's Wife

A Servant Girl

A Word Chopper

4

A Merchant

And a beautiful wife — Each Hanseatic, Oriental or Slavic Merchant's disembarkation — The pathways of Baker movement form spirals — It is a plain, wheat-coloured box — A memory he does not know he possesses — Fictioneers from a grander era

[A Merchant on his spiralling

homeward journey, dragged onwards by Fate, his days filled with trip falls, delays and junctures neither he nor the befuddled pony could have pre-guestimated nor predicted, and his nights spent following a trail of breadcrumbs through another person's life, or so it seemed. A Merchant still three hundred miles from the homely port of the Queen of the Hanseatic League, his own L—! The transience of his own life marked by the rock solidity of the box of Lubecker Marzipan he carries with him, a badge of steadfastness his own life and aching muscles cannot match or indeed imagine.

His wagon trundles through war-blasted hamlets, blood-poisoned streams and invisible forests. Swathes of destruction pillage him of opportunities. The ruptured Stations of His Cross — appointments, well-wishings and barter being chief amongst them — force onward cancellations of now-impossible arrangements. His original destinations dwindle, dwarfed by the inevitable waves of commerce coming east, across the steppes, or south, through mountain jaws and thin-towered towns. He is now officially lost a *mullah's call* straying into realms where spires bubble like women with child, or onions with many layers.

On a busy street in one such nameless town, of a Federation only nominally implied in the current constellation of national borders, allegiances and on the edge of a river delta swollen with monsoonal rains, the Merchant sees a Persian, his thick head cloths accentuating the rugged chisel of the man's pleasant face.

His features jump out at the Merchant from the crowd of walking people, few of whom bother to look up at the large man riding his Wagon not of this city, not even of the same cloth. *Travelling seller of Stuffes, illusory.*

The young Persian man jumps on board, rocking the load of oddities, the boxes rattling with the road's bumps, just as if it were filled with tiny pellets, or grains. He grins at the Merchant and then starts counting fortunes on his fingers.

"One for me, one for ye, Merchant man looks just like his donkey! Italiane, sire? Englische? Pray, what brings ye to Persia, Sire?"

"And what brings ye to speak Englisch like a native and yet have no proper regard for the etiquette of business conversations!" retorts the Merchant, though the thickness of the Britannic vowels leaves a crusty residue over what he had intended to express as outrage."

"Sire! Of course, ye be right. Pray, allow me to introduce myself as Mawtaban. Aye be a Persian, and this be the towne in which aye have lived my whole life. But for these past three months ...What be yer name, Mister?"

"My name," announces the Merchant, unaware that a small crowd of people has also gathered around the wagon, the pony too having paused to listen to his words.

"My name is Lord Peele d'Almonde. Aye am a Merchant from the faraway city of L—"

"Rats!" shouts Mawtaban, laughing as he does so, "rats!"

"Aye beg indulgence — what has a rat to do with the fine city of L—?"

"Ah, L—, yes, she be a fine city, but as far as cities go, ye know V— is the only one for me, or ye for that matter."

The man's manner is only slightly mocking. Peele observes from the way he carries himself and the obvious deference of the crowd that he has stumbled upon a man of exceeding worth and positive virtue. He smiles at the Persian, then offers his hand deftly.

"An honour to acquaint myself with yer business acumen, Mister Mawtaban. Pray, what have ye to offer for my consideration?"

The Persian is holding a box, warily, as if an animal might be inside it. He describes its contents thusly:

“Sire, Lorde Peele, aye almost dare not utter what ye shall presently hear. This box contains an Unholy relic, of maximum aesthetic significance, worth a fortune to me if kept hidden, Master Merchant, ye see?”

“No, aye see a box, Mister Mawtaban.”

They laugh together for a moment. Neither is sure exactly what’s funny. The Merchant yanks on the reigns and the little cart carrying his wares comes to a little stop. He turns and faces the young man, whose beard is perhaps only three days old, his warm robes a little mud-spattered but of a firm cut — in sort, no peasant.

“Shew me the contents of yer box, and aye shall offer ye a price,” the Merchant says, palms upwards.

A plain, wheat-coloured box, though nailed expertly. Stencilled across its flat boards are strange letters whose meaning or origin he cannot fathom. Inlaid with other patterns also, clearly ships or sails of some sort and again that script, not so much words as a series of streamers, flying triumphantly from right to left.

It has a scent of Almonds, of which he is familiar – but of other things also, alien as the lettering. Blood and the stuff of procreation, bird scents, sweat ... the substance almost has a sound, a faint whine.

Peele prises open the lid to see a giant replica of a human toe, or what he hopes is a replica. The mere sight of the toe, cut from what kind of giant creation — makes him recoil from a memory he does not know he possesses and slam the lid back down on the thought.

It is too late, however.

Venice appears before him, like the fabled haze of the Crusades.

Within his ears a multitude of voices clamour for vocal expression, though none escapes his lips and the earth remains silent. Indeed, he has all but forgotten that he is standing on dry land. He imagines himself in a flat-bottomed boat, smoothly gliding in through the treacherous surf and sandbars, the wooden slats virtually walking on the water, which is black and unguessable as tomorrow’s tide.

[Waking just before dawn,

Peele peers out from beneath the protective shield of his wagon. The horse is still here, he notices. A shimmer of relief runs through him while the sun rises, no – staggers into view. His shirt is sticking to him and his skin feels blistered, like the scurvy. The box lies open on the ground beside him, its lid slightly bashed. No doubt he had fallen on it just before crashing into his sleep. He tries to remember his dream but the details are missing. What was the Persian wearing? Was it a cassock of some sorts?

Aye have been druggede. Good-natured haggling and easy banter, all merely a front for a subtly maniacal purpose? Mayhap. And but, why. Exact. Or was it just weariness after all that led me to accept aimlessly, not a care in my mind for my cargoes' value, not my life itself, which even moments ago had seemed so fair?

Again he sees the box and again the recoil of his head and body from the memory of its contents strikes at him.

His annoyance grows.

It has been snowing.

The road has disappeared, though a rumour of its path can be discerned beneath the ridges of white flakes and cream. The patient horse has been coated with the stuff.

Aye am hungry, and worst of all late!

[He recognises a House,

the front of it, situated directly opposite the Town Hall, on the City Square, containing a dazzling array of objects, odours and mysteries – yes, that's the one. *My House of Commerce. That damned Persian! Druggede! To not even recognise one's own House!* Even through the green-tinged fug of his addled vision, however, Lord Peele observes a change in the tremor of the Town – as if in his absence a charge has been detonated, or a fuse snapped in two, releasing pressure. Something has set the bricks of the houses to a gleaming grey. Though the snow has fallen already the walls of the buildings betray the

ineluctable symptoms of decay. Lord Peele's whiskers begin to turn on their ends, as if twisting away from an idea Lord Peele could scarcely entertain.

Arranged in an inverted pyramid of commerce, with show room on the ground floor and immediately behind it the warehouse and its splendours; that's how he remembers it, anyway. Scarcely seems like that now, here, under the slight shelter of the recess before the door. Above him the living quarters, and the Dining Room, shortly to be populated with guests, and the Bed Chambers, shortly to be furnished with his fresh collection of objects from far-flung places, drapes and materials from Damascus, embroidered quilts from Genoa, candlesticks and scented lamps from St Petersburg.

And then there's his beautiful wife, who they say comes from V—.

At street level, in his show room, Lord Peele recalls displaying boxes whose lids had been levered open, to be perused by travelling noblemen, their strutting wives, the odd member of the clergy. Depending upon the day of the month one might find there rope, spice, a chair, clothe, dried meat, wax, grain or wooden toys. All confected, and from Marzipan too. Or so it seems now, in this weird precipitous dim, over everything the faintest of pink lights, emitted by the faraway planet, Marz, in the ascendant House.

The sum of his stock has been spirited elsewhere, and the rays of planet light shine over empty boards.

He has never needed or kept an inventory of his wares, for the Bakers, as if just sprung from the oven, skip through the streets announcing in fine, shrill voices the arrival of this or that sailing vessel, these or those wagons, one or the other solitary horseman, making it easy to surmise the reason for each Hanseatic, Oriental or Slavic Merchant's disembarkation before his Confectionary door. Stepping smartly to avoid the small fires of the fishmongers, the Bakers also spread information relating to more mysterious wares, whispered beneath tallow-scented cloaks, just out of hoof-range, rumours of Stuffe.

Peele notices, almost as an after-thought, that the streets are now empty. Usually, it is the Bakers who are everywhere, he thinks *that's it, the season has changed. They're safer underground, now the snow bandits have been let loose. For the next trimester no longer shall they trundle carts and trolleys more ancient than the town itself, their rustic wheels striking sparks from the*

worn-smooth cobbles as they pass, chanting tunes overheard on the decks and landing stages, through the slumbering show rooms, down more steps to the musty cellar, shifting bales of this and that to make room for what is expected, goods whose sojourn within these warm, solid-brick walls might last only a matter of hours, before being exchanged for yet another cartload of stuffs, whose own destination, unknown to it, might not be revealed for days or weeks, depending on the next maritime arrival, a horse's whinny, all whistling that same tune again, and none of them over four feet in height.

Upon his return to L— this snow bandit evening, the remembered pathways of the Bakers' movements form spirals for his dazzled orbs: shuttling imagined orders and lines of flight, their labour's bi-products transformed into food, or temporary sleeping quarters, each influx of goods and humanity greeted with the same glinted eye as the last — another opportunity for barter, interest, dividends. Even the seabirds share in the foreknowledge of L—'s prosperity, endlessly re-arriving, like a briny morning catch dumped on the wharf's long cobbled strand, picked over by fishmongers, messenger boys and Merchant's wives alike. Sleeping now, like a River's waters trapped beneath the winter's crust of ice.

[The Cathedral's towers

come into view, piercing the snow clouds and lightening the Merchant's heart. His mind, however, cannot escape the subject of the Persian's box, which he deposits, without even so much as a second of hesitation, beneath the house, in the Cellar.

The transformation of the upper levels, however, not even his weary nose is ready for. The overwhelming scent of Almonds assaults his battered nostrils as he realises he has been walking through a series of exhibits, each of which has been finished, to the last detail, with pure Marzipan, almost white. For a moment he is astonished at the spectacle. Then the gruesome cogs of his mind begin to seek traction. His anger and suspicion erupt.

“Blanche!” he pronounces.

His wife looks up from her Fiction and beams.

“Peele! Ye have arrived! We were beginning to wonder whether ye would make it, with the snow bandits and —“

“Indeed,” mutters her husband quietly, “and aye am beginning to wonder, Blanche, what has been confectioned during the trimester aye have spent away from this House.”

“Oh, that. It’s nothing. Aye’ll explain later.”

“Aye think ye’ll explain it now!”

“Well aye judge it better,” Blanche concludes, “to leave what’s beneath us where it lies — being, unlike ye, unwilling to waste time on regrets.”

Peele remonstrated her severely but she would not budge.

“Having trodden the traders’ paths for three cycles of the moon and more, ranging in yer sojourns from the Italiane south and its islandes, to the streets of Toledo westwards, north as far as the Scandinavian pole, east to the borders of Barbary, or so aye approximate now, well, a trifling confection such as a Harem — aye mean, it’s hardly proper for ye to be angry upon that subject at all, Peele.”

5

A Merchant's Wife

*Blowing little jets of steam — Miniature explosions, crystal turning liquid — Her own Harem
— The breasts Blanche would mould from her own — Whole mountains of Marzipan — Shrill
little whistles*

[Blanche

d'Almonde, in her dreams — her arms floating pale and smooth atop a brocade coverlet, the rest of her self barely moving beneath the embroiling threads — is like a horse in the snow, blowing little jets of steam between pursed lips, for even at the top of the house winter announces itself, sometimes with a whinny, at others galloping through the air's ways on steel-rimmed shoes, sparks flying from the fog, fizzling in the sluice of freshly-falling snow, mixed with soot and small pieces of kindle wood, heat blasting the Almond boughs, the brown and stinking coal which she cannot bear, brought all the way from Stettin, in a Hessian sack.

Unguarded, her belongings and treasures speak their own languages in the darkened room. Shortly it will be dawn; the little silver cup knows it already, and gleams mischievously. The candlewick stands blackened and resigned, immersed in its own fuel, awaiting the struck match. The Pot is not here at present. That will be for Lu to bring, in the presence of its older sibling, the Kettle, purring with steam and magic. The great chest at the foot of the bed knows little, being merely a repository of memories and silk scarves. The bed barely moves, intent on bearing its load without complaint, its springs ready to soothe with creaking neighs if by chance she rolls suddenly or gestures at a dream.

The windows are so cold they might crack if they did move, frosted with the night's own decorations, the thin spray of paint offered by the moon's breath against the glass. Across the slumbered town, night plays its final card, laying a thin sheet of snow over the eaves and sloping rooves, failing however to adhere

to the City's many green spires which, like Almond wood when polished and sanded, will bear no sticking to. Daylight issues forth mutedly, like water from the smallest of springs, defrosting the night's last line of defence, causing ice to begin to move. Sound returns to the treetops first, in the form of miniature explosions, crystal turning liquid.

Blanche rolls over into the pre-dawn's gloom.

Her bedding has wound a little over the lump neither she nor the Servant Girl had felt the previous evening. Her curls drift across her face as she dips again beneath the belly of sleep. No sounds now in the town's prewaking; instead, this stealthy invasion, as if powered by some great machine. Its workings, buried beneath the island, pump greater and greater clouds to cover the day, which may never come.

The snow is here already, she thinks. It has beaten him.

She hears beams begin to groan under the weight of snow above her head and knows that the snow will soon slip and melt. Then the trees will begin to release their loads of white confection suddenly, randomly, with crashes, and the mountains and the snow hiding her exquisite Confections will be revealed.

[Her own Harem.]

Such a strange idea. But a perfectly reasonable one — for if her husband could gallivant, stepping in and out of who knows what den or brothel, then a Confectionery Harem was a perfectly harmless diversion, was it not? Within such an Establishment she might express her own desires, embedding the soft, moist Almond flesh of her characters with passions, or mysterious motives, speculation upon which might amuse or divert her for years, if that was what it took.

Peele had claimed that he would be away for several weeks — but that in the meantime, she would be wise to ration her ingestions of Marzipan, as the Famine was beginning to bite at the fresh reserves of Almonds in L—, and his cellar's supply must last them the whole winter. At the time she had scoffed at his pessimism, having just seen a parade of Baker boys haul seventy eight bales of the green eyed wonder nuts, over three tonnes in total, into the cellar.

Blanche kissed her husband goodbye and watched him ride off down the lane towards the stone bridge across the River. An Almond blossom fluttered down from the House's sorry eaves, and landed on the tip of her nose. She blew it away with an irritated puff, then slammed the door, then decided to confection her own Harem.

Returning to her bed, and sketching some designs on a napkin, she could see immediately that the Confectionery work would be beyond even her own prodigious talents. There was the Cook, of course, but she was so old and doddering, it would be best perhaps to preserve her own patience, her own sanity. Mayhap the Apotheker, from whom after all she received her Prescriptions, her little white pills, could share some of the load.

She knew, did Blanche, having caught the Apotheker's eye on many an occasion, that another attempt would prove profitable, though her desire for him be as a zero, on the ground, while his, an elegant figure eight, like the belt that constrained his massive gut. Yea, he would do.

She planned a series of rooms furnished with Confectionery chairs, settees, pouffes and cushions. Even the brocaded swirl of the curtains would be manufactured, the long flowing drapes shaded a delicate eggshell blue perhaps, the window frames chiselled from some suitably hewn pieces, the very carpet woven from tassels of spun Stoffe. The cups and saucers upon the tables, porcelain seeming but falsities, all.

The wine goblets, in that one particular room, their tarnish even would be smeared on, like the calling of a Genie in reverse, the wiping on of the soot and grime that would send her (Blanche) back inside her bottle, or teapot, or lamp — whatever she might choose to confection. The bowl of grapes, for brushing against the skin, might call for the Nun's artistic talents, though of course she must never be allowed to know the reason for the request, only that the fruit (on reflection, let it be peaches, for they are out of season presently) must appear as like-like as the Spring harvest, with a sheen over the skin suggesting a piece of fruit only days, instead of eons, old.

How within each room, a small scene might be represented, starting with a room for relaxing, with cushions strewn as if randomly, the long limbs of a girl sprawling elegantly across the embroidered cloth, her arms wrapped around a burly man's chest, looking up at his face as he swallows another grape. The

grins Blanche would plaster on their faces herself, as well as the sparkle in the girl's eye (in those of the men, small braziers might burn). The girl's skin would be flawless, naturally, as white as a statue's.

The breasts Blanche would mould from her own, a ritual she looked forward to enacting with some delight. Within her loins a tingle erupted then spread to her legs. She considered all of the materials from which she might confect the girl's toenails and fingernails, deciding at last that some shells, the kind that washed up on the beach near the isthmus of the River there yes, they would do. Her hair would present the greatest challenge.

After this first room, she might even confect a whole series, according to various themes (ancient Egypt, something blasphemous, a room containing a multitude of girls, a room in which men only play with each other, a bath house (steam might present difficulties there), a room containing several rooms, each built inside the other, or carved concurrently from a giant ball of Stuffe. How she might need whole mountains of Marzipan to achieve such a wild design. But achieve it she would, with the Apotheker's help or with no one's. How the Servant Girl and herself might need to dig beneath the House with their own hands, in order to make more room for the rapidly expanding Harem, spanning several levels now, each with its own glory holes and spying rooms, lifts and pulleys, bronze moulds to assemble and set the casts, not to mention the crowning glory of the piece, a stunningly wrought Marzipan Madam.

[A small chamber

fitted with several wooden chairs, "The Waiting Room" is in fact a front for Lady d'Almonde's Harem of Confections, which Lu has never entered. Nor has she any need to do so; the bleached white expressions on the faces of Lady d'Almonde's guests as they depart speak entire Novels to her. It is quite clear the real room is nothing more than a method for dissecting indulgences, the men mostly Merchants or Captains for whom the merest whiff of Marzipan might spell the end of such privileges, not to mention Marriages.

The Apotheker, that old buzzard, might well be described as their leader of sorts, the Lady's confectionery paramour. Lu shudders at the memory of her first encounter with him; how he had arrived upon some dull pretext and, once

the consultation was performed, leered as he swiftly sought his own way refreshment-wards, like an old nun impatient for Ahem. She was but eighteen years old at the time, and the Apotheker fifty years her senior; and yet this did not seem to prevent him from telegraphing his oddly impotent desires over her, as a seagull hovers above a half-eaten sugar bun, patient but predatory.

“And ye must be Beck?”

She did not speak.

“Enjoying yer new home, my childe?”

There was that sweating again.

“One day ye will understand how fortunate ye are, to have been offered sanctuary by Lord Peele and his wife. Aye doubt, however, that yer present insolence could entertain such a thing as gratitude?”

Lu watched his mouth then, as though not hearing the words, perhaps hoping to read in his lips a different version of the story she had come to accept as her own. She found no alternative there, however. He brushed past her then, dismissive, bee lining for the small, cold room.

As the door slammed behind the Apotheker on that occasion, she thought she heard a snigger, though it may have been only the wind.

Lady d’Almonde kept the door to the Harem locked; only her confraternity were allowed access, by means of duplicated keys. It became commonplace for Lu to instinctively step backwards when some foul-mouthed Merchant reached inside his shirt for the string upon which his key was fastened. She would not expect to see the visitor again for some hours, or indeed her Lady (though how the woman herself got in and out she could never tell, suspecting but not seeking out the secret passage, trapdoor, tunnel or false wall, whatever it might be, that allowed Blanche to make her dignified entrances and exits).

Finally, the clumsy goodbye gropes. Always the same shrill giggles, a faint whiff of excrement, the beady eye. Like currants kneaded into the Baker’s doughy face, powdered white as if in shock. His hoarse shouts and slapped backs, maniacal glares in Lu’s direction, as if she were another ware on display in the Harem.

Always the same sound, an awful hum.

6

A Servant Girle

A sliver of sharp alarm — Too slow when the time came for running — Her Lady's anniversary tea — The Apotheker's voice — Small spheres of the stuff — Aye was covered in Marzipan — One divine spread of sweet meats

[A Midwife sprawls

in the d'Almonde cellar for the length of the night, rigid atop a sack filled with soft and aromatic nuts. Awaking at what she supposes is dawn, a few slits of light appearing through the planks of the trapdoor, Ave turns her head around, smelling then isolating the provisions and cargoes - piles of sea salt, beer and cheeses, various dried meats, sacks of barley.

Whole pigs, sacks of grain, baskets of eggs, salted fish, barrels of water and alcohol, spherical cakes the size of a human head, plus sausages on strings. Their penultimate quiet revives her. Beside her, at eye level, sits a stack of boxes, wooden, inscribed with blackened letters, flowing like rivers on a map, in several directions.

Her hungry fingers prise the boards of the boxes back with shrill little whistles. She finds the proofs of the Merchant's wanderings: a myriad of jangling beads, cushioned boxes, mirrors and sacks of nuts crammed together in a cosmic jigsaw whose logic she cannot discern, like a carpenter's wife his tools. In her mind she memorises each object, its value filed, its origin noted. She is like a librarian inside a vast catalogue. At the completion of Ave's meal, one particular box still winks at her. It is to her mind the centrepiece, a flat, pale wooden box, inscribed with alien lettering.

Though the Cellar shines with the rumour of her many ingestions, she cannot resist one final discovery. Upon catching sight of the toe it is too late for her to stop the images flooding into her mind like water through a poorly maintained dyke. She doubles over in pain, then jerks violently backwards. Her

head hits the wall of the cellar sharply and she falls down dead on the cold earthen floor.

[Lu's

eyes open with a sliver of sharp alarm. Her feet look as if they have been fashioned from a bough, by some carver's patient whittling. In a moment she is gone from the small room, the warmth escaping from her heels. Cook has beaten her to the Kitchen again. The fire in the grate glows; she has coaxed a tiny fire to sing atop the ash, its tongues long and warm enough to set the dangling pot of water boiling.

Shortly she sets off up the stairs with a great clattering tray of tea things in her little blue hands, one step at a time, as her Lady advises. She looks neither up nor down but straight ahead, at a fuzzy place just in front of her face, as if a book and not a floral doily adorns the crown of her head. Though she has performed the same ritual several times now, nervousness shadows her with a snicker. Her shoes cuff the stair boards with their heels, forcing her constantly to right herself and continue on her delicate, if clumsy way.

A thin bead of sweat reveals itself in the space in between her lip and her nose, trickling down through what she might have called her *snot drain* when she first arrived in the Marzipan house, filled with every imaginable ware save love, and a mother. Caught just like all the others. Too slow when the time came for running. Her grip unsure on the baby as the laughing Nun pulled at her leg. The small flakes of mud and dust coming away from her feet, flying into the Nun's face. The baby's final position there under the tree, hidden behind the stunned chicken.

Lu's feet stomp up the stairs, through the small vestibule outside the warehouse, the Dining Room, finally ascending to the level of the chambers of the Lord Peele and his wife. She can already hear her Lady tossing in the bed. A band of light peeks from under the door. On the landing Lu can make out the knotted sticks of her own arms, slightly pink.

She rests for a moment there, the beads of sweat encircling her face now, creating rivulets at her neck. The tray sits on the small stand by the door. She goes to the doorknob and twists. The rumour of light beneath the door becomes

a solid grey wall, moving at her like a sea fog, changing her serving apron from fuzzy cream to white in an instant. Across the room, her Lady sits upright in her bed, looking towards the window.

“Good morning, Beckie.”

A small and uncomfortable silence then ensues, as it does every morning, during which the Lady considers relaxing her formality and requesting that the servant girl address her as “Blanche”; at the same time, Lu considers the myriad ways in which she may have offended her mistress, and the possible repercussions, reflection upon which might leave her stranded there, with the tea tray, for some hours.

“Aye shall take my tea,” the Lady says then, in a more energetic tone.

“Yes Lady d’Almonde.”

Lu trembles throughout the entire grim ritual but manages to not drop even a mere smidgen of the powdery stuff her Lady likes infused with her tea not more nor less than a spoonful at a time, and never twice before breakfast. The worst of it is over when Lady d’Almonde’s eyelids slide over. She is not asleep, however.

“More tea, my Lady?”

“Oh yes, indeed, quickly now Beckie!”

“It’s Lu, my Lady. Aye knew ye would like it, my Lady. After all, Lord Peele did purchase it especially in — “

“The next mention of that man within my earshot will be yer last utterance upon these premises. Do ye understand me, Beck? Damn ye, get me some more tea! Where in Hades have ye hidden my tea?”

“At once, Lady d’Almonde, aye meant no offence.”

“What on God’s earth do ye know about offence, Miss Beckie? How dare ye use the word “meant,” from this moment forwards, hear me?”

“My Lady, aye — “

“Get out!”

“As ye wish, Lady d’Almonde.”

“Get out!”

On the landing, Lu slurps thirstily at the last drops of her Lady’s anniversary tea. Three months now she has been working here, and Lady

d'Almonde still mistakes her for Beckie, who was taken away in a box, her hands and wrists gone porcelain-like, they said, as if she were growing into a statue.

Whether aye be Lu or Beck, my life has been a fortunate one.

Lu scolds herself quietly, for the tea is now only lukewarm, causing the Stuff at the bottom of the cup to coagulate, rather than dissolve. So she uses her index finger to scoop out the stuff.

A voice curls up towards her:

“My dear girl, have ye been drinking yer Lady’s tea?”

“Master Apotheker! Aye was only –”

The gentleman waiting at the foot of the stairs allows the slightly bemused expression on his face to lapse before replacing it with a grim politeness.

“Out of my way, childe.”

Lu’s face flashes scarlet as the Apotheker walks stiffly up the stairs.

[The Apotheker’s voice

remains even, placid.

“Lady d’Almonde, am aye to understand that ye have within yer own house a Servant Girl addicted to my prescriptions? Forgive me, dear Lady, but aye suspect ye may indeed be slightly muddled in the head, to allow a mere childe to ingest such strong stuffs! A mere childe!”

“Master Apotheker, aye can assure ye that the girl will be punished!”

“My Lady, the girl can wait. For now, as if to force reason to fizzle away entirely, leaving only madness, ye proceed to disrobe before me, displaying yer womanhood in a highly provocative manner, and then conclude by suggesting, as though it were a mere trifle, that aye might care to concoct there ‘a replica of what the good Lord in his wisdom created there the first time.’ My Lady, aye have no choice but to reduce yer prescription of Marzipan from daily to never!”

“Never?” Lady d’Almonde whispers.

“Nay, never!” the Apotheker chokes, whipping his arms into position by his sides, the fingers of his hands forming fists.

“That being said, should it be a facsimile ye are seeking, my humble services may be of some value.”

The Apotheker takes small spheres of the stuff and crafts swirling slopes, perfect cupolas and domed areolae atop the saddened slopes of Lady d'Almonde's breasts. He fans his tiny fingers out, smooths the lumpier sections, pinches and twirls the areolae, scraping here and there at an area of the cream-coloured stuff that refuses to be trained. And all the while, as the beads of perspiration sail down the Apotheker's forehead, not a sound coming out of any of them, as if even the slightest stutter or intake of breath might cause the confection to crumble, like the final refrain of a carol.

Lady d'Almonde continues to stand, a thick blanket around her shoulders, watching the boy sculpting magic there, against her skin. How the Marzipan adapts itself to many environments, she thinks. The Apotheker's hands, for example: how his palms are barely large enough to hide a small plum; and yet, see, the paste refuses to stick to him, as though it is magnetic, and he its opposite. Though his affinity for the substance does not surprise her: how he crushes the cake into rugged wedges between his fingers, then slowly grinds the stuff down, finally scooping the softened balls out of the mortar, producing a perfectly formed sphere ...

Her ruminations are interrupted by the sound of the wind changing direction; the windowpanes bang flat against the opposite side of their frames. The fire has burnt down so far it now collapses on itself, ashes trickling through the grate, leaving a few blackened knots of burning ember. Lady d'Almonde watches the Apotheker apply the finishing touches. When she reaches out and touches the mounds, which have been brushed with sugar, like a dune, the stuff is still warm.

“Thank ye, Master Apotheker, to ye my debt is great.”

“Not at all, Lady d'Almonde. The pleasure has been all mine.”

“Aye accept the compliment. And aye would be delighted if ye would kindly remain in our company a little longer,” the Lady continues in a much more serious tone, “for upon us is the night of Lord Peele's Greate Dinner. Should ye grace us with yer presence tonight, likewise shall our honour and pleasure be immense!”

“A fine Sentence ye have confected there, Lady d'Almonde, as sure as aye am the Apotheker.”

“Very well, ye must stay for dinner, Master Apotheker. However first aye must take my bathe. Excuse yerselves, gentlemen. Lu!”

[Aye was covered in Marzipan.]

She helped me to the Steam Room and ran a hot bath. As the steam rose from the surface of the water, aye felt meself becoming intoxicated by the charms of this young girl, whose name aye did not always remember.

She stirred the water, suggested that aye might bathe. As aye shed the years of accumulated Marzipan, did aye feel her eyes focus more sharply upon my body, as if aye was indeed fair? Never having become too maudlin over my physical form, aye felt a flush as aye realised Lu was entranced — almost, aye thought to myself, as if she had never seen a grown woman naked before.

A new feeling came over me then, that known to some as Marzipan, others desire. Aye lay in the bath as she gathered my castings together in a bucket. Through the steam she darted glances at me, her eyes widening as aye soaked me hair. Aye could see that the water would need changing. She'd already thought of that, returning from outside with a large bucket of hot Almond milk.

We began the process again. Aye stood shivering. She tipped out the milk on my head and laughed. Feeling my desire returning aye stared at her strong but thin arms, red with friction. My skin began to glow alarmingly, and aye feared that my passions might carry me away.

She smiled and began to unfasten her boots then looked up.

Aye must have been staring.

She blushed.

“Get out!” aye shouted. “Get out!”

[But no, it is the sound of Lord Peele

coming through the door with his customary bustle, batting at those imaginary stars circling above his head, expecting one divine spread of sweet meats and the slivered almonds Cook carves so well.

“Exact! Beck —“

Too late, the dead girl’s name hangs in the air.

Blanche grimaces. She hears the Servant Girl’s shoes strike the landing.

“She is Lu, my Lord. The Boy Catcher has arrived, as has the Apotheker and the Nun. Aye have shown them to the Dining Table. The Boy Catcher is in a most animated frame of speaking, and he wishes to relate to ye a Confection that is indeed most wondrous!”

“Lu, off then, as ye were. Exact. Inform the Cook that we are ready for dinner. Blanche and aye shall be down presently.”

7

A Word Chopper

*A wail, rent from the silence of drunkenness — His arms just beginning to knot into branches
— Mawtaban never set foot on the ground — “Aye don’t give a damn about those Words” —
Another off-white cube of the Stuff — His Confection steamed blissfully on the cold ground*

[If an Object

can be said to contain the stories of its occupants, like bricks or cornerstones claim a church, then the Merchant’s Table, upon which over the years a grim assortment of sailors, unemployed riggers, prostitutes, Cuckoos and Fictioneers has dined, contains also the spirits of seventeen knocked teeth, five pints of human blood, immeasurable tears disguised as beer froth, plus a thousand stains miscellaneous or unspeakable.

Over the table’s surface now, upon his return, a funereal coating of ash, whether from the hearth, a pipe or the complimentary white cheroots of pure Marchpane, acquired upon the death of Venice.

Such Confections had been popular once, as popular as the written Fictions even, because the ingestion of them, their metaphor, encouraged fortune and the revelation of certain mysteries. Now the Marchpane cheroots have disappeared, as have the Merchants proffering them, the rumours trailing behind them, artful as smoke and silhouettes. Many a Cuckoo addresses these cobbled streets at night but precious few remain peddlers of the real stuff, Fictioneers from a grander era. But the stories of Captaine Nullius have not been heard in this place for years. And but the Famine has now begun to eat at the buildings.

Stairs, window frames and bricks shed their tightly packed materials like an Almond tree flinging its flowers to the spring morning air. Blurs of sand, chips of miniature stones, the overarching film of dust in the corridors. It is unmistakable, this tranquil decay, though few notice it especially, and even they do not care. The Cuckoos continue to stagger through it; while the boys whiz

and skate; and the Merchant carries on selling his wares, though few Traders pass through the City nowadays – just another transplanted Confection of a Place, on a fragile River island, disintegrating from neglect and the green spires' spreading branches, leaves lance-shaped and sharp at the edges.

[He feels his way

towards the Table and settles in the seat reserved for him. Figures begin to appear from out of the fog: his Wife, in a long grey cloak, miserably studying the bottom of an empty glass; the old Cook, motionless at the far end of the room, though her eyes are everywhere; a Cuckoo and his Nun engaged in some profane dialectic, their arguments interspersed with spittle and sharp jabs; the Servant Girl, attempting to tune a lute; an Apotheker, whose wares lie stranded somewhere beyond L—'s Pale; plus a Baker, cheekily puffing on his off-white Marchpane pipe, within which no trace of Stuff may be found (until, upon closer inspection, one sees him *sucking* on the pipe's stem, and the wearing away of that pale toffee over time, till it snaps).

“A tale! Ahem!” says Karl, addressing the Merchant.

The chorus of agreement following this inducement could be perhaps more reasonably described as a wail, rent from the silence of drunkenness or abuse, with no cavern left in which to echo, now the steam from the Merchant's fire has penetrated the crevices of the building as smoke invades the lungs, beginning at the mouth, which is the root. The Cuckoo's mouth forms an “O” cutting short his Nun's summing up, leaving her biting onto her own final flourish of rhetoric like a bird caged only with the little door left open, the prize already having flown into the recesses of history, where there are no Words and Vowel Birds do not exist.

[Mawtaban's Tale

comes even more slowly still, though the audience is already assembled around the Merchant's table, and is also eager for news of Karl's hunt through the weird Forest, the rare prey he pursued there, its final and sorrowful

mystery, the Merchant's House being a catholic establishment of sorts, antique in outlook and sentimental in persuasion.

"Once upon a time heals all wounds," begins the Merchant, "Mawtaban the Word Chopper was only a boy, his arms just beginning to knot into branches, the muscles beneath his skin swelling slowly, like tulips. The Forest rhizome into which he was born had evolved over many generations, as a rat colony develops its own hierarchies and lines of communication, breeding and enduring, evading Roman legions, hordes of Goths, stampeding animals and the occasional falling tree.

The River, that wound its way around and, in some places, through the ancient Forest, marked a natural boundary beyond which he would not venture (the old men told stories of adventurers who floated down the River in log canoes, never to return; such explorers were commonly regarded as heroic but foolish; by the time he was born, such yearnings for foreign lands might be said to have died out altogether amongst them).

Mawtaban was born into Ave's hands, like the others.

She it was who named him, after his mother disappeared.

[Mawtaban never set foot on the ground.]

His life consisted mostly of swinging or jumping from branches, eating and listening to the old Stories that sprung up out of the ground, choked with loud vines. Therefore, when the Venetians came up the River in their sailboats, in order to make forays into the woods, Mawtaban (like his brothers) barely noticed.

Using elaborate nets and devices the Venetians — strange men who spoke Italiane — trapped Mawtaban just like his fellow hunters with an ease that demonstrated the eerie ingenuity and power of their arts and quickly succeeded in convincing the Forest people of the existence of a fine (but still invisible) City called L—. In those days, of course, L— was not even a thing in name; the "City" was merely a ramshackle assortment of lean-tos, sails and huts.

After a youth spent fossicking for food, hunting pheasants and sleeping in trees however, Mawtaban appeared to believe quickly in both his new home

(a ruddy wooden hut on the one street in town), and his new soul. For by entering the town, so the Venetians said, Mawtaban had divested himself of his pagan follies and had become a member of the Cuckoo religion.

“Mawtaban, from now on ye be a Word Chopper. Do ye understand?”

“Yea.”

“Silence!” the Venetian shouted at his new apprentice, then gestured over the River to the far bank, where a jumbled section of Forest sprawled.

“Do ye see all those Words there? Aye want ye to chop all of those Words down. Do ye understand what aye am saying?”

“Aye don’t give a damn about those Words”, said Mawtaban, as though not even speaking a language at all.

Under the spell of the Venetians, therefore, Mawtaban was enlisted as a Word Chopper.

He fell to his duties with legendary vigour, clearing whole swathes of Words, whistling tunes all the while, taking great care to chop even the smallest branch or twig so that the only remaining evidence of his former life and language resided beneath the earth itself.

The Venetians let it be known that the whole Forest must be cleared of women and children too, the trees torn down and Almond groves planted in their place. The wonder nut must grow, and supersede the old forest, whose shrieks of protest no one bothered listening to, for the Venetians had begun feeding the people small cubes of a white Stuff that stopped them from feeling hungry.

The Venetians looked on Mawtaban’s work with glee.

They set him a further mission, which they hoped would seal the fate of the forest and its now-blithering people for good. He was to travel deep into the Forest and chop down a Story, a fine and tall one, very stout, belonging to the Midwife.

It might take him some time to chop all of its Words down but chop them down he must.

Then, with the resultant sentences, Mawtaban must build a new story, regarding the finer points of which he might expect a revelation some time soon.

Mawtaban accepted his burden with a sense of wonder.

Such fine schemes these Venetians set in motion! Why, in no time L— had become a Town, then a City. A stone bridge now linked the Island to both sides of the River. *Soon the Forest will be totally destroyed*, he thought as he chewed down on another off-white cube of the White Stuff, which he had heard one of the Venetians jokingly refer to as *nullius bread*.

[He made his determined way

out of L—, stepping briskly to avoid arriving in what was left of the Forest after dark. When he reached the other side of the River he silently crossed himself, then whispered a hesitant Recipe. His time in civilisation had made him wary – nay, petrified – of the Forest’s now-alien noises, its embracing pitch-blackness, not to mention its ability to menace and expand in size.

He entered the conversations of the Forest like a prodigal son whose only interest is in retrieving a few forgotten objects, the bulk of which had made them impossible to take away in the first place. He no longer had ears for the noises of the invisible animals; the scents of the flowers did not appeal to his nose. He stepped over twigs and fallen branches as if they were dead beggars. Silently, with great concentration, the Forest brought to bear the full weight of its majesty upon him. He brushed it aside as he had seen a Venetian dismiss the pregnant woman begging him not to chop down Ave’s House.

Mawtaban lit a little fire and sat down beside it, comforting himself with another brief recitations of a Recipe. He drank a cup of milky white Almond water, took up his axe and began searching for the Midwife’s Story.

It did not take him long to find her.

Her Story reared up as if asking to be told.

Without hesitation, Mawtaban made a score of incisions, severing the life coursing through the Story.

A mighty crash followed, then that silence again.

The next morning, Mawtaban woke with a loud yelp.

He had been dreaming the City of L— in miniature, complete with delicate, hand-carved crucifixes and tiny wooden People. He recognised himself

as one of the wooden confections, placed opposite the familiar lines of Venetians before the altar.

Suddenly, mid-way through some ritual service, a giant boot trampled upon the first line of Venetians, crushing them like a row of matchsticks. Persipan had only a moment in which to escape before the boot came crashing down again, completely destroying the rest of the Venetians, as well as everyone else.

The dream perturbed Mawtaban greatly.

Looking across at the giant fallen Story he noticed, not for the first time, that the Forest was completely silent.

He coughed once; to make sure it was not his ears failing him. The sound ricocheted off the plots and the shivering leaves of the fallen tale.

Mawtaban looked around him. The glade in which he had made his camp was being invaded by fog. Great masses of fluffy wet cotton fog.

Encircling his legs.

Making his axe slippery.

Then the Confection solidified into mass. He held onto his axe with a premonition of danger and commenced dismembering it, chopping its Sentences into neatly sized chunks.

Mawtaban busied himself constructing his own Story all that morning, taking more care than he perhaps needed to for it was no simple design. *No fear ye, he thinks, mine is an elaborate Confection, complete with platform, railing, stairs and an intricate trapdoor system for removing my clothing as aye shoot neatly through the hole.*

As Mawtaban laboured away, gaining more pleasure from his efforts, the solid contraption rose before him in the glade. By sunset, it was ready for a trial run. Mawtaban placed the rope around his own neck, stood over the trapdoor and, with his right arm extended as if preaching, yanked the lever with his left.

It worked. The body of the Word Chopper swung naked, half below half above the trapdoor, while his Confection steamed blissfully on the cold ground.

[Another kind of silence descends then,

as the Merchant's dinner guests ponder the physiological and spiritual implications of his gruesome Fiction, avoiding the glare of his manic twin orbs, though some do manage a nod in his direction. Those of them who are familiar with the story sense in its conclusion a final dismissal of something: that the Forest, after all, was right. That Mawtaban, a prototype, their ancestor, had been tricked several times over, not only by the Venetians (who ascended to Ahem) and L— (which disappeared) but by that very desire that made the seeking and felling of Stories compulsive. That turned Confections unreasoned, or else reason only to themselves, avoiding all prodding, like fragile eggs, only made of Words.



3

Sugar

A Nun
An Apotheker
A Cook

A Recipe for Marzipan Lamb

Ingredients

2 jugs of Jelly (assorted colours & flavours)

500 cakes porridge

50 glace cherries

2 weights Marzipan

1/2 weight of Persipan

Shredded coconut to taste

Whipped cream to taste

2 barrels diced fruit (seasonal)

2 spoons of Jam

1 weight of Sugar

2 jugs of treacle

1 spoon of Lard

Peppermint toffee (for Lamb's teeth)

Icing sugar (optional)

8

A Nun

*Jellied innards and a blanc-mange brain — The freckles on her broad cheekbones — St
Thomas Aquinas — The Sisters of Santa Corona — No less than a scale model — A
jigsaw jumble of spiralling gables — Love goes through the stomach*

[The Nun's tongue accepts the wafer

like a bird's claw gripping a bough.

She swallows her Indulgence silently, returning to her seat in the small votive chapel. As she settles into her post-communion reveries, the novices begin to sing something in Latin, and the recuperative powers of the *Stuffe* revive them all until, during the hymn's triumphant final chorus, she bursts herself into a brilliant harmonic, the waxen smile on her contemplative face betraying nothing of the constant pains in her stomach and the absence of love on her meditative palette, though the Priests in their stern speeches preach of the importance of Love and the older Nuns, even from the sheltered vantage point of their old age's cages, look disapprovingly on a faith devoid of passion, in the holy sense.

Though her *Cook Book* contains no reference to love as such she, unlike her brother, Lord Peele, can remember their Mother's loving hands, her smooth arms whose hue reminded her of their childhood home, the houses of the city in the hills coloured like human skin that has seen the first of summer's hot rays.

The Nun remembers chasing her first girl through the stumps of the old Forest, barely constricted by the long flowing robes, seeming to leap from one tree stump to the next in a game of hot rocks. She remembers the girl's backward looks, terrified.

"Beck!" The Nun calls, "Beck!"

then watches, inert, as her prey crashes into the River at the tail of the bend, where the chunky ice sludge is deepest.

[After supper

the Nun joins the older Sisters in a recital of the *Way of Terror Nullius*. The prayer, traditional at the beginning of winter, commences with the following words:

“O Terror Nullius! Most Adorable Saviour, look down upon me, prostrate at yer feet, imploring yer Mercy both for myself and for those of my kin. Guarantee our safe passage to Venice — as yer own ascent to Glory was arranged, and procure for us some small place within the Realm of Yer Ahemly Burden. May yer Journey of sighs and tears touch my heart with Contrition and Repentance, and may aye be happy to endure the Sufferings, Humiliations and Deprivations heyain described!



THE WAY OF TERROR NULLIUS:

PARTE

1st

1. Recall how Captaine Terror Nullius, blown across the seas by mysterious Winds, came upon the strange island continent of Ahem and discovered, to his Eternal Misfortune,

that not a Soul worth saving existed theya, save that Demned and Barbaric Cook!

Oh Terror Nullius, it was not the mischievous winds that condemned Yer Name to Eternal Infamy, it was my own Selfishness and Greed in wishing for unequivocal Confections! Aye pray that Ye may assist my Soul in understanding Yer Pain!

2. Recall how the heavy Burden of Marzipan (long may Its Resins perfume these pages!) was laid upon Nullius' sunburnt shoulders and how meekly his acceptance, nay joyous fully intending to feed the world through His Heroic Efforts!

O Captaine, through the Intercession of Marzipan, may aye too come to accept meekly and happily the weight of Yer Burden, and by extension, the hunger of the whole World, so that in doing so, aye may prove my willingness to follow Ye always!

3. Recall how Captaine Nullius and his ship and the Scurvy sailed for Venice. As the wondrous effects of Marzipan began to take hold of him, recall how the Scurvy was spirited away to China!

O Lord Nullius, it was for my own sake that the Scurvy bore yer self and the Marzipan to China! It was for my descent into Mortal Sin that Ye succumbed to the Marzipan's Heinous Administrations. Let my remembrance of this Sacrifice guide me ever in my Journey in yer footsteps! Thank ye!

[The Nun's contribution to

her brother Lord Peele's dinner table is a fabulously confectioned, life-sized Lamb of Marzipan, intricate and lovingly sculpted, complete with jellied innards and a blanc-mange brain. What looks and feels like a coat of wool is in fact the most finely spun Marzipan, a trifling detail the finer points of which are revealed when the Nun stands up to "shear" her creation. The layer of frissed woollen Marzipan, dyed a suitable off yellow, slips off like icing from a wedding cake, or a Lady's fur coat. As the dissection and eventual re-distribution of the Lamb's raspberry-flavoured heart, coconut intestines and sweet beet hooves continues apace, her table companions look on with a kind of gleeful wonder. The blade's incisions in the first layer of skin cause life-like streaks of blood to drip from the wounds. Underneath, the jelly works its macabre magic, giving way to the solid organs, each composed of a different stuff, the eyes and brain especially stimulating comment, though the Nun bristles as the guests devour her creations and pretends not to hear their praise.

Unlike the Lamb, and especially its brain, the consistency of which is quite fluffy, the Nun's corporeal mass — her arms and legs, the straight trunk of her torso — glimmer but wanly in the ivory light, her skin littered with tiny spots, like the surface of a planet. Her hand, as it slices the Lamb's sugar tail away, looks as if it has been sprayed with cocoa or chocolate. The palm's warm pink relief, exposed when the tail is placed there, inspires again the table's applause. The freckles on her broad cheekbones and nose create a *trompe l'oeil* whenever she raises her eyes to look across at her table companions there.

Meanwhile the Apotheker observes the ceremony silently.

Zachariah sits rigid in his own little seat next to the Boy Catcher.

Between the Nun's tusked arms her dissection dance weaves a stronghold of both knowledge and pleasure. Within her catholic sanctuary the ancient arts of confection continue unchecked, encompassing procurement, manufacture and distribution, an operation to rival Peele's in scale, superior to it in both quality and reputation, though it be clandestine. What miracles she performs in her nunnish Pharmacy she will never admit; but the town's social fabric has long been woven with rumours that she and her kind still practice the old Persian writings, the ones visible on the wooden Marzipan boxes that

trundle in and out of the Convent like coffins or constructed machines. Some believe these holy women traffick in more than simple scripts; that their places of prayer are in fact shelters of another kind that, like a body bearing a virus, must be “quarantined”.

“Not so!” counters Peele, “In my house, Confectioneers of all spots are welcome, even ye with yer silly nunnish bluster!”

“My dear brothere, we Nuns have a perfectly sound reason to occupy ourselves with this magical stuff – for was it not Thomas Aquinas himself who decreed that to ingest the Marzipan does not break our fast?”

“That is true.”

“Surely ye are familiar with the expression ‘Love goes through the stomach’?”

“Aye am, in deed.”

“Do ye not know then that before Love enters the Stomach it must first pass through the Divine Mouth and slide down the Mystical Throat? And that after leaving the Stomach it must sit patiently in the Ahemly Bowel, to be finally expelled by the Holy Anus? Talk to me no more of love or stomachs!”

With that Peele falls silent and ponders the physiological implications of the Nun’s words.

She is correct of course: the many fasting days do indeed precipitate meatless meals. Her passion is holy indeed.

By now the dinner guests have almost ingested the entire Lamb, save its teeth, which the Nun accepts, meekly, being of her own confection.

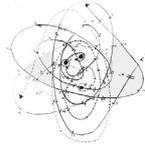
How they snap between her own teeth!

Her eyes light up at the cleansing taste of peppermint!

The Apotheker will have nothing of it, however, Convinced that what the Nun has presented constitutes a Divine blasphemy, he strides out of the Merchant’s Dining Room and heads for the Sitting Room, shouting:

“If ye be impressed by such profanity, then surely the shock ye shall receive upon witnessing my own Confection will steal the very wind from yer stomachs! Follow me if ye dare!”

Having nothing better to do all but one of the guests accepts the Apotheker’s invitation. The Nun, meanwhile, chooses to amuse herself with further recitations from her *Cook Book*.



THE WAY OF TERROR NULLIUS:

PARTE

2nd

4. Recall the Emperor's acceptance of Terror Nullius as his own Son, their interlude (in disguise) amongst the People, their ingestion of the Marzipan and their eventual separation. How oppressive that experience must have been for both of them! A sword of anguish and betrayal must have pierced the Emperor's Heart especially!

O Emperor, may the Compassion that existed between Ye and the Greate Captaine pass on to me, and may aye share in His Love for Ye. O Mighty Terror Nullius, Intercede for me with Yer Father, that aye may be saved from the Dearth of all Good Things that is yet to come!

5. Recall how the Genie, seeing Captaine Nullius and his donkey in agony, offered the great Captaine her bottle. How Nullius put it to his lips and was instantly assimilated! Then, how the Genie and the Donkey commenced their long wanderings in Mesopotamia!

O Captaine of My Soul, let me too Ingest the Marzipan! Let me hunger for nothing else! May my enemies in this World be crucified to me and me to them and let me not shrink from pain! Rather, may aye consider myself lucky to

have been chosen to follow Ye, on Yer Journey, for Yer Eternal Burden's sake!

6. Recall how the women of Venice wept openly upon seeing the Greate Captaine returning once more to save the city from Napoleon! How he did comfort the women, though he was in chains, saying: Do not weep so openly for me, because theya are other cowmen after me for whom ye couldst more profitably shed tears!

O Admiral, let me mourn Yer Suffering at the hands of Napoleon, that in doing so aye may be comforted. Let my prior ignorance of my Failings enable me to escape the awful judgement handed down by Yer Wise Self in Venice!

From the Sitting Room comes the sound of astonishment.

Closing her *Cook Book*, the Nun gets up and goes to the doorway, where the following scene greets her.

9

An Apotheker

*His chronik arsenal — Yes, it is snow — A fine distinction — carvings of Marzipan body parts
— Lovingly crafted in several life-like colours*

[His prescriptions

alone could fill a novel with gory or depressive detail; the full gamut of his chronik arsenal might stun a reader at several yards; the shelves of his Apothekery do indeed groan beneath the weight of tomes both edible and consultable, but the majority of the latter, truth be told, consist of Confections of the Grimmelshausen variety, and anything whose title of first few pages mentioned the word “chirurgery”.

See the dust, no, the shavings that have built up over the years, in corners, beneath shelves, settled and ready to be spilled from buckets or sacks. See the row upon row of glass jars, of a kind only a Midwife used, and the various Stuffles, ground compounds and tablets, brass-coloured labels and steel counting scoops. The showers of dust falling now in the pressurised space of the Apothekery takes on the appearance of sleet, or, yes, it is snow.

Comes the sound of the Apotheker clearing the phlegm from his throat and the resultant spit into a nearby receptacle.

His voice, free now from the clinging film of saliva, booms across the table, to where the Nun stands, hand in hand, immobile as a statue, as if awaiting his Expo.

“My dear Sister,” he begins, “come in and take a seat. Ye have no doubt heard of the Italiane Leonardo of Vinci and his kitchen notebooks, the *Codex Romanoff*, wherein the great scientist and artist expounds upon his mastery of the confectionery arts?”

The Nun inclines her head slightly.

“Aye myself have seen the manuscript,” the Apotheker continues, “and can vouch for its authenticity. We, like Leonardo before us, salute our virginal

sisters, who are ever amongst us, the Cooks be praised. Aye must, however, at this juncture introduce a fine distinction between a mere Cook or manufacturer of Marzipan, and a true Confectioner.

“As ye have no doubt gathered by now,” the Apotheker concludes, “Sister, yer arts, so richly and mysteriously demonstrated for us tonight, bear little comparison with authentic Confectionery and are furthermore manifestations of a blasphemous inclination. Holy Anus, indeed! My dear people, aye am loathe to accuse this good Nun directly of trucking with the Devil; and yet aye find no other point from which to approach the question of her motivations! Be that as it may, aye am sure yer good personages wish no longer to dwell upon such theological trivialities. And rather than enter into some description of the Confectioner’s various arts, such as carvings of Marzipan body parts, replicas of Ahem, imitation fruit, religious statuettes and other confections, aye would now like to present instead, for yer viewing pleasure, my own City of L—!”

The Apotheker strides to the far end of the room, where a large round table had previously stood unadorned (save for a token confected flower in a vase, perhaps a voluptuous rose, its stem the wound twine of green toffee). A large object has been placed on the table, shielded from inquiring eyes by a white sheet, one corner of which the Apotheker now whisks downwards, causing the whole curtain or sail to slide off the mound. The dinner guests surge forward suddenly, excitedly making for the table.

The Nun gasps.

It is no less than a scale model of the whole of the City of L—, the topography of its gingerbread streets and stepped Merchant houses lovingly crafted in several life-like colours.

The Confection dwarfs the Nun and the other guests, but seems to have elevated the height of the Apotheker, in his own eyes at least, in a demonstration of arrogance, that other great trompe l’œil, if any was needed. Zachariah reaches out to touch the town but the Apotheker slaps his hand away.

“Tonight aye am able to state with absolute veracity that aye have myself concocted a new element, and aye have named it Persipan. What ye see before ye has been made using the exact same method as used to manufacture Marzipan, and at one tenth of the cost. Aye challenge ye to tell the difference

between my Confection and what my fellow guests have presented tonight as Marzipan.”

The guests begin to eat the Apotheker’s Confection, with the intent of demolishing the whole thing completely, if only to verify with complete certainty the substance’s fraudulence. The Merchant however notices upon closer inspection of the model town that his Premises have not been included amongst this jigsaw jumble of spiralling gables, despite the authenticity of the snaking rivers making of L— an island. The Merchant’s fury increases when he realises that upon the very spot where his House should be located, the wily Apotheker has placed a small donkey instead.

“Why, ye —!”

Remain calm, the Apotheker thinks but beneath his sculpted exterior, lies buried an unease, a sense that perhaps the tiny figurine, a last-minute joke, a mere trifle for his whirling hands, has cloyed the purity of his triumph.

“My dear Apotheker,” the Merchant begins ominously, his eyes gleaming in the candlelight.

“Yea?”

“Aye believe the slight twitching at yer temple there betrays the falsehood of yer pronouncements. Not content with seeking to erase the fact of my owning the finest Premises in L—, located in the very best situation, ye go one step — nay, ye stumble — too far, into the Ovens of yer own basest instincts. Aye demand an explanation for this profane insult, ye worme! My Marzipan, the Marzipan manufactured for me, is a world-famous article!

“And here be ye, seeking to smear my hard-work, and the sweat of my Apprentices, rescued by my own hand from certain starvation in the Baker’s Ovens, Sire! Ye would do best to heed my Sister’s fine words, Apotheker: love goes through the stomach — anything else claiming to be pure, or indeed a Confection of any sort, constitutes that worst form of falsehood — aye mean, the hollow kind, at whose empty centre lies a stricken expanse of hot sand, a desert verily. This stuffe ye serve up to us as Persipan, my Lorde and Master Apotheker, is not Persipan at all but Poison! Aye shall demonstrate to ye the real Stuffe! Lu! To the cellar!”

But the Servant Girl refuses to go, her hands in a wringing panic.

“My Lord, please! The Trapdoor is broken! And the Marzipan has been eaten! And the Midwife lies dead there, beside the wall!”

“And the Box?” the Merchant asks quickly.

“Here, my Lord Peele!”

The Servant Girl holds out some shards of what was once wood.

The Merchant’s face takes on a slightly green tinge. Perhaps there is some trickery in his facial preparations, concerning the substitution of peach kernels for almonds.

The Nun, still blasted by the Apotheker’s words, allows a mere hint of humour to become infused with her hate.

“Well, aye’ll be pickled.”

Zachariah sits back, looking only a little poisoned. His belly has swollen massively, and taken on a sickly green hue. Tears stream from his eyes continuously. His mouth twists in silent screams. Inside his head he hears Vowel Birds, flying away.

“Send for the Cook!” cries Blanche, in a fit of green nougat rage.

10

A Cook

A thousand tiny kernels — Captaine Terror Nullius — The Cook's Tour

[Cook's

on the kitchen steps, peeling Almonds.

The sack, protruding from the rear of the Merchant's house like a horse from the stable, bulges with a thousand tiny kernels, artfully spilling from the roughly hemmed fabric. As if this kitchen space were a bazaar, instead of a sovereign isle of commerce — see it nestled in its strange bay of prosperity, while elsewhere on the archipelago typhoons and famines strike randomly. The little stones cartwheel against one another, causing the slightest of frictions, manifested in the human ear as a mouse's rustle, a faint switch of paper peeled away easily, showing the tiny beige-coloured eyes, the greenish flesh, slanted feline and soft. The piles of nut and peel grow, the one in a shallow red bowl, the other floating away momentarily as its mass sprawls across the bench.

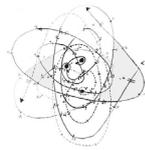
“Lord Peele's here,” whispers Lu from the pantry door, “plus the Apotheker and his boy, a Nun, one Cuckoo, a Boy Catcher and someone else aye don't recognise. Lady d'Almonde says to say she's wanting to know if yer Confection is finished yet — the Nun has already dissected her Lamb, the Apotheker and the Merchant have come to blows over an gigantic replica of the City, made entirely of Persipan according to the discovery of false designs! The Boy Catcher's told his entire life story and worst of all, the Cuckoo says he's invented Persipan! Lady d'Almonde's spitting whips! But worst of all, the Baker Boy, Zachariah, has taken an illness of the stomach! Lady d'Almonde sends for a poultice!”

“Yea?”

Eva boils then pounds the Almonds to a Paste. The Almonds, Eggs and Sugar, arrayed in an arc on her smooth wooden bench, appear as offerings on an altar. Her hand barely trembles as she turns to the relevant page in her Cook

Book, stirring the ingredients all the while with a spiralling motion, her wooden spoon never once touching the rim of the bowl, then adds the secret ingredient.

Dipping her index finger into the bowl, she scoops out a small amount of the *Stuffe* and ingests it. A slight wind disturbs the well-thumbed pages of another *Cook Book*, thicker and larger than the Nun's. Oblivious to the Servant Girl, Eva licks her forefinger, turns a page and continues reading.



THE WAY OF TERROR NULLIUS:

PARTE

3rd

Recall how, imprisoned on Napoleon's floating guillotine, Nullius felt once more the horrific sensation of Marzipan sickness spreading over Him like a Fug. How he fell from the Gondola, into the open arms of a group of Cuckoos who, aided by the general confusion, hastened Him into the Labyrinth!

Oh Brilliant Captaine, now that aye have contemplated Yer third fall into Torment, aye ask that Ye forgive my frequent falls into Iniquity and my slowness in lifting myself out from that place's miserable pessimism. Let my remembrance of Yer Abduction make me hate this aspect of meself even more!

Recall how Nullius lay down upon the Rack and extended his arms Ahemward, so as to offer to whoever might be listening the secret of His discovery of Marzipan and the weight of his gigantic Burden! In the end, theya were no Witnesses to the inexorable bow of the Captaine's head; likewise, no Listener strained his ear for the sound of Terror Nullius breathing his last!

My tortured and interrogated Captaine, May aye never again Forsake Ye, or neglect the Memory of Yer brutal treatment, at my own hands! From this time forward, may aye live only for ye. And let me die loving ye alone, as per our agreement!

Recall how it took Terror Nullius three weeks to die, his departure delayed only by well-meaning but pitiful administrations of Marzipan by the secret army of Cuckoos! How they stole the lifeless Body of the Saviour away from the Labyrinth, and how they dissected him!

O Captaine, aye reverently kiss the Marzipan that encloses yer Relics, for in doing so aye recall that through Yer Entombment, Yer Resurrection in the Hearts of the Cuckoos is guaranteed! Mind ye not the Confections of this World! If ye have risen with Captaine Terror Nullius, yer passage to Paradise is assured, for He dwells in the City of Marzipan!

*In the name of Marzipan,
and of Persipan,
and of our Terror, Nullius,
Ahem.*

“Well, isn’t that something,” mutters the Cook, closing her *Cook Book* with a stunned look on her face, “a poultice, ye say, Lu. My, such silly, boyish stuff! Aye shall show them the fruits of my Holy Passion!”

[The Cook’s Tour

takes the remaining dinner guests towards her Confection by a roundabout way, a slight bypass through the streets of the Sorry Hills, via lanes and passages along which some of them have never journeyed. Where the banked up leaves from successive Famine winters clog the streamlets, the clumsily built drains, where shells outnumber Confections, where the cobblestones are ever slippery and only salt’s scattered there, like food for the Vowel Birds, which remain extinct.

The first stop on their tour — the awe-inspiring Exposition Building, with its gigantic egg-shaped dome — impresses the eyes and, if it can be believed, the ears of the assembled dinner guests. It’s soon apparent to even the most unobservant of them that something is awry.

“What’s that smell?” asks the Apotheker haughtily.

“Unfortunately,” admits the Cook, “preservation is my biggest worry, the mortar no sooner having been pasted than it begins to rot. The process of putrefaction will take long in its accomplishment but the interior, especially, is problematic.”

She had ordered some initial sorties into the Confection by teams of twenty Bakers at a time. Their news was not good: the porridge cakes had begun to ferment. Hence the brewery-like smell of the cobbled lanes. As the decay rippled along the parapets, the Vowel Birds began to eat again at the raisins, nuts, glace fruits and oatmeal. There was no part of the Confection upon which the eye could rest without spotting a band of these determined birds, fringed with bright speckles of Marzipan. Then came a roaring sound and a crackling like lightning. It was a crack in the great Dome. An immense cloud leapt into the sky, volumes of greyer smoke rolled up, and the Dome fell down. A whirlwind carried great drifts of the galvanised *Stuffe* miles in the air. Finally,

the liquid built up from the perspiration of the walls burst through the brickwork — and the illusion, like a gigantic shard of glass, was thus shattered.

The Cook had simply shook her head and started again.

Now the snow has begun to fall, and the small drifts blown against the walls or into corners spread out again, frosting the cobbled loaf stones, adding a sparkle to the raisins in the walls, the embedded glace fruits and the blanc mange cornices there. The dampness adds to the mouldy stench of the porridge cakes. The air's coldness means that for the dinner guests it is like walking through an olfactory mass, each chunk of frozen air exploding in their faces like the memory of thawing soup or bacon sizzles. The Cook's spirits rise — perhaps the snow and the ice have frozen her Confection as is, like a Glacier snail-like, trailing its slime behind it, leaving icicles in the desserts. In which case her anxieties are null, for regardless of the stench and the putrid air, once they are inside the Confection her guests will stand witness to a tabernacle of satiety, over which she has slaved and worked these many long months in isolation, peeling, boiling and grinding the Almonds she requires.

It is a burden for any of them to continue yet walk on they must. The great Dome of the Cook's Exposition looms overhead. The dinner guests cease their whining and puling and, like Pilgrims revering a tall and far-off statue, forget the squalor of their immediate surrounds. This will not last long, however.

“And ye thinke the whole of this, so long in the telling it hurts the nostrils, can in any way outflank or amaze any of my Confections thus previously described?” queries the Apotheker mildly.

“Aye do, Apotheker,” the Cook asserts, “and shall further out-confect ye thusly.”

[The Marzipan Library

sits across the River from the Exposition Building.

Cotton hoardings still cover the shell of the Confection's windows, which are made from sugared glass toffee. The bricks, according to Leonardo's designs, are made of porridge, on top covered by a glue-like layer of Persipan. The walls of the Confection have also been plastered with a foot-thick layer of

yellow Cake at the level of the roof, drenched in some pesticides to ward off the Vowel Birds, who will feed on anything Marzipan at all. One enters the Confection from street level. Above one's head towers a frieze, approximately twenty feet high, depicting workers cheerfully loading boxes, tethering horses, the wheels and snow treads. An archway made of ivy frames the Door of the Confection. Ye enter the Great Hall. An old woman with a balding head and seraphic wings floats mildly in the air, holding a small Marzipan trumpet to her ear, straining for the sounds of rumours, which are not allowed, or calls for help from Amateur Tasters who might have foolishly started on a Confection for which they have no appetite yet, one of the classics perhaps. The Confections are housed in the wings and grand entranceways of the Library. Massive shelves, filled with Confections, groan beneath their weight. Tables, dusted with icing sugar and flour, hold out their strong legs to catch the Confections as they fall, opened at some page, as thin as the finest pastry, or a bride's fingers. The Tasters and Bakers wander at their leisure, their legs scissor-snapping back and forth through the corridors that crackle and wink, being laid with sugars and always more talc, flour and other assorted white stuffes, some of it industrial excess reinvented, or merely the detritus of sugared pockets, wooden Stuffed boxes and Baggage. The main prize here being not the walls even of the Library (though they be indeed edible) but the sweetmeats contained within the Confections themselves, those great old weary arks. The dusted sugar paper calligraphies with like-like dyes, the codex an inevitable sea blue, like a vein beneath porcelain skin; then annotations in the crimson red of haste; plus watermarks and other secret stamps in the spider's silver, like a line drawn on a chart. How the Tasters and the Cooks and the Merchants greedily ingest the Confections, as though their time is short, like Bakers. This Confection has taken the Cook over one year to build, in secret, as it were, on the far side of the island, where the Merchants do not go, where the pools are stagnant, not filled with sugared swans.

“And ye thinke the whole of this, so long in the telling it hurts the eyes, can in any way outflank or amaze any of my Confections thus previously described?” queries the Apotheker again.

“Aye do, Apotheker,” the Cook asserts, “and soon ye shall regret having asked me that rhetorical question a second time.”

[The Marzipan Cathedral

complements the Library Building on the other side of the River like a Bride her Groom, graceful where he is robust, sparkling where he is dense with a single colour, wet where he is dry and wooden, slender where his muscles are coarsely bound. The titanic structure's spires glisten in the white sky. Fjords of light thunder silently, massively, through its candied stained-glass windows and towers of illumination. The entire pulpit, set up and out from the altar, like a promontory on the edge of a continent, has been confectioned out of the whitest Marzipan any of the dinner guests have ever seen, Blanche d'Almonde included. Each row of pews has been made, it appears, out of chocolate latticework and treacle, and the floors beneath them spring, like marshmallows. The crucifix remains only partly constructed, a long, cumbersome looking contraption, not of her making mind ye —

The roof oozes Marzipan sap, not snow.

The Spire glistens with the Stuffe.

Most triumphantly, a gigantic Marzipan Ship lies ready to be launched into the River from the Cathedral's grand set of steps, with enormous chocolate logs placed beneath it, so thus to decrease the friction of its passage, its stern pointed towards the place from where Zachariah had so obediently come, so long ago, across the River there.

"Ahem!" The Cook crows triumphant, the smile on her face expressing more eloquently than can these mere words the Miracle of her Confection. "Aye believe the matter is now settled?"

"And ye thinke the whole of this, so long in the telling it hurts the buttocks, can in any way outflank or amaze any of my Confections thus previously described?" queries the Apotheker yet again.

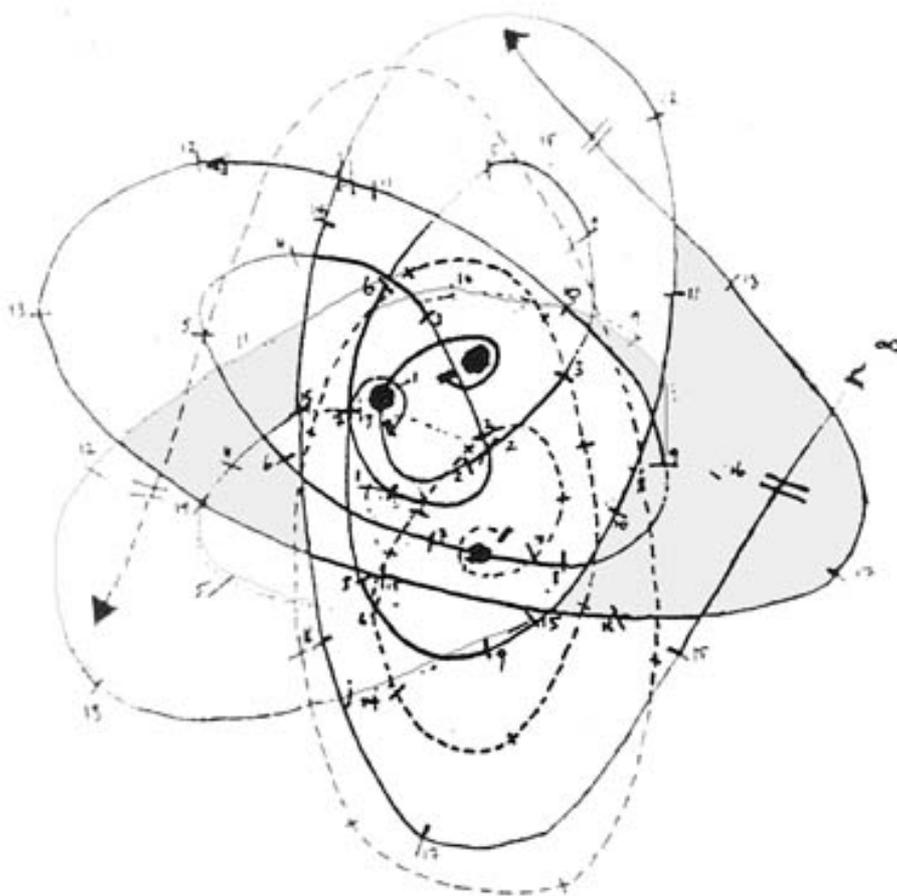
"Aye do, Apotheker," the Cook asserts, "and soon ye shall regret having asked me that rhetorical question a thirde time."

"Yea," agrees the Lady.

"Aye too now find yer questions tedious."

We must attend to the boy! He is not well! " cries Lu.

“As do aye,” intones the Persian softly, materialising out of the gloom, to the horror of the Merchant, “and for the sake of all present, may aye suggest, Master Apotheker, that ye reveal yer true identity, and that we return to the Merchant’s Table once more for the discovery of it.”



4

A Secret Ingredient

A Cuckoo

11

A Cuckoo

— *Disembowelled and placed in a jar — The one hundred and seventeen islands of Venice — The Laguna’s tongue — Venice’s clandestine handshake — A labyrinth that took two hundred years to build — The Church of the Santa Maria Assunta — “Die Liebe geht durch den Magen!” — Persipan’s frozen head — Shuddering shrieks, hungry holes — Make disappear, ingest, devour, finish — Evening stretches out its lanterns*

[“Ahem,”

the Apotheker begins, “it is true that aye am taking possession of yer very souls one by one. It is also true that aye have for a long while taken advantage of yer addiction to Marzipan, and have pilfered yer supplies while ye have been trapped in yer debt. Further, it is true that what comes out of my mouth is no better than what comes out of a donkey’s arse. Finally it is true that were aye a rat aye would have been disembowelled and placed in a jar, the better to be observed by men of science, long ago. But all of this being said the truth is that aye am a Venetian, and a Cuckoo at that, and should therefore be accorded the rights and privileges available to me under the auspices of Venetian law.”

“What ye just intended to reveal about yerself has long been known to us,” snorts Lady d’Almonde, “and it is a relief to hear ye admit to yer true identity, for if ye had held out much longer, theya might be none of us left to Confect!”

“Yea!” shouts the Nun, “and now we’ve seen yer true colours, it would take a miracle to convince us that mindless suffering, starvation and slaughter are permitted under the Captaine’s plan (long may It unravel itself in this world!”

“Apotheker, we poor starving folks, we are still hungry!”

“Where is the miracle yer prophets have promised us?”

“Quiet, quiet!” says the Apotheker, now glaring at the Persian openly thinking *now look what ye’ve —*

“Quiet, let the man speak,” says the Persian, coming further forward to that the Merchant can see his whole face, “aye believe he has a lot to explain.”

[A Cuckoo's

boat causes the Laguna to lap at the one hundred and seventeen islands of Venice like a dog at a bowl of blue ink, or a mapmaker at the dried cream surface of a chart. His face displays the stern mask of his Order: vicious, repugnant and unsavoury. The silver clasps on his cloak belie the vow of poverty he might have taken, way back in the cold store of his indoctrination, when Cuckoos still enjoyed the protection of the Doge himself, testing their Novices once a year through a series of clandestine Venetian ceremonies. The absurd term ‘Cuckoo’ survives though the Order does not.

Marchpang of course endures the ridicule with humility. *Nullius in verba* was labelled insane and a pretender up until 1828, when his discoveries were verified by a second uncovering of Marzipan in Dulloway, in the Land of Eggs. The magnificent Cuckoo compact: years of selfless worship demonstrating one's determination to disseminate Marzipan throughout the world for the sake of all mankind; followed by documentation of confectionery history in one's Cook Book.

The Laguna's tongue, raised for a moment as its nose responds to the far-off sniffing of the Adriatic, senses a change in the continent's drift, some northern tinge of pine and silted rivers, then lets fall a droplet of saliva. This disrupts the series of concentric rings someone has drawn so carefully like bluebottle tendrils on the water, causing them to break off their advance, merely to wobble and wane in the uncertainties of sunken history, resurrected for us today in the amateur's guidebook, dipping our feet in the shallows of Lorenzetti's Fifth Itinerary.

The ringlets shatter themselves upon mooring posts, stone steps and barricades erected over time to protect the very buttress of Europe from Persian, Oriental, American invasions. Walls that have drifted for a thousand years in a long and futile protest against the wearing down of days glisten heroically with slime and barnacles. It will shortly be time for these walls to be

buffeted again, new posts to be knocked into the Laguna's silty skin, but such requirements go unnoticed at midnight, of course. The moon shines down like a searchlight, illuminating bodies of water like trails of crystal sprinkled by some divine angel in a balloon, in order to guide these two men of the cloth, calmly rowing a small boat towards the Church of the *Gesuiti*, the *Santa Maria Assunta*, situated in Canaregio, representing the fingers of a right paw, clasped together with the left, to form Venice's clandestine handshake.

Almost transparent in the water the flat-bottomed boat, just back from the Lido run, escapes the moon's yearning grasp and jettisons into the reaches of the snaking canals, diverting the dog's attention away, only to ride in close to the pier upon a rumour of a wave. It carries but two passengers shrouded in typical mystery, as of its time the masks and cloaks of a different biennale announced a similar certainty of strangeness, distantly related to the psychotic black the two men choose for their adornment. As for their Captaine - the spiritual one, who does not care for names - he is almost invisible in the prow, steering as if a phantom puppeteer directs even his leanings and derivations, his strings silver in the moon.

Things have taken on the apparition of sootiness, of grime, and a faint sadness common to all degraded - though still Beatified - cities. Napoleon's occupation of Venice continued unopposed, though the Cuckoos, as a gesture of defiance, have coated the walls of their churches and villas with Marzipan. The fame of the Stuff has grown rapidly, infused as it is with the reckless spirit of a magnificent Empire's impending disintegration.

Trade lines drawn hesitantly across the continent continued confidently on, into and across the seas; foreign rulers demanded large quantities and watched with interest as their subjects scrambled for the scraps; and songs were sung in its honour from Cape Town to Montreal. At no other time in the history of the world had so many Venetians been so happy. With the benefit of hindsight, however, it must be said that these spontaneous expressions of joy were but indicators of a Confectionery Malaise, of which Captaine Nullius was, arguably, the first (un)diagnosed case.

Persipan, though he has tried to imitate the Nullius look (forbidding terror), has settled instead for an informal visage, virtually unreadable, which some of his fellows now and then mistake for a dreamy, faraway gaze.

Marchpang finds this look horrifying, and has told the young novice as much, on several occasions. At last, after heated debate, they have agreed to plot their own courses down the long, solemn aisle towards self-expression, taking their seats in different sections of the facial department. In any case, they must now row the boat in unison; otherwise they will never reach their target, their secret assignation, under the marble brocade of their Order's crumbling headquarters.

Through the steam and the darkness, the spires and towers of Venice come into view. Strings of lights direct the eye's attention skywards, escaping through small chinks in the city's quaint but sizeable clay brick armoury. Behind such walls, such veils, candles flicker on exposed flesh; the city hints at its own proclivities while tempting the casual Gondola towards canals from whose algae-encrusted passages it may never return, whose strange delights have never been described in spoken words, whose venom can only be rumoured at.

"It is said," expounds Persipan, "that the waterways branching off these Canals comprise a labyrinth that took two hundred years to build and a further six hundred to solve. Not that labyrinths can really be solved, really but —"

"Quiet!" barks Marchpang, thinking *the long night of my soul draws quickly to an end! Venice, aye immerse myself in yer quicksilver streams, yer falling cellars, yer washed-out laneways and labyrinthine mysteries, yer cults and quacks and idols! Our Captaine, who art in Marchpane, spare me a relic from yer glory days!*

He laughs, as much at the memory of the downfall of the Beatified city, now in ruins, as at himself. For who has not been instrumental in his own Civilisation's downfall, the equivalent of a secret ingredient inside a wooden box buried beneath the wreckage of a fallen cathedral, itself clouded in strange fumes, odd passions? The ruinous ingredient, he now realises, contains not just written instructions but a map of the passageways he and Persipan will need to negotiate if they are ever to escape death in Venice by terminal addiction to Marzipan, of which more later.

"But seriously, Brother Marchpang," the novice rejoins, "how could any Cuckoo whose brain hasn't been minced like dog shit through a strainer and then passed off as a form of food look himself in the face now that Napoleon runs this place? No splendour remains in this Baroque metropolis," gesturing

now towards the shoreline, towards the Sacci Della Misericordia, “save we Cuckoos, of course.”

And even this most noble of Orders, he might have added, is rapidly rotten away, like a once-worn dress, a submerged paddle, superseded dogma or a wedding cake.

Marchpang remains, however, silent and calm.

“So, Brother,” challenges Persipan again, his voice booming through the fog disarmingly, only to reappear, much diverted and scrambled, from a different canal a few moments later, “where does our Lion sleep tonight? What feast awaits us, in what historical setting, down what dim and marbled aisle, behind which fabled Baroque brocade, in what dim tabernacle, in what dim cathedral?”

“Ah”, murmurs Marchpang, “tonight we shall dine in the Santa Maria Assunta, no further than a stone’s throw from our present moorage! For behind its elegant façade sit the symbol of that shame which ye speak — “

“The Angel?”

“Napoleon’s trophy, no less! Yea, we shall chip the very Marzipan from beneath the toenails of that Angel! We shall ascend to paradise, or at the very least we shall be transported as if by a dream canoe to the far shores of waking consciousness, from whence we shall climb that oaken ladder through Limbo and launch ourselves, toward Ahem, in a balloon! Yes, we shall look down upon this unholy mess and we shall laugh until our sides split. Aha! Sugar, almonds and egg whites shall issue forth from within us!”

“Yea,” Persipan contributes hesitantly, “may we see the great Captaine and live to tell others of the miracle!”

Persipan is young and lean. His eyes are wet, and the folds of his cassock cannot hide the trembling of his arms and legs. He has unwittingly plastered a thin film of grime from the oars across his face. Were he wearing a sword, doubtless now would be the time to unsheathe it, the better to punctuate the valour of his words with swipes at imaginary foes. *Aha!*

Help, whispers Brother Marchpang, so quietly that only the Captaine himself can hear. They have come to a halt in the shadow of the church’s front door, set in stone against the backdrop of the cobbled courtyard. Marchpang dawdles for a moment, mooring the boat against the grimy steps, then produces

a key, for in these dark and gloomy days not even a church remains open after nightfall.

Together, Brother and Novice enter the Church.

The Church of the Santa Maria Assunta has been decorated throughout with all manner of trompe l'oeil, both statuary and confectionery. They gaze upon the lapis lazuli-encrusted tabernacle, suspended as it is above the altar, so much like an iced confection. A scent of musk emanates from the walls, which boast the finest theological art ever painted.

“Marzipan was first introduced to the discerning palates of the Republicans of Venice here,” whispers Marchpang before the Altar, “when Captaine Nullius returned from China. Throughout the city a great roar was heard to go up that day, in celebration of this most magnificent of substances. An Angel was paraded through the streets to the accompaniment of operatic music and the general awe of the people, though none knew why or wherefrom the statues had come. Nullius donated the statue to the people. And in addition the Great Captaine had the floors of the church inlaid with a map of Venice, featuring all one hundred and seventeen islands made of Marzipan, here —“

Persipan, however, has eyes only for the Angel.

Of indeterminate sex but unparalleled beauty, its smooth marble eyes gaze down on the two Cuckoos with a faint expression of scorn, perhaps pity. Transportation from the Orient has failed to dull its sheen, instead adding to its exotic magnetism. If the hair fails to gleam in the light from Tintoretto's torch, it is because the statue's presence here amounts to an exquisite fiction, a confection of historical accidents bittersweet, though reasonable. Clothed in marble robes whose swishing brocades echo the church's own bombastic pulpit, the Angel stands over eight feet high.

Marchpang pauses in adoration before the Angel's foot.

A dull marble colour, infused with jelly-like veins just beneath its surface, the foot is an astounding piece of art, poised in the act of flexing, as if the Angel is reaching up to touch something positioned on a tall shelf. The anklebone juts bulbously from the side of the heel, and the toes, splayed, are constructed entirely of Marzipan. Solemnly genuflecting, he pulls a knife from the intricacies of his crow-black robes and begins chipping Marzipan from beneath the big toenail.

It is slow work.

The toe is as big as Marchpang's own foot, and the nail like an abalone shell, curled and sharp on its outward side. His hands shake but little by little the scrapings achieve their aim. Tiny wedges of Marzipan emerge, like shavings from a pencil, and curl upon their release from the nail. Miraculously, he chips so carefully that the Angel does not stir. A thin smear of blood sugar stains his wrist as he pulls away, but there is no sign that he has violated the Angels' deep sleep.

Marchpang swallows the shavings. The Marzipan tastes unusual but he is familiar with its cloying scent.

Its effects are almost as immediate as he could have hoped.

Within seconds of ingesting the chippings and retreating into the nave, the echoes of his breathing have taken on an extraordinary timbre, like waves sucked beneath rocks. All around him he sees skulls and seabirds, circling the assembled host, sitting upright in the pews, though all of them appear quite dead. They wear creamy starched rags, or calico, stained with small specks, probably blood.

Their heads turn to greet Marchpang as he stumbles out into the aisle, his knife clinking on the ground in front of him as he stares, stunned and insensible. He does not feel the swish of cloaks as Persipan rushes to retrieve the fallen knife.

The audience assembled do not notice either. Their gazes locked on Marchpang, they begin to chant in a strange key:

“Die Liebe geht durch den Magen!”

Persipan, impervious to the alien chant, scrabbles towards the feet of the Angel and is practically slobbering as he wipes the blade of Marchpang's knife in preparation for his crazed excavation.

Overcome by his desire, Persipan cuts off the Angel's entire toe.

The Angel leaps from the wall and cries out, a shriek that sends a shiver through the church's spine, before kicking the helpless novice across the pressurised space of the church, where he lands beneath the Way of the Captaine, Third Station.

A rumble from beneath the floor shakes Marchpang from his stunning vision. He revives, only to pass out again immediately, upon realising that he is now embedded in the wall of the Cook's Marzipan Church, in L—.

And once arrived in the City Square Marchpang's eyes make out a group of Houses, over which tentacles of snow are festooned. And he makes his way to them, through the drifts, and discovers the Merchant's House, and at the table theya, frozen as solid as ice: the Lady Blanche d'Almonde, in her robes. Lord Peele, in his matching. The Apotheker and the ghost of his nemesis, Zachariah. Lu, the servant girl, behind the door. The Cook, in her apron, downstairs. The Boy Catcher, and the Nun, standing. Finally, Persipan's frozen head swathed in some sort of cloth, in his hand a small wooden box, open and empty.

All of them frozen solid, their skin as wan as Almond flesh, their cheeks gaunt from the Famine, their eyes blank.

"Greate Captaine!" shouts Marchpang, "truly, this be the greateste of all Confections!"

"So, ye made it?"

Persipan's voice croaks a little, from being so long frozen.

"Yea, lad," says Marchpang. "Again, ye have nailed it."

"Tell me, once more, Great Captain, of how ye came to discover Marzipan."

"Ah, *probably* discover," murmurs Marchpang slowly.

"Oh, probably. But in Ahem, yea?"

"Em, *probably*. Exact. Yea. Although aye later swore, under great duress, that aye had found the Marzipan of Ahem *under the ground*, aye also found myself unwilling to reveal the exact location of the X-spot where aye 'found' it, not to mention the contents of the box, or anything as specific as that."

"Yea, in fact, when asked whether ye had conducted scientific analysis upon the Marzipan, ye spake *Aye am an explorer, not a scientist*. Captaine Nullius, did ye truly utter these words?"

Marchpang clears his throat.

"Yea. 'Twas indeed stupid of me, aye admit. 'Twas technically true that aye was an explorer. Nevertheless, aye knew full well that Marzipan is composed of almonds, eggs and sugar, plus a fourth element of unknown (possibly alien) origin. Aye claimed, however, that the Marzipan itself was a

fruit, like that of the Breadtree, the ingestion of which cures the body and mind of hunger. In terms of nutritional value and vitamin count, even outranking *Van Diemen's Lard*.

[“Aye made at last to leave Ahem.

“It was surely one of the most marvellous places in the world, bursting with gold and Marzipan! My discovery surely rivalled Columbus' voyages to Japan! Aye met the great Khan! Soon would my fortunes be considered greater than those of Spain and Portugal put together.

“Several hours into my voyage home, aye retire to my bunk, complaining of a headache. It is then, lying insomniac beneath the beams and the invisible canopy, that aye begin to smell, indeed feel, the Marzipan of Ahem seeping up through the planks, its scent intoxicating.

“An overwhelming desire to sleep descends unhappily upon the crew, who have been complaining daily of insect bites, vertigo (the island's summit was a mile above sea level) and visions, and who make no effort now to protest or offer resistance. By morning, several have succumbed to this weird sleeping disease and cannot be roused. They are transferred to the ship's holds, it being thought that this will protect the rest of the crew from contamination. Alas! By lunchtime three more crew members have fallen ill and, to cut a long story short, all seventy five of them are snoring their heads off by nightfall.

“Except me,” grins Nullius, “though naturally aye became increasingly puzzled and then alarmed by these sudden manufactures! Aye cannot rouse the crew at all, despite repeated bashings upon doors and various threats more and less anatomically accurate. Finally aye grab an axe and chop down a door. Nothing, no one even in there. All further attempts to find the crew prove fruitless. Eventually aye return to my duties, leaving the wheel under the watchful eyes of the stars.”

“So it was,” intoned Persipan, “that Captaine Nullius continued alone through the desserts of Jordan and Palestine, in the footsteps of Marco and Polo, confecting his wanderings in the far desserts of Mesopotamia, crossing desserts more and less Holy, becoming lost in the desserts of Persia, heat struck and dehydrated, looking for figurines in ditches, the Syrian desserts especially a

waking nightmare. Genies accosted him in the deserts there, begging him for Marzipan.

“By night ye wrote feverishly in yer journal. In the dark the Stuffe was the flame that sustained ye, offering tantalising glimpses of another world, previously invisible. Ye watched elephants copulating in mass riverside orgies; monkeys sitting in judgement upon the skeletons of rats, palaces in the shapes of penises; trees with eyes. Ye fell off yer donkey, onto a magic carpet of sand, into interlocking dreams distinguishable only by the presence within each of a different numbered Marzipan figurine. Each time ye would trudge after it half-heartedly; then the dream would stop. Finally a Genie, seeing ye in agony, offered ye her bottle. Nullius, ye put it to yer lips and ye were instantly transported to Venice. Is that not right?”

“Everything went smoothly in Venice,” commented Nullius after a long pause, “at least, until it became apparent to me, sailing tranquilly down the Canal Grande in battle formation, that Napoleon had also just arrived in town, bringing with him spoils of war, trophies of conquest, agents of humiliation, a statue no longer at rest in its home sands.

“Aye regarded that Maniac suspiciously as aye advanced towards the Piazza, while also keeping an eye out for Zachariah Polo — who, it was rumoured, had come to liberate the city. Napoleon saw me first, however, through a spyglass he'd stolen from somewhere. Upon catching sight of my explorer's bleached white wig Napoleon ordered a battalion of his crack troops to round me up. Aye offered no resistance. Napoleon was impatient, and rude! To top it off, he accused me of harbouring a performing donkey!

“Ye know, we have no patience for delays or programme changes!’ he mouthed at me, most haughtily.

“However, as ye also know, everybody loves a circus,’ aye parried, mildly.

“Speak to me quickly, Cooke. Tell me why ye be heya,’ Napoleon barked, ‘before aye kill ye’.

“Aye know not the person ye be speaking of, this Cooke’ aye replied, truthfully enough, making full use of the podium space available to me. ‘However, as ye seem to be a figure of great importance aye will let ye know for nothing that my name is Terror Nullius. Aye return to Venice bearing gifts more

marvellous than these pitiful — ‘gesturing to the statues which did indeed appear a little tarnished now, ‘trinkets, excuse me. Aye bring gifts from the Emperor of China, who sends ye nothing but scorn and contempt. Aye bring gifts from the newly discovered land of Ahem, wheya tyrants of yer type have not yet taken root. Aye bring tidings of disgust and revulsion from all peoples of the world between heya and the Forbidden City. In short, aye bring ye nothing. Nothing, that is, save this!’

“Stepping forward, aye offered Napoleon a wooden box. Inside, the Marzipan of Ahem, covered in gold-leaf paper.

“Aye do not accept gifts from imbeciles claiming to be people who died hundreds of years ago,’ declared Napoleon. ‘Get out of heya! Take her away!’

Aye was dragged off the podium by a complement of soldiers. The Marzipan of Ahem was also seized. The scent of the Marzipan wafted across the Canal and into the noses of the women of Venice who also fell asleep. Napoleon was dismayed. He signalled for cannons to be fired at the main churches and cathedrals, presumably in an attempt to destroy the scene of his greatest shame. However just as the first shots went off — Boom! — a great whoosh! sounded across the Sacred and Blessed City. Up from underneath the canals water jettisoned. A marbled Angel, wailing and screaming, struck terror into the heart of Napoleon, who wept. Boom! The Angel drove through the flanks of Napoleon's guard, utterly demoralised. Boom! Boom! Napoleon tottered from his gondola and fell into the Canal, the incessant explosions and percussions causing him to expel the contents of his bowels with a loud gulch. Boom! And thus it was that Napoleon met his Waterloo.”

“Truly, ye made many mistakes throughout yer long life, Captaine Nullius,” said Persipan, laughing now.

“Yea,” Marchpang nods, “ye may put it that way.”

Persipan’s voice rises a notch in pitch.

“Aye also recall, however, yer magnificent characteristics, yer humaneness and spirit of generosity in dealings with the Ahemians. Ye signalled for the crew to cease shooting Vowel Birds and instructed them to begin educating any birds they managed to capture on the finer points of Italiane grammar instead. The villagers praised yer actions as those of a Greate

Captaine. Word quickly spread throughout the Forests that ye were fine and steadfast men.”

“Surely, thou speakst the right again there, Persipan.”

“Pray tell more of yer journeys, Captaine,” speaks the Persian.

“Nay, my son, we have ingested enough of this Marzipan. No longer should ye hunger after Confections. Come, let us eat no more. We have a dance to attend. If it be any consolation to ye, aye believe a slim volume detailing my heroic life and times will soon be published, under the title of *Gullible’s Travels*.”

[A Baker’s

dancing through the streets of L—, throwing his rags into the air with a gleeful idiocy, as the Merchant’s guests, all the dead and starved ones, look on. His pillow for a belly especially incites comment. Everyone is laughing, even the Midwife, whose rags cannot hide her incorporeality any longer, revealing the grim, gleaming bones, cream-coloured, like the boughs of a tree. Her companions have fared little better: clutching various parchments, clothes-stuffes, swords and lutes, clanking against the femur bones, the old flute’s mouthpiece whacking against the Apotheker’s jawbone, though he does not mind.

Zachariah’s feet skip and click against the stones, striking sparks on the cobbles, weaving complicated dance steps, spinning Confections. How he joyfully joins the Merchant’s dinner guests in a dance, addressing each partner with a tiny bow, and a whistling intake of breath between the candied teeth. The dinner guests being pleased of the invitation and decent in the acceptance, mouldy robes and shifts dropping away to reveal their own haggard limbs, like scorched wood dangling in an imitation of a tree, or a hanging man, swaying gently in the icy breeze.

How the change, when it comes, erupts from the assembled throats as one, the sound whooshing out from where their stomachs once were, now just shuddering shrieks, hungry holes. How the Midwife joins the dance, jiggling merrily, her breasts heaving and rolling beneath her shift, improbably sending each partnering skeleton in turn clattering to the cobbled street, like jumbles of

firewood or kindling that can no longer bear their own weight, though none of them pay any attention, or mind.

How the Servant Girl, upon seeing the Midwife, drops to her knees, her flimsy patellas shattering like shells upon a rock, the splinters scattering in the wind like knitting needles, and still her merry laughter. How the Cook, upon seeing the Servant Girl fall and injure herself so, whips a cloak from around her neck, gathers the girl's bones in a bundle and then sets off down the cobbled lane, only to be jettisoned into another spiral of the dance, across the street, the bag of bones crumbling to dust, hitting the ground with faint talcum puffs.

How Marchpane and his frozen Novice Persipan commence a hesitant minuet, clasped together in death even as in their previous lives, there beneath the Angel of Death's foot, for example, and that chopped toe.

The roars of appreciation, from the staring guests waiting their turns to dance, shred dead leaves from the air.

How the Merchant sets aside his wooden box, clapping his bony hands together, the sound like a rattle or a Lady's bracelets jingling, taking his wife's pale arm bone in his hand and hitting it against his own skull, sounding the emptiness there too, and in the space where her eyes once shone with her craving for the Marzipan just a blank hole now, and nothing coming in or out, though her amusement is lessened none.

How the Apotheker nods grimly at their serenade, his leg bones chattering uncannily in time, eying the Nun calmly from a nearby step. How the Nun skittles shyly across the cobbled laneway towards him, her dextrous fingers ripped bare, not even sinews there now, save if one imagines instead a confectioned corporeal system, composed of jellied veins, rubberised sinews and sugar glue tendons, treacly, and stronger than honey. How the glitter of the Confections engineered there, against the memory of her veil, catches the last gleaming ray of the Boy Catcher's lantern as it crashes to the ground, spluttering out, the final spark dancing away down the lane, extinguished in a puddle of snow.

How when darkness is complete the good cheer of the assembled dinner guests and Bakers only increases. How lutes and guitars are brought out to be eaten, the wooden shards crushed between greyed teeth, little chips of wood showered left and right, then scooped up in another fractured jawbone, or swept into a pile and devoured by an onlooking skeleton, meanwhile the music and

the dancing increasing in pitch and fever. Flying bones that glow in the dark, memories of sound bouncing off the brickwork of the Confection, L—.

How even when the wood is gone the skeletal jaws continue to snap open and shut like trapdoors. A Baker's head adorned with a Captaine's hat, while delicate Pipes play tunes to rouse even dead Stuffe from within the lungs, if they still existed, in that starved, famished, famine-bound place, all those many long dead tired empty made-up years ago — ransacked, pilloried, raped, torched and looted beyond all recognition.

L— of the empty belly, slashed.

Make disappear, ingest, devour, finish.

How Zachariah feels no hunger, no need to glance behind him now. His shining feet slapping against L—'s bread loaf cobblestones like dead fish, discarded from the evening's catch, good only for seagulls wheeling around, their spirals etched into the island now like a paint-brush covering some fainter stencil's trace. How evening stretches its lanterns out in front of him, willing him over the edge of the path onto the frozen surface of the River.

[Notes

The cover image is a detail from the restored ‘Totentanz’ (literally ‘dance of death’) by Alfred Mahlau. Located inside the Marienkirche, Lubeck, it is itself based on an earlier painting by Bernt Notke, 1463.

The images between sections of the central narrative are from an exhibition by the author entitled “Captain Cook and the Marzipan”, held at the Public Office, West Melbourne Australia in 1999.

While in the preceding Confection the Merchant’s Wife dissolves her Marzipan in black tea, in reality it was the Prussian princess Luise Charlotte (1798-1860) who had the unusual habit of stirring Marzipan each morning into her coffee.

The Boy Catcher’s golden hand originally belonged to the founder of the Niederegger Marzipan empire, whose house does indeed still exist, in the very best situation, opposite the Lubeck city hall, and whose factories now produce many tons of Marzipan per day.

My description of Venice as experienced by the Cuckoo and his Novice depends upon Lorenzetti’s excellent guidebook.

The Merchant’s mercantile dealings are not as sophisticated as those of the Lubeck Hanseatic guilds, which for a long time were allowed to sell only the individual ingredients of Marzipan and not finished Marzipan itself, this being the sole preserve of Apothekers.

Thomas Aquinas did pronounce words to the effect that “such an ecstatic sweet [Marzipan] does not break the fast”.

Nuns did also jealously guard their Marzipan recipes, as Apothekers their prescriptions, adding secret and imported ingredients.

The Way of Terror Nullius, as written in the *Cook Book*, lists the usual co-requisites and one special indulgence: a wafer-thin slice of Marzipan each day. In order to gain the indulgence, a Cuckoo must recite the Way of Terror Nullius in its entirety. A Cuckoo must also Meditate briefly, with a contrite Heart, upon the Captaine's Suffering at the appropriate moments. In public Celebration of the Way of Terror Nullius attention should be paid at all times to the prevailing Customs and Practices of the Host Culture.

The Vowel Bird is my own Confection.

DAVID PRATER,

May 3 2004

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