

# THE OXFORD HOARD

by Rob Sherman



2009

For my parents, in the event of their anniversary.

*“Rare, precarious, eccentric and darkling.”*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, on Oxford, 1847

*“Oxford awake! The land hath borne too long  
The senseless jingling of thy drowsy song...”*

G.V. Cox, *Black Gowns and Red Coats*, 1834

- 4 - Exeter
- 5 - Hamel's Ford, 512 BC
- 6 - Visiting the Museum of Oxford, 1979 AD
- 7 - Oxnaforda, or Atrebates, 60 AD
- 8 - Cowering in St. Catherine's College, 1979 AD
- 9 - The Royal City of Oxenford, 1231 AD
- 10 - Reclining in Christchurch Meadow, 1982 AD
- 11 - St. Bartholomew's Leper Hostel, Long Compton, 1312 AD
  - 12 - St. Radcliffe's Hall, Summer
  - 13 - Worm Hall, 1410 AD
- 14 - Walking Home on Blue Boar Street, 1981 AD
  - 15 - Pusey Lane, 1557 AD
- 16 - Sore Feet on Pusey Lane, May Morning, 1981 AD
- 17 - The Ashmolean Museum, Broad Street, 1683 AD
  - 19 - Browsing The Ashmolean, 1980 AD
  - 20 - St. Giles' Walk, 1850 AD
- 21 - A Return To The Ashmolean, 1988 AD
  - 22 - Oxford

## Exeter

I was born in Oxford on 14th June, 1988, in the John Radcliffe Hospital, to Darren and Susan Sherman. An original, more grandiose building, the butchered child of the Queen's physician after whom it was named, once stood in its place. From my mother's room you may have been able to see down from the eyrie of Headlington Hill, through Pusey Lane and along the Marston Road into the old confusion of Oxford itself. I couldn't tell you, however; she has never mentioned it. The river, the Isis to local people, does run down there, though, a popular place and deep in the middle. A lazy and heavy river, it now folds around ice-cream and tossed wood in a brainless greed. Where these things flow once stood broad feet and the hooves of mules.

Mum did tell me that there were three other women in the room, all roosting. We both wore matching bracelets so that we didn't lose each other, one pink and one blue. She keeps a stitchwork in a cheap monofiber frame, with my name, her grandfather's name of which she is very proud, and my date of birth. My weight is picked out there too. I was a big baby, and had a heart murmur, a sudden seizure of concern; but it righted itself, and I survived.

We go back to Oxford every now and then. My parents both studied at St. Catherine's College, and have friends and memories there. They met as most do; in passing, not noticing marks and signs that embed themselves. My father with basket hair and dreadful skin. My mother engaged to another man and with a love for Spanish and the old poets. They started dating not long afterwards, my mother's engagement forgotten, and a few years after my father completed his doctorate they married, not far from where we live now in Kent. My father hated gold and never wore a wedding ring. They returned to a small town outside Oxford called Didcot, near Long Compton, and within a few years I was born, on the hill, from which you can see the place where they first met and lived a few corridors apart.

Mum tells me a story every now and then, from those days, the only one I can remember; studying in Spain in her holidays, she lived with a rural family, a hardy group with large mouths for laughing. They kept rabbits; forever scared and with huge eyes. My mother doted on them, as she dotes on everything, spending days dragging fingers down their spines. The family thought this very strange; they do not care for animals in the same way in Spain. One evening a smell filled the house, a spongy smell, that lay wet and huge in the nose. A pot waited on the pitted board of the *terraza*. The family laughed; it was a rabbit, not a child.

## Hamel's Ford, 512 BC

My ma is cryin' away, cryin' away, but I'm beaming, sunshine beaming, for the sun is rose and my knee is better.

I was with the wood, grass licked my foot as wolf asleep, mushroom searching. I smelt shit and blood, and saw boar, blue-black, held by two trees like a cage. I couldn't see his eyes but I ran and ran, my head hurt from a drum-boom, all around me, and my hair was full of stream. I hit moss and bark, my knee ripped and there naked meat and bone. I was in hurt, hard and icy hurt, my head wrapped flame and rock, and I felt not my own breath. My knee get worse. I faint, I wake and Pap, far away and behind hair, watch me from under roof. I am home. I get well. Knee is better. Blood all gone down the well. We eat coney, was good day and meat was hot and grease. I am ready.

My ma still is cryin'. I can't see why, I am in new dress, long and white, and the sun is shine. My face is wet, and hair tied down my back like rope. Steamsmoke hang over burh, can't touch it. I see river curve and squat downhill. A man and ox stand where riverbed is seen, feet wet and watching. Watching me.

Everyone is here, watch me too. My feet are mud and cold, but my dress is clean, and gold is under chin, can't see it, but feel it cold and grooved on neck. Cathbad gave it me. He is old, and painted, blue on his cock and legs. He hold blade, tooth-kine and brown. It is old like him. He my woodman, and for all young and toothless in willage. I had to hold my cock and sing high in the Woad Eton, down near the river. All my friends watching, between trees. Cathbad call high to Tiw, thank him. Stupid god. Not mine. Cathbad tell me that god put holes in King's Stone with iron fingers, to carry it better from Heaven. Pap spit on woodman as he walk, say he lie, that Stone was brought from sun-down by men, rolling like dead swine. King Stone wait, with other stones that stand in cromlech Cathbad lives in. The King is old stone, heavy as a tree. He colour more as to soot than rock, nearly black. He not look as stone should.

Cathbad hold my arm like gold hold my neck. He look without joy as he lift me up to King Stone. I see my Ma, she look away, at river. I see hills from up on rock. No-one else up here, just me. I see smoke on the horizon, and bird making visit to woods, tops of trees. No-one else can see it! Willage is round, humped like a dog hit with stick. It look scared on this hill. Scared of me.

Cathbad want me down. I get down, lie as he show and spake. The hills and willage go. I can still see birds. Above me the knife.

Cathbad say something stupid and old.

## Visiting the Museum of Oxford, 1979 AD

*St. Aldates marked a precipice  
Where the Town Hall joined the main road,  
the museum its sleepy lump,  
Benign and burrowed deep into its side.*

*Blue Boar Street beside it  
Trailed a slowly dissolving tail  
Back into the back streets,  
A wind-blown history.*

*The museum had always been there,  
Avoiding their view,  
But they had emerged from The Bear that day,  
Their favourite place to drink and scheme  
Futures underneath  
The furniture of neck-ties,*

*And they saw it, clinging embarrassed, exposed for once.  
There was no entrance fee  
For pictures of a town not theirs,  
The streets cooling and hardening  
In an oven of plagues and pageants.*

*There was still beer clinging to their upper lips,  
But they found a deeper brew,  
A bog brew, a fertility gift and fertility cut.*

*Ten children, frilled with mineral growth  
On their sides, like chewed ears,  
A nursery petrified in a nap-time of flint.*

*They are presented as gifts to them both;  
An angled, lit information pack informing them  
That these ten died to save a village from a high river  
And low wheat.*

*They still cling to wide rope  
And a soup of linen settles into the atoms  
Of their shoulders.*

*The smallest, shock-broken by a hammer of peat  
Is one in from the left, a band of gold  
Piercing its jaw like a toothbrush.*

*Susan circles her own torc round her finger.  
It feels tight, as if history  
Has swollen her,  
Pregnant  
With black rock and buried jewels*

## *Oxnaforda, or Atrebates, 60 AD*

Today my head hurts. The sun here scalds it, glares at me. It was raining only yesterday. Now the ground is dry, my men thirst, and the locals are restless. I found three soldiers tying wildcats to the washing lines, hanging them like pig meat, and betting coins and statuettes on which would claw the others to death first. They are bored. My son runs the lengths of the fort wall, tapping soldiers in the small of their backs. He is almost six, and will be a soldier one day. He will likely die in Africa, or Anatolia, a wound from a savage spear taking his leg, and then the rest of him.

The chair is not wide enough for the spreading breadth of me, and creaks. It was presented by local craftsmen in our first year of occupation. I rub my face in my left hand, its surface dry from the heat and the shafts of standards.

She is going to make this a long day.

She is in the dirt before me, her hair fanning across the parade ground like a wash of weeds in a delta. She is fair, though dirt-covered and with few teeth, like many of her kin. The soldiers have not hurt her; they know that any violence against the locals will be met with my most extreme displeasure. I clasp the cup in two hands; it is pure, and cool, the gold mined in Silures, to the West. The face of Aesculapius holds me, an old god, one who few care for. His hammered beard catches the sun, the craftwork of the Eaton Wood cults blinding me. Rome is still scared of these deities, and so the priests down in the forest eat well and beat metal. The only trouble they seem to have is with the locals' insistence on protecting their heathen stone circles, covered in holes like termite wood, and refusing all of our attempts to incorporate them. They will not last long; we plan to divert the Tamesis, the river that runs down to Londonium, away to the north. This village will wither, the inhabitants following the water. With no river, there is no cult, no trade, and no life.

I growl in discomfort at the flare of refracted sun from the warm artefact in my hand, and speak to her, keeping my Latin simple.

“This was reported stolen four days ago. My soldiers found it in your home. Did you take it?”

She looks up, knowing that she is questioned, but her eyes make no motion. She does not understand me. I point first at her, then the cup. It is a horrible thing.

“Did you take this?”

The soldiers drag her up, her feet never tautening to take her weight. She has wet herself. She can only be sixteen. I beckon a nearby soldier, dawdling in the noon swelter.

“Gaius, call for a translator.”

The soldier continues staring at the sky, scratching himself. He speaks to me as if I were a child.

“Apologies, sir, but the translator has been called to Corinium on urgent business. He won't be back for a week.”

I contemplate disciplining the soldier for his lack of respect, but it is too hot, and it would only scare the girl.

It could have been taken by any one of them. If I execute her, and I am wrong, the villagers would riot. There would be death. More death.

I watch the girl. She holds two thin fingers at her side, raised while the rest of her fist is clenched. I do not know what it means.

## Cowering in St. Catherine's College, 1979 AD

*She had heard of a man unravelling himself  
Like the chaos geometry of weeds and reeds  
Into girls' bedrooms, stealing hearts and graduation presents  
Missing teeth like a French film star.*

*She watched the sky for the start of sundown.*

*Darren lived three corridors away,  
Kate Bush coughing out like a burglar alarm.  
He sweated security and she stuck to him,  
A moth on his blot paper.*



## *The Royal City of Oxenford, 1231 AD*

I wear my medals proud, pure Roman gold. The big one was from the Pope, the Lord's Hammer himself. A little man, with red woman's lips and a warpish finger. I remember France, I remember it. Killing monks for the priests. Monks. Families. That was my job. The sun had shone. Ah, France!

And now I'm here, back home. My beard itches from month-old brew and syphilis under the matted hair; my face humps and moans like a red sea. A rage had risen in me, when I became sore; but I would never find the whore that did it.

We are upwind from the pauper pits, and the air carries no stench. There have been a couple of murders, important folk from London. Usually just amulets taken. Maybe an ear ripped off, the jewellery hidden under sacking, ready to be sold for bread. Ain't had this many important folk here before. They called us back a week ago, needing extra guards; the town's gone mad akin to hounds to a wounded pig. Kills. Maims. Eats.

They're opening an *universitie*, down here by the river. That's what they say. I've seen one in Paris before; a lot of boring men, fucking each other and reading books. They stand before me, looking up at the podium. They're shivering despite the sun. I watch them. How can I possibly look at them all at once? The people move in waves, making my job harder.

My medals hang around my neck, under my armour; they clatter like coins in a cup. I was told that wearing them in public might offend people, bring politic and trouble where they don't need to be none. I listen, but I hate them. The *cwipes* have no honour.

I don't like the buildings. The stone is local, popped from the hills by hundreds of men. They all look like cathedrals, but soon they'll be full of books and desks, no holy men. Men in hoods watching the stars turn like Saracens, only praying once a day. The roofs look like giant skeletons. Fallen on their faces. Spires stick through like spears left and turned to stone. All stone. All dead. My groin aches. I glance at Glaubert, hefting the pike from hand to hand. His earlobes dance in the Levant breeze. He sports a new earring, a polished, blue stone.

That foreigner, Emo, is saying something on the scaffold. The little fig-showerer had chronic diarrhoea, had shit himself in the carriage from Portsmouth, collecting it in a little golden goblet. His *butte* lips quivering, paleness filled with the red of embarrassment. Apologised to all the guards. I hate the mincing prick. His voice is wavering, I can't hear it properly back here. I finger my medals. They are cold against my chest, the consumption rising in it like a stove. It has been bad recently.

The sun is gone behind clouds. The stone, warm and yellow in the light, has turned grey. Like ash. Like bone, old bone, hidden in tombs. We had to dig some up for the priests, saw the parts of people, children, shattered pelvises and rot. All in together, beneath the Pope's feet. He gave me my medal. The sun had shone.

## *Reclining in Christchurch Meadow, 1982 AD*

*He'd cupped his hands to his eye  
As if to dam the river's light.*

*She'd breathed out the long breath  
And the pleasure of a hornet sting*

*Ringed  
                  her  
                          chin.*

*He'd watched the ballistics of a cloud  
Showing up, reeling at a sun-slap.*

*She'd torn bread, surprised by  
The microscopic sonic boom*

*It produced.*

*They'd squinted and scratched grass-rub  
Watching the triangular violence  
That occurred, stock-still and always  
In the pigeon lofts.*

## St. Bartholomew's Leper Hostel, Long Compton, 1312 AD

My face is broken, my nose unsticking from its wet hold like a crab in a rock pool. My eyes hang under heavy, scabrous flesh, and my tongue is black, or so I am told. My milked pupils see but dimly, and I walk into doors and windows often. I have five fingers left, two on one hand, two and a thumb on the other. I do not miss them.

Physical discomfort purifies the mind, and I worry that without pain my mind will remain sullied. I see my flesh peel and crinkle as I see leaves fall, or trees hewn; they are events, out in the world, never in me. Must I feel my loss to understand it? Friar Sutantus says that this is foolish, that I am a child of God. I suppose that I agree with him; the Lord has seen fit to gift me with the ability to walk through fire, and to be pierced by steel and hurt not, as Isaiah mouthed. I am not repelled by myself, nor others; my day is a constant cycle of beauteous stone and pocked skin; hanging meat and blue sky. These things are one, and do not trouble me.

I read, and walk when I can; my feet get worse by the day, and I felt a toe gone when I bend to put on my wraps this morning. The hostel is large, over three hundred of us live here, and the grounds extend all the way south, towards the city. We smell smoke and shouts sometimes, but I have never seen it, never seen the people. There are only friars and us.

My family is rich, very rich; my mother still sends me food, though she has never visited, not even when I begged her to take me to touch the heathen stones. The friars say that she is powerful in her old age; a beautiful woman. She was but twenty-five when I was sent here.

The friars mix me elixir, a brew that tastes of broth. I sense comfrey, and the ghost of gold, powdered and mixed to heal me. Another of my mother's distant cares; she crumbles the family fortune into my morning meal. The friars are not apothecaries, but the mixture tastes well, and as I pray to Saint Eligius, he who guards gold and those who work it, I do not die. I remember that I am to eat pig this evening, for it is the feast of Saint Scholastica, the proud student, and in the city they will be lighting fires, cheering, like boys do. Like all children do. That means tomorrow that we shall journey to Binsey, to be healed by Frideswide's well. I am worse than I was last year, when I submerged myself in her dripping cave. But no matter.

I hear the scrape of John Good's one foot outside my door, walking round to see Gwendolen. She loves him, I think. They sex, in their way, and John walks faster when she is near. They do not sin.

I hear a rumble from outside the lazar house, the barest bubble of noise. It is the friars, singing morning prayers. The loam of porridge is with me, in my gluey remains of a nose, and there is pig tonight. I wrap my shawl tighter. I may be the happiest man alive.

St. Radcliffe's Hall, Summer  
CHEMICAL EXAM  
No Conferring!

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1.

*Will you, upon conception of your first child,*

*a) Thank yourself and introduce yourself to sparkling wine, in a daze of effort and grins,*

*or*

*b) Mainline a urino-utero-interface analysis for definition and meaning?*

2.

*Does betaglucanase rid a soused virgin of her preconceptions and let her love?*

3.

*Did the use of LSD in Vietnam lose America the war?*

*Did you care?*

*Answer these using the Periodic Table and one's own knowledge of spells.*

## Worm Hall, 1410 AD

“Can more than one angel occupy one place at the same time?”

The master's voice darts out, and I crouch, late and without a seat. I am watched by the others; they see the dirt and my mussed hair. I stare to the front. I want to answer the question. I want to know the answer.

*All Bodies Originate From Light.* That had been it. That had been Jenks's paper. He was so bent on it; he loved the Bible, he loved the science that the West Country hadn't been able to give him. He wanted to show God in the triangles we had found between the planets, the circumferences discovered around the sun.

We had stepped out with four hours until class. Two Welsh boys, clutching blackjacks under our books. We had heard that the Ape Hall lot had kicked out all the Welsh lads from the college grounds; shouts reached us across town, aided by the clear air.

We saw a black flag risen at the West Gate. He turned to me.

“Sprig, keep the fuck up.”

“I am keeping up... They're on Blue Boar. We'll jump 'em.”

We had heard they had captured the local priest, the mousey Hawkins, and forced him to pray for the souls of all the Welsh in the city; we were being treated as dead men. Fucking Scots. On this day for years, since before I had been born, the Scots students had capered through the city, striking up Moorish dances and smashing windows. But we had heard no rumour of blood.

We turned onto the Corn Market, past the whore dens (Lewis was laid up, crotch-rot eating him like seagulls on krill), and stopped stock still.

The Scots boys were there, three streets early. Ten or eleven of them. Three dangled swords like canes, the blades sharp. I could see bows secreted like flags in their mass. They stopped and spread, as if against some unseen wall. They had painted their left arms blue, the still-wet stuff dripping in pools at their feet. One grinned, a gargoyle of a lad, but the others made no smiles, and as one they began speaking, slowly and quietly at first, but growing to a roar.

“War, war war! Sle sle sle, the Walsh doggus and her wheylps!”

Jenks dropped his books, a term's worth, to the gutter and flourished with his cosh.

Always on parade, that one.

“Show them, Sprig. We are fucked otherwise.”

It had been my father's, in some war, but I flung my dagger as hard as I could at the crowd, the short blade splitting them in half to opposite sides of the street. They recovered and offered no challenge or call. They were on us, and my forehead cracked against the cobbles. I stayed awake, my face jammed to one side, and I heard their voices. They spoke their own tongue, insulting us with their lack of Latin. Jenks was nowhere to be seen; I heard wetness, a fit of some thing caught in a snare. I felt new wet, blossoming on my back. I smelt their piss. A hand flipped me over, and Jenks lay, his skull in triangles and circumferences. One of the Scots with a rich sword, bright-pommel, lent it square on my chin.

“Kiss ye ground, yer Walsh wheylp!”

The piss pooled between the street's stones, and I bent, kissing the liquid like a cat. It smelt of Sundays in the kitchens. When I came back up they were gone, Jenks's blood joined with their piss in a dip of road, rendering it copper, the gold dulled. There was no thing to do but go to class.

## Walking Home on Blue Boar Street, 1981 AD

*The boys are young crows, with neither shape nor form,  
Their dimensions pointless, the only geometry their smiles.  
They wing in from the lines of neolithic hills on winds of gonorrhoea,  
An ancient topography on the power lines.  
She walks home from a burger van on Cornmarket,  
the meat in her hands  
A power source and fire circle.  
They watch her pace, and she bows her head.  
A line is passed, a screaming belt  
That, this time, unlike other times,  
Loosens and lets her past.  
They nod, no knives,  
Just boys, at last.*

## Pusey Lane, 1557 AD

Heaven is ugly, son.

It must be. All them martyrs, the men and women burnt and buggered and stabbed and shot for God, them virtuous out by Colchester that starved last winter, and now, all this; ranks of them piling through the gates of Paradise, good Christians, sicking up pieces of lung and covered in great boils that crack like baked pies. Lepers and burning sons. Columns of them, leaving wet parchments of skin on the holy grass, blood blooming in the gazebos and on the steps of God's palace. Hell must be pretty; well-fed Catholics with all their teeth, kings and queens and the rich, tortured and hurting, but beautiful. But now Henderson's joining them. There's one ugly one, at least!

I saw him taken out this morning. The cart was covered in that thick mud from the river; must have been an early start. We're the last ones on the street – the rest have run, or else died. I can't never hear nothing. The road is empty, always, apart from the low cackle of incense in the censers that wait in the gutters.

The scum here on the barrel ripples like to piss and blood, orange and loamed. I scoop it with one hand and suck it in. It tastes foul, which is good, which is all good; the worse the scum tastes, the better the beer will be.

They say the water's infected, the river's not safe for man nor beast, and so folk drink themselves blind waiting for the end. I sell a barrel a day, rich men sending their servants with silk tied over their mouths to carry the brew back up to their high houses, the sweating heads of Oxford. The body is ill, is dying, and the head cannot last. But it can forget about its hurt for a while.

Anyway, I live right in the armpit, the ringlets of smoke blowing out into the day, and not one sore! I don't go out much anymore, and if I do it's covered with heavy leather and a mask to shield my throat, but I live, for you and for me. The barrel cracks out a tune. The beer is nearly ready. The cellar reeks of rotting field. Everything's rotting. I laugh. Just me and you, living in the rot, producing more rot to rot the rich, and as pure as the day we came here. All in pain, except me and you.

I wipe my hands and climb to the parlour. Four days of food left, before it starts to turn. The shopkeepers are all dead. I will have to start asking for bread and cheese as payment. No need for gold when the bankers are slitting their wives' throats. London burns, Oxford rots and the gold is used to make stew and compress. They're old remedies, though; all the golden steam in the world won't cure the sickness.

I see the squat tower of St. Michael's, down by the corn market. The crucifix looks as to be on fire, the smoke from the corpse pits wreathes it so. It looks as to what it is; a thing of torture, designed for death, and raised up to watch the whole city die. All except us. We'll watch to the end, and past it.

Sore Feet on Pusey Lane,  
May Morning, 1981 AD

*The arteries of where she was  
Funnelled sound in bumping order  
Pushing pressure past and out  
Pooling in the quads and halls.*

*Providence had pushed a beer  
Sweet and thick, into her hand  
Smoke from poisoned tin and meat  
Dulled the whip of distant cat-calls.*

*She had lost her friends, her man, and she searched still  
After ghost choirs, Morris dancing, that May Morning, on the hill.*



## The Ashmolean Museum, Broad Street, 1683 AD

“The hare's horns are backwards, Jenkins.”

I start something awful, my head buried in packing crates, dust littering me like war-smoke, or plague-fires. I catch my ear on a nail, the pain bright in the cold cellar. The thump is rude in my chest as I see my face some months hence, puffed and green like a lettuce, before any fear of infection vanishes as I glance back and see the face of Mr. Plot, his chin blossoming into a bib over his black doublet. His tiny eyes lance into the gloam, seeking me out.

I rise and face him, a fool of a Scot barely eighteen, my hair a sneeze gracing my temples. My hands flutter at my side. At the age of seven I held my family's cat after it had been kicked to the brink of death by local ruffians, purely for sport. Its spine draped like sausage in my hands, and with one utterly defeated look into my eyes it died. Since that day my hands shake with the memory. I had nearly blinded a stuffed antbear while trying to stitch its ear on, and so had been relegated to the packing room. I stammer, to boot. A truly fucked specimen.

“Si-si-sir, I didn't m-m-mount the h-hare. 'Twas Henry, *veritante*.”  
My Latin is an instinct, but it calms him.  
“Henry, eh? By God, I'll have that boy's ears.”

He leaves, and I am in dark and silence again, only one candle stuck in a slotted bucket lighting my work. The entire wealth of the Museum is at my hands, curiosity cabinets stuck at strange angles, leaving them undignified and eldritch. My pen scratches over their tags.

A flask of black, foul blood, mixed with soil after it had been collected on the Isle of Wight. They say that it fell from the sky, drawing flies like budding clouds.

Two feathers, smothered in dye and caulk, said to be from the tail of a Phoenix. They reek of treatment.

A vest and toothbrush, both from ancient Babylon, or so Mr. Tradescants tells us. He is a strange man, his eyes never rest, and he wears britches that go down to his ankles. He speaks in a high, sing-song voice, like a child warbling, and his hair is slicked back with some kind of grease. Every few months he visits us, bringing new packages, and has tea and meetings with Mr. Plot for hours. A strange man.

I reach an open crate set back from the others. A smell of pickle and death washes over me, and I tuck up my kerchief around my nose and lips.

Inside, a note, handwritten by Tradescants himself. *A Mergirl from the islets of Patagonia*. The black thing within is hard to ken, and I lift it gently, raising it high. Something under my foot sends me dancing, juggling the wet mass. I fall hard against the clumsy, dead Dodar, and the Mergirl cracks across the flagstones, and I see her come in two.

I start, flail for the candle to better see my doom, for that is what it shall surely be when Plot next visits. I stop, and look. My hand comes up instinctively, a pagan symbol that my mother taught me to make a man love me.

The preserves applied to her have compressed her skin like a grandmother's, and her head is bent from the drying and cracking of chemicals. Her legs are hacked free and gone. Her eyes are Mongoloid, heavy-lidded, and her mouth is small; she could not have been more than five or six when she died. Her costume, a heavy, rotten fish with its head struck clean, lies to one side, stringy fragments joining the mutilated creature to the girl. I cannot help but imagine the process, the bile-like glue, the girl's arms bent into place.

Though her neck is tensed like a fist, I can see something looped around it, a necklace or a brooch. The jewellery has been tarnished and dulled by the vinegar of her

embalming, but I can still see winks of blue and faint green, perhaps gold or unburnished emerald.

A pool of clammy water spreads around her, the billeted lamplight marking it like waves, high in a warm sea.

## Browsing the Ashmolean, 1980 AD

*There's a secret light  
Jointed and unique  
That slips into collections  
Of things curious and antique*

*That fills them up with reverence  
And dusts their flanks with age  
Adorns them with the medals of soil  
And the stain of haemorrhage*

*So that the brilliant ingots that they possess  
Golden teeth of glory,  
May slice through quickly, eye to eye  
And greet you with their story.*

## St. Giles' Walk, 1850 AD

My piss spreads, soaking the gallows. The young girl in the front row of the crowd giggles, pointing shyly at my quaking crotch. Does she even know my name? No – her mother has not told her, only brought her to see an old man die. A man of some import; the Director of the Ashmolean, no less.

They say I killed my wife, that I slit her throat with a bread knife. They never showed her to me. “Ad enough of that, I expect, my Lord,” the awful constable had growled at me, licking his fingers clean of salt and growing bigger in my mind. The door was cracked and broken like a letter's seal. I had my keys, my damned keys when they arrested me! Why would I break into my own house? Where is the sense?

It is up there, up with the smoke and ravens. They dressed me in white breeches, knowing that I would wet myself, knowing that I would shame my last moments. But I am not ashamed. It is only chemistry and biology, the loss of muscle control that pre-empts a threat to life. It is only science, not shame.

They found me, the *bulldogs*, the secret police who wear the clothes of fishermen, digging in old graves. I had need of the bones, old as Gloriana Elizabeth herself; some older. I hung my rope lantern on the resting place of one of the few gentlemen to have survived the plague, some three hundred years ago. I imagined him surrounded by decay and death, as I was now, the smell of the sacred earth oddly sweet, as if potatoes and fruit grew here. The first I knew was a gruff hatchet-noise, metal digging at stone, and I realised it was a voice. They had hauled me out like a drowned kitten and rode me back to the Museum, and I sat in my office, surrounded by the drawings of floodplains lost and villages subsumed.

They came back, told me of my wife. Asked me if I had done it. The usual way with such things. The grave-digging was enough for me to hang; my wife became paperwork, a bonus. I hadn't opened the casket, but within, to my bad luck and insane laughter, were hundreds of small sacks, stuffed with gold. A poor grave, and a man buried with more wealth than he could ever carry. It was stolen from the rich, no doubt, but with the plague he had never had a chance to spend it; he had been buried with it, like a savage, to take to the next world. The police thought I meant to take the bags, like a commoner or soldier. I saw myself opening the casket, discovering the gold. The bones. I had only wanted the bones. I would have walked away.

The crowd is small, a Sunday turn-out after Church. A child sneezes thick dribbles of mucus down its blouse, but its mother does not notice. I see coal-smoke lipping the pillars of the Library, and Christchurch. I see the last days of this place, what the rich pauper had seen hundreds of years ago, children sickening and dying. The flames are distant yet choking, and the buzz and hum of a distant doom comes, in my ears now as the rope draws in its breath.

## A Return to the Ashmolean, 1988 AD

*The rooms are deep, bubbles in amber  
Cavernous Os where science pickets sleep.*

*The two pad, irreverent,  
Greased, chicken-salad, Sunday fingers  
Trailing the glyphs in the Egyptian Wing.*

*They recourse to Latin on the West Wing Stair  
And pull each other through the foyer  
A crowded room, Minoans and Etruscans  
Too polite to eat the canapés.*

*They feel the oven of Beaumont Street,  
The Oxford heat, a special river breath  
That rolls through the side streets  
And sticks to you.*

*They imagine cool vaults, ranked artefacts  
Leather, gold and dried sassafras, dipped in the  
Quick-set and layers of layers,  
Below them, icebergs that float  
Amongst the dead.*

*They feel a buried kick within them,  
Her belly's layers relay this fact.  
A child that floats, she smiles, satisfied.  
It'll like museums, after all that.*

## Oxford

I am brought from the hospital like so many of my friends, and my mother, and my father, and his father, and laid in a new crib. The days after my birth are noisy, but apparently I don't cry. I watch everything with eyes that haven't changed size to this day.

We live in a council house outside of Oxford, and my mother teaches and learns to drive. She works in a school dedicated to St. Frideswide, the patron saint of my birthplace. She tells me the story about rabbits, once, the first time. We return to Oxford many times; once I eat Thai food that mixes to a thick soot in my stomach and I vomit for days. We walk the Isis, and the Thames, and eat sandwiches and Scotch Eggs.

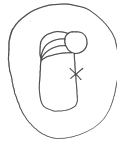
When I am twenty we take some friends to see the famous Rollright Stones. They aren't interested. I see rocks walking down to the river to drink and plot, clutching the holes in their sides. They were vandalised not long after I was born, and now they are ringed with railings and anti-climb paint.

When I am nine we make that move to Kent and I grow more. I eat ice cream and cry at Lassie. I dream one night that my mother dies; I never see her, am not allowed to see her, but my father collapses on our neighbour's lawn, broken. Every so often the dream comes back to me; my lack of power, my aching eyes upon waking.

When I am not born my father shows my mother his books of birds, falcons glaring at owls in a Greek-like, perfumed landscape. He is a bird-watcher, and likes her. She is crying, but not because of him. She sees her ring slipping, with none to take its place.

When I am eighteen I apply to the University; this was never something that was questioned. Keble College must swell to accommodate me, and the other candidates and I drink beer in The Bear, my parents' favourite pub. The others seem to follow me, and I feel important. I know a little of the place already; I drunkenly tell the story of my birth, so similar to theirs, but saturated in this town that means so much to them. I leave the next day after my interview, with crippling self-doubt, not ready to come back. They don't want me anyway. I am resigned that history might die with me. Of course, I am stupid. Oxford was not the place for me.

When I am twenty, as I write this, my parents have been married twenty-five years, and they retreat to Italy to remember barging and the sun of the hill. After many years of refusal my father has a ring made, a simple gold thing, his finger bigger and more swollen as the band cups him. He and my mother match now, but he has never liked jewellery.



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