

THE FROZEN THAMES

Helen Humphreys



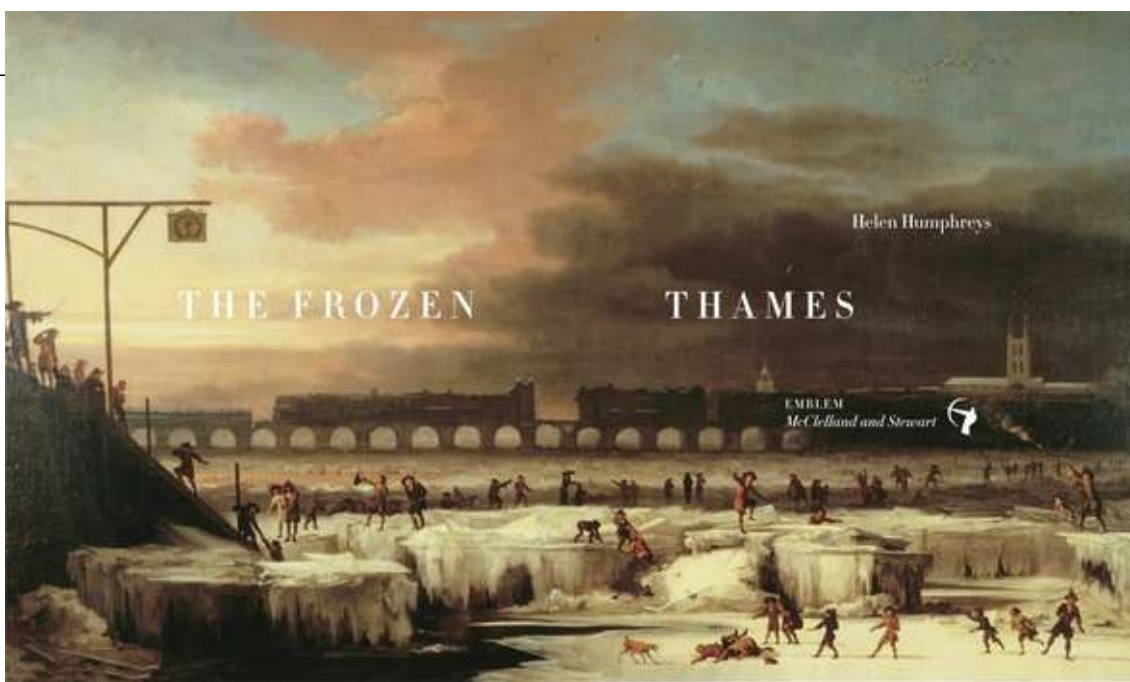
EMBLEM

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FOUR POUNDS FOR THE PRIZE, IN THE HAND OF CHARLES II.—ONE A PAIR OF THE YEAR.

(image credit Front matter 1)



(image credit Front matter 2)

Cloth edition published 2007

Emblem edition published 2008

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Humphreys, Helen, 1961-

The frozen Thames / Helen Humphreys.

eISBN: 978-1-55199-481-9

1. Thames River (England) – History – Fiction.

2. London (England) – History – Fiction. I. Title.

PS8565.U558F76 2008 C813.'54 C2008-900904-5

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program and that of the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Media Development Corporation's Ontario Book Initiative. We further acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council for our publishing program.

McClelland & Stewart Ltd.

75 Sherbourne Street, Toronto, Ontario M5A 2P9

www.mcclelland.com

v3.1

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Postscript: 1927

Author's Note

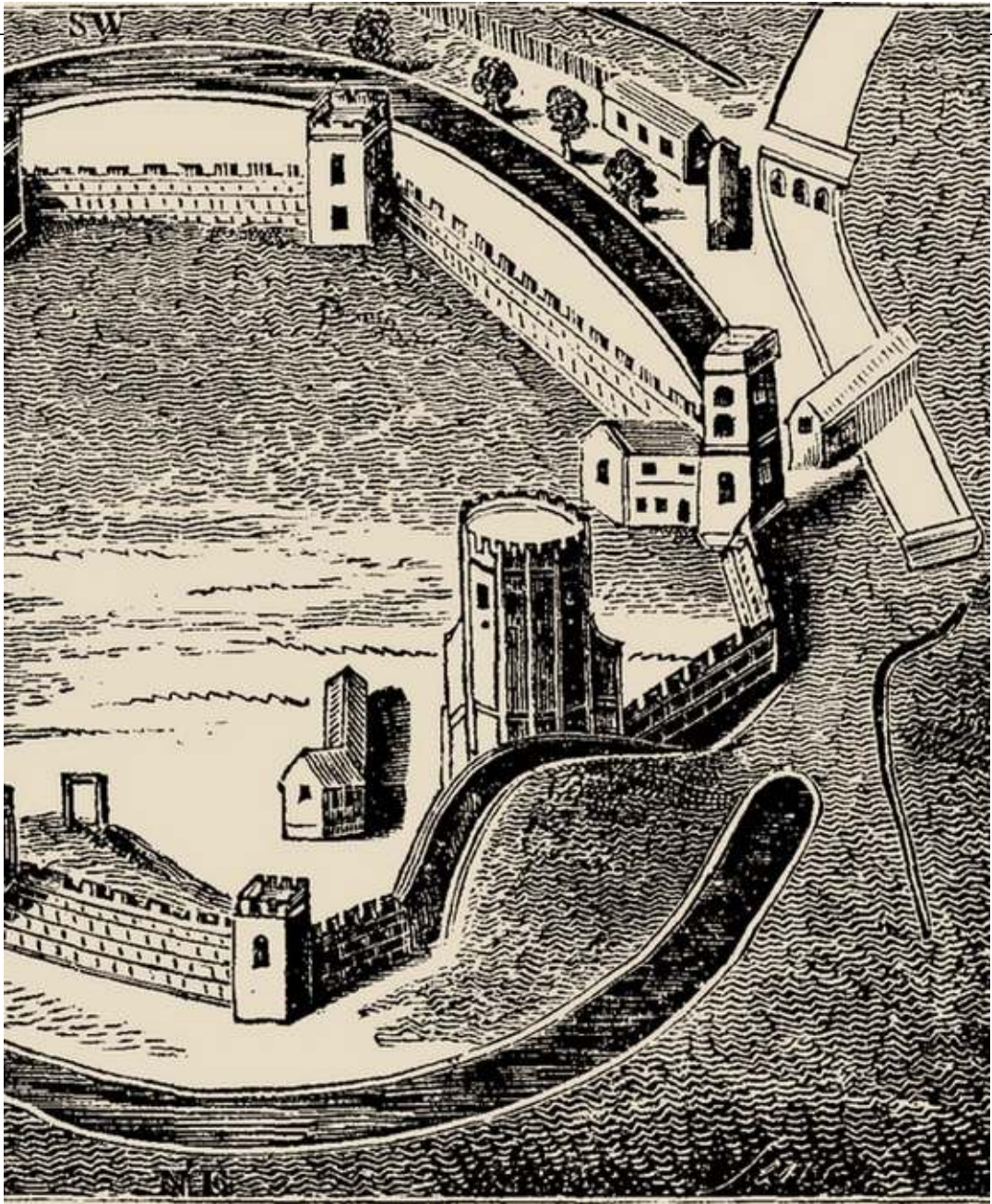
Dedication

Acknowledgements

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In its long history, the river Thames
has frozen solid forty times.

These are the stories of that frozen river.



(image credit 1142.1)

Matilda is under siege. For more than three months now she's been barricaded inside this castle in Oxford while her cousin, Stephen, circles the ramparts with his men. She waits for slow starvation to force her out and into his capture.

They have eaten all the horses and burnt all the furniture. They have retreated through the pockets of cold, to a small room without windows at the base of the tower. At night they huddle together like dogs.

Matilda is Queen of England, but her cousin has stolen the Crown, and now she is locked into battle with him. She has been locked into battle with him for almost seven years.

Stephen would never have been able to race to London to claim the Crown if Matilda had been in England at the time, not stranded in France with her child husband, Geoffrey of Anjou, who everyone agreed had descended from the daughter of Satan. She would never have had to marry a fourteen-year-old if her brother, William, had lived, instead of drowning in the Channel in 1120 on the White Ship, rowed across by drunken men who, in their drunkenness, hit a rock and holed the boat. Their father, Henry I, King of England, was so grief-stricken that he never smiled again, and decided to pass on the throne to his daughter Matilda, even though it was unheard of for a woman to inherit the Crown and govern the realm.

Matilda would never have had to think about being Queen if her father hadn't died suddenly. Her father wouldn't have died suddenly if he'd listened to everyone around him and not eaten such a huge helping of stewed lamprey eels.

It is night at Oxford Castle. Usually Matilda makes the rounds, visits her men slouched by the narrow windows, their longbows leaned up against the stone, but tonight she is too weary, cannot think of anything appropriate to cheer them further onwards in her service towards their very deaths, so she goes instead into the interior of the castle to find her maid who will prepare her for sleep.

Her maid, Jane, is not in the room at the base of the tower. Matilda finds her out in the courtyard, staring up at the sky, Matilda's nightshirt slung over her arm.

"Look, ma'am," she says, as soon as she sees the Queen. "It's snowing."

So it is. Big, lacy flakes that swim down out of the darkness decorate the shoulders of the Queen's maid.

"Ma'am," says Jane. "The snow is the same colour as your nightshirt."

Matilda takes her three strongest knights. They make a rope out of their leggings and they wait until the hour is the darkest, the snow is the thickest. They are lowered to the ground from one of the castle windows by the men they have left behind. All four of them are dressed in nightshirts and they move like ghosts, softly and slowly, towards the edge of the river.

The Thames is frozen. Matilda saw it freeze. These days and days of the siege, she has spent a good deal of time looking out at the enemy camped on the edge of the river. A week ago the temperature dropped, and now Stephen's men walk up and down the ice on horseback. They have even built two fires there, near the shore.

In order to get to the other side of the river, Matilda and her three men will have to walk between those signal fires. They move in single file, a man in front, then Matilda, two men behind her. They move slowly and carefully, do not speak, keep close together.

Through the swirling snow, Matilda can see the glow of the fires, can hear the voices of Stephen's army. If they can just pass between those fires they will cross to the middle of the river, out past the sentries, and from there they can walk to the other side. Matilda is equally opposed and equally supported by the people of Britain, and there will be someone who will help them, give them horses so they can ride to Wallingford, where her ally, Brien FitzCourtenay is waiting.

They are almost at the fires when a sentry on horseback comes towards them. They instantly stop, locked into position, heads bowed against their chests. They are wearing white bonnets and white nightgowns. The snow erases their bodies, but perhaps it doesn't completely erase their outlines, for the sentry halts before them. Matilda can hear the horse breathing, can hear it snort. The horse knows that they're there. She raises her head a little and can make out the upright figure of the man in the saddle. She sees him lift his arm, thinks he is going for his sword, but he blesses himself instead, blesses himself and rides right past them. He must have thought that they were ghosts.

In that moment when Matilda is standing perfectly still, trying to be invisible, she realizes that this is what she's learned from the three months in the castle. She's learned how to watch and wait. She's learned how to choose what burns, how much heat there will be in her maid's sewing box, in the wooden bowl that used to hold apples. She saw the river freeze at that moment when the water took hold of itself and wouldn't let go. All this time she thought the siege was chaos, but she can see now that it was really calm masquerading as chaos. When she gets away, the control she thinks she has in riding to Wallingford, in going back into battle against Stephen – that will prove to be the real chaos.

Matilda holds her breath. She lets it go. The horseman has passed and the knight in front of her has begun to move them, once more, across the frozen river. There is nothing to do but go forward.

When Thomas goes into the storeroom behind the alehouse, he sees immediately that they are in trouble, rushes upstairs to wake his brother.

“Robert,” he says, shaking the blanket-covered lump on the bed by the wall. “Robert, wake up. The ale has frozen solid.”

It has been cold since Candlemas, and now, in the middle of February, the cold has just kept tightening its grip. It has moved deep inside every house, deep into the heart of every man.

Robert shucks his blanket in one angry movement. He cannot bear any more. There will never be a spring. He will never get warm. He sits on the edge of his bed, his head resting on his hands. A low moan escapes his lips.

Thomas is over by the small frost-encrusted window. “I suppose,” he says, his back to his brother, “that if the mighty Thames can freeze over, then something as trifling as ale could freeze as well.”

“We’re ruined,” says Robert, into the bowl of his hands. His breath snaps back at him, the only warmth there is in the room.

“I suppose,” says Thomas, “if we slept with the jugs of ale, we might be able to keep them warm.”

“We will perish,” says Robert, but Thomas doesn’t hear him, because he is still speaking into his hands, transfixed by the feeling of his own warm, used breath on his face.

“I doubt,” says Thomas, “that anyone will hold us to fault for such a thing. There has never been such a cold winter.”

“Cold winter,” says Robert, from the bed. “Freezing cold bloody awful winter.”

Thomas turns from the window, his face lit up with his sudden good idea. “I think,” he says, “there’s profits to be made here.”

At the mention of money, Robert perks up, lifts his head, and looks towards his younger brother. “How?” he says.

“When ale is frozen, it expands. We can’t sell it as we used to, but we can –” Thomas pauses for effect, even though he doesn’t need to, for Robert is listening intently. “We can start to sell it by weight instead of volume.”

The oxen don't want to cross the frozen river. They stand at the edge of the ice, swaying in their yoke, pawing at the ground. In front of them the frosted Thames seems as vast and wild as a moor, fog drifting like smoke across the white, uneven surface.

Oxen are wise and the driver trusts their instincts. He relies on his oxen to tell him when it will rain by their refusal to leave their stalls. He understands their attachment to one another, knows that if an ox is separated from its partner in yoke it will bellow and roar, be as upset as any human would be who was parted from their mate. That is why the driver has brought both oxen with him this morning, to the edge of the river, even though he only requires one ox to pull the cart. He is hoping that by bringing both, each will be a comfort to the other. But instead they seem to be doubly stubborn, doubly wary of what they are being required to do.

The freezing of the Thames has been an unexpected gift to the ox driver. He transports grain in his small cart, from his farm on one side of the river, to the miller on the other side. If he can cross on the ice, instead of by road and bridge, it saves him a half-day's journey.

The driver has had this pair of oxen for a long time, since they were born and he was a younger man. He can't even remember how long that might be. Each year seems much like those on either side of it. Only this year is different, and this year is different only because the Thames has frozen solid. In his entire lifetime he has never come upon such a thing as this before.

The oxen are brothers. They understand one another in a way the driver envies, although he would never say this to anyone.

So now, here they are, at the edge of the frozen river. The driver wants to cross the ice. The oxen want to stay on shore. The driver knows it will do no good to talk to the oxen, to scold them, to force them forwards with a lashing. This will just make them afraid and more certain that they were right in feeling they should not cross the river. This will mean that they will be inclined to balk in the middle of crossing, to stay put out of dread and nervousness. What the driver and the oxen both know is that if the oxen don't want to move, they don't have to, nothing can make them.

The driver respects his oxen. He walks with them over the fields every day. He is beside them and knows them. He spends more time with them than he does with any other living being. So he knows what he must do to convince them to come with him across the ice.

Oxen are magic creatures. The tiny, buzzing bird that makes the honey, the smallest bird there is, is born from the ox. If this tiny, yellow-and-black bird dies, the only thing that will revive it is for it to be covered with mud and placed under the living body of an ox.

The driver feels sometimes that he is the small, buzzing bird, that he has been born from the body of an ox. And so now he darts ahead, onto the ice at the edge of the river, just like that small bird darting off in search of the honey flowers. He runs forwards and back, the grind of ice and snow crisp beneath his boots. The ice does not have the hollow ring of cobblestones. It feels heavier, more substantial, like the thick mud of the fields. There's a muffled finality to his steps that must sound reassuring to the oxen, because, as the driver

turns to face the opposite shore, he hears the slow, measured weight of them moving trustingly on the ice behind him.



(image credit 1282.1)

I live atop the London Bridge, in a small stone house, on the fourth arch. I know the bridge, and I know the river below. I have seen all manner of weather. I know the swiftness of the tides and the rhythm of the boats that slip through the fast water under the arches. Each pier has a breakwater around it called a starling, and these starlings act like a dam, slowing the water above the bridge, and squeeze it through the narrow chute of each arch into a fierce rapid. It is fine sport to shoot through these rapids in a small boat.

In the old times, the first times, the river was crossed using a ferry. It is said that when the last ferryman died, his daughter took all her wealth and used it to build a convent on a site that was thus named St. Mary of the Ovaries. The daughter's name, you see, was Mary Ovary. Later, priests made a school in the place of that convent. They were the ones who built the first of many wooden bridges across the river.

It was a priest who, much later, in 1176, designed and constructed this stone bridge upon which I live. It took thirty-three years to complete. There are gatehouses at either end and a church in the middle, St. Thomas's, named after Thomas Becket. There are nineteen arches, including one that has a drawbridge that can be raised to allow the tall ships to enter the river below the bridge.

I have lived on this bridge for as long as I can remember, as long as I have been alive. Our house is newly built, for there was a fire on the bridge in 1212, just three years after the final work had been finished. The fire started on one side, and people rushed over from the other side to help quell the flames. But the wind was strong that day, and blew sparks across the bridge, catching the other end on fire, so that both ends were burning towards the middle and the people on the bridge were trapped between advancing walls of flame.

Three thousand bodies were plucked from the water below, the dead choosing to jump rather than burn, and dying all the same.

I think of that fire when I lie in bed at night. I can almost hear the hiss and whisper of the flame as it slinks across the bridge towards me.

But it is not fire that comes. It is ice. This winter is the coldest I can remember. The river shuts tight below me. I can see the men and oxen walking across it as though it were a road. Sometimes I can even hear the groans of the river under the ice, a groan like a dying animal or a sleeping man.

I am lucky to live on the fourth arch, because when the ice started to break up, it shouldered through the archways and crashed against the starlings, and five of the arches towards the middle of the bridge collapsed. Ice is stronger than water, that is what I have learned. Ice is made from water, but it does not seem to remember water.

Five arches collapsed and houses were pitched from the bridge. Walls crumbled and timbers snapped. The bridge survived the fire, but it does not look as though it will be able to survive the ice.

London Bridge is falling down. Falling down. Falling down.

London Bridge is falling down. My fair lady.

The hare is set upon the ice. Here, it does not have the shelter of the field, cannot dash between furrow and stubble, use its colours to try to match the colours of the earth. Here, it is quick brown against this long, white river. There is nowhere for it to hide or escape. It will be run down by the dogs and torn to pieces.

This winter is so cold that loaves of bread will freeze unless wrapped in a layer of straw. The ice is so thick upon the river that it has damaged the starlings around the piers of the bridge. People have made a huge fire, there by the bridge, and even with the flames shooting higher than a man's head, there is no danger that the ice below will begin to melt.

I am the fewterer for this hare coursing. It is my task to lead the two greyhounds out onto the ice in leash, and to loose them when the hare has been given a bit of a lead. Behind me, behind the dogs, are the horsemen and footmen, the ones who have wagered on this race, the ones who own the hounds. Right now I am the most powerful person on this stretch of ice. I will be the one to set everything moving.

A hare will not run in a straight line. It will dodge and weave, moving in a criss-cross pattern over the ground. At first a greyhound will follow the exact positioning of the hare, and, because the dog is a good deal larger and more ungainly than the hare, it will overshoot, will stumble, will have to double back, will fall behind. The better the dog, the sooner he will realize that he doesn't have to follow the hare so exactly, that he can anticipate the direction the hare might be heading, that he can run a straight line, gaining ground on the hare and cutting it off. The hare is locked into running the way he does. He cannot help himself, but the dog can. The dog is not such a bundle of nerves and instinct. The dog can think for himself, can work things out. The dog has all the advantages, and doesn't have to worry about its survival the way the hare does.

I do not think it is fair to bring what is meant for the field out onto the ice. The hare is too visible. The surface is too slick. There is nowhere for the hare to run, unless he can make it to the shore. But to do this he must cross a vast, flat expanse of frozen river, and the dogs will almost certainly run him down when he gets to this part of the course.

There is a point for the lead dog at the first turn, a point for the dog that leads the hare, a point for the dog that turns the hare, and a point for the kill.

The hare was scooped from a field yesterday morning. It has been kept in a box covered with a horse blanket until now. It will be frightened and confused, will run as hard as it can to get away. I saw it shivering in its box before it was set loose. A large hare, all baggy skin, starving from this long, cold winter.

The dogs are the dogs of noblemen. They are well fed, kept indoors, treated with more kindness than most men. It is considered an act of murder to kill a greyhound. There is a law in place that states exactly that. It is murder and a man may be put to death for it, just as if he had killed another man.

The dogs are more important than I am. No one would care if I froze to death this winter, but the dogs will never be allowed to suffer as I've been suffering. The dogs will lie on velvet cushions by a blazing hearth. They will be fed from the tables of lords. Some say the dogs

even sleep in bed with the noblemen.

The dogs are racing one another. The noblemen will ride up behind them and keep mind of their score. The dog who catches and kills the hare will undoubtedly be the victor.

A fewterer's job is to loose the hounds at a precise moment, the moment when the hare is just out of reach. It is a moment that is felt rather than measured. I know it in my bones, and the dogs know it too, know when I have waited too long, strain against their leashes to tell me that I have waited too long to release them.

The thing about ice that I have noticed is that it is hard to judge the distance of a moving object upon it. In a field there are markers to gauge that movement. It is easy to see how far the hare is running, how much ground it is covering, how far ahead it is. The big, empty whiteness of this frozen river makes all of that harder to judge. Only a man with a keen eye, a man who was used to the feeling of distance, or a dog who had run a coursing, would know that the hare has been allowed a longer run than it should have been allowed.

This is the most I can do without being caught and punished, without my small wage and the loaf of bread and bottle of ale I have been promised being kept from me. The hare has good instincts. He has started across the wide part of the river towards the far shore. I slacken the leashes of the hounds and let them go.



(image credit 1363.1)

I look for you along the banks of the river, where the great fires have been laid. Each fire is a pyramid of coal, taller than the tallest man, and blazing with a fierceness that seems to match my need to find you.

You're not there, by any of the fires, nor at any of the tables that have been set upon the ice for this enormous feast. You promised you would come, and yet you haven't, and so I cannot settle, walk along one bank to the end of the coal fires, and then back along the other bank.

Here at Reading, the Thames has frozen so thickly that it will hold up the pyramids of burning coal without a quiver. It will hold up the long tables laden with food, at which sit all the poor and weak in the town. For one night only, for this night, we are to be treated to a great feast by the Abbot and the Grey Friar monks. The brothers themselves are acting in our service for the evening, fetching us food and drink when we so desire it.

I would be enjoying this, but I am too worried about whether or not you will arrive as promised. I know your family has been ill. You might have stayed to tend to them.

I am standing on the ice, a little way out from the fires so that I am not blinded by their flames, so that I can still see you if you come walking from the north end of the river. I am wearing a new black cloak I have fashioned from a blanket. It is not the green cloak you are used to seeing me in, and I worry that you will not recognize me, so I am determined to recognize you first. I don't like the new law that has been passed this year, decreeing that only the nobility are permitted to wear coloured clothing, and that each of the colours is coded with meaning. As the lower orders, we are only allowed black or grey. They can have red to signify their superior position, blue to show their fidelity, yellow to flash hostility, pale grey for sorrow, and green for love.

It seems an impossible law to enforce, and yet I have complied, and in my acceptance show my fear of disobeying.

All around me, at all the tables set upon the frozen river, there is great merriment. The monks have provided each table with a hogshead of ale, and some of the merriment is caused by the generous taking of this ale.

And suddenly, there you are. You walk towards me over the ice, the fires throwing you into shadow, lighting you boldly with each surge and ebb of flame. You have recognized me even in the new cloak. You walk towards me without hesitation, and my body feels suddenly weightless, as though I could float up like a bird, look down upon this little stretch of ice with the orange puddles of light bleeding at the edges, and the black lines of the tables laid out in the centre of the river.

When you are almost upon me, I move forward so that I may clasp you in my arms, but you hold out your hands to stop me. You, too, are wearing a black cloak, and there is frost decorating the ends of your hair where it touches your face. Not frost, I realize with a start, not frost but frozen tears.

"What?" I say, and my breath unknots in the cold night air, drifts off into threads of smoke. You pull back the sleeve of your cloak and hold your bare arm out for me to see the black

boils that are pockmarked over your flesh.

The Black Death.

It seemed as though the plague had passed. For more than ten years people died. Every second house in London seemed affected. There were so many dead that they were just tossed into massive pits, piled one on top of the other with no ceremony or marker. The nobility fled to the country, and then, when it all seemed to be over, they came back and passed this law about the clothes. This is to keep us in our place, because, with so many dead the poor have become less so, have inherited money and property from those who have died.

You hold out your arm and I see the black spots, know that you probably already have the fever, that you will be dead in two or three days, and I cannot bear it.

All around us I can hear the sounds of people being happy – laughter and talking. I cannot remember this kind of happiness, not ever, and it seems so wrong that a moment so good could lie peacefully alongside a moment so bad.

If I touch you, I will be infected. You probably shouldn't have come here, because you now carry the disease, and because it has most likely taken all your strength just to get here. But I am glad you kept your promise, and I am more than glad to see you. I don't know how I can live without you, or if I will. It was only days ago that I last saw you, that I touched you. The plague could be bubbling under my skin as we stand here.

I lift my cloak so that you can see the lining, so that you can see what I've wanted to tell you. I have sewn pieces of my green cloak into the lining of this black one. Green for love, under the new law.

It seems strange that this is the end of the world, this scene of feasting and happiness something that is so outside my usual days. But perhaps that is good, perhaps if I had to leave a world that was my own it would be harder.

You lower your arm and smile. You have understood. I step forward into your embrace and kiss you.

The birds fall from the trees. They tumble from the roofs and chimney-pots where they have perched. They are heavier in death than they were in life. Solid and flightless, they fall to the ground like dark, feathered apples, with exactly that weight, the weight of an apple.

There has been a frost for fourteen weeks straight and everything is starving. The Thames has frozen solid. The fires burn so fiercely in the hearths of the houses that sometimes the houses themselves catch into flame, a bright bloom of red flaring up in the field of white that is now London.

Everyone, everything, is starving, but it is the birds that are dying. They die fast and the songbirds go first, all the delicate notes of the thrushes and blackbirds stopped in their throats. They drop from the trees, songless. They fall from the railings of the bridge onto the frozen river below. At the threshold of every house, the hinge of every gate, the surface of every road, lie the small, cold bundles of bird.

A woman walks on the ice below London Bridge. She is hunched against the weather, keeping her head down to avoid the wind that whistles between the stone arches of the bridge. A bird falls at her feet. Another hits her shoulder and bounces off her body onto the river.

The woman goes home and tells her husband: "I was hit by a bird that fell from the sky." And later on – the next morning, or the morning after that – she will be dressing herself for the day and will see the bruise that has flowered on her shoulder. A bruise as dark and rich as the colour of a blackbird's wing.

It is almost the same distance by road as by river from Gravesend to London, but it is a completely different journey. Moving the wine by barge was a peaceful, slow drift up the Thames. It was fishermen and green fields and cows drinking at the water's edge, lifting their heads to watch the boat sail by.

Now that the whole length of the river has frozen, all the way from London Bridge to Gravesend, John must make the journey overland. The wine has been loaded onto a cart, and the driver seems determined to take them over the roughest roads he can find. The wheels of the cart groan and squeak, clatter against the hard, rutted earth. The jugs of frozen wine knock together like stones. The horses shift in their creaking harness, and the driver whistles a low, tuneless whistle all the way, except for when he tries to engage John in mindless chatter about the pain in his legs. The noise is all too much, and once John has delivered the wine to the merchants and made it home, at the end of a very long day, he is in a foul temper.

"I can't abide any more tumult," he says, striding into his house and slamming the door so hard that the dog begins to bark and wakes the baby.

Annabelle looks up at him blankly. She has been sitting quietly by the fire with the middle boy on her lap. The dog had been lying at her feet. The baby had been sleeping.

John kicks the dog and lumbers towards the warmth of the hearth, collapsing into a chair with a long, dramatic groan. He pulls a jug of frozen wine out from the inside pocket of his coat and sets it in front of the fire.

"All of it bloody frozen," he says.

Annabelle continues to regard him blankly, and it occurs to John that her name, which she's proud to consider as French, is really the name of a cow.

The winter has been long and harsh and very cold. The small house they live in has only one fireplace, this one, downstairs, and so, over the course of the winter, everything has migrated towards the hearth. Chairs are pushed right up to the grate. The table is spitting a distance from the fire. Clothes are hung above it and boots are warmed before it. All the beds have been moved downstairs and are arranged in an arc around the flickering coal. No one has been upstairs in weeks. The last time John climbed the stairs to the attic it was so frigid up there that he might as well have been scaling the tallest mountain peak.

"I'm hungry," he says. He has been gone two full days, living on bread and cheese and beer, which at the time seemed well enough, but now seems to have been a great and painful deprivation.

"Supper's in the pot," says Annabelle, but she makes no move to disturb the sleeping child in her lap and fetch the food for her husband.

"Well," says John, hurt that she has refused to serve him. "I'm hungry, but I'll wait for the wine." He glares at the jug by his feet, nudges it a little closer to the fire with his toe. It still seems completely frozen, although the outside of the jug has started to bead with water.

"Suit yourself," says Annabelle. She shifts the boy on her knee, and he whimpers in his sleep like a dog.

“We are living in the fireplace,” says John, looking around at the cluster of furniture huddled up against the hearth. “It is not proper for a man to have to live in the fireplace.”

Annabelle says nothing. The dog, with a wary glance at John, slinks back towards the fire and settles down on a scrap of rug by Annabelle’s feet.

John stares at the jug of wine, willing it to melt. The freezing of the Thames has changed everything for him. All that once allowed him, included him, has now locked him out. Once he moved up the slow water of the river, moved in the soft embrace of his wife. Once, the sweet relief of wine released his good humour, flushed him warm, full of happiness.

“It’s cold out here,” he says, but no one hears him.

The three boys have come down to skate on the river. The water above the bridge has s fast and smooth. There is no snow on the surface and the ice glistens black under th winter sun. It is early in the morning and there is no one else moving on the Thames.

The boys sit on the ice at the edge of the shore and strap the skate bones onto their bo soles. They push off from the bank, at first tentatively, and then with stronger and strong strokes, until they are flying, like crooked birds, up the centre of the river.

At first Samuel thinks he is just heating up from the exercise, from the effort of pushing h body across the ice. But the sweat starts to run from his face like rain. His hair is wet an plastered to his head, and he can feel, by their heaviness, that his clothes are soaked. H stops. His legs feel shaky, uncertain about holding him upright. His friends are now far ahead of him, swooping and gliding up the river, moving fast and far away from him.

It is most surely the *swetynges sykenesse*, and the thought of this makes Samuel wobble an crash to the ice.

The *swetynges sykenesse* has suddenly come back this year after many years of being absent. This second outbreak is not as virulent as the first, but people are still dropping dead a terrifying number.

The sickness kills swiftly and without warning. There is a sudden, burning sweat, and th a fever, and the person thus afflicted could be dead within the hour. It kills people as it find them – sleeping in their beds, gathering firewood on the heath, walking to market. Unlike th Black Death, it seems to be a peculiarly English disease. There has been no word of affecting the French.

Samuel is now too weak to cry out, to call loud enough for his friends to hear him. He cur up on the ice, presses his cheek against the surface. The cold feels good, but soon the ice beneath his cheek turns to water. He is burning a hole through to the river below, and h imagines falling into that water and floating there amongst the fishes. He closes his eyes. H can hear the fish swimming, the scrape of their fins moving through the water. They brus against him and lift him up, drag him along the bottom of the river.

Samuel opens his eyes. His friends have him by the arms, one on one side of his body, on the other. They are lifting him and pulling him. He can hear their laboured breathing. H can see the ice spray up from their skates.

But he still feels like a fish, swimming in his own sweat, gasping for air. They have hook him, caught him, are reeling him in. He starts twitching, trying to wriggle free of their gras. If they get him to shore, they will kill him. They will split his head upon a rock and run knife along his belly. They will sink their plundering hands deep into his flesh and haul o his steaming entrails. His only hope is to shake them off, here in the water, where he can sti get away, where he can still save his life.

He has walked the frozen river every day, all this long, cold winter. He doesn't walk to watch the skaters on the ice, or the carts and oxen crossing from one side to the other with their loads of grain or apples. He doesn't look at the sky, empty now of birds, or up at the arches of the bridge, each one gaping open like a hungry mouth. None of these things is as interesting to this man as the river itself. He walks along, only looking down at the ice in front of his boots.

He is an explorer. Well, not quite an explorer yet, but he wants to become one. All this year and last year there has been talk of a passage through the polar ice at the top of the world, and he has listened to all of this speculation and pondered upon it. Several attempts have been made to find the way, but all have ended before they reached the polar seas. This man wants to be on the next ship that leaves England for such a purpose.

And so he is studying the properties of ice in order to prepare himself for the vast stretches of it that await him in the Northwest Passage. Every day he treks along the Thames as though he were walking in the Arctic wastes. He keeps his eyes down to observe the ice, and so he won't have to see any other people, the chimneys of the houses on the banks, so he can imagine that he is the only living, moving creature in an endless white landscape.

He has made a vow to himself to keep walking on the ice until he falls through it and he intends to keep this vow. It makes him feel that what he is doing is dangerous, and he needs that feeling of danger to keep the image of himself as an explorer alive.

At the beginning of the freeze, the beginning of winter, the ice is clear and dark, like tar. As it melts it softens, the whole sheet of it sagging the way a floor does from having weight on it in the same place year after year.

Snow shows the veins of brown leaves on the surface. The leaves have collapsed on the gravelly rind, their tracery fine as lace.

When the sun's warmth dissolves the snow into the ice, it becomes milky as the body of a fish. The leaves and sticks that have frozen into it filter light and heat through their skins and make themselves into islands, rings of water form around them, and they eventually burrow themselves through to the water below.

The ice seems to melt from above and below at the same time. Holes appear at random and water pools on the surface. Each section of ice seems to be different from the one next to it.

When the explorer finally does fall through the ice, it is swift and sudden, not the gentle lowering he had expected. He scrapes his shins on the jagged edges of the hole on the way down and then, because he has plunged through quite close to shore and the water is shallow, he climbs out awkwardly and walks home, the cold river water stiffening the hinges of his body shut.

At home, drying by the fire, drinking hot milk, the explorer wonders at the wisdom of what he has been doing. He has been trying to learn the properties of ice, but all he has learned is that ice is diverse, that no piece of ice matches another. He has wanted to learn the properties of ice in preparation for walking on the empty Arctic plains, but what he has perhaps done

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