

DAY 1

'It became green everywhere in the first spring, after London ended...'

Richard Jefferies *After London, Wild England, 1885*

I'm set up now, with an uncomfortable chair and awkward desk, in a small room attached to a deconsecrated Church, Holy Trinity in Islington's Cloudesley Square. I'm here in this little room to write, and work on artworks. And something had better come of it I suppose. I have brought armour here, the armour of some books that I am proud to have read because they're dense non-fiction, and some others which I have the strong intention of reading. My little portable etching press is here too, and a scattered assortment of things to print with or onto. I need a cushion.

I've written a short play, a dissection of a satirical annual called *Fun* from 1876 into a two-person piece called *No More Fun*. I've been making etchings to go alongside it, and the purpose of this time is to think about sets, costume, and work on the script.

There's this slight feeling of futility at the bottom of everything though (I'm depressed at the moment, not sad this time, but chemically imbalanced). I'm scatter-brained these days, my attention span macerated in the torrential vinegar of Youtube videos, Instagram reels, and podcast chatter. I've been doing this to myself of course, with the weapon in my pocket. I'll have to harness attention as best I can then for the next fortnight.

I am so easily overwhelmed. I think maybe that I make things from what I find because it's easier to construct something legible from them than by asking my brain to look at itself for inspiration. I can garden, I can clean, I can tidy up and re-arrange and I self-soothe in doing so.

London is overwhelming. I've lived here almost my whole life and had different phases with it. Yesterday I had four different encounters with homeless men. The first accused himself of being a piece of shit and then the train carriage of being horrid individuals. I wanted to say hey – I'm a piece of shit too! But don't carry change often nowadays. The second man had just finished a big bottle of sherry and was explaining the relationship between Gypsy culture and Christ to a woman who listened patiently. The third was swaying unreliably down the middle of a busy road impervious to horn-hoots, the fourth kicking the life into a sponsored fibreglass cow outside an off-licence.

I am so filled with dread and doom at the moment, and the feeling that at any minute I could fade away, that I found myself thinking of these four unfortunate people as being 'fools' in the Shakespearian sense, behaving and speaking truthfully, in a way that is a more appropriate response to our situation, living as we do in an oppressive, corrupt, unfair and filthy city. We walk around London as if it is kind to us whilst it slaps us around, and they have had this illusion stripped away...

London is also, of course, a wonderful well of inspiration which breaks through the walls of my cynicism and pessimism each day. I have so far taken in the very Londonish railings that perimeter this

church building, and the scrawny weeds that hem them like they do in the foregrounds of my favourite early Renaissance paintings. I have been thinking, in a sort of self-indulgently self-aware way, about what my voice is as an artist, given that I'm at the apex of all privilege positions (white, male, straight, able-bodied with familial wealth). I am sent looking, therefore, into the past and into systems of chance and coincidence, those systems that have conspired to elevate and insulate me from the worst of it all as a person and artist.

Guilt and doubt exert a very useful brake on my creative ego, but they're sometimes awfully counter-productive. I think I can get around them, or through them, by engaging in a sort of slow reportage, a softer, whispered, archivist or antiquarian role when I am making things. I sift, sort and fiddle – few big bold moves to be found here but instead slow and worried ones.

John Dryden on London, 1682:

*'Yet monsters from thy large increase we find/ Engender'd on the
Slime thou leav'st behind'*

Lines lifted from Henry Mayhews *London Labour and the London Poor*, 1851

*'Of the Dredgers, or River Finders,
of the Sewer-Hunters, the Mud Larks,
In remote days, everything connected
The tide, and the nature of the bottom
Valuables among the rubbish*

*Bones, and old rope, mixed with
Some hoped-for prize.
A living as it were by a game of chance,
Plodding, carefulness,
Tattered, indescribable things
Hunger in the mud.'*

DAY 2

In this search to find a voice with which to say things, I've worked for a long time with the idea of a narrator, a character who can displace and communicate the things I'm interested in, in a way that is halfway coherent. This was, for a while, a person called 'Prophet Johnny Loose' (the name taken from treasure hunt instructions found in the woods). I made work through Prophet Johnny about the end of the world using reconfigured cartoon imagery (from *The Beano*, and 20th Century 'Boys Annuals' like *Jet, Tiger and Tarzan*), and religious pamphlets found or handed to me in the street.

I am amused and fascinated by the behaviours, rhetorical flourishes, and overconfidence of a particular kind of bloke, perhaps because I recognise that with very little nudging, I tip over into those poses. My British single-sex private boarding school bred good public speakers, excellent bullshitters and sometimes fragile men like me that break and have needed putting back together. Men in power or with platforms, pundits, priests, 'public intellectuals' and artists often seem incentivized to be very certain of themselves. In chasing that self-assuredness, however, absurdity can quickly follow.

The current narrator, for a short play called *No More Fun*, is not hugely changed from the previous one but is now a composite of two historical characters. One, John Collier (alias Tim Bobbin), was a self-taught engraver, sign painter and writer of comic verse, and



in the 1750's made the below engraving of a couple of drunk fools. It was in the downstairs loo throughout my childhood. There is a pub named after him in Clapham. The other, Adam Toppin, was a doomsday prophet, wood engraver and self-appointed constable 'Poor Adam' in London in the 1600's. A composite of these and a series of archetypes in popular London woodcuts and engravings (the cuckold, the fool, Punch, Swillgut Baconface, Somebody & Nobody). By repurposing antique material, I am trying reiterate that

nothing is really new, to make work that says something about the unchanging march of beautiful and ugly London.

I want to use this Shakespearian 'fool' or 'madman' to speak truths to an audience about my experience of the world, however oddly dressed up. It's probably good to self-reflect here that I'm probably doing this because I'm a bit mad. Maybe I'm going there because it's useful and not that far away. I also live in Camberwell, just up the hill from Maudsley hospital, and most days witness the overspill of patients with mental illness and substance abuse disorders, slipping through the safety net.

The algorithm of my Instagram reels is truly fucked, and I'm not sure how. I get mostly lonely men who seem misguided as to what filming romantic pleas or angry tirades will achieve. The guy I found today is too perfect – his is the voice of my previous narrator: the conspiracy-minded apocalypse prophet. Here's a transcript of one video, delivered as if in response to a question or challenge, and seemingly mid-conversation. As I write it is midday and he has posted 12 videos.

"Yeah I 'spose the point of the 99 theocratic spin in competition with the democratic 66 spin, the point of that is, the main problem is the emotional bubble on and off Earth, and that being confirm-bias-built in such an epic scale one-way, and then that also transfer off Earth as that leadership, without a different directorship, in leadership, of correction..."

The danger here of course is that in using a displaced narrator I am cosplaying the fool or madman and punching down at vulnerable

people. I am protected against most of my own vulnerabilities by my privilege and have the time and space to look after myself. Hogarth was a Tory, and I'm not interested in moralising about other people's vices and lifestyle. Maybe I'm closer to a character like Edgar in *King Lear*, a ducal heir who chooses the costume of madman 'Poor Tom' to escape from danger but isn't making fun of madness in doing so. He fully transforms. The figure of 'Poor Tom' is positioned as closer to the natural world, his self is less fortified ("*Edgar I nothing am*"), bleeding into his surroundings, the storm, the heath he crosses.

'Poor Tom' in *King Lear* Act II Scene ii:

*"My face I'll grime with filth,
Blanket my loins, elf all my hair in knots
And with presented nakedness outface
The winds and persecutions of the sky.
The country gives me proof and precedent
Of Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices,
Strike in their numbed and mortified bare arms
Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary."*

Madness in *King Lear* is framed as a powerful chaos: "*His roguish madness / Allows itself to anything*" (Act III Scene vi). In writing *No More Fun* I picked out a fourth-wall breaking phrase for the drunkard "*Why am I privileged to smash anything I please?*"

DAY 3:

I am constantly operating somewhere in between an arbitrary process and magical thinking. I often use objects that have been put out onto the street in the bizarre hope that someone will want them (wood scraps, well-worn children's toys, books that weren't worth reading etc.). I do want them. But these objects often settle themselves quickly into patterns that float, nebulous, behind my eyes (my most common street finds have recently been jigsaw pieces and fabric flowers, once I notice something, it seems to proliferate).

I am trying to make some very preliminary set designs for *No More Fun*. I've turned the two anglepoises into exaggerated theatre lights and arranged a scene onto the shelf. When I was a child I loved scale-shifts, miniaturisation and collecting and arranging objects, spending hours with my plastic soldiers in the trees at my parents' house and spinning stories for myself. This has continued (an ex-partner teased that I was working towards a 'Museum of James'). I am basically still playing in the same way in my studio.

From the 15th to 18th centuries in Europe, wandering showmen toured 'Raree' shows, or peep-boxes viewed through a small hole, with miniature painted or printed sets that played on false perspective and transformations using lighting and lenses. I can perhaps tie this into my Poor Adam/ Tim Bobbin character and have him showing off some such device.