## THE NETTLES<sup>1</sup>

The nettles will give me away,

But this plain is as far as I can walk.

My arms will mutiny and refuse to dig,

Leave me to kick a hole in the sod

Or chew a grave, perhaps...

So this must be the place, my body insists,

Never mind the nettles, and how they will testify.

My legs have no wandering left in them.

They will buckle and demand to know the course

Before they go on another pace,

And if I do not admit to having none they will know how I lie.

It is lonely and wide here, a graveyard-in-waiting,

And my heart would clench with the perfection of leaving my burden here,

My shovel cutting through the frost-crisp crust of this plain,

Leaving my burden to feed stinging plants and choking weeds.

No better epitaph than that, not for the weight I carry—

But the nettles will not content themselves to be gravestones, I know,

They are spiteful things, they will take what I commit to them

And still raise my confession,

Stretching tall, an endless jury, lifting their accusing heads.

Unless I come to cut them back.

I could come and cut them back, I could silence them

With blades I have taught today to silence voices,

With blades who obey better than my legs, which will only have

To carry me back again and again since they will not go on.

Otherwise the nettles, the nettles will speak,

They'll press gleeful charges,

Paint on the surface the shape of what I bury, to say,

See...come see...

A marvel, a man, a murder, come see...

But not another step, my coward legs insist

As my shuddering arms drop the burden.

My burden,

And we stare at each other, my jury and I.

I'll come back, I say, I'll cut vou down.

The nettles laugh with voices like quills.

The nettles say, we'll see.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Owen Ilford, *The Collected Works of Owen Ilford*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (Onnendale Press, 1850). Published in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Eds. as "The Jury." According to an old wives' tale, nettles grow a foot higher in the soil of a grave.

Some scholars are obsessed with the poet who wrote of nothing but history and murder, others think the better story is the way a whiskey-soaked piano man brought him back from obscurity and nearly started a revolution. In any case it's impossible to read any of Owen Ilford's works without filtering them through the lens of "The Nettles," arguably the poem that rewrote Nagspeake history. Originally titled "The Jury" in the first and second editions of Ilford's Collected Works (and by Walter Mapp on his incendiary recording, "Raise My Confession: The Buried Lyrics of Owen Ilford"), the poem was reintroduced as "The Nettles" in the third and final printing, and it is by this last title that the poem is best remembered. According to Ilford's only published biographer, Dr. Edsel Price, the poet himself was dead before the second printing<sup>2</sup> and therefore could not have had anything to do with the changes to the title; it is as if the publisher felt (or hoped) that the content of the poem would seem less inflammatory as "The Nettles" than it was as "The Jury."

By long-standing tradition, there are two fundamental questions scholars of Owen Ilford debate when they chance to find themselves together without an angry mob trying to batter down the door and beat them all to death: firstly and most importantly, does "The Nettles" refer to the so-called righteous murder of Governor Roman Pellitory in 1805, and secondly, is "The Nettles" autobiographical?<sup>4</sup>

The sanctified place Pellitory's death holds in the head and heart of the average Nagspeaker is legend. The "righteous murder" defense, although so infrequently invoked that at the time of this writing the number of court cases in which it has figured in the last two hundred years could be counted on one hand, is still the most hotly contested issue in Nagspeake politics. It is therefore easy to see why "The Nettles," if it tells the story so many claim it does, possesses the power to inflame and enrage its readers so.

Nagspeake law of the last two hundred years has been defined by the city's refusal to discontinue use of the righteous murder plea. Detractors say it is merely sanctioned vigilantism. The plea's adherents argue the strength of the things that must be proved to use it: to claim righteous murder the equal and premeditated participation of a minimum of twelve people of at least twenty years' age<sup>5</sup> and ten years' citizenship in Nagspeake must be demonstrated. Additionally, the citizen "jury" must prove that the victim not only *deserved* to die, but *had* to die. The reason must compellingly

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> This is not verifiable, as we do not definitively know when Ilford lived or died. Dr. Price's book, unfortunately, tends toward unverifiable assertions of this sort.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Dr. Edsel Price, *No Better Epitaph: a Speculative Biography of the Man Who Killed Roman Pellitory* (Howthaltor Press). Others have written about this fascinating subject, speculating on exactly when and how he lived and died and especially why he was so obsessed with writing poetry from the point of view of murderers; however, only a limited number of articles clashing with Dr. Price's theories have survived the fight for publication.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> This author has suggested another, potentially more significant possibility behind Owen Ilford's murder poems. See *Serial Poesy* (self-published), in which the question is asked, are *all* the murder poems autobiographical?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The minimum age requirement was amended the law after a group of fifteen schoolchildren ambushed and killed a classmate during a school trip to FantasyTowne amusement park some years before it closed. The grounds on which they argued that their classmate had to die for the good of the rest is not recorded, as the judge rejected the righteous murder plea on the legal grounds of "patent absurdity" and was heard to say that he "would be goddamned if he'd hand his robes over to a bunch of kids in this lifetime." As a side note, Judge Holligan was defeated in the following year's election by a freshman justice. The name of the ringleader in the FantasyTowne death received twenty-six write-in votes.

demonstrate the jury's civic reasons for pursuing murder rather than traditional legal action.

The death of Governor Pellitory was, of course, the case that created the righteous murder plea. Thirteen men and women took the stand to testify that they had taken part in the planning or execution of Pellitory, following which a flood of citizens stepped to the podium throughout the long afternoon to claim that they, too, had either held him down or held a knife. In the end, the voice of the city convinced the presiding judge to throw out the case.<sup>6</sup> The term "righteous murder" was coined several years later when another advocate quoted the Pellitory ruling as a precedent in support of his case.

So what makes anyone think Owen Ilford had the death of Roman Pellitory in mind when he wrote "The Nettles?"

Ilford's birthdate, if it was ever recorded, has been lost (like nearly every other piece of information about his life; perhaps, as some conspiracy theorists would have it, intentionally, or perhaps naturally in one of the traditional burnings of the Nagspeake archives held four times each century). The date of his death (given without much substantiation by Dr. Price) was about seventy-five years after Pellitory's murder. Price fixes this year based on the assertion that "Pruning the Iron Skyward," Ilford's homily on the building of the funicular railway in the year before his presumed death, was written specially for the groundbreaking ceremony by Ilford in his role as poet laureate and that the next laureate, John Oltshur, was named to the post the following year as a successor to Ilford after his death. It is true that the groundbreaking was, chronologically, the last historical event Ilford wrote about, and Oltshur did, in fact, hold the post beginning the year after the groundbreaking. Anticipating, however, that his critics will challenge him with the fact that for the fifteen years preceding Oltshur's appointment according to historical record (such as it is) there was no poet laureate in Nagspeake and that there is no record in any case of Ilford every having held the post, Dr. Price preemptively cries, "Conspiracy!"

Ah, conspiracy. One would weary of hearing it except for this fundamental truth: there is no tangible, historical record of Owen Ilford to be found anywhere, anytime, ever. Indisputably the poems exist (albeit in very limited texts), and they are credited to an Owen Ilford so at some point someone called him/herself by that name, if only to claim authorship of certain works that no one else has cared (or dared) to claim. It follows, then, that if no record exists of someone who had to have existed, there must be a reason for the absence, and conspiracy, unlikely and complicated though it seems, might be, in the end, the second simplest solution. Things that Price explains away with this handy excuse include, but are not limited to, the disappearance of Ilford's poetry files at Onnendale Press, the sole publishers of his work (until, of course, Walter Mapp's "Confession" recording); the strange death on the funicular railway of Ilford's longtime

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Dr. Price claims that the judge actually threw the case out due to the fact that Roman Pellitory's body itself was never found and therefore no actual murder could be proved, but this may be apocryphal.

<sup>7</sup> The first simplest being that Nagspeake *burns its archives once every generation*, transferring the burden of recording what has been to the authors and historians whose weighty task it is to constantly be questioning and reconstructing history, all so that the city never stagnates under the weight of its true past or confines itself to a single narrow interpretation. This heritage of debate and discussion is why Nagspeake publishers' collective reluctance to publish any views on Owen Ilford (other than Dr. Price's) is so morally repugnant to this author and others who have been effectively silenced by it. It is also the most obvious explanation for the disappearance of the "historical record" of Owen Ilford's life.

editor and friend, Tod Whopplefold; and the decision of Deacon and Morvengarde, at the height of the controversy that made the third printing the last, to discontinue selling poetry altogether through their eponymous mail-order catalogue (solely, according to Price, to have an excuse not to carry Ilford's *Collected Works*).<sup>8</sup>

Price's evidence in support of his Pellitory murder theory is as speculative as the evidence he uses to place Ilford in Nagspeake at the necessary time. Having asserted that Ilford *could* have been alive when the murder and subsequent trial took place, he turns to the poem to solve, via close reading, the riddle he claims is hidden in plain view in the verses.

The first clue is of course the subject: the hiding, with great pain and difficulty, of a murdered man's body. As is well known, the body of Roman Pellitory was never produced into evidence during the legal proceedings that followed his death. This was because, according to the citizenry, there was very little left of it; the picture painted by the court reporter's notes is one of dozens of angry hands descending with dozens of angry knives, a "mob," according to the counsel for the prosecution, that left nothing behind to bury, let alone merit an inquest. Setting aside the prosecutor's characterization of the act, that must be admitted that historical record is silent on what happened to the "mangled remnants" (again, the prosecutor's words), so in theory they *could* have been buried in a plain of nettles; no one who was there said for certain the body was *not* (which is clearly enough for Price, whose scholarship appears to be based entirely on the absence of negative proof and seems to feel under no obligation to provide any proof positive for anything). So perhaps Owen Ilford is supplying a long-sought, missing piece of the most important legal case in Nagspeake history: the final resting place of

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> This spurred the founding of not one but two independent poetry presses, a magazine and a broadsheet in what came to be called the printer's quarter in Nagspeake's Shantytown. Although Ilford scholars (when they can catch a breath before sprinting down alleys to escape violent critics) like to rant and rave about the silencing of Owen Ilford by his hateful home city, Nagspeake is now considered to be a vibrant center of poetry publishing. Dr. Price snipes that it's less in thanks to aesthetics than to the members of a shadowy mob whose members sit at home scouring chapbooks and collections, watching for Ilford's successors so they can run for their pitchforks. If this was the case, however, it seems the openly subversive broadsheet called *Nettles* would've merited a proper witchhunt or two rather than the few measly firebombings its floating offices have actually had.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Of course he *could* have, but as the date of publication was accidentally (?) left off of the first edition of the *Collected Works*, he could've lived anytime afterward, as well; the second edition followed the first after seventy-five years (assuming the first was released when Whopplefold says it was, and assuming that Whopplefold had, in fact, been a contemporary of Ilford, which is far from proved since Edsel Price's claims that Whopplefold was Ilford's "longtime friend and editor" are based solely on the testimony of Whopplefold's great-great-grandson, a notorious drunkard, who also, according to the appendix to *No Better Epitaph*, claimed to keep as pets four aged bats who carried messages from Nagspeake to Resistance forces in World War I.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> With the well-known tendency of trial lawyers to degenerate into sensationalism, the prosecutor went on thusly: "...a mob...that spiraled into madness and disorganization at the first spout of blood, a feral beast with endless arms, something from the works of Milton that might guard the gates of hell, multiplying itself as gore flew, attracting more and more unto itself until the whole thing might as well have been a big...a giant ball of flesh and steel, no longer human, just madness balled up, just...balled up...how could he have deserved that...how could anyone...to see that in this world...dear God..." Evidently not even lawyers can keep that kind of bullshit up for long.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> One thing righteous murders can be counted on to be (by definition) is organized, even dispassionate. For this reason, it has been suggested by many legal scholars that the published account of the event must be corrupt and that the prosecutor's statements should be stricken.

Pellitory's body. Perhaps "The Nettles" gives the point of view of one of the many citizens who testified; perhaps this is the voice of someone who spoke after the court reporter ran out of paper. Why would this be so awful? Why all the controversy? Why all the violence, the burnings, the attacks, the kidnapping of the publisher's son to keep Onnendale from publishing a fourth edition? Because the killing described in the text could never, under Nagspeake law, defend itself as "righteous." "The Nettles" describes murder, plain and simple.

## Consider:

- 1) The narrator is alone. According to legend, fully one-eighth of the adult citizenry of the city at that time claimed to have participated in Pellitory's murder. Fourteen people testified that there was not enough left to bury, and presumably if the remains were interred they would've had to have been carried in a bag (while the poem's narrator is carrying a body that still has enough shape for him to fear the nettles' reproduction of it on the surface), but assuming a burial of some kind, it stands to reason no one person would've had to do it unaided. However, in the poem, the narrator is obviously alone and—significantly—refers to the body throughout as "my burden," (italics mine) suggesting the responsibility is his alone, as well.
- 2) The narrator is *hiding a body*. He is covering his tracks. In a righteous murder there would have been no need for this kind of secrecy. The entire defense is based on the idea that the victim's death is imperative, an act borne of civic duty, and therefore it would be unnecessary, even counterproductive, to act in secret. In addition, the body in the poem clearly must never come to light, hence the need to return to the scene again and again to prevent the nettles on the gravesite from growing higher than their neighbors. This killer does not intend to confess. <sup>12</sup>
- 3) The imagery used does not suit a righteous murder. There is a notable absence of consensus; the narrator speaks of "coward legs" that make demands and refuse to obey, arms that "mutiny" and may "refuse to dig." The literal body politic has come to no accord in this matter. Would a jury? Additionally, there are the legal images. When the narrator of the poem refers to jurors, he is referring to an *empanelled jury*, a group of citizens selected from the populace to rule on a case. This is evident from the line, "And we stare at each other, my jury and I," in which the narrator is clearly separated from and being examined by the jury in question, which would not be the case if he was referring to a quorum of jurors, the term for a group of (minimum) twelve that claims to have committed righteous murder. <sup>13</sup> Finally, the images of graves, graveyards, gravestones, and epitaphs seems out of place, when all five

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> A *Nagspeake Legal Review* article from the turn of the century narrates the case of a family whose plea of righteous murder was denied on the grounds that, since they had taken steps to hide the body (it was dismembered and used as bait in the family's network of crab-pots), they could not have been convinced of the moral correctness of their actions.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> A quorum of jurors is so-called because in coming together to commit the act of murder they are considered to have preemptively empanelled themselves to rule on their case and decided unanimously in favor of execution. Thus a righteous murder case has no court jury (on the assumption that it would be impossible to find another group of twelve from the same citizenry who could be verified to be impartial).

historical righteous murders resulted in bodies more suited for composting than interment.

This is the heart of the controversy, then: if "The Nettles" is written from the point of view of Roman Pellitory's murderer, then everything that has ever been remembered or recorded about the event that ended the Governor's life is false. By extension, that branch of Nagspeake law engendered by the precedent *set by the murder as remembered by history* is founded on a lie. The righteous murder plea would not exist without Roman Pellitory. What would become of it—of *us*, many Nagspeakers would say—if these allegations are true? And why could "The Nettles" not be a description of another murder? Any other murder? Certainly that is possible, is it not?<sup>14</sup>

Let us turn again to Dr. Edsel Price, for whom the possible is so conveniently converted to fact. The identity of the murder victim comprises a full five chapters of his fifteen-chapter missive.

His first piece of supporting evidence is the one that started the debate after the first printing of the *Collected Works*. It has long been suggested that Ilford's use of nettles in the poem is not just a clever point of concentration for the murderer's paranoia. The Governor's surname, *Pellitory*, happens also to be a genera or subgrouping of the nettle family *Urticaceae*. How much more obvious does it need to be, Price shrieks: the nettles on the plain will rise up to point hands at the killer of their namesake. Oh, and by the way, the good scholar adds smugly, don't forget that Roman Pellitory first came to Nagspeake as part of the Scadson-Hoopf "Amazing Show of the Unbelievable" Circus as an impalement artist touted as "A Marvel, A Myth, A Man." In support of this Price produces a print of the banner which pictures a sword-swallower bearing the vaguest of resemblances to Pellitory (and whose name is not featured at all). Somehow, Price would have us believe, Owen Ilford knew of these humble origins and encoded them in the cry of the nettles, perhaps fancifully meant to recall circus barkers: "See...come see...a marvel, a man, a murder...come see..."

This author finds it all a bit of a stretch.

The rest of Price's evidence is just as questionable. The poet/killer refers to the knife he has taught that day to "silence voices;" Pellitory was supposed to have been stabbed and/or slashed to death. There is the legendary nautical past that certain of Ilford's poems are supposed to allude to and which informs so many images in "The Nettles." Also, Price claims to have knowledge of a memoir supposedly written by the governor whose publication came to a halt with his ignominious death. The nettles' "voices like quills" reference not only the plants' stinging spines but the guilty

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> At least twenty of Ilford's fifty-six published poems are in some way related to murder: in four a murderer plots his crime, either working out the details, talking himself into it or working himself up to it; six describe the disposal of a body; two are remorseful, perhaps best described as "what have I done" poems; three are similar but more exultant "*look* what I have done" poems; and the five most disturbing of all describe the moment of death. Many of the twenty murderer's tales can be interpreted as referencing the same murder as another, and careful scholarship and close reading suggests that Ilford describes at least eight separate events. If "The Nettles" refers to a real death, does it not follow that the other poems might, as well?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> The Scadson-Hoopf Circus toured for nearly a century before disbanding. Although the definitive work on this historical circus, *Sailors of the Unbelievable*, confirms that the circus frequently visited the Magothy area, neither the book's author nor any of her sources were able to identify the marvel, myth, or man in the picture by name. "If it was him," chortled one wizened source interviewed by this author, "he weren't much of a knife man, were he, getting all carved up like that."

conscience of one writer who has silenced another's voice (and here we begin to cross over into the question of the autobiographical nature of the poem; this is the cornerstone of Price's argument in favor of a poet/murderer, and of course a very poignant issue in Nagspeake where all of history is in a constant process of being invented by such men at all times<sup>16</sup>).

As to the question of whether or not, always assuming everything above turned out to be true, Ilford killed Pellitory himself, Dr Price suggests an innovative test: he himself will go in search of the putative gravesite and exhume whatever, after two centuries, remains. As has been widely reported, Dr. Edsel Price has not been heard from in the twelve years since the publication of *No Better Epitaph*. His publishers have offered substantial rewards for his safe return or information leading to his recovery or the recovery of his journals. So far the lonely and wide graveyard-in-waiting remains, to all appearances, the lost geography imagined by a poet that might never have existed.

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Walter Mapp arrived in Nagspeake ten years after Dr. Price's disappearing act the same way he seemed to arrive everywhere he went: one day no one had ever heard of him, the next he was playing piano at some dive in the Creve Coeur district, growling through cigar smoke and sweating bullets of his signature blend of Solderdown whiskey and quinine. As it was not the habit of patrons to visit Creve Coeur saloons for the music, <sup>19</sup> it took some weeks before the lyrics pierced anyone's boozy fog and some weeks more before anyone was sure he was hearing them correctly.

It has often been remarked upon that despite the polarizing poet to whom Walter Mapp looked for his lyrics (and the predictable response on the part of a certain portion of citizens who were prone to feeling sensitive about those lyrics), Mapp himself never became a target, not even in Creve Coeur. Some have speculated that the key lay in Mapp's performance style, inasmuch as he could be said to have had such a thing. He began each set with no preamble and grumbled through the lyrics as if it hardly mattered whether or not anyone heard them. Even when the dives he played filled up with the restless representatives of the factions who argued in the streets over the meaning of his "message," Mapp himself said nothing, even when exhorted to do so by his audiences. The extent to which he *didn't* behave like a revolutionary has led some scholars to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Price appears blissfully unaware of his own monopolistic silencing of at least two generations of Ilford scholars.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> This author was present for the sending-off party at Howthaltor Press and spent some time discussing with Price his theories on possible burial sites and the route he planned to take. Much like the rest of his research, it was all based entirely on supposition.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Anyone with any information is encouraged to contact Jasper Toethe by post-card only at Howthaltor Press, Post-box 423, Number 8 Bay Byway, Nagspeake 54321-2122. Mr. Toethe notes that it's no good sending any more letter bombs to that address as only communications written on single-ply card stock are being delivered at this time.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> After Mapp Creve Coeur attracted dissidents and artists like a rusty magnet pulls nails. This is not to suggest anything has been done about the quality of the liquor or the scope of the rodent problem. <sup>20</sup> And perhaps it didn't: at least two of the so-called revolutionaries who spearheaded the resulting Ilford revival with all its shocking consequences never heard Walter Mapp play live.

suggest that Mapp himself might not have understood the effect his music would have, <sup>21</sup> but for whatever reason the same upstanding citizens who would have happily taken a chop at Roman Pellitory (and might very well have been involved in some of the hijinks played on Ilford's and Price's publishers over the years) sat quietly and listened to Walter Mapp every night, side by side with the upstarts who would claim Mapp for their prophet as the gravel-voiced piano man sang Owen Ilford's most inflammatory lyrics without the faintest hint of irony or apology. Some of Ilford's most controversial poems were regularly requested if Mapp didn't get to them quickly enough, and "Brick Ash" was said to have actually provoked tears on several occasions, <sup>22</sup> despite being written from the point of view of yet another murderer. <sup>23</sup>

Walter Mapp played Creve Coeur for six months, showing up haphazardly at this dive or that without any sort of schedule. Would-be followers loitered in alleys, organized networks to reconnoiter the district, set up signals to be shouted from one corner to another through the rough streets so that as soon as the piano man was spotted heading for the Pour House or Rusthead or Sadie's Grill, everyone who knew the code would know in a matter of minutes where to go. When he wasn't playing he wandered, ambling along like a sailor from the Shantytown docks caught sobering up and lost on the wrong side of town. Half a year later he was gone, and an uneasy stillness settled on Nagspeake. His audiences appeared unsure of what had happened to them in the dives, why they had felt compelled to sit and listen without judging, why it seemed they had never before understood Owen Ilford's words or even heard them properly. The hush lasted until the arrival of the autumn Deacon and Morvengarde catalogue, in which Mapp's record, Raise My Confession: the Buried Lyrics of Owen Ilford, appears for the first time. In true Deacon and Morvengarde fashion, despite having discontinued all poetry listings the catalogue's Publishers included a printed copy of the "song lyrics" with every record sold, thus neatly circumventing their own no-poetry rule and not only putting Owen Ilford back into print for the first time since the third edition of the Collected Works, but making him the only poet whose works were available through the catalogue.

Nagspeake erupted.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> If he didn't then, he figured it out before the release of the record. Chief among the shrewd business decisions Mapp made in support of "*Raise My Confession*" was the exclusive distribution he negotiated with Deacon and Morvengarde. Clearly Mapp foresaw both the potential sales and the need to protect the records (not to mention the delivery agents) until they reached their destination (it is a crime punishable by ten years' imprisonment or equivalent injury to intentionally impede the progress of a D&M delivery or to harass its agents while on the job). Besides, what musician doesn't think his music will shake up the world? <sup>22</sup> A testament, presumably, to Mapp's singing; although the narrator of "Brick Ash" does evince some regret after secretly locking his daughter into the municipal archives just before the ceremonial burning-down of the building, he clearly leaves her to die anyway. The ash of the title is most likely bone rather than brick, as the Archives building has always been constructed to facilitate the best burn for the ceremony. No part of it has ever been made of brick.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Or the same murderer. This author has done exhaustive research into the possibility that Owen Ilford's murder poems represent not only actual events, but the work of a serial killer. Moreover, it is this author's belief that Ilford himself was that murderer, and the poems represent the criminal's well-known need to confess. Another tantalizing possibility is that the poems came first and that the poet, having created literary tableaux of death, was compelled to recreate in the flesh what he had already sketched out in verse. The poems were not published until sometime afterward, so it would have appeared to the public that Ilford was writing about murders of the past, attempting to show the point of view of an unknown killer.

One thing is certain: something about Walter Mapp himself must've been the sedative in the brew, because without his physical presence his grainy, gritty, whiskey-and-quinine rumblings could no longer masquerade as anything but what they were: resurrections and rebellions dressed as shanties, calls-to-violence to be swallowed like harmless pills with a mouthful of porter, seditions and libels and propaganda all made up, conveniently enough, of another man's words so that Mapp himself could never be accused of anything but adaptation and arrangement.<sup>24</sup>

Mapp was notable by his absence from the chaos he wrought. Molotov cocktails made from Solderdown bottles burst through the windows of houses where the record could be heard playing; those same networks that had watched the dives for the piano man's next visitation whistled warnings down chimneys and through chinks in walls to warn households that slow-moving cars were turning down their streets, windows down and listening, matches at the ready. Teenagers played *Confession* backwards seeking hidden messages until parents fearful for their lives locked their children in basements and closets away from phonographs and record players or anything that would produce a consistent revolution. Children broke out of closets and basements and ran away to Creve Coeur, where they formed half-feral bands, communicating in click languages over distances of a mile or more and spending hours translating Ilford lyrics into their uncanny dialects.<sup>25</sup> The madness would not be stopped. Meanwhile Walter Mapp was gone away somewhere else, carried off to some destination on the Magothy and Whilforber line by a one-way train ticket purchased two days before the Deacon catalogue hit Nagspeake. Appeals to Mapp's record producers for comment or rescue met with silence. Only one publication claimed to have had any communication from Mapp at all: the underground broadsheet *Nettles*, which reported the following brief interview.

*Nettles*: Were you surprised?

*Mapp*: I knew there'd be cracks, 'cause everything cracks in the end, I just didn't know where they'd show first or when.

*Nettles*: Did you choose Creve Coeur because you thought you'd have a greater impact there, or a lesser?

*Mapp*: Thought I'd like the people better. I heard once demons can only go around in straight lines, so I figure that's how you know drinkers are men of God. *Nettles*: Do you feel any remorse or responsibility for what's happening in Nagspeake now?

*Mapp*: Guess I coulda stuck with "Amazing Grace." Or "Happy Birthday," maybe, round it out with "I'm a Little Teapot." Sound like a more responsible set to you?<sup>26</sup>

The interview ends abruptly at this point; according to the article Mapp was heard to grumble something that sounded like, "Just gotta ask one damn question not damn nobody asks the right questions never did damn grail all over" before hanging up loudly

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> I hate Walter Mapp.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> The broadsheet *Nettles* printed a few of these translations, but the effect was considerably lessened by the symbols devised for writing the dialect, incredibly similar to musical notation; in fact, when played on the pianoforte the written click translation of "Brick Ash" sounds remarkably like "Fur Elise."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> A teapot makes a remarkably good Molotov, if one secures the lid properly and throws hard enough.

in the interviewer's ear. Nobody has, to this author's knowledge, hazarded a speculation on the meaning of that.

The streets of Nagspeake had stopped being safe, but even then, when wars broke out in the alleys between the citizens with their firebombs and the bands of kids wielding shards of pottery from tiled roofs and the terror of their weird language, incomprehensible, coming from all directions and from who knew how far away—even then, things were not as bad as they would get. Would-be revolutionaries, poets, and students congregated in the Creve Coeur saloons (most of which now had two pricing scales: *regular* and *academic*), crouched under broken gaslights or bare electric bulbs and argued about the true significance of Owen Ilford and the prophetic soul of Walter Mapp. They did not venture into the streets while there was fighting outside, because when they did the kids and the citizens, who had no common ground between them suddenly found one: hatred for those who stayed in the safety of dark rooms talking while the real battles were being fought elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> And still it would get worse; this time, however, it would be the fault of a hoax that has never been allowed to die.

\* \* \*

In the first place no one should've been fooled by the so-called Price Postcard; the postmark was recent and originated in Bell Hill, a town too far from Nagspeake to have been a potential hiding place for Roman Pellitory's body and too close to the offices of Walter Mapp's record company to be coincidental. No one who had ever seen Dr. Price's cramped and obsessive handwriting could have mistaken the penmanship on the postcard for his; Price's notes had to be carefully deciphered, even by his editors, and the postcard's author was careful to make every letter legible. Certainly Jasper Toethe and his publishing partners knew it wasn't a message from their missing author and no one at Howthaltor Press would've been responsible faking for that sort of publicity; sales of *No Better Epitaph* had skyrocketed but on the other hand there had been certain security issues to deal with and Toethe was having weekly panic attacks as a result. Therefore it was almost certainly not thanks to anyone at Howthaltor that the Nagspeake papers got wind of the postcard; however, when asked directly Jasper Toethe admitted that yes, a postcard purporting to be from Dr. Edsel Price was, in fact, in his possession. 28

Tragically, the response was what the reader must certainly expect; most tragically, because the card's text, on balance, doesn't really signify. What matters is what the public did not grasp: *Dr. Price could not possibly have written it.* 

Setting aside the evidence of the problematic postmark, the handwriting and the unlikeliness of the postcard itself (which could've been read by any pair of curious eyes only to be stopped, stolen, or destroyed), the supposed message was sent to the post-box Jasper Toethe had set up expressly for information on Dr. Price's whereabouts, explaining the postcard (although the "postcards only" rule was a mere two weeks old at

says we have is lying and was probably responsible for this dastardly, rabble-rousing hoax."

10

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> On one notable occasion during a very temporary truce one of the revolutionaries who led debates in the dives argued that Walter Mapp had done his work by sitting in a saloon and spreading the word peacefully. The leader of the mob retorted that the revolutionary clearly hadn't ever read Owen Ilford for himself, pulled out a gun and shot the other through the eye. "Write a poem about that," he suggested to the rest of the saloon academics, and walked away. If anyone took his advice, no such poem was ever published.
<sup>28</sup> A better response would've been, "We have received nothing at all from Dr. Edsel Price. Anyone who

that point) if it made any sense at all for Price to write to the publicly announced address rather than directly to his editor at Howthaltor. But setting all this aside, Price still could not have written the letter because to do so he would have had to have been alive, and it should have been obvious by then that he was not.

Dr. Price's plan had been to write a book about the journey he was undertaking, which was to have been comprised of journal entries and letters posted periodically to Jasper Toethe at Howthaltor. These letters were to serve the dual function of reporting on his journey and confirming his safety and approximate location. Not one such letter has ever been received. Dr. Price did not follow even the first day of his planned itinerary, nor did he make contact with any of the subjects he planned to interview. His train tickets went unclaimed. It is as if he never managed even to embark. It would not have shocked anyone, given the nature of his journey and researches, had Dr. Price turned up dead; anything else, frankly, unless it was returning empty-handed to publish another volume of complete speculation, would've been astonishing. But twelve years of silence, only to finally send his first words by a postcard? Impossible. The Magothy coast is not deepest Africa, and Edsel Price was no Dr. Livingston.

Who, then, wrote the postcard? And what became of Dr. Edsel Price? The first question could not interest this author less. The card was not from Price, therefore should be discarded as the attempt of a party or parties unknown to stir the pot, so to speak. The second, however, has been too long neglected. This author has formed a theory on what might have happened.<sup>29</sup>

At the sending-off party at Howthaltor Press on the night before (on which?) he disappeared, Dr. Price was drunk on power and on Auld Tongue, his sherry of choice.<sup>30</sup> When he left, propped up on the shoulder of his driver Nailtry, he took a long route home in order to visit a lady friend who lived on Scotch Bugle Street. Nailtry left him at the lady's house, where he stayed until some time in the night.<sup>31</sup> Nothing is more likely, given the sort of house in which this lady kept a room, than that Price continued to drink and possibly took some cantharides or a quantity of Mrs. Cupana's trinitatis-and-guarana potency pills, for which he was known to have a liking.<sup>32</sup> It would have been in the gray hours, then, that he started home.

As is well known, familiar landmarks change during the gray hours; iron flows and shadows move, and Price would've had to cross three suspension bridges to go quickly from Scotch Bugle Street to his own home in the Bayside Quarter. How easy it would have been to jump irrationally at some graceful wrought iron's reach, to misstep and plummet into the Broadgirdle or the Spitegash or any of the gorges that slice into the hill. How much easier to have been followed by some unfriendly reader and to have been

<sup>31</sup> From the remarks of Gerard Nailtry to *Nettles*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> This author wishes only to lay to rest the memory of the great Dr. Edsel Price. Since the appearance of the postcard, a revival of hope has brought Dr. Price from beyond death back into the limelight. This has caused no little pain to his children and widow, and has, thanks to the public outcry always attendant on Ilfordiana, caused Howthaltor Press to put a moratorium on any other books about Owen Ilford and his work.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Personal observation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> An invoice from Agni Medical showing Dr. Price's purchase of Mrs. Cupana's pills reached this author completely by accident; if not for the relevance to this author's theory it would, of course, never have been made public.

pushed! This, however, would have put the assassin at risk of being seen. Let us imagine a more likely scenario.

An unfriendly party wishing to silence Dr. Price would've been well-advised to attend Dr. Price's sending-off soiree. It would've been only too easy to slip into one of Price's many refills of Auld Tongue an Anamirta-cassilago Combi Capsule, readily available through that same catalogue from which Dr. Price was in the habit of ordering his aphrodisiacs.<sup>33</sup> The assassin could have reasonably counted on the likelihood that Dr. Price's "amorous instincts," incited by the Anamirta-cassilago Combis, would have lead him to Scotch Bugle Street, where, in order to assist his vital functions, he would likely have partaken of his potency pills. It would then only have remained for the assassin to follow Price after leaving the house until his inevitable collapse, at which point he could easily appear to come upon the body and hail a hansom under the pretense of taking the fallen scholar home, only to hack the body to pieces in the safety of the assassin's own house and dispose of the remains at his leisure, possibly in the arsenic-rich ground on the inland side of the hill near the Ferrous Sanctus monastery, where the remnants of Price's body would've absorbed so much of that deadly element from the soil as to render any other theory on his death absurd.<sup>34</sup>

While this author does not claim to have proof positive for this theory, the likelihood is undeniable. It is therefore irresponsible of Howthaltor Press, in conjunction with Price's widow, not to come forward with a public statement acknowledging Dr. Price's demise a full twelve years ago. Furthermore, the Nagspeake publishing community must take immediate and active steps to renew the debate on Owen Ilford, his poetry and his legacy. The memory of Ilford and the works of Walter Mapp and Dr. Price will continue to spark debate as all great works should, and other voices must be allowed to join the discussion.

<sup>34</sup> Of course, this last is pure speculation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> According to the Agni catalogue's description of Anamirta-cassilago Combis, these pills are "quick-dissolving, tasteless, and lingering in effect. These capsules produce no immediate symptoms, but contain a time-release factor that encourages amorous instincts and a pleasant vertiginous sensation originating in the genitalia. Warning: due to poisonous drug interaction, do not combine with trinitatis or guarana. Positively, unequivocally deadly, albeit not immediately, in combination with Mrs. Cupana's Potency Pills."