Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Book of Crows

Written by Sam Meekings

Published by Polygon

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

First published in Great Britain in 2011
by Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House · 10 Newington Road
Edinburgh EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

ISBN 978 1 84697 172 3

Copyright © Sam Meekings, 2011

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted in any form, or by any means electronic, mechanical or photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the express written permission of the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the British Library

The publisher acknowledges investment from Creative Scotland towards the publication of this book



Designed by Dalrymple
Illustration and calligraphy by Susie Leiper
Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Clays Ltd, St Ives PLC



The Whorehouse of a Thousand Sighs

PART I · 80–78 BCE

My father used to tell me that if you saw a crow it meant someone was going to die. He would be drunk as usual but unable to sleep, sobering up in the shade of some lanky tree while the sun simmered the ants, and that's when he would start telling me the old stories. I never paid him too much attention – I'd usually be watching the ants to see how far they would struggle on across the burning sand before giving up. But I guess in spite of myself I must have listened to what he was saying, for those old stories are all that's left of him now. 'Always keep an eye out for crows,' he would say. 'They're nothing but tatty black messengers of death. They came the day before your mother was taken, and I don't doubt they'll come back again for me.'

I never really cared about my father. Whenever I had a little time free from lugging about the dingy, moth-bothered skins that we sold from village to village, I used to run around the scree, jumping over clumps of sandweed and dodging the snakes curled out in the sun, pretending I was a bird and could just up and soar far, far away from him. My mother, well, he used to say that she could make your heart fly clear of your body, and he often cursed the day that I split her in two. But I don't remember her at all.

In fact, it's strange how little I remember of my life before I got here. Like one of those mirages we used to hear about from desert traders, my childhood sometimes seems as if it was nothing more than an elaborate illusion, a lost possibility that no amount of longing can call back into existence.



I remember waking up and trying to turn and banging my head against one of the bars. The sun above was as bright and blinding as burning sand, and the sand below as hot and bubbling as

the sun, so for the first few minutes I wasn't sure which way was up and which was down. I licked my lips. They were broken and tasted like tears. The roof of the cage was a mishmash of lashed strips of bamboo, slicing the morning sun into bright daggers of light. There was a stinking blanket beneath me, and my skin was sticky and damp from the heat after a couple of hours. The bars on the four sides were made of long sticks that must have been snapped off from some sturdy tree, the likes of which I'd never seen before. I found that I could reach my arm out to the elbow through most of the gaps between the branches, but there was no way my head could have got through. The cage wasn't small, but it wasn't big enough to stretch my body out straight either. Moving very carefully, I was able to turn over onto my stomach and then raise myself onto my knees.

When I peered out, I saw that the long bamboo pole running along the top of the cage was held by two big men, one in front and one behind. The men were dark and heavy-set, and they reminded me of raisins shrivelled in the sun. Sweat dribbled down their naked chests. For a while, I tried to pretend that I was a princess being carried to a luxurious castle and a noble prince. Before long, though, I needed to pee, and I was pretty sure that wasn't the kind of thing that happens to princesses. I called to the men to stop but they didn't respond, so I had to make do.

There were only a few cages like mine. I counted just four others, bobbing along on either side. But when I wriggled around and looked out the back, I could see lots of people walking. They seemed to be mostly mothers and children, though I could make out two or three men among them, all wearing dirty rags and bent double in the heat. They were tied together, marching in slow, tentative steps through the sand, and every one of them was panting for breath like fish suddenly snagged up from a river. More of the big men moved among them, pulling them up when they fell, or shoving them forward when they showed signs of slowing. At least I didn't have to walk. They must have thought I was pretty special.

Of course, I later learnt that I was only in the cage because they were worried about me attacking them again. One of the big men showed me his hand through the bars, so I could see the bite marks where I'd drawn blood. I didn't remember that. I didn't remember when they took my father, or how I had come to be in the cage.

There are holes in our hearts, Silk told me once, and some of our memories just trickle out when we don't want them anymore. Maybe she was right.

Every few hours the big men would dump the cages down in the sand and gather around one of the water skins hung over the mules. If they were feeling generous, they'd give me a little water too. I had to drink from their hands. Most of the time, though, they just stood about grunting in their strange language. At first I thought they were arguing with the short man on the horse, who seemed to be the boss, but after a couple of days I realised this was just the way they spoke, always shouting and waving their arms around. After the shouting they'd haul our cages back up and keep on going across the dunes.

I never wondered about where they were taking us. I know that sounds strange, but all I'd known were the little dusty villages that my father and I used to flit between. It never occurred to me that there might be something on the other side of the desert, because all the old men in the villages used to swear that it had no end – once the sand starts, they used to say, it goes on forever. They used to call it the country of death. Nobody had ever met anyone who'd been into the desert and come back out again. We'd heard about other tribes from far off, but everyone knew they went round it, not through it. The desert, the old men said, has no north or south or east or west. It just is.

At first I wondered whether I was dead, whether this was my punishment for breaking my mother all those summers before. But it seemed unlikely – what was the point of being dead if I could still feel the fleas itching and the sun frying my skin? And I realised I couldn't be dead when other people actually started dying. Sometimes when we set up camp a prisoner would fall asleep and never wake up. The other people tied to them would make a fuss when that happened, and the big men would cut the bodies loose and leave them for the crows. Sometimes, when someone was really sick, coughing up blood or their brows burning red with fever, they would also be untied. You would have thought the first thing they'd do would be to try to escape. But most of them kept walking with us just as before, following as far as they could until they had no more strength, and then they'd lie down in the sand and cry. There was no point waiting around for them to die, so we just left them to it.

At night we were set down at the bottom of the dunes while the big men struggled to make fires from the few shrubs and dry grasses they could gather. I ate like a wild hog, lapping gristly chunks of horse-meat or desert rat or still twitchy crickets from a hand pushed between the bars, but only after the big men had fed themselves. It was at these times, between the tying up of the horses and the end of evening when the big men would throw furs over our cages to keep out the cold, that I was able to talk to some of the other prisoners around me.

'Do you know where we are?' I asked the nearest cage.

A girl shuffled her big behind around for a few minutes until she finally lay on her side, facing me. Her hair was dark and ragged, and her face needed a good wash. She was a few summers older than me and might have been considered beautiful under a dim-enough light.

'We're in the bleeding desert, of course! The sand should be a clue.'

'Yes. I know that. But … I mean … why are we here?'

'We're on our way to the big city, I expect. When these bastards who caught us aren't robbing and raiding and murdering they probably pretend to be merchants.'

'But what do they want with us?'

'We're the merchandise.'

I didn't have a chance to ask her anything else that night, for at that moment one of the big men tossed a fur over my cage and began to shout, so I just turned over and tried to get to sleep. It's strange, out there in the desert you spend the days praying for the burning sun to ease up a bit, and the nights hugging yourself to try to keep from freezing. I listened to many of the older male prisoners arguing about which was worse, the heat of the day or the cold of the night, but it seemed to me that they were missing the point. The cold comes for your bones, but the heat comes for your flesh. It's always been like this. But in any case, I don't think those men really disagreed – they just needed something, anything, to talk about. And if there's one thing I've learnt in my life, it's that arguing is what men most enjoy doing.

The days melted into each other, and I honestly can't tell you how long I was in that cage. Since I had no idea whether we would

ever reach the end of the desert, time seemed to stretch out and I couldn't be sure what day it was. All the things I'd ever known were now nothing but a dull, fuzzy blur.

I didn't ask the girl with the big bottom anything else about the city, because I wasn't sure that I would like the answer. Instead, whenever we were dropped down after another long day being lugged across the plains, I asked her about her home. She soon warmed to this, and I enjoyed listening, because I found that her old village sounded exactly like the places my father and I used to pass through. I lay back in my cage, with the moonlight dripping in between the wicker and cane, and pretended I was a little girl again. Everything she talked about was reassuring and familiar. She spoke of the same work tending the stubborn goats, the same feasts and famines coming on each other's heels, the same elders sitting round the night fires trying to summon djinns, of the same way some of the women swung their hips when they walked and the same way other women tutted when they saw them. She spoke of the snake men who hawked their slithering collections from village to village, of the music of worn drums and cicadas, and of the peace she had felt beside her husband just a few hours before the raid had begun and the big men had come and stolen her life from her.

'So why are you in a cage? Did you try to stop them too?' I asked.

'Don't be an idiot. What could I do? I'm just a woman. Anyone who fought back was stabbed, and those who surrendered are tied up in those long lines behind us. They're not worried about me hurting them. Ha! No, they're only worried about me trying to hurt myself again and leaving them with one less girl to sell.'

'I don't understand. Why would you want to hurt yourself?'

She sighed. 'You're too young to understand. When they killed my husband, I knew that was the end of my life. A woman can't survive without a man – everyone knows that.'

With that she shuffled herself into a corner and turned away from me.

I found it harder and harder to remember what the world looked like without bars interrupting the view, and I even got used to the sour, coppery taste of the water I lapped from the dark men's cupped hands. Meanwhile the sand got everywhere. I would wake up each

morning to find it between my toes, in the creases of my elbows, throughout my matted hair and coating my parched tongue.

After a while my clothes really began to reek, and my back began to cramp and ache, no matter how much I squirmed about trying to get comfortable. I lay awake at night, scared of snakes slipping in under the furs, finding it impossible to block out the muffled sobs and nervous whispers of the prisoners camped down behind me. Sometimes the big men would grab one of the women from a tied-up family and drag her behind a dune, leaving her relatives to weep in shame while everyone else pretended they couldn't hear the grunts and screams as the big men took their turns. Then they would finally throw her back, bloody and dishevelled. It was at those times that I was thankful for my cage, though the girl with the big bottom told me that they wouldn't take any of the younger ones anyway.

'You lot'll be fine,' she explained. 'After all, they wouldn't want to do anything to scupper your market value.'



Just when I was getting used to the shaky journey and the sun frazzling my skin, I noticed a change in the big men. They had been grumpy and slouching for many days, yet suddenly they began to walk faster, their shoulders pulled up high and their heads darting left and right as if scanning the horizon, all the while yabbering and grunting. For once I understood what was happening. We were reaching the end of the desert.

After so long spent in the white glare of burning sunlight I couldn't properly make out the mud houses and cave dwellings till we were really close. I was so happy to see signs of life that I would have cried if I'd had any tears left. On the flat roof of one of the dwellings, a single dirty crow was preening itself. It cast a disinterested glance down at our ramshackle procession and went back to nuzzling its beak beneath one of its cocked wings, as though it had seen this kind of thing a hundred times before and was no longer shocked by anything humans did. I should have known then that things would only get worse. But instead of worrying about such an ominous sight at the time, I felt relieved. I thought it meant we had finally arrived at the end of the world: the place where you get to meet your dreams. Once again, I was wrong.

My cage was shoved onto the back of one of the many wooden carts that were waiting for us there, and after the ragged men and women behind were prodded up there too the mules were struck and we started moving again. At least now there was a bit of shade from the spindly trees surrounding the village – I could see some of the children's faces were cracked and dry from all those days in the desert, and some of the older men looked without seeing, their eyes like dull egg-whites. The sun is a terrible creature, I thought.

One of the tied-up men seemed to have an idea where we were. Every so often as we juddered down the dirt track, he would look around at the green vines with their strange fruit and say that we were definitely getting close to the city. Everyone nodded solemnly when he said that. What city? I wanted to ask, but I kept my mouth shut. Unmarried girls aren't supposed to join in adult conversations anyway, although I wasn't really sure that the normal rules of behaviour still applied.

We bounced around in the back of those carts for the next two days, stopping at villages to stock up on supplies then camping in fields while the big men kept watch. I was asleep when we finally entered the city – the one and only time I saw Gaochang, though of course I didn't know that then. Someone pushed a greasy finger into the cage to prod me awake, and when I opened my eyes I wasn't completely sure if I was still dreaming. There were people everywhere, more people than I'd ever seen before, crow-haired and flame-haired and straw-haired and tall and short and fat and thin and old and young and most of them wearing the oddest clothes I'd ever seen, long flowing robes that seemed to have stolen the colour of the sky or of dew-sparkled grass. The noise was so loud that I couldn't hear the prisoners next to me speaking. There were traders calling on the streets, holding up handfuls of raisins or pointing to barrows full of dark spices and bolts of billowing silks. Locals haggled with them in high-pitched warbles that I couldn't understand. Some of the mud-and-straw buildings reached higher than one man standing on another man's shoulders, and they leaned and tottered so precariously that I worried they might collapse upon us. There were children playing in the zigzagging alleys and men with swords being shown ornate rugs by dark-skinned men with long-flowing beards. The sound of chimes reached us from a temple in the distance, and I closed my eyes and once again gave in to my

fantasy of being a princess, imagining that the bells were being struck to welcome me to the city.

The mules couldn't move more than a few steps at a time through the throng, so the big men had to jump down and push some of the traders out of the way. In the end the cart was led behind one of the tall buildings into a courtyard filled with donkeys, pigs, chickens and the straw and mess they slept in. It was then that they hauled down my cage and untied the top. One of the big men beckoned me out, but for a minute I didn't move. It might sound stupid, but for all the discomfort, I'd got used to my cage. I didn't know what was going to happen to me next, and I'm not ashamed to say I was afraid. The big man grabbed my arm and yanked me up and out. When I tried to stand up straight and take a few steps my body crumpled and I would have collapsed if he hadn't been at my side. My legs seemed to have forgotten what they were supposed to do. He barked something and pointed at the trough of water the pigs were slurping from. I didn't understand.

After a few more shouts, he grew impatient and marched me over to the trough. I didn't have the energy to struggle, but I might have put up a bit more of a fight if I'd known that he was going to dunk my head under the water. I came up coughing and spluttering, my hair slapping back across my face. It wasn't till one of the big men began to tug at my dirty clothes that I finally realised they wanted me to wash. I told them I could take care of that myself, thank you very much, but of course they couldn't understand me, and the brutes didn't even have the decency to turn their backs while I wriggled out of my foul-smelling robe. Still, I did the best I could with them leering and laughing, splashing the cold water over myself and watching puddles of sand and dust dribble out around my feet. When I was finished I was a bit disappointed to find that instead of one of those bright-coloured robes I'd seen in the marketplace I was given a sackcloth tunic that barely covered my knees. At least it was better than putting my dirty robe back on. I was already becoming good at looking on the positive side of things.

Just when I was getting used to stretching out my body again, I spotted the large cart they were rolling into the courtyard. On the top was a huge wooden cage – just like the one I'd been in, but several times bigger. There's no way on earth I'm getting into any

kind of cage again, I thought to myself. However, after the big men began to whip one of the old prisoners who refused to climb up into its open door, splattering his blood over the paving stones, I hastily changed my mind. A whole horde of us was shoved inside, the door swung shut, and the big men knotted it tight. We pressed and jostled into each other's bodies as the cart wobbled round the corner back onto the city streets. Over the sound of squealing pigs and caterwauling hawkers I heard a few of the men around me begin to hurry out half-remembered prayers to ancestors under their breath.

I shoved my way closer to the bars in time to see us draw to a halt in what looked like the market square, a big open stretch of traders selling piles of pistachios, muslins, jewels, dyes, medicines and cloth. There was already a crowd gathering around us, and as the cart tipped back and the big men dragged our cage down the slope to the ground, even more people appeared, shoving their hands through the bars, pinching and tugging and stroking and groping. A middle-aged woman yanked at my hair, while a fat man prodded my stomach. I tried to slap away the more persistent hands grabbing at my breasts, but my screams and curses got lost amidst all the bustling and shouting. I did my best to hide behind some of the others in the cage, hoping the rude city people would soon get bored and leave us alone.

It was only after the first man was dragged from the cage that the crowd began to calm down, though after a few locals had approached to feel his biceps and prod his chest and gut, the shouting soon started up again. The accents were thick and most of the people around me seemed intent on spitting out each word, as if they were trying to speak with a whole jugful of water in their mouths. Then I understood: they were making bids. While one of the big men was occupied counting the coins that had been thrust into his hands for the first sale, I began to push my way to one of the sides of the cage, thinking I could prise myself between the bars.

I struggled and squirmed, and managed to push my legs out. But my father always used to say that I had a big old useless head, and now I saw that he was right. However much I twisted, I couldn't force my head to squeeze through the gap. I was too late spotting the big men coming back towards me and as I turned over and tried to move towards the other side of the cage one of them caught

hold of my foot. He began to tug, and then another one grabbed my ankle. I stretched out to the other prisoners to steady myself, but they recoiled as I reached for them. The big men had pulled my whole leg out now, and I gripped onto the bars so tight I felt my hands burning. I cried and started to kick, but the man holding my ankle only grinned at me and said something to his friend, who laughed. Then they really began to pull, and I flailed and yelped as they tugged. Soon half my body had been yanked out from between the wooden bars, and once again only my head and arms remained inside with the prisoners. My hands were rubbed raw and pricked with splinters.

'Ok, ok, I've learnt my lesson. I'm sorry! Listen, I've said I'm sorry!' I screamed at the big men as they yanked harder.

They had soon lifted me from the ground completely and they turned me, letting my shoulders slide right through. It wasn't long before I felt the pressure on my head as it began to stretch the bars. I was sure that my skull was about to burst open and spill out all its juice. As I screamed they pulled a little more, and then the bars were clamped around my temples. I closed my eyes to try to stop the dizziness and pain, and at that moment I could hear the temple bells clanging deep inside my head. I was no longer screaming – I was struggling for breath. Just when I thought I was about to faint, there was a loud pop, and I was through. The big men flew backwards and tumbled to the floor with me sprawled on top of them.

The Empress, whom I had yet to meet, watched the whole stupid struggle, apparently, and she later told me it was one of the funniest things she had ever seen. 'It looked like a big wooden animal was giving birth to you,' she laughed, revealing her entire set of mouldy brown teeth. And I guess she was right in a way. That was the day my new life began.

The big men lifted me to my feet and beckoned the customers forward. A line of people approached. I gave my best smile, hoping that some kind family would take pity on me. A bearded man hooked his finger inside my mouth and pulled back my lips to look at my teeth. A short woman examined my hands and scalp. I tried not to cry when a tubby, grey-haired man grabbed my buttocks. After what felt like hours, the big man pushed them back and the sale began. People began shouting and shoving and throwing their hands up in the air. As the auction went on, most of the crowd fell