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 Sensorium of God

Written by Stuart Clark

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.

The Sensorium of God

Stuart Clark

THE SKY'S DARK LABYRINTH TRILOGY
Book II

Polygon

First published in Great Britain in 2012
by Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd

Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

Copyright © Stuart Clark, 2012

The moral right of Stuart Clark to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

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.

ISBN 978 1 84697 187 7
eBook ISBN 978 0 85790 079 1

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

Typeset by IDSUK (DataConnection) Ltd
Printed and bound by Scandbook, Sweden



Content approved by NMSI Enterprises/Science Museum. Licence no. 0283.

PART I
Action

1
Woolsthorpe, England
1679

There was no place for daylight in this morbid womb. The alchemist smoothed the heavy curtains across the window and pressed them into the corners of the frame, determined to banish any sunshine from the room. Candles would provide all the illumination he needed to perform his work.

Edging round a table cluttered with bottles and vials, he approached the bed. His eyes came to rest on its unconscious occupant, whose outline was scarcely visible beneath the heap of blankets.

He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a small mirror. Just a fortnight ago he had used it to bounce light across his rooms in college. Now, he held it close to his mother's mouth. Reassured by the faint condensation that collected on the polished metal, he straightened. His eyes stung from exhaustion.

Returning to the window, he stood in front of the table and stared at the bottles. Each one contained something different: a salt, a herb, some liquid essence. Now they were all that stood between his mother and death. He drew his hands together as if in prayer and raised them to his face. Taking a sharp breath, he shoved the baggy cotton shirtsleeves up his thin arms and set to work.

He picked up a flask, upturned it and shook the final drops of a previous concoction to the floor. Then he began swirling a new mixture together.

Three drops of yellow dock root oil – to help purify the blood.

A sprig of saturated thyme – to bring courage.

Coffee essence – to stimulate the heart.

A pinch of crushed turmeric.

A few days ago he would have measured everything and kept track of the recipes in his notebook, but yesterday his mother had slipped into an unbreakable sleep. Now, he sloshed together anything that

came to mind. He set the bottles chinking as he snatched up one container after another.

God grant her reprieve and I will atone for every wicked thought I have ever harboured against her, he vowed.

He took the flask and leaned over his mother to drip the curative on to her thin lips. As he did so, the door opened. Unwelcome light entered the room, making him blink.

'Come along, Isaac.'

Newton shot a piercing look at the all-too-familiar figure bustling into the room. The portly woman carried a tray of food.

'I must work,' he snapped.

'Nonsense.' Mrs Harrington thrust the tray at him.

Upon his arrival last week, he had found the troublesome woman supervising the household with misplaced industry.

'You must eat,' she said. 'There's no point in making yourself sick as well.' There was no warmth in her voice.

'What concern is it of yours? You don't belong here.'

'I'm your mother's closest friend. I've known you since you were born. I helped deliver you, in that very bed.'

'You were just a girl from the village, hired to help out during my mother's confinement. Only later did you worm your way into her affections.' Newton crossed to the table and lifted more bottles, inspecting their contents. 'Isn't it true that you were so convinced I wouldn't last my first night that you dallied in conversation when you were sent for medicines?'

She drew herself up. 'Your mother grows weaker every day, Isaac. It's time to say goodbye to her.'

'No! I haven't finished my ex–' He cut himself off.

'Your what? Your experiments?'

'My treatments, my treatments.'

Mrs Harrington softened her voice. 'Isaac, let her pass in peace, with sunlight and warmth.' She pushed past him, making for the curtains.

'Don't open the window. There are miasmas in the air, my mother is too frail.'

'She needs fresh air. It reeks in here.'

'The potions react with sunlight. You'll destroy them.'

She gave him a sour look. Balancing the tray on one hip, she pulled the curtain open. The sunlight cut into Newton's eyes. He gripped the sides of the table to steady himself against the molten force rising inside him.

She crossed to the mantelpiece, still carrying the tray. 'You think your mother wants all this?' She cast her disdainful gaze over more bottles and flasks.

'My mother will be treated with whatever I choose,' he said through clenched teeth.

A knowing smile crossed her face. 'I've watched you and your wicked little ways since you were a boy.'

'The boy you remember has grown up.'

'As far as I can see, nothing's changed. I remember you peering round the congregation while the rest of us bowed our heads in prayer. You always did think you were something special.'

Newton's hands jerked free from the table and he started groping among the bottles. He picked something up and without thinking hurled it in Mrs Harrington's direction.

Jaw dropping in disbelief, she heard it smash against the wall. Newton's second missile found its mark, glancing off her fleshy left cheek. She reeled backwards, dropping the contents of the tray across the floorboards, and fled the room, screaming.

Newton rushed after her, kicking the food aside and slamming the door shut with his whole body. He stumbled to the curtains and yanked them shut before returning to his mother's bedside. Her jaw was slack. He reached out to touch her face, hesitating at the last moment. When his ink-stained fingers made contact with the skin, terror flashed inside him and he snatched his hand away. She was gone. Tears of rage spilled from his eyes. When the spasm subsided, he sank to his knees and raised his face to heaven.

'Lord, why do you test me with such impossible tasks?'

The servants took Hannah's body and sewed it into a woollen burial garment and bonnet. Quiet tears accompanied their busy hands. They laid the body on a table in the parlour where Newton stood in one corner, keeping vigil.

Outside the world had turned to green, yet he seemed immune to its warmth. His clothing hung as if tailored for a larger man. To hide this fact he had swaddled himself in his academic gown, embracing its comfortable feeling of far-off Cambridge.

He could not go near the corpse. How small she looked compared to his memory. The bonnet covering her hair could not disguise the tangled white eyebrows and the thin skin stretched over her cheekbones. She was as pale as the coarse wool of her shroud, and with each passing hour looked less as though she had ever been alive.

He conjured the memory of her once delicate face, with its attentive eyes and the tumbling ringlets of dark hair that she had let him stroke. He tried to hold the image but another kept forcing it away. He saw his mother in the distance, peering out of the carriage that had taken her away from him for eight years. It was his earliest memory. The scene replayed itself in staccato images, and he watched for the millionth time as she broke her gaze and looked away from him long before she had to, before the vehicle had drawn out of sight.

Why had she turned away? The question haunted him, now perhaps more than ever before. *What if she were magically to open her eyes now?* The impossible reality filled his mind. She would sit upright, the sunlight from the window catching the outer threads of her woollen garments but rendering the rest of her in silhouette. She would talk in the softest of voices, her features indistinct, answering his questions without hesitation.

– Why did you leave me, mother?

– I fell in love with Barnabas. I wanted to start again, to pretend you never existed.

– Why?

– You always were difficult. You didn't need me or want me.

– Then why did you return when he died?

– We couldn't stay in the rectory once Barnabas had died. I needed a home for my new children. You just got in the way.

– Did you love them more than me?

– Of course I did.

Movement through the panelled window snapped him from his imaginings. The round ball of Woolsthorpe's rector was making its way up the path towards the front door.

Newton left the parlour and opened the front door before the Reverend Hazel could knock.

'My condolences, Mr Newton. Your mother was a credit to the parish.' Hazel made to step forward, stopping himself just in time to avoid walking straight into Newton's immobile form.

'You have a difficult task, Reverend. My mother has not left a will. I searched her papers today but could find nothing.'

Hazel patted his leather satchel. 'I have it here. Mrs Harrington delivered it to me at the beginning of the week.'

Suspicion flared in Newton. 'Let me see it.'

Hazel fumbled around, eventually producing a folded piece of paper. Newton seized it and unfolded the sheet. It was indeed covered in his mother's handwriting.

'As you see, you are sole executor and principal beneficiary,' said Hazel. 'She has left the house and estate to you in its entirety.'

Newton's eyes worked through the almost illegible scribble. Indeed, Woolsthorpe Manor was now his. The other gifts were trifling, some five pounds for the parish poor and similar sums for the serving staff.

'There is little provision for your siblings,' said Hazel tentatively.

'Half-siblings,' Newton corrected him. 'They inherited from their father. They want for nothing.'

Hazel paused before answering. 'If that is your decision.'

'It is.' Newton handed him back the will.

'Then there is just one other matter. Your mother indicates that she is to be buried according to your wishes.'

'In the churchyard, next to my father.'

Again, Hazel paused. 'As you wish. Well, I see no further reason to delay you.'

'I'm aware that you had a high regard for Barnabas Smith, Reverend, but I know my mother.'

'God bless you, Mr Newton.' The coldness in Hazel's voice made it sound like a curse.

Newton shut the door on his receding form and looked around the hallway, seeing the plaster and timbers anew. For thirty-seven years – his entire lifetime – he had either lived in or visited this house and walked its fields. Now it was his, yet he felt more at home in a small

room overlooking the quadrangle in Trinity College. He grimaced at the irony.

The mourners gathered by the church. Dressed head to foot in black, they were silhouettes against the sun that had chosen to mock them with its rays.

Newton looked around and thought what a pitiful end it was. The servants and the farm hands were there, snuffling and grizzling. There were a few villagers and, of course, his half-brother and half-sisters. They stood together, Mary, the eldest, blinking tears and being comforted by Hannah, the youngest and his mother's namesake. Benjamin looked angry, as usual. He bristled as Newton greeted them.

'Not here, Ben,' whispered Hannah.

Newton scrutinised his half-brother and thought what an imperfect rendering he was: short and lacking a well-proportioned oval face, with a nose that was too small. The glare from his red-rimmed eyes, however forceful, inspired no confidence.

'Why bury her here?' Benjamin asked.

Newton should have guessed this would be his lament. 'To be with her true husband.'

'But you never knew him! He died just eighteen months after marrying her, while she was still carrying you. She was married to my father for eight years. If there is a rightful place–'

'Silence!' Newton raised his hand. 'I will hear nothing from the man who killed her.'

Benjamin's mouth gaped in astonishment.

'Isaac, how can you say that?' gasped Hannah.

'By nursing him – a grown man – my mother contracted the fever herself. It's nothing but a statement of fact.' Newton turned from their incredulous faces, exhilarated by the shock he left in his wake.

The congregation stood around the grave, as unmoving as the headstones, while Hazel mumbled his way through the eulogy. He insisted on referring to the body as Hannah Smith, a name so alien to Newton that his mind soon drifted, leaving the minister to work through his platitudes.

Left at Woolsthorpe in the care of his grandparents, Newton had never known when his mother would visit. There was not enough consistency

to her appearances to allow him to discern their shape; they could fall on any day of the week and last anything from a whole day to a meagre hour. He would present her with the latest of his wooden models, maybe a simple sundial or a mobile windmill, and she would politely contemplate the creation and then ask how his schooling was progressing.

When it was time for her to leave – always too soon – his grandparents would force him to watch her go. Sometimes the pain of her departure would rumble inside him like summer thunder; other times it would strike like a bolt of lightning. If he tried to run away or he succeeded in hiding, his grandmother would threaten at the top of her wavering voice, 'If you cannot behave yourself, we'll have to stop your mother coming to see you.'

'I wish she were dead,' Newton had screamed at them when he had heard the ultimatum once too often. In the shocked aftermath he had fled the house, returning at twilight, tear-stained and grubby but unrepentant.

For eight years this hateful cycle repeated itself, but then came the biggest tragedy of all. His mother returned for good, but trailing a meddlesome six-year-old girl, a weakling boy and a screaming baby. Daily, Newton was forced to witness her devotion to them while she all but ignored him.

Newton's thoughts returned to the present. He watched with utter disbelief as the small body was lowered into the grave, wincing when he noticed that Benjamin was helping the undertakers.

Where are you, Mother? With Father in heaven? With that devil Smith, suffering for abandoning me? Well, God cannot help you there. Only I can forgive you that sin.

The day after the funeral Newton called the servants to the kitchen. They stood in silence, straightening uniforms and tucking away curls of hair. Mrs Harrington rose from her throne at the end of the long, heavy table, her hand fluttering self-consciously to the bruise on her cheek.

'Mrs Harrington, your services are no longer required. You will leave immediately,' Newton barked.

She looked around for support but no one would meet her gaze. Swallowing hard, she regained her composure. 'You wicked man! What would your mother say?'

'My mother is no concern of yours. She has her sins to atone for, you have yours.' He lifted his dimpled chin to look down his long nose at her.

'She loved you, Isaac, more than you deserved. That's why she left you here when she married Smith. He wanted Woolsthorpe, but she insisted it was yours alone. He forbade her to bring you to live with him, thinking she'd relent. But she didn't, because she knew you'd always be overlooked in favour of any children she had with Smith. So she bound you up in Woolsthorpe so tightly that no one could contest it when she left it all to you.'

'We were happy here, together,' Newton heard himself say, and instantly chided himself for revealing his thoughts.

'You were three when she left. How could you possibly understand that your mother was struggling for money? She had to marry Smith. He was already old when she married him. It was just your bad luck that he lived until he was seventy-one.'

Newton's eyes locked with hers briefly, then turned to the gleaming pots and their curved reflections of the scene. 'You're trespassing. Leave my grounds and never return.'

When he glanced back, a half-smile played across Mrs Harrington's face. As she stalked to the kitchen door, she turned and said: 'One day, you will meet someone who will do to you what you have done to me. Mark my words.'

2
Southwark

A stooped figure paced the cobbles outside the Crown Inn, hands clamped behind its back, downcast face invisible beneath a shock of greasy hair. Only a sharp nose protruded, from which dripped the occasional dewdrop of clear fluid.

Most people gave the shuffling homunculus a wide berth even when the courtyard became crowded with carriages and new arrivals. They edged around him as if his crooked spine were contagious. It was a reaction that Robert Hooke was used to and, for the most part, ignored. After all, avoiding eye contact was the easiest thing for a hunchback to do. So he contented himself with watching his own feet, craning his neck only when the whirling clatter of approaching wheels and hooves drew his attention.

What would she look like?

Certainly not the vivacious young woman he had sent back to the Isle of Wight eighteen months earlier, if her mother – his sister-in-law – were to be believed. No, Grace would be broken and contrite. Perhaps he would put a protective arm around his niece as they walked home, to let her know that one member of the family still loved her.

The evening air invaded his ill-fitting jacket through the gaping cuffs and the threadbare patches at his elbows and shoulders. His stockings and voluminous breeches offered little protection from the chill either. He pulled the jacket tighter and paced around some more.

The colour was draining from the rectangle of sky above the courtyard. If the Portsmouth coach did not arrive soon, Hooke would have to leave before the bridge gates were closed for the night and return in the morning.

Perhaps, he thought, *I could book a room and wait here.*

He checked the pouch containing his money and was about to head inside when a battered old coach rattled into the yard. Almost at once the passengers disembarked, stretching and helping each other down.

They laughed and exchanged pleasantries as their luggage was unloaded. A young woman turned to leave the group.

It was not her.

This woman wore a velvet cape and walked with purpose, carrying a large bag with ease. He looked past her, hoping for another female to sidle out. Perhaps he should go and look inside; maybe she was afraid to face him. She had good reason.

'Hello, Uncle,' said the woman.

Hooke fought to straighten himself to look at the stranger.

'It's me,' she said.

'Grace?'

She smiled, a flash of white teeth behind cherry lips, and the breath left his lungs. He stared into her dark eyes. Where was the ruined girl he had been expecting? Grace was supposed to be cowed, not yet nineteen but her bloom already plucked. He had imagined her on the verge of tears, unable to look at him for shame.

She produced a handkerchief and dabbed his chin. A red spot appeared on the material, no doubt the result of his last-minute decision to shave before hurrying to Southwark. The gesture broke his paralysis. He swatted her away and said angrily, 'I can look after myself.'

She looked around in case others had witnessed the rebuff.

'You're not even sorry, are you?' he said.

'Uncle. . .'

He could hardly bring himself to look at her. 'From now on, you will address me as Mr Hooke. You are my housekeeper. Nothing more.'

They walked in silence to the bridge, where a large crowd was milling around the gatehouse. The imposing wooden structure towered above them, and people looked blankly from one to another. As was usual when confronted with a crowd, Hooke tried to burrow through, but this time the way was blocked by the press of people. The musty smell of unwashed clothing hung in the air.

A plump woman turned to stare down at him. 'You'll have to wait your turn like the rest of us.'

Hooke retreated. He could see nothing but people's backs. 'What's going on?'

Grace stood on tiptoe and peered into the crowded passage. The bridge was like a tunnel with wooden buildings lining either side. She saw people hanging out of top-floor windows, calling to each other and pointing at something, while at street level the shopkeepers hurried to gather their wares before they were trampled or stolen in the crush. 'Everything's at a standstill. I cannot see why.'

Hooke singled out a young man who had just emerged from the throng. 'You there, what's the hold-up?'

The man jerked a thumb over his shoulder. 'A cart's got a wheel off. You'll be lucky to get across before the hour's up.' He paused long enough to look Grace up and down, then hurried on his way.

'We'll take a wherry. Come on, before everyone has the idea,' said Hooke irritably.

They cut through the crush of people into one of the alleys that ran parallel to the riverbank. It was dark now, and Hooke stepped up his pace. As they headed downstream, away from the torrents of water cascading between the wooden bulwarks of the bridge, Hooke's breathing became laboured.

'We can slow down if you want,' said Grace.

'I will walk at whatever speed I choose,' he said, but slowed down nevertheless.

It grew cooler as they descended a flight of stone steps to the riverside. Shadows moved on the quayside and the lanterns on a line of river taxis bobbed up and down.

'Need a ride?' asked a gruff voice.

'North bank,' said Hooke.

The wherryman caught sight of Grace and quickly reached for her bag. 'Allow me, miss.' His voice had softened.

'Thank you,' she purred.

Hooke's blood almost boiled.

The man stowed Grace's bag, then he took her gloved hand and guided her into the boat. For a moment, they looked as if they were dancing.

Hooke plunged from the bank, setting the small vessel rocking. Unbalanced by the motion, he sat down heavily.

'Are you all right, Uncle?'

Hooke glared.

'Sorry . . . Mr Hooke.'

'Perfectly,' he spat. 'Now, let's be on our way.'

'Oh yes, sir,' the wherryman said with just a hint of sarcasm. He cast off and pumped the oars with his big, muscled arms, straining against the river. As he rowed, he stole frequent glances at Grace.

The towering shape of the bridge loomed to one side, almost lost to view except for the occasional lighted window. They cut through the inky water, navigating the constellation of boat lights that danced around them as others crossed the river. When they reached the far bank the wherryman set the oars, ensuring that they landed with nothing more than a soft tap on the quayside.

Dismissing the man with some coins, Hooke turned to Grace. 'Hurry up, girl,' he grumbled.

They headed northwards, leaving behind the crowds and entering the hinterland between the stone of rebuilt London and the older realms of wood and plaster. Half-finished buildings lined their way, deserted now that the workmen had left for the day. In the darkness, it was easy to confuse the nascent buildings with ruins.

Hooke crossed the road, pacing out its width from force of habit. Anger flashed as he reached the opposite kerb; the road was at least two feet narrower than his written specification.

Why did the authorities insist on squeezing London back into its mediaeval claustrophobia? Did no one ever learn? The labyrinthine old alleys and shanties had proven to be coffins when the fire came. Nursing his annoyance, he even forgot to watch the corners for pickpockets.

After what seemed like an age, with Grace trailing along silently behind, the familiar bulk of Gresham College loomed. A dozen years ago, it had been on the safe side of the Duke of York's firebreaks and escaped the flames. It had become a sanctuary for city officers and financiers. Now, however, it found itself painfully unfashionable. The flesh was gone from its timbers, leaving just the matted sinew of the wood to hold the structure upright. Yet, for all its obvious antiquity, it was home.

Hooke fumbled with his keys and the side door creaked open. He led Grace through a shabby hallway and back outside into the quadrangle. They crossed to the far corner.

Hooke's rooms were little warmer than outside. He wasted no time getting a collection of apple logs burning in the grate, then set about kindling the rushlights dotted around the main room. As the fire drove

away some of the cold and the strong odour of rat droppings, Grace circled the large room. Her footsteps set the floorboards creaking beneath the threadbare rugs. She stepped over the pieces of abandoned apparatus and ran her fingers along the wood panelling. She straightened a few of the portraits and lingered by the fire. 'It's good to be back.'

Hooke buried the shred of pleasure provoked by her comment.

'Am I to sleep in the turret room?' she asked.

He gave a curt nod.

With a rushlight in one hand and her bag in the other, she disappeared through the door that led to the turret.

'Don't be long,' Hooke called. 'There are provisions in the kitchen for you to make us supper.'

He dropped into a chair at the large dining-table squatting in one half of the room. The chunky piece of furniture doubled as his workbench during the weeks when it was too cold to work in the cellar. Taking up half of the scuffed tabletop today was a wide wooden cone, upturned and sitting in an iron cradle. Resting at the bottom of this shallow funnel were three iron balls, each smaller than Hooke's clenched fist. He scooped them out and set one after the other rolling around the wooden rim.

The growl of the iron on the wood blocked out his thoughts as his eyes followed their elliptical trajectories. Each ball would dip low and gain speed, then whip round the centre to climb the incline, never quite reaching as high as on its previous lap. He became lost in the repetitious motion, rolling ball after ball, wondering what would happen if there were no friction between the iron and the wood. Would the balls circulate endlessly like planets?

Grace reappeared wearing a simple shift with her brunette hair pinned rather brutally into the nape of her neck. In the lamplight she seemed to have less rouge on her cheeks now.

That's better, thought Hooke.

'You have new-fitted my room. Thank you,' she said.

Hooke rolled another iron sphere, and Grace went to the kitchen to prepare supper.

She returned almost an hour later, carrying two chipped bowls. Each was filled with a colourless gruel.

Hooke peered at the one she laid before him. 'Is it soup?'

'Potatoes and oysters.'

'From the pail near the window?'

'The oysters, yes.'

He pushed the bowl across the table. 'They were for an experiment next week on water temperature.'

'It's not my fault. I'm not used to this kind of work.'

'Oh no, you're too fine to cook for yourself, let alone others. Well, it's all you're good for now. You're nothing but a servant of your own making.'

'I won't spend the rest of my life in servitude,' she cried.

'Perhaps you should have thought of that before you let Sir Robert Holmes make a whore of you.'

She gasped. Her head dropped and she pressed her hands to her cheeks before speaking in a quiet voice. 'I thought that, of all my family, you might have forgiven me. We have a bond, remember?' She looked up. The hope in her face elicited a stab of hatred inside him. He knew exactly what she was trying to do, and the knowledge extinguished the provocative memories she was attempting to revive. 'Did you expect me to greet you with open arms? John is dead because of your shameful behaviour.' He stumbled from the table, seized the poker and stabbed at the embers. What on Earth had possessed him to spend this past fortnight fashioning new bedposts and remaking the chest of drawers in her room? What a fool . . .

'I have suffered enough,' she pleaded.

'My brother, my only brother. Gone because of you.' He glared over his shoulder at her.

Silent tears cut streams across her cheeks. 'Don't you think I would change things if I could? I never dreamt that Father would . . . '

'Go on, say it. Say it. Take his own life. Your father committed suicide because of you and your despicable behaviour. For all your London airs and your good looks, you're nothing but a foolish slut.'

Her eyes blazed. 'Indeed! I must have been utterly foolish to think that you would still love me.' She fled.

Hooke watched her disappear, an awkward mixture of guilt and satisfaction replacing the hatred that had swirled inside him. Had he not wanted her to cry, to show remorse? He thrust the poker back into the bucket, raising a sharp clatter. Yes, he knew, he had wanted those things. So, why did they now feel so wrong?