



## A Mercy Draft

---

No Known Copyright

Princeton University Library reasonably believes that the Item is not restricted by copyright or related rights, but a conclusive determination could not be made.

You are free to use this Item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use.

## Princeton University Library Disclaimer

---

Princeton University Library claims no copyright governing this digital resource. It is provided for free, on a non-commercial, open-access basis, for fair-use academic and research purposes only. Anyone who claims copyright over any part of these resources and feels that they should not be presented in this manner is invited to contact Princeton University Library, who will in turn consider such concerns and make every effort to respond appropriately. We request that users reproducing this resource cite it according the guidelines described at <http://rbcs.princeton.edu/policies/forms-citation>.

## Citation Information

---

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

A Mercy Draft

1 folder (partial)

## Contact Information

---

## Download Information

---

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:15:39 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/kk91fr14v>

Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to stay quietly on the page—weeping a bit or occasionally revealing a shimmer of fear—but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth. I only want to explain. You can call what I tell you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments when a dog's profile plays in the steam of a kettle. Or when a corn husk doll, splayed in the corner of a room at first sight is sitting on a shelf when you turn your head and it's not clear how it got there. Stranger things happen all the time everywhere. You know. I know you know. One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read? If a pea hen refuses to brood I read it quickly and, sure enough, that night I see my mother standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron. Other signs take time. Even now it is difficult. Too many signs, or a clear <sup>omen</sup> portent clouding up. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much. Let me start with what I do know.

*like the garden snake crawling up to the sleigh blades to die*

As a child  
The beginning begins with the shoes. <sup>am</sup> I <sup>able to</sup> could never abide being barefoot  
<sup>always</sup> and ~~used to~~ beg for shoes, anybody's shoes, even on the hottest days. My  
mother, frowning, is <sup>angry</sup> ~~disturbed~~ by what she says are my prettified ways. I'm  
dangerous, she says, but she relents and lets me wear them. As a result, Lila  
says, my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the  
strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires. It's true. Lila is right. I  
have the hands of a slave and the feet of a well born lady. So when I set out to  
find you, she and Mistress give me boots to fit a man, not a girl. They stuff  
them with <sup>hay and</sup> oiled corn husks and tell me to hide the letter inside my stocking—no  
matter the itch of the seal. <sup>I don't read what Mistress writes and Lila and Soledad cannot, but I know what it is meant to say to anyone who stops me.</sup>  
My head is light. Nothing frightens and tempts me more than this  
assignment. From the day you disappear I dream and plot escape, a  
run-alone, with no one, out beyond the maples and butternut, over the hills, but  
which way? Who will tell me? Who lives in the wilderness between this farm  
and you and will they help or harm me? <sup>What about</sup> Do you remember the boneless bears  
in the valley? <sup>Remember?</sup> How when they move, their pelts sway as though there is nothing  
underneath? Their smell belying their beauty, their eyes <sup>knowing</sup> remembering us from  
when we are beasts too. You telling me that is why it is fatal to look them in



the eye. They will approach, run to us to love and play, which we mis read and give back fear and anger. There are giant birds nesting out there too, bigger than cows, Lila says, and not all Indians, she says, are like her, so watch out.

"A praying Indian" they call her, but she bathes herself everyday and Christians never do. She wears cheerful beads on her arm and dances in secret at first

light when the moon is small. More than fearing loving bears or birds bigger than cows, I fear pathlessness <sup>the Night</sup> in the dark. How, I wonder, can I find you <sup>in the dark</sup> then?

Now at last there is a way. I am under orders. It is arranged. And although I am happy the world is breaking open for us, its newness alarms me. To get to

you I must leave the only home, the only people I know. Lila says, from the state of my teeth, I <sup>am</sup> ~~seem~~ to be around six when I am brought here. We cook

cherries for jam ten times since then, so I must be sixteen. Before this place I spend my days picking okra and sweeping the yard; my nights on the floor of

the cook house with my mother. Saturdays we learn to read and write. Four of

us hidden near the marsh with the Reverend <sup>Father\* two books and</sup>. He has a slate. We have sticks

to draw through sand; pebbles to mark words on flat smooth rocks. I forget

almost all of it until you. I like talk. Lila talk, Soledad talk, stone talk. Best of

all is your talk. Lila says <sup>the place of</sup> my talking on stone <sup>is</sup> ~~was~~ in the colony where Sir <sup>does</sup> has

\* He is forbidden to do it, so we hide.

At first I ~~could not~~ <sup>don't</sup> talk any word.  
All of it is different from ~~how~~ what  
they mean ~~before~~. Lila's words say  
nothing I know. Nor Mistress. Slowly a little  
~~I start to~~ ~~learn and~~ ~~make my own~~ talk <sup>is</sup> in my  
mouth and not <sup>only</sup> on stone.

<sup>to</sup>  
~~with~~ my mother and me.



business. So that is where my mother and her baby boy are buried. Or will  
 be if they ever decide to rest. Sleeping on the floor with my mother and her  
 baby boy is not as nice as sleeping ~~in the cowshed~~ <sup>our part of</sup> in the broken sleigh with  
 Lila. In cold weather we put planks around and wrap our arms together. ~~We~~  
<sup>have no smell</sup> ~~don't smell~~ the cow flops because they are frozen and we are deep under  
 blankets. In summer Lila makes a cool place to sleep out of branch and hides  
 protecting us from mosquitoes. Soledad ~~alone~~ sleeps in the house with Mistress  
 and Sir. The men helping you, Will and Scully, never do because their own  
 master won't have it. They are exchange for land leased from Sir. Soledad  
 says Sir always has a clever way of getting without giving. I know it <sup>because I see it</sup> ~~The~~ <sup>forever and ever</sup>  
 planter ~~in the colony where Sir does business~~ is not paying the whole amount he  
 owes to Sir. <sup>saying</sup> ~~So~~ Sir <sup>instead</sup> says he will take the woman and girl, not the baby boy, and  
 the debt is gone. My mother, the woman, begs no. Her baby boy is still at her  
 breast. <sup>she says, she says</sup> Take the girl, the daughter. <sup>Me</sup> Me. Sir agrees <sup>and changes balance of the</sup> ~~but reappplies the debt and~~  
~~determines the balance.~~ Soledad tells me she likes Sir's cleverness. She is with  
 child. <sup>NOT</sup> Father ~~unknown~~ <sup>divine intervention</sup> and she won't say. Will and Scully each deny. Lila  
 believes it is Sir's. Says she has her reason for thinking so. Mistress is not  
 pleased. Neither am I. Not because our work is more, but because mothers

\* me watching [from the doorway]  
 my mother listening, her baby  
 boy on her hip.

nursing children scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. <sup>How</sup> ~~My~~  
<sup>they raise them to</sup>  
~~own mother~~ looks <sup>at</sup> me hard, saying something I can not hear. Saying  
<sup>home</sup> something important, but holding the little boy's <sup>head in their</sup> hand.

*ff to Sir to  
to Mrs P to*  
Since your leaving with no goodbye, summer passes, then autumn and  
with the waning of winter the sickness comes back. When Sir returns no one  
believes those little sores are going to be Soledad's old sickness. <sup>The one only you can fix</sup> He screams  
at night and cries in the day. Then he is too weak to do either. He has bought  
only seasoned slaves, including me who survived measles, and could not help  
envying us our health and feeling cheated of his <sup>big</sup> new house. I can tell you it is  
still not finished. The gate of course is beautiful; your ironwork wondrous to  
see. The house is grand, just waiting for its glass windows. Sir wants to be  
taken there, although there is no furniture. He tells Mistress to hurry hurry never  
mind the spring rain. The sickness alters his mind as well as his face. Will and  
Scully are gone and when we women carry him into the house without windows  
he is sleeping and never wakes. Neither Mistress nor we know if he is alive for  
even one minute to smell the new cherrywood floors he lies on. We are alone.  
No one to dig Sir's grave but us. Will and Scully stay away. I don't think they



x<sup>2</sup> want to. I think their master makes them because of the sickness. Still we do not say the word aloud until we bury him and Mistress notices six <sup>blisters</sup> of them on her chin. Now she has twenty-nine. She wants you here much as I do. For her it is to save her life; for me it is to have one.

You probably don't know anything at all about what your back looks like whatever the sky holds: sunlight, moon rise. I rest there. My hand, my eyes, my mouth. When I first see it.....

Tr tk

<sup>IN 1682</sup>  
^ Jacob Vaark galloped along, sweat so heavy it salted his eyes. His horse, <sup>rented</sup>  
Regine, ~~accustomed to colder climate~~, was drenched and panting for water. <sup>(over)</sup>  
<sup>Swatting mosquitoes & on the watch for mudsnakes</sup> that startled the horse  
Finally he glimpsed the wide iron gates and guided Regina through them.  
<sup>they</sup> Trotting, slowly he passed a few <sup>rows of</sup> poorly kept quarters. Empty all of them, in the  
<sup>damp</sup> tobacco <sup>feilds,</sup> he reckoned. The comfortable smell of the leaves, like  
<sup>tobacco</sup> fireplaces and good women serving ale, cloaked the estate. <sup>planter's land</sup> The road ended at  
<sup>Beyond the gates</sup> a small brick plaza, announcing a prideful entrance to the house. He stopped.

Trying to estimate the damage  
to what Sopping  
weather had  
wrought.  
Whatever  
the loss,

like balm.



Hot Moisture, hot and ripe w/ mosquitoes, <sup>could have annoyed him</sup> always <sup>but didn't</sup>

The ride from port was X, but he <sup>took</sup> delight in the journey. Breathing the air, of a world so new, so modern, so open to life. Shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears;

~~He passed through Virginia Colony to the Province~~

As he left the colony and entered the province, <sup>his feelings were fought</sup> ~~mixed~~: unlike <sup>the</sup> ~~Virginia~~ <sup>Royal Colony</sup> # the palatine Maryland could trade to foreign markets which ~~pleased him~~ but it was popish to the ~~core~~ <sup>which</sup> repelled him. No matter tobacco and slaves were married here - each currency clutching the other, ~~the elbow~~ of

~~X~~ Forests untouched since Noah. ~~WM~~ etc. Everything possible

~~the~~ #  
a ~~fact~~ <sup>fact</sup> that meant profit

A boy appeared and, dismounting in some pain, Jacob Vaark <sup>N</sup>aded over the reins, cautioning the boy.

"Water. No feed."

"Yes, sir," said the boy and turned the horse around, murmuring, "nice lady, nice lady," as he <sup>led</sup> took her away.

Jacob Vaark climbed the steps, then retraced them to stand back from the house and appraise it. Imposing, he thought, ~~and~~ very impressive. Two long windows, at least twenty-five hands tall, flanked the door. <sup>Five</sup> Four more windows above on a wide second story resting on six pillars. Tk <sup>Arch. (brick)</sup>

Easy, he thought. How easy to build such a house in <sup>that climate.</sup> Southern colonies. <sup>A Chimney at each end</sup> Soft <sup>brick</sup> wood, no caulking, <sup>needed</sup> everything designed for breeze, not freeze. Long dining room, parlor, no kitchen to speak of with a cook house out back. Easy living, but the heat...

He removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his hair line with his sleeve. Then, fingering his soaking collar, he <sup>scraped his boots of mud and</sup> mounted the steps.

Seated at a small table in the parlor, windows closed to the <sup>boiling</sup> burning air, Jacob Vaark drank sassafras beer and studied his host, a <sup>Michael</sup> Mr. D'Ortega.

Disaster had struck, according to D'Ortega. Jacob Vaark knew all about it, but



listened politely to the version this client/debtor recounted. D'Ortega's ship had  
sunk not two hundred feet from shore. It had been anchored there for a month  
waiting for a vessel, due any day, to replenish what he had already lost. A third  
of his cargo had died. Fined by the British for throwing their bodies into the  
Bay; forced to scoop up the corpses—what they could find—(they used pikes and  
nets, D'Ortega said, a purchase which itself cost two pounds, six<sup>9</sup>). And ordered  
to burn or bury them. He had to pile them in two drays (sixteen s.), cart them  
out to low land where saltweed and crocodiles would finish the work.

Does he cut his losses and let his ship sail on to Barbados? No. A  
sloven man, stubborn in his wrong headedness like all of the Roman faith, he  
waited in port for a month for a phantom ship from Portugal carrying enough  
cargo to replenish the heads he has lost. While waiting to fill his ship's hold to  
capacity, it sinks and he has lost not a third, but all, except the crew, who were  
unchained, of course, and four unsalable Africans red-eyed with anger.

Tk

Obligatory  
tower, yfloreas  
sees funny  
in shoes - laughs  
mother appears  
offer to buy

crop losses  
= slaving

We are seven, excluding the Brothers Ney, and the horses are not the  
only ones made nervous by snowflakes in springtime. Their haunches tremble;

by the  
hard  
proprietary

they shake their manes. We are nervous too, but we sit still as the flakes come down and stick to our shawls and hats; sugaring our eyelashes and flouring the men's wooly beards. Two women face into the wind that whips their hair like corn silk; their eyes slits of shine. The others cover their mouths with their cloaks and lean against one another.

Sudden snowfall on tender leaves is pretty. Perhaps it will last long enough on the ground to make animal tracking easy. Men are always pleased in the snow where killing is best. No one can starve if there is snow. And in spring, the river is full of spawn and the air of fowl. Although this snow will not last, it is heavy, wet and cold. I draw my feet under my skirts, not for warmth, but to protect the letter. The satchel I clutch on my lap.

Mistress makes me memorize the way to get to you. I am to board the Brothers Ney wagon in the morning as it travels north on x road. After one stop at a tavern, the wagon will arrive at Hartkill just after midday where I disembark. I am to walk left, westward on another road called x which I will know by the arrows carved into the bark of a cedar. But the Brothers Ney are late. When I climb aboard and find a place among the others, it is already late afternoon and the tavern needs lamplight when we reach it. At first I don't see it, but one



of us, a boy with his hair in a pigtail, points and then we all do. Winking through the trees is a light. The Neys go in. We wait. They return to water the horses and us. After that it is silent. The snow ends and the sun is gone. Six drop down, the men catching the women in their arms. The boy jumps alone. The three women with skin like mine motion to me and I drop down too. They move off back down where we are coming from, stepping as best they can figure in tree shelter at roadside, places where the snow is small. I don't follow. Neither can I stay in the wagon. I can't be alone with strange men when, drunk and annoyed, they discover their cargo is lost. I go west into the trees. Everything I want is west. You. Your talk. The medicine you know that will make Mistress well. You will read the letter and come back with me. I have only to go ten miles west. Two days. Three nights.

[insert F] [moving into the trees parallel to road. Land slopes down; she loses sight of road. Lost. Night. Has lila's calf skin pouch around neck and satchel of food on her shoulder.]

Tk [Algonquin girls bathing in stream]

I walk down the path and over a narrow bridge past a mill wheel turning

in a stream. The creaking wheel and rushing water are what shape the quiet. Hens sleep and dogs forbidden. I am so thirsty I climb down the bank and lap from the stream. It tastes like candle wax. Heavy with water I make my way back to the path. I need shelter. The sun is setting itself. Two cottages have windows but no lamp shines through. The others resemble small barns that can accept the day's light only through open doors. None is open. There is no cooksmoke in the air. I am thinking everybody has gone away. Then I see a steeple on a hill beyond the village and am certain the people are at evening prayer. Rather than go there, I decide to knock on the door of the largest house, the one most likely to have a servant on watch. Moving toward it, I look over my shoulder and see a light further away. The single lit house in the village. I go to it. Rocks interfere at each step rubbing the sealing wax hard on my sole. Rain starts. Soft. It should smell sweet with the flavor of the pines and sycamores it has crossed, but it has a burn smell, like pin feathers singed before the boiling.

Before I can knock, a woman opens the door. She has green eyes. The rest of her is a black frock and a white cap. Red hair edges it.

"Who ~~has~~ sent you?" She is suspicious and holds up her hand, palm



out, as though I might force my way in.

"I am alone, please. Shelter sends me here."

She says words as written in the bible.

"Hast thou no protection, no companion"?

"No, mam."

"Art thou from this earth or elsewhere?"

"This earth, mam. I know no other."

"Art thou Christian or heathen?"

"Never heathen, mam, although I am told my father was."

"Where doth he abide.?"

The rain is getting bigger. Hunger wobbles me.

"I never knew him. My mother is dead."

"Orphan. Step in."

I try to eat slowly and fail. Sopping hard bread into lovely, warm barley porridge, I don't lift my head except to say "thank you" when she ladles more into my bowl. She places a handful of raisins next to it.

I notice a girl lying in a narrow box of straw. Under her head is a blanket

roll. One of her eyes looks away; the other is as straight and unwavering as a she wolf. I don't think I should initiate anything so I wait for the girl or the woman to say something. When I finish the food down to the last raisin, the woman asks what is my purpose traveling alone.

"My Mistress has sent me on an errand."

"It must be vital to risk a child's life in these parts."

"Yes, mam. Mistress is dying. My errand can save her."

"Not from the first death. Perhaps from the second."

I don't understand her meaning. I know there is only one death, but many lives beyond it. Remember the owls in daylight? We know right away who they were.

The girl lying in straw raises up on her elbow. "This be the death we have come here to die." Her voice is deep, like a man's though she looks to be younger than me. The woman doesn't reply and I do not want to look at those eyes again. "No thrashing can change it though my flesh is cut to ribbons." She stand then and limps toward the lamp. Holding it waist high, she lifts her skirts. I see dark blood beetling down her legs. In the light pouring over her pale skin her wounds look like living jewelry.



The woman speaks. "Those lashes may save thy life."

Tk

The woman closes the lamp and stretches on a pallet; the girl returns to her straw. I lie down on the floor. Their voices slide over me.

"I am not a demon. I am not."

"We will know comes the morning."

"They will allow that I am."

"The knowing is theirs."

"Truth is mine."

"Be still lest He hear you."

"He will not abandon me."

"Nor will I."

"Yet you bloodied my flesh. Why?"

"How many times do you have to hear it? Demons do not bleed."

You never told me that and it's a good thing to know. If my mother is still alive she can be teaching me such things.

The story of a life is not a life. Life is much better, or worse, than its rendition.

So, trust me.

All will end well, and if not, the cost will be deferred.