



A Mercy Draft

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Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark—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 odd 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 need more time to understand. Even now it is difficult—too many signs, or a clear omen clouding up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much like not reading the garden snake crawling up to the door saddle

to die . Let me start with what I do know.

The beginning begins with the shoes. When a child, I am never able to abide being barefoot and always beg for shoes, anybody's shoes, even on the hottest days. My mother, frowning, is angry at what she says are my prettified ways. I'm dangerous, she says, but she relents and lets me wear the throwaway shoes from the master's house, pointy-toe, one raised heel broke, the other worn, a buckle on top. 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 ^{Portuguese} ~~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 hay and oiled corn husks and tell me to hide the letter inside my stocking—no matter the itch of the sealing wax. I don't read what Mistress writes and Lila and Soledad cannot, but I know what it means to say to anyone who stops me.

My head is light with the confusion of two things, hunger for you and fear. Nothing frightens me more than this ^{errand} ~~assignment~~ and nothing is more temptation. 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

I am asking myself which way? Who will tell me? Who lives in the wilderness between this farm and you and will they help or harm me? What about the boneless bears in the valley? Remember? How when they move, their pelts sway as though there is nothing underneath? Their smell belying their beauty, their eyes knowing us from when we are beasts also. 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. Underneath she wears cheerful beads and dances in secret at first light when the moon is small. More than fearing loving bears or birds bigger than cows, I fear the pathless night. How, I wonder, can I find you in the dark? Now at last there is a way. I have orders. It is arranged. I will see your mouth and trail my fingers down. You will rest your chin in my hair again while I breathe into your shoulder in and out in and out. I am happy the world is breaking open for us, yet its newness alarms me. What more, besides bears and giant birds are out there? To get to you I must leave the only home, the only people I know. Lila says, from the state of my

teeth, I am maybe six when I am brought here. We boil wild plums for jam ten times since then, so I must be sixteen. Before this place I spend my days picking okra and sweeping tobacco sheds, my nights I spend on the floor of the cook house with my mother. Once every seven days we learn to read and write. We are forbidden to leave the place so the four of us hide near the marsh with the Reverend Father. He is forbidden to do this but he teaches us anyway watching out for Virginians who want to catch him. He has two books and a slate. We have sticks to draw through sand; pebbles to shape 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. At first when I am brought here I don't talk any word. All of what I hear is different from what words mean to my mother and me. Lila's words say nothing I know. Nor Mistress'. Slowly a little talk is in my mouth and not on stone. Lila says the place of my talking on stone is Mary's land where Sir does 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 broken sleigh with Lila. In cold weather we put planks around our part of the cowshed and wrap our arms together under pelts. We don't smell the cow flops because

they are frozen and we are deep under fur. In summer Lila makes a cool place to sleep out of branches protecting us from mosquitoes. In the house of Mistress and Sir there is room only for Soledad to sleep. The men helping you, Will and Scully, never do because their own master does not allow it. They are ~~OK~~ exchange for land leased from Sir. Soledad says Sir always has a clever way of getting without giving. I know it is so because I see it forever and ever—me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip. The master is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. Sir saying he will take instead 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. Take the girl, she says, the daughter, she says. Me. Me. Sir agrees and changes the balance due. Reverend Father takes me on a ferry, then a ketch, bundles me between his trunks of books. Soledad tells me she likes Sir's cleverness. She is once more with child. Father still not known 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 nursing walking children scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I can not hear.

Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand.

Jacob Vaark galloped along, sweating so heavily it salted his eyes. His rented horse, Regine, was drenched and panting. Mist, hot and rife with mosquitoes, could have dampened his spirit, but didn't. As usual, the ride from tk was hard, but he always took delight in the journey. Breathing the air of a world so new, so modern, so open to life never failed to invigorate him. Forests untouched since Noah; shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears. As he left Delaware [?] and crossed into Maryland, his feelings fought one another like tk. Unlike the colony, the province could trade to foreign markets, a good thing, but it was Romish to the core, a bad thing. His sensibilities were offended by the lax, flashy, cunning of the papists. "Abhor that arrant whore of Rome." His entire school had memorized those lines from their primer. "And all her blasphemies; Drink not of her cursed cup; Obey not her decrees." Which did

not mean you could not do business with them and he had out dealt them many times, especially here where tobacco and slaves were married, each currency clutching its partner's elbow. Finally, swatting mosquitoes and on the watch for mud snakes that startled the horse, he glimpsed the wide iron gates of Bliss and guided Regina through them. Far away to the right, beyond the iron fence enclosing the property and almost hidden by the mist, he saw rows of quarters, quiet, empty. In the tobacco fields, he reckoned, trying to limit the damage sopping weather had wrought on the crop. The comfortable smell of tobacco leaves, like fireplaces and good women serving ale, cloaked Bliss like balm. The path ended at a small brick plaza, announcing a prideful entrance to the house. He stopped. A boy appeared and, dismounting in some pain, Jacob Vaark handed 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 led her away.

Jacob Vaark climbed three wide steps, then retraced them to stand back from the house and appraise it. Imposing, he thought, and very impressive. Two wide windows, at least two dozen panes in each, flanked the door. Five

more windows above on a wide second story resting on six pillars. He had never seen a house like it. The wealthiest men he knew built in wood, not brick, riven clapboards and no need for the grand pillars suitable for a House of Parliament

Grandiose, he thought, but easy. How easy to build such a house in that climate. Soft wood, creamy brick, no caulking needed, everything designed for breeze, not freeze. Long hall, probably, parlors, chambers.... 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 scraped his boots ^{on the} and re-mounted the steps.
and scraped his boots on the iron ^

Tk

Seated at a small table in the parlor, surrounded by graven idols, the windows closed to the boiling air, Jacob Vaark drank sassafras beer and studied his host, a Mr. Michael D'Ortega. Disaster had doubled, 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 been anchored two hundred feet from shore for a month waiting for a vessel, due any day, to replenish what he

had lost. A third of his cargo had died of ship fever. Fined five thousand pounds of tobacco by the Lord proprietary's magistrate for throwing their bodies too close to 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) 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, thought Vaark. 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 only the vessel, not only the original third, but all, except the crew who were unchained, of course, and four unsalable Africans red-eyed with anger.

Dinner was a tedious affair. It began with an odd prayer and cross signing before and after. His considerable hunger shrank when confronted with the heavily seasoned food: everything, except pickles and radishes, was fried or over-cooked. The wine, watered and too sweet for his taste, annoyed him and

Now he wanted six more months to pay what he had borrowed
that did not mention food

Vaark's

the company was worse. D'Ortega's wife was a chattering magpie, asking
pointless questions—How do you manage living in snow?—and making sense-
defying observations—The King will be back—as though her judgment was equal
to a man's. Nothing transpired in the conversation that had footing in the real
world. They had six children, two of whom were old enough to sit at table.
Silent boys, thirteen and fourteen, wearing peri wigs as though they were at a
ball or a court of law. His bitterness, he understood, was an unworthy result of
having no survivors. ^{himself} ^{male or otherwise}
Now that Patricia had followed her dead brothers, there
was no one to reap the fortune he was amassing. Thus, restraining envy as
best he could, Vaark entertained himself by imagining the couple's relationship.
They seemed well suited to each other—vain, voluptuous, prouder of their pewter
and porcelain than their sons. It was very clear why D'Ortega was in serious
debt. Turning profit into useless baubles, unembarrassed by prettification, silk
stockings and an over-dressed wife, he would remain in debt, unable to ride
out any set back, whether it be lost ship or ruined crop, and honor his debts.
Watching the couple, he noticed that neither husband nor wife looked at each
other—except for a stolen glance when the other looked away. He could not tell
what was in those surreptitious peeks, but it amused him to divine their

meaning while he endured the foolish talk and the inedible food brought to table by a woman who smelled of verbena.

Tk

His own Rebekka seemed more valuable to him each time he was in the company of these rich men's wives. From the moment he saw her struggling down the gang plank with two boxes and a heavy satchel, he knew his good fortune. Plump, comely and capable, she had been worth the long negotiations. There was not a shrewish bone in her body. She never raised her voice in anger, ^{she} saw to his needs, made the tenderest dumplings, took to chores in a land completely strange to her with enthusiasm and invention, cheerful as a canary. Or used to be. Three dead infants in a row, followed by the accidental death of Patricia, their eight year old, had un-leavened her. A kind of invisible ash had settled over her which vigils at the small graves near the meadow did nothing to wipe away. Yet she neither complained nor shirked her duties. If anything, she threw herself more vigorously into the farm work and when he traveled, as now, on business, trading, collecting, lending, he had no doubts about how his home was being managed. Rebekka and the two women who helped her were as reliable as sunrise and strong as posts.

Dessert, fruit and pecans, was an improvement and when he accompanied D'Ortega on the impossible-to-refuse tour of the place, his mood had lifted slightly, enough to admire the estate honestly. The various tobacco sheds, wagons, row after row of barrels—orderly and nicely kept—well made meat house, milk house, laundry, cook house. All but the latter white washed plaster, a jot smaller than the slave quarters but, unlike them, in excellent repair. The subject, the purpose, of his visit had not been resolved. D'Ortega had described with great attention to detail the accidents beyond his control that made him unable to pay what he owed. But how Vaark would be re-imbursed had not been broached. Examining the spotted, bug ridden leaves of tobacco, it became clear to him what D'Ortega had left to offer. Vaark refused. His farm was small, his trade needed only himself. Besides having no place to put them, there was nothing to occupy them.

"But you can sell them, easily." said D'Ortega.

Vaark winced. Flesh was not his commodity.

Still, at his host's insistence, he accompanied him to the little sheds where some two dozen or more had been assembled to stand in a line, including the boy who had watered Regina. The two men walked the row, inspecting.

NEVER mentioning

D'Ortega identifying virtues, weaknesses and possibilities, oblivious to the scars, the wounds like misplaced veins tracing their skin. One even had the facial brand required by local law when a slave assaulted a white man a second time. The women's eyes looked shot-proof, gazing beyond place and time as though they were not actually there. The men looked at the ground. Except, every now and then, when possible, when they thought they were not being evaluated, Vaark could see their quick glances, sideways, wary but, most of all, judging the men who judged them.

Suddenly Vaark felt his stomach seize. The tobacco odor, so welcoming
~~a balm~~ when he arrived, now nauseated him. Or was it the sugared rice, the
hog ^{cuts fried and} roast dripping with molasses, the cocoa Mrs. D'Ortega was giddy about?
In any case, he couldn't stay there surrounded by a passel of slaves whose
silence made him imagine an avalanche seen from a great distance. No
sound just the knowledge of a roar he could not hear. He begged off, saying
the exchange was not acceptable—too much trouble to transport, auction...His
solitary, unencumbered proficiency was what he liked about trade. Coins, bills
of credit, quit claims were portable. One satchel carried all he needed. They
walked back toward the house and through the small gate in the ornate fence,

D'Ortega explaining all the while: he would do the selling, arrange transportation, hire the handler.

Vaark, stomach turning, nostrils assailed, grew impatient. This is a calamity, he thought, that will lead to a year in a law suit he did not look forward to. D'Ortega's strut as they had walked the property offended him. And moreover, he believed the set of that jaw, the drooping lids, the overbearing high handedness hid something soft, like his hands that had never held a plow. Something beyond Catholic, something sordid and overripe. Barely listening^{*} as they neared the cook house, Vaark saw a woman standing in the door with two children. She looked healthy enough, better fed than the others. On a whim, mostly to silence him, knowing D'Ortega would refuse, he said, "Her. I'll take her."

D'Ortega stopped short, a startled look on his face. "Ah, no. My wife won't allow it. She can't live without her. She is our main cook."

Vaark drew closer, smelling the verbena. "You said 'any.' I could choose any. If your word is worthless, there is only the law."

"Well, yes," said D'Ortega, "but there are other women here. You've seen them and this one^{here} is nursing."

→ ^{the} "Then law it is."

Just then

The little girl stepped from behind the mother. On her feet were a pair of way too big woman's shoes. Her little legs, rising like two bramble sticks from the bashed and broken shoes made him laugh. A loud, chest-heaving laugh that eased his stomach a bit. Before his laughter subsided, the woman clutching one child on her hip, came forward. "Please, sir. Not me. I am still breast feeding. Take her. Take my daughter."

Vaark looked over at her, his mouth still open with laughter, and was struck by the terror in her eyes. He shook his head, thinking this is wretched business.

"Why not?" asked D'Ortega. "I'll send her to you. Immediately."

D'Ortega seemed agitated.

No
} "Mmm," grunted Vaark, thinking, I've got to get away from this place before I lose my dinner; but thinking also, maybe Rebekka would welcome a child around the place. This one, here, swimming in shoes, appeared to be about the same age as Patricia, but if she got kicked in the head by a steer as Patricia had, the loss would not rock Rebekka so.

"There is a priest here," D'Ortega went on. "He can bring her to you. I'll have him board a sloop to any port on the coast you desire...."

Vaark thought if he didn't get to a privy soon....

"Excuse me, I'm unsettled. Would you direct me?"
+K

They wrote new papers. Agreeing the girl was worth ten pounds
considering the number of years ahead of her and reducing the balance to^{by}
three hogshead of tobacco or fifteen English pounds—the latter preferred. The
tension lifted, visibly so on D'Ortega's face. Eager to get away, Vaark said
hurried goodbyes to Mrs. D'Ortega, the two boys and their father. On his way
to the narrow dirt trail, he turned back, waved at the couple and once again, in
spite of himself, envied the gate, the fence, the house. Might it be nice, such a
fence to enclose the headstones near his meadow? And one day, not too far
away, to build a house that size on his own property? On that rise, in back with
a better prospect of the hills. Not as ornate, as D'Ortega's. None of that
pagan excess, of course. But fair.

He whipped Regina to a faster pace. He was in a hurry to get to a tavern
in town before night, have one, perhaps two, drafts of ale, its bitter, clear,
~~strong~~ taste critical to eliminating the sweetish rot of sin and ruined tobacco that
seemed to coat his tongue.

Since your leaving sudden with no goodbye, summer passes, then autumn and with the waning of winter the sickness comes back. Not like before with Soledad but now with Sir. When he returns this time he is different, slow and hard to please. He sweats and wants water all the time and no one wants to believe the blisters are going to be Soledad's old sickness. He vomits at night and weeps in the day. Then he is too weak to do either. He reminds us that he has bought only seasoned slaves, including me, who are survivors of measles so how is this happening to him? He can not help envying us our health and feeling cheated of his new house. I can tell you it is still not finished. The gate is still beautiful; your ironwork wondrous to see. The house is grand, just waiting for its windows. Sir wants to be taken there even though there is no furniture. He tells Mistress to hurry hurry never mind the spring rain pouring down for days. The sickness alters his mind as well as his face. Will and Scully are gone and when we women each holding a corner of a blanket carry him into the house without windows he is sleeping with his mouth wide open and never wakes. Neither Mistress nor we know if he is alive for even one minute

to smell the new cherry wood 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 want to. I think their master makes them because of the sickness. Even the pastor does not come. Still, we do not say the word aloud until we bury him next to his children and Mistress notices ^{two} ~~six~~ in her mouth; ^{then six. The next morning} ~~two of them~~ on her tongue, twenty-three ^{are} on her face. Twenty-nine in all. She wants you here as 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

We are seven, excluding the Brothers Ney, and the horses are not the only ones made nervous by snowflakes in springtime. Their haunches tremble; 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 the post 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 which I will know by the sapling bent into the earth with one sprout growing skyward. But the Brothers Ney are late. When I climb aboard and find a place among the others, it is already late afternoon. The others do not ask me where I am headed. Instead they tell where they have been tk 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. Three of the women motion to me. My heart thumps 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. My fear is like ice. I can't be alone with strange men when, liquored and angry, they discover their cargo is lost. I have to choose quick. I choose you. 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 hear what I have to say and come back with me. I have only to go 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 her neck and satchel of food on her shoulder.]

Tk 4: Lila:

Tk 5: Florens ,Algonquin girls bathing in stream

Tk 6: Rebekka

How long will it take will he be there will she get lost will someone steal her?

She liked shoes, the little one, when she first came, and only when Lila noticed and made her some, did she say a word. Rebekka's thoughts bled into one another, confusing events and time but not people. The need to swallow, the pain of doing so, the unbearable urge to tear her skin from the bones underneath only stopped when she was unconscious—not asleep because as far as the dreams were concerned it was the same as being awake.

I shat in a bucket for four months to get to this land.

She has repeated this over and over to Lila, the only one she talks to without restraint. Lila was burning something to soothe her patient, put her to sleep. Whispering and shaking a doll around the bed.

In public, said Rebekka. There was no other way for us women so tightly packed in the cabin. Tk

They warned her the Indians would slaughter them all and when she found Lila already there, waiting in the little house her new husband had built

for her, she bolted the door at night and would not let her sleep anywhere near. Fourteen or so, stone faced ^{she was} and tall as a man, it took a while for trust between them. Perhaps because both were without family, or because both had one man to please they became what was for each a friend. And when the first infant was born Lila took care of it so tenderly, so knowing, Rebekka was ashamed of her early fears and denied to herself she'd ever had them. Now she remembered everything, in no particular order. The first hangings she saw in the public square amid a happy crowd attending. She was barely four years old, and the death faces would have frightened her if the crowd had not mocked and enjoyed them so. With the rest of her family, she was present at a drawing and quartering but, although too young to remember being there, the dreams of it were made more vivid by years of re-telling and re-describing by family members. Brawls, knifings and kidnaps were so common in the city of her birth, the violent squabbles among local Indians or with militia that peppered this region seemed a distant, manageable back drop in a land of such space and perfume, the thought of what her life would be had she stayed crushed into those fetid streets, spat on by Lords and prostitutes....^{TIC} Rescue ^{Number} one in Sunday School where she was chosen as one of four to be trained and

educated for service. Rescue two when her parents got notice of a man overseas looking for a strong wife rather than a dowry. Between the warning of immediate slaughter and the talk of easy wealth, she anticipated neither. It was the sea journey that shocked her. Tk The intermittent skirmishes of men against men, arrows against powder, fire against hatchet that she heard about from neighbors could not match in any detail the pile of frisky, still living human entrails thrown into a bucket and tossed into the Thames; the fingers trembling for a lost torso; the hair of a woman guilty of mayhem bright with flame. She did not know what her ^{settler} neighbors once knew of common dismemberment and violence, but she did not share their alarm when three months after the fact, news came of a pitched battle or a peace gone awry. With neighbors she was soft spoken; in the meeting house she was accommodating. Only in Lila's company did she let the misery seep out.

"I chastised her for a torn shift and next thing I know her head is cracked."

It would have embarrassed her to mention personal sorrow in prayer; to be other than stalwart in grief; to let God know she was less than thankful for His watch. She had delivered four healthy babies, watched three surrender at a

different age to a variety of illness, and then to watch the first born, who reached the age of eight and provided a happiness Rebekka could not believe, die in her arms with a broken head; then bury her twice first under branches because the frozen ground could not accept the coffin and they had to leave her to freeze in it, and second in the spring when they could place her among her brothers with the pastor attending. ^(insert fr. notes) Lila arranged jewelry and food on the graves, along with scented leaves, telling her that the children were stars now, or something equally lovely, yellow and green birds, playful foxes, even clouds she saw at certain times. Pagan stuff, but more satisfying than the I- accept- and- ^{will-} see- you- at- Judgment Day prayers Rebekka had been taught. There were summer days ^{one} when she sat in front of the house, she sewing and talking profanely while Lila churned butter at her side. Here, in bed, her deft, industrious hands wrapped in linen lest she claw her self bloody, she could not tell if she was speaking aloud or simply thinking.

"I shat in public..."

7.

I come into a part where cows are grazing among the trees and I know ^{[if}

cows are in the woods] a farm or village is near. Neither Sir nor Mistress will let their few heads loose like that. They fend^{ce} the meadow because they want the manure and not a quarrel with neighbors. Mistress says Sir says grazing will soon die in the meadow so he has other business because farming will never be enough in these parts. Black flies alone will kill all hope if marauding wild life does not.

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. It is the single lit house in the

village so I decide to go there. Rocks interfere at each step rubbing the sealing wax hard into 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 is much bigger than Lila and has green eyes. The rest of her is a brown frock and a white cap. Red hair edges it. She is suspicious and holds up her hand, palm out, as though I might force my way in. Who hath sent you she asks. I say please. I say I am alone. No one sends me. Shelter calls me here. She looks behind me left and right and asks if I have no protection, no companion? I say No madam. She is not persuaded and asks am I of this earth or elsewhere? Her face is hard. I say this earth madam I know no other. Christian or heathen, she asks. Never heathen I say. I say although I am told my father was. And where does he abide, she asks. The rain is getting bigger. Hunger wobbles me. I say I never knew him and my mother is dead. Her face softens and she nods saying orphan, step in.

She tells me her name, Widow Ealing, but does not ask mine. You must excuse me, she says, but there is some danger about. What danger I ask. Evil,

she says, but you must never mind.

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. We are in a good sized room with fireplace, table, chairs and two sleeping places—the box bed and a pallet. There are two closed doors to other places and a kind of closet, dim with a partial wall at the rear where jugs and bowls are kept.

Then I notice a girl lying in the 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 Widow to say something. At the foot of the bed of straw is another very small one. A kid lies there, too sick to raise its head or make a sound. When I finish the food down to the last raisin, the Widow asks what is my purpose traveling alone. I tell her my mistress has sent me on an errand. She turns her lips down saying it must be vital to risk a female's life in these parts. My Mistress is dying, I say. My errand can save her. She smiles then and looks either toward the fireplace or the kid. Not from the first death, she

says. Perhaps from the second.

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

The girl lying in straw raises up on her elbow. This be the death we have come here to die, she says. Her voice is deep, like a man's though she looks to be younger than me. Widow Ealing doesn't reply and I do not want to look at those eyes anymore. The girl speaks again. No thrashing, she says, can change it though my flesh is cut to ribbons. She stands then and limps to the table where the lamp burns. 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 ^{jewels/?} jewelry.

This is my daughter Jane, the Widow says. Those lashes may save her life.

Tk

^{closes the shutters}
The Widow [^]turns off the lamp and stretches on the pallet. Daughter Jane returns to her straw. The dark in here is greater than the cowshed, thicker than the forest. No moonlight seeps through a single crack. I lie between the sick

kid and the fireplace and my sleep is broken into pieces by their voices. Silence is long and then they ^{talk} ~~spea~~k once more. I can tell who is speaking not only by the direction of the sound but because the Widow says words in a way different from her daughter. A more singing way. So I know it is Daughter Jane who says how can I prove I am not a demon, and ^{it is} the Widow who says sssst it is they who will decide. Silence, silence, then back and forth they go. It is the pasture they crave, Mother. Then why not me? You may be next. Two say they have seen the Black Man and that he—the Widow does not say more for a while and then, ^{she says} we will know comes the morning. They will allow that I am, says Daughter Jane. They talk over each other: The knowing is theirs, the truth is mine, truth is God's, then what mortal can judge me, you talk like a Spaniard, listen, please listen, be still lest He hear you, He will not abandon me, nor will I, yet you bloodied my flesh, 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 not dead she can be teaching me these things.

I believe I am the only one who falls asleep , and I wake in shame because the animals are already lowing. Tinny bahs come from the kid as the

Widow picks it up in her arms and takes it outside to nurse the dam. When she returns, she un-shutters both windows and leaves the door wide open. Two hens strut in, ^{another} ~~one~~ flies through a window, joining the others in their search for scraps. I ask permission to use the commode behind a heavy hempen curtain hanging in the closet. When I finish and step around the wall I see Daughter Jane holding her face in her hands while the Widow freshens the leg wounds. New strips of blood gleam among the dried ones

At table for a breakfast of clabber and bread, the Widow and Daughter Jane put their palms together, bow their heads and murmur. I do likewise, whispering the prayer Reverend Father taught me to say at night, my mother repeating with me. Pater Noster... At the end I raise my hand to touch my forehead and catch Daughter Jane's frown. She shakes her head meaning no. So I pretend I am adjusting my head cloth. The Widow spoons jam onto the clabber and we two eat. Daughter Jane refuses so we eat what she cannot. Afterwards the Widow goes to the fireplace and swings the kettle over the fire. I take the bowls and spoons from the table to the back where a basin of water sits on a narrow table. I rinse and wipe each piece carefully. The air is tight. Water rises to a boil in the fireplace kettle. I turn to see steam forming shapes

as it curls against the stone. One looks like the head of a dog.

All of us hear footsteps climbing the path. I am in the back behind the wall cleaning up and although I can't see them, I hear their talk. The Widow offers the visitors chairs, they refuse, a man's voice saying this is preliminary yet witnesses are several. Widow interrupts him saying, her ^{daughter's} eye is askew as God made it, it has no special power. Tk

I step away from the wall and into the room. Standing there are a man, three women and a little girl who reminds me of myself when my mother sent me on. Each turn to look at me as the little girl screams and hides behind the skirts of one of the gasping women. The man's walking stick clatters to the floor causing a hen to flutter out the door. He retrieves it, points it at me saying who be this? One of the women covers her eyes, saying God help us. The little girl wails and rocks back and forth. The Widow waves both hands saying, she is a guest seeking shelter from the night. We took her in –how could we not–and fed her. Which night? the man asks. This one past, she answers. One woman speaks saying I have never seen a Negro this black. I have, says another, she is as black as others I have known. Look at this child, says the first woman. Hear her. It is true then, the Black Man is with us. This is his minion. The little girl is

inconsolable, sobbing, trembling. The women whose skirts she clings to takes her outside where she is suddenly quiet. I am not understanding anything except that I am in danger as the dog's head shows and Mistress is my only defense. I shout, wait. I shout, please sir. I think they have shock that I can talk. Let me show you my letter, I say, quieter. It proves I am nobody's minion but my Mistress. As quick as I can, I remove my boot and roll down my stocking. The women stretch their mouths, the man looks away then slowly back. I pull out Mistress's letter and offer it but no one will touch it. The man orders me to place it on the table but he is afraid to break the seal. He tells the Widow to do it. She picks at the wax with her finger nails. When it falls away she unfolds the paper. It is too thick to stay flat by itself. Everyone, including Daughter Jane, who rises from her bed, stares at the markings upside down and it is clear only the man can read. Holding the tip of his walking stick down on the paper, he turns it right side up and holds it there as if the letter can fly away or turn to ash without flame before his eyes. He leans low and examines it closely. Then he picks it up and reads aloud.

The signatory of this letter, Mistress Rebekka Vaark of Milton, vouches for the girl person into whose hands it has been placed. She is owned by me and

can be identified by a burn mark in the palm of her left hand. Allow her the courtesy of safe passage and witherall she may need to complete her errand. Our life, my life, on this earth depends on her speedy return.

Signed Rebekka Vaark

Other than a small sound from Daughter Jane, all is quiet. The man looks at me, looks again at the letter, back at me, back at the letter. You see, says the Widow. He ignores her, turns to the two women and whispers. They point me toward a door that opens onto a store room and there, standing among carriage boxes, and a spinning wheel, they tell me to take off my clothes. Without touching, they tell me what to do. To show them my teeth, my tongue. They peer at the candle burn on my palm, the one you kissed to cool; they look under my arms, between my legs, ^{they} walk around me, lean down to inspect my feet. Naked under their curiosity I watch for what is in their eyes. No hatred or fear or even disgust, but looking at me, my body, across distances without recognition. Finally they tell me to dress and leave the room shutting the door behind them. As I put my clothes back on, I hear them arguing. The little girl is back, not sobbing now but saying, she pinches me, here and here. A woman's voice asks would Satan write a letter. Satan is all deceit and

trickery, says another. But a woman's life may be at stake, shouts the Widow. Who will be punished then? The man's voice booms, we will tell the others, we will study on this , pray on it and return with our answer. It is not clear, apparently, whether I am the Black Man's minion. Dressed I step into the room and the little girl screams and flails her arms. I am instructed by the man not to leave the house. He takes the letter with him. The Widow follows him down the path pleading, pleading.

Tk

Daughter Jane boils duck eggs and when cool wraps them in a piece of cloth. She folds a blanket and hands it to me, motioning with two fingers to follow. We leave the house, scurrying around to the back yard. Chickens cluck and fly from our feet. We run through the pasture. One cow turns to look. The other does not. We duck between the fence slats and enter the trees. Now we walk, softly, Daughter Jane leading the way. The sun empties itself, pouring what is left through tree shadow. Birds and small animals are still eating and calling to one another.

We come to a stream, dry mostly, muddy elsewhere. Daughter Jane tells me how to go, where the wagon trail will be that takes me to the post road that

take^s me to the hamlet where you are. I say thank you and lift her hand to kiss it. She says no, it is I who thank you.^{*} She watches as I step down into the stream's dry bed. I turn and look up at her. Are you a demon I ask her. Her wayward eye is steady. She smiles. Yes, she says. Oh, yes. Go now.

I walk on alone except for the eyes that join my journey. Eyes that do not recognize me, eyes that examine me for a tail, an extra teat, a man's whip between my legs. Wondering eyes that stare and decide if my navel is in the right place, if my knees bend backward like the foreleg of a dog. They want to see if my tongue is split like a snake's, if my teeth are filed to points to eat them with. To know if I can spring out of the darkness and bite. Inside I am shrinking. I walk though the dry bed shaded by watching trees and know I am not the same. I am losing something with every step I take. I can feel the drain. Something alive is leaving me. I am a thing apart. With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a shivering rabbit, a crow without wings, a minion with no tell tale signs but a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark^{is} small and toothy. Is that what my mother knows[?] why she chooses me to live without? Not the outside dark we share, but the inside one we don't. Or is this dying mine alone? Suddenly it is not like before when

+ They look at you
and forget about me.

I am always in fear. I am not afraid of anything now. The sun leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. I am at home.

Tk: 8 Soledad

Tk 9: Florens arriving at smithy's

Tk 10: Mother

11

You will kneel to read this, squat, perhaps in a few places. I apologize for the discomfort. Sometimes the tip of the nail skates away and the forming of words is disorderly. Reverend Father never likes that. He raps our fingers and makes us do it over. I stop the telling only when the lamp burns down. Then I sleep among my words. The telling goes on as dream and when I wake it takes a while to pull away, leave this room and do chores.

Tk [re: Mistress, Lila, Soledad. Loss of the smithy]

There is no more room in this room. The floor is covered. From now you will stand to hear me. The walls make trouble because lamp light is too small to see by. I am holding ^{light} it in one hand and carving with the other. My arms ache so but it is good to tell you this. I did not know it when I hurt the child, when—tk I am near the door and at the closing now. What will I do when the telling stops? All of a sudden I am remembering. You won't read my telling. You don't know how to. Don't laugh. Maybe one day you will learn. If so, come to this house again, climb the stairs and enter this room in daylight. If you don't read this no one will. These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom all across the world that is this room. Only here am I Florens. In full. And forgiven.

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.