



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://rbsc.princeton.edu/policies/forms-citation>.

Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

A Mercy Draft

1 folder

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:13:59 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/g158bn88k>

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 seeing the blood once more—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, sitting on a shelf is suddenly splayed in the corner of a room and it's clear why it is 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 know for certain.

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 madre, frowning, is angry at what she says are my prettified ways. Only bad women wear high heels. 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 Portugese lady. So when I set out to find you, she and Mistress give me Sir's boots that 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 am lettered but I do not read what Mistress writes and Lila and Sorrow 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

if I am lost. Nothing frightens me more than this errand and nothing is more temptation. From the day you disappear I dream and plot. To learn where you are and how to be there. I want to run across the trail through the maples and white pine 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 natives, she says, are like her, so watch out. A praying savage neighbors 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 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 seven or eight when I am brought here. We boil wild plums for jam eight 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 madre. We are baptized and can have happiness when this life is done. The Reverend Father tells us that. 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 and Protestants who want to catch him. If they do he will be in prison or pay money or both. He has two books and a slate. We have sticks to draw through sand, pebbles to shape words on flat smooth rock. When the letters are learned we make whole words. I am faster than madre and her baby boy is no good at all. Very quickly I can write from memory the nicene creed including all of the commas. Confession we tell not write as I am doing now. I forget almost all of it until you. I like talk. Lila talk, stone talk, even Sorrow 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 madre 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 madre my mother and her baby boy are buried. Or will be if they ever decide to rest. Sleeping on the floor with them 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 if our hammocks are hit by mosquitoes Lila makes a cool place to sleep out of branches. In the house of Mistress and Sir there are no more children, yet Sorrow still sleeps by the fireplace. The men helping you, Will and Scully, never do because their own master does not allow it. They are exchange for land leased from Sir. Lila 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. Madre, my mother,

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. As soon as the tobacco is hanging to dry Reverend Father takes me on a ferry, then a ketch, bundles me between his trunks of books. When I arrive here I believe it is the place Reverend Father warns against. The freezing that comes before the everlasting fire where sinners bubble and singe forever. But the ice comes first, he says. And when I see knives of it hanging from the houses and sheds and feel the white air burn my flesh I am certain the fire is coming. But Mistress smiles when she looks at me. So does Lila. Only Sorrow is not happy. She flaps her hand in front of her face as though bees are bothering her. She is ever strange and Lila says she is once more with child. Father still not known and Sorrow does not 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 greedy babies 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. Weeping. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand.

The man moved carefully over pebbles and sand to shore. Fog, Atlantic and reeking of plant life, blanketed the bay and slowed him. He could see his boots sloshing but not his pouch nor his hands. When the last wavelets were gone and his soles touched mud, he turned to wave to the ship, but could not see whether it remained anchored or risked sailing on—hugging the shore and approximating the location of wharves and docks. Unlike the English fogs he had known since he could walk or those way North where he lived now, this one was sun fired, turning the world in thick, hot gold. Penetrating it was like struggling through a dream. As mud became swamp grass, he turned left, stepping gingerly until he stumbled against wooden planks leading up beach

toward the village. Other than his own breath and tread, the world was soundless. It was only after reaching trees that the fog wavered and split. He moved faster then, more in control but missing too the blinding gold he had come through.

Picking his way with increasing confidence, he arrived in the tacky village sleeping between two huge riverside plantations. There the hostler was persuaded to accept tk deposit if the man signed a note: Jacob Vaark. The saddle was poorly made, but the horse, Regina, was a fine one. Mounted he felt better and rode along beach fronts until he entered the old Lenape trail. Yet there was no reason not to be cautious. In this territory he could not be sure of friend or foe. Half a dozen years ago an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes—whether freedman, slaves or indentured—had waged war against local aristocracy led by members of that very class. When this ‘people’s army’ lost their hopes to the hangman, the work it had done—which included the slaughter of opposing tribes, running the Carolinas off their land—reinforced a thicket of laws authorizing chaos in defense of order. By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel, bearing arms for blacks only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners

for slave deaths or maiming, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever. Any social ease forged before and during that rebellion by gentry and laborers crumbled beneath a hammer wielded in the interests of the gentry's profits. Lawless laws encouraging cruelty in exchange for common cause if not common sense.

In short, Virginia was a mess and even with the relative safety of his skin, solitary traveling required prudence. He knew he might ride for hours with no company but geese careening over inland waterways, and suddenly, from behind felled trees a starving escapee might emerge, or in a hollow a family of runaways might cower, or an armed felon might threaten. Carrying several kinds of specie and a single knife, he was a juicy target. Eager to be out of this colony into a less precarious but personally more repellant one, Jacob urged the mare to a faster pace. He dismounted twice, the second time to free the bloody hindleg of a young racoon stuck in a tree break. Regina munched trail side grass while he tried to be as gentle as possible, avoiding the claws and teeth of the frightened animal. It limped off, perhaps to the mother forced to abandon it or more likely into other claws.

Galloping along, he was sweating so heavily his eyes salted and his hair

matted on his shoulders. Already October and Regine was drenched and panting. No such thing as winter down here, he thought, and he might as well have been in Barbados—which he had seriously considered once—although its heat was rumored to be more lethal than this. But the decision was null before he made it. An uncle he had never met from a side of his family he had no contact with, died and left him 120 acres of a dormant patroonship in a climate he much preferred. One with four distinct seasons. Yet this mist, hot and rife with gnats, did not dampen his spirits.. Despite the long sail in three vessels down three rivers, and now the hard ride over the tk trail, took delight in the journey. Breathing the air of a world so new, so modern, so open to possibilities never failed to invigorate him. The cloud of warm gold one gone, he could see clearly forests untouched since Noah; shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears. In spite of the Company's lies about the easy profit awaiting all comers, it was actually the hardship that attracted him. Confronting the unknown, defying it, placating it. Making a place out of no place, a temperate living from raw life, he relished never knowing what precisely lay in his path, who might approach with what intention. He flushed with pleasure when a crisis, large or small, needed invention and quick action. Rocking in the

hostler's poorly made saddle, he faced forward while his eyes swept the surroundings. He knew the landscape intimately from years ago when it was still the old Swedish Nation, and he was an agent for its Company. For years he had traveled the South River into the bay, disembarked at Christiana, and negotiated Lenape trails on horseback, mindful of their fields of maize, careful through their hunting grounds, politely asking permission to enter a small village here, a larger one there. He watered his horse at a particular stream and avoided threatening marshland fronting the pines. Recognizing the slope of certain hills, a copse of oak, an abandoned den, the sudden odor of pine sap—all of that was more than valuable; it was essential. During and after the contest between Sweden and the Netherlands, there had never been any point in knowing who claimed this or that terrain; this or another outpost. Other than the Lenape, to whom it all belonged, from one year to another any stretch might be claimed by a church, controlled by a Company or become the property of some royal's gift to a son, or a favorite. In such ad hoc geography Jacob simply knew that when he came out of that forest of pine skirting the marshes, he was, at last, in Maryland, which at the moment belonged to the king. Entirely. Upon entering this privately owned country, his feelings fought one

another to a draw. Unlike colonies up and down the coast—disputed, fought over and regularly re-named; their trade transferred only to the victor—the province of Maryland allowed trade to foreign markets, good for planters, better for merchants, best for brokers. But the palatinate was Romish to the core. Priests strode openly in its towns; their sinister missions cropped up on the edge of Lenape villages. Law, courts and trade were their exclusive domain and over-dressed women in raised heels rode in carts driven by twelve year old Negroes. He was 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. Disdain, however, was difficult to cloak. His previous dealings with this estate had been with the owner’s clerk while sitting on ale house stools. Now, for some reason, he had been invited, summoned rather, to the planter’s house—a plantation called Bliss. A trader asked to dine with a gentleman? On a Sunday? So there must be trouble, he thought. 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. He had heard how grand it was, but was not prepared for what lay before him. The house, honey-colored stone, was in truth more like a place where one held court. Far away to the right, beyond the iron fences enclosing the property and almost hidden by the mist, he saw rows of quarters, quiet, empty. In the 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 gracefully, 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 brick steps, then retraced them to stand back from the house and appraise it. Two wide windows, at least two dozen panes in each, flanked the door. Five more windows above on a broad 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 with no need for grand pillars suitable for a House of Parliament.

Grandiose, he thought, but easy, 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 Lord, the heat.

He removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his hair line with his sleeve. Then, fingering his soaking collar, he re-mounted the steps and tested the boot scraper. Before he could knock, the door was opened by a small, contradictory man: aged and ageless, deferential and mocking, white hair black face.

"Afternoon, Sir."

"Mr. Ortega is expecting me." Vaark surveyed the room over the old man's head.

"Yes, Sir. Your hat, Sir? Thank you, Sir. This way, Sir."

Footfalls, loud and aggressive, were followed by Ortega's call.

"Well timed! Come, Jacob." He motioned toward the parlor.

"Thank you, sir," said Jacob, marveling at his host's coat, his stockings, the cunning wig. Elaborate and binding as those trappings must be in the heat, D'Ortega's skin was as dry as parchment, while Jacob continued to sweat. The condition of handkerchief he pulled from his pocket embarrassed him as much as he need for it.

Seated at a small table 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 knew all about it, but listened politely to the version this here 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 alligators would finish the work.

Does he cut his losses and let his ship sail on to Barbados? No, thought Jacob. A sloven man, stubborn in his wrong headedness like all of the Roman faith, he waits 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. Now he wanted more credit and six additional months to pay what he had borrowed.

Dinner was a tedious affair made intolerable by the awkwardness Jacob felt. No offer to wash up after his journey or before the meal; his rough clothes in stark contrast to embroidered silk and lace collar. There was even a trace of racoon blood on his hands. Why such a show on a sleepy afternoon for one guest below their station? Intentional, he decided; a stage performance to humiliate him into a graveling acceptance of D'Ortega's wishes. The meal began with a prayer whispered in a language he could not decipher and cross signing before and after. In spite of his dirty hands and sweat limp hair, Jacob pressed down his rising anger and focused on the food. But his considerable hunger shrank when confronted with the heavily seasoned dishes: everything,

except pickles and radishes, was fried or over-cooked. The wine, watered and too sweet for his taste, annoyed him and the company got worse. D'Ortega's wife was a chattering magpie, asking pointless questions—How do you manage living in snow?—and making sense-defying observations, as though her political judgment was equal to a man's. Nothing transpired in the conversation that had footing in the real world. They spoke of the unique responsibility this untamed world offered them; its unbreakable connection to God's work and the difficulties they endured on His behalf. Caring for ill or recalcitrant labor was enough, they said, for canonization.

"Are they often ill, sir?" asked Jacob.

"Not as often as they pretend. In Portugal they would never get away with such trickery."

"They come from Portugal?" Jacob wondered if the serving woman spoke English.

"Well, the Angola part," said D'Ortega. "Talk about a beautiful land."

"We were there for four years," added Mrs. D'Ortega.

"Portugal?"

"Angola. But, mind you, our children were not born there."

"Portugal?"

"No, Maryland."

"Ah, England."

As it turned out, D'Ortega was the son of a cattleman, in line for nothing. He'd gone to Angola to manage a ranch, but found promises of wealth more generously met further abroad . The kick up from one kind of herding to another was swift—on the surface anyway, thought Jacob. D'Ortega did not seem to be making a go of his relatively new station, but he had no doubt he would prevail somehow, as this invitation to dinner was designed to prove.

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 unworthy, the result of having himself no survivors—male or otherwise. Now that Patrician had followed her dead brothers, there was no one yet to reap the modest but respectable inheritance he hoped to accumulate. Thus, restraining envy as best he could, Jacob 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 abundantly clear why D'Ortega was in

serious debt. Turning profit into useless baubles, unembarrassed by sumptuary, silk stockings and an over-dressed wife, wasting candles in mid day, he would remain in debt, unable to ride out any set back, whether it be lost ship or ruined crop, and thereby 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. And if that wasn't enough, the woman who brought to table smelled of cloves. His initial embarrassment about the unabated, unavoidable consequences of his long journey: muddy boots, soiled hands, perspiration and its odor, was erased by Mrs. D'Ortega's loud perfume and heavily powdered face.

His own Rebekka seemed more valuable to him the rare times 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 search made necessary because taking over the patroonship required a wife and because he wanted a certain kind of mate—an unchurched woman of child

bearing age, obedient but not groveling, literate but not proud, independent but nurturing. And he would accept no less. Rebekka was ideal. There was not a shrewish bone in her body. She never raised her voice in anger. 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 Patrician, their eight year old, had un-leavened her. A kind of invisible ash had settled over her which vigils at the small graves in 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 her two helpers were as reliable as sunrise and strong as posts. Besides, time and health were on their side. She would bear more children and at least one—a boy— would live to thrive.

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 tobacco sheds, wagons, row after row of barrels—orderly and nicely kept—the 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 the meeting 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 Jacob 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. Jacob refused. His farm was modest, 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.

Jacpb winced. Flesh was not his commodity.

Still, at his host's insistence, he accompanied him to the little sheds where, their half day's rest interrupted, 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. D'Ortega identifying virtues, weaknesses and possibilities, but silent about 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 Jacob felt his stomach seize. The tobacco odor, so welcoming when he arrived, now nauseated him. Or was it the sugared rice, the hog cuts fried and 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. Specie, bills of credit, quit claims were portable. One satchel carried all he needed. They walked back toward the house and through the side gate in the ornate fence, D'Ortega pontificating all the while: he would do the selling, ten pounds? Spanish sovereigns? arrange transportation, hire the handler .

Stomach turning, nostrils assailed, Jacob grew angry. This is a calamity, he thought, that will lead to years in a law suit in a province ruled by the king's

judges disinclined to favor a tradesman over a Catholic gentleman. The loss, while not unmanageable, struck him as unforgivable. And to such a man. D'Ortega's strut as they had walked the property offended him. Moreover, he believed the set of that jaw, the drooping lids hid something soft, like his hands that, accustomed to reins, whips and silver plate, had never held a plow or felled a tree. There was something beyond Catholic in him, something sordid and overripe. He felt the shame of his weakened position in status and power. No wonder they had been excluded from parliament back home and, although he did not believe they should be hunted down like vermin, other than on business he would never choose to mingle or socialize with them. Barely listening to Ortega's patter, sly, indirect instead of straight and manly, they neared the cook house where Jacob saw a woman standing in the doorway with two children. One on her hip, one hiding behind her skirts. She looked healthy enough, better fed than the others. On a whim, mostly to silence him, knowing D'Ortega would refuse, he said, "Her. That one. I'll take her."

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

Jacob drew closer, recognizing the clove-laced sweat. "You said 'any.' I could choose any. If your word is worthless, there is only the law."

He could see how D'Ortega lifted his eyebrows at this threat from an inferior, but he must have thought better of returning the insult with another. He wanted this business over quickly and he wanted his way.

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

"Then the law it is."

D'Ortega smiled. A law suit would certainly be decided in his favor, and the time wasted in pursuing it would be to his advantage.

"You astound me," said D'Ortega.

Jacob refused to back down. "Perhaps another lender would be more to your liking," he said and enjoyed seeing the nostril flare that meant he had struck home. D'Ortega was notorious for unpaid debts and had to search far outside Maryland for a broker, since local ones refused what they knew would be certain default. The air between them tightened.

"You don't seem to comprehend my offer. I am not forfeiting my debt. I am honoring it. The value of a seasoned slave is beyond adequate."

"Not if I can't use her."

"Use her? Sell her!"

"My trade is goods and gold," said Jacob Vaark, landowner. And he could not resist adding "But it may be hard for a papist to understand moral restraint."

D'Ortega's hand moved to his hip. Jacob's eyes followed the movement as the ringed fingers curled around a scabbard. Would he, wondered? Would this curdled, arrogant fop really assault his creditor, murder him and claiming self defense, prerogative, rid himself of both debt and social insult even though it would mean a complete financial disaster considering his coffers were as empty as his scabbard? The soft fingers fumbled for the absent haft. Jacob raised his eyes to D'Ortega's, noticing the cowardice of unarmed aristocracy in the company of a commoner. Out here in wilderness dependent on paid guards nowhere in sight this Sunday. Where else but in this disorganized world would such an encounter be possible? Where else could class tremble before courage? Jacob turned away, letting his exposed back convey his scorn. It was a curious moment. Along with his contempt, he felt a wave of exhilaration. Potent. Steady. An inside shift from careful negotiator to a raw

boyhood he had not felt in twenty-five years . He did not even try to mute his chuckling as he passed the cook house and glanced again at the woman standing in its door.

Just then the little girl stepped from behind the mother. On her feet were a pair of way too big woman's shoes. Perhaps it was that feeling of license, a newly recovered recklessness and the sight of those little legs, rising like two bramble sticks from the bashed and broken shoes that made him laugh. A loud, chest-heaving laugh that confirmed his victory. His laughter had not subsided when the woman cradling a small boy on her hip, came forward. Her voice was barely above a whisper but there was no mistaking its urgency.

"Please, sir. Not me. I am still breast feeding. Take her. Take my daughter."

Vaark looked up at her, away from the child's feet, his mouth still open with laughter, and was struck by the terror in her eyes. His laughter creaking to a close, he shook his head, thinking God help me if this is not the most wretched business.

"Why yes. Of course," said D'Ortega, trying to shake his earlier embarrassment and re-establish his dignity. "I'll send her to you. Immediately."

His eyes widened as did his condescending smile, yet to Vaark he seemed agitated.

"My answer is firm," said Jacob, thinking, I've got to get away from this substitute for a man; 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 Patrician, and if she got kicked in the head by a mare as Patrician 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...."

"I said, no."

Suddenly the woman smelling of cloves knelt and closed her eyes.

They wrote new papers. Agreeing the girl was worth twenty pieces of eight considering the number of years ahead of her and reducing the balance 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 and re-nourish his good opinion of himself, Vaark said hurried goodbyes to Mrs. D'Ortega, the two boys and their father. On his way to the narrow track, he

turned Regina around, waved at the couple and once again, in spite of himself, envied the house, the gate, the fence. For the first time he had bested—face to face—a nobleman. Out-nobled him in fact and realized, not for the first time, that only things, not bloodlines or character, separated them. So mighten it be nice to have such a fence to enclose the headstones in his own 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. Nor would it be compromised as was Bliss. Access to free labor made D'Ortega's leisurely life possible. Without the ^{Africans} ~~blacks~~ he would not be merely in debt; he would be eating from his palm instead of silver plate and sleeping in the wilds of Angola rather than a four post bed. Jacob Vaark sneered at wealth dependent on a captured work force that required more force to maintain. Thin as they were, the dregs of his kind of Protestantism—church of England rather than the brutal Mather—recoiled at whips, metal, and armed overseers. He was determined to prove that his own industry and skill could amass the fortune, the station D'Ortega claimed without trading his conscience for coin.

He tapped Regina to a faster pace. The sun was low; the air cooler. He

was in a hurry to get back in to Virginia, its shore and to Pursey's tavern before night, sleep in a bed if they weren't all packed three or four abreast, otherwise he would join the other patrons and curl on any surface. But first he would have one, perhaps two, drafts of ale, its bitter, clear taste critical to eliminating the sweetish rot of vice and ruined tobacco that seemed to coat his tongue. Jacob returned Regina to the hostler, paid him and strolled to the wharf and Pursey's Tavern. On the way he saw a man beating a horse to its knees. Before he could open his mouth to shout, disgusted sailors pulled the man away and let him feel his own knees in mud. Pursey's Tavern was closed, as he should have known, so he went to the one always open on Sunday. Rough, illegal and catering to hard boys, it nevertheless offered good and plentiful food.

Tk

Seated at a table cluttered with the remains of earlier meals, he listened to the talk around him, which was all sugar—which was to say rum—its price and demand becoming greater than tobacco's. The man who seemed to know most about kill-devil [tk]

Vaark decided he would look into it.

A fiddler entered for their merriment and their money and, having played less well than himself, raised Vaark's spirits enough for him to join in the singing. [tk the song]

After a leisurely meal of oysters, veal, pigeon, parsnips and suet pudding, he reserved bed space with just one man in it and, strolling outside, thought about the disappointing day and the disgust of having accepted the girl as part payment. One day, maybe soon, the Stuarts would lose the throne to everyone's relief, and a protestant rule. Then, he thought, a suit against D'Ortega would succeed and he would not be forced to settle for a child as a percentage of what was due him. He knew he had rationalized the bargain by thinking Rebekka would be eager to have her, but what was truer than that was another thing. From his own childhood, he knew there was no good place in the world for waifs and whelps other than the generosity of strangers. Even if bartered, given, apprenticed, sold, swapped, tricked for food, labored for shelter or stolen, they were less doomed under adult control. He refused to be sentimental about his own orphan status, the years spent stealing food and cadging gratuities for errands, the luck of being taken on as a runner for a law firm. The job required literacy and led to his being signed up by the Company.

So he felt a disturbing pulse of pity for orphans and strays remembering well their and his own sad teeming in the markets, lanes, alleyways and ports of every region he traveled. Once before he found it hard to refuse when called on to rescue an unmoored, unwanted child. A decade ago a sawyer asked him to take off his hands a sullen, curly headed girl he found half dead on a river bank. Jacob agreed to do it provided the sawyer would forgive the cost of the lumber he was buying. Unlike now, at that time his farm needed more help. It was sixty cultivated acres out of one hundred and twenty, after all, and belonged to a traveling man who knew very well that it was not wise to have male labor all over the place during his long absences. His preference for steadfast female labor over dodgy males was based on his own experience as a youth. ^{a long} ^{to escape, rape or thrive} An absent master was invitation and temptation. In the right ^{Comically Shock} environment women were naturally reliable. He believed it now with this black child that the mother was throwing away, just as he believed it a decade earlier with the curly haired, goose girl, the one they called Sorrow. And the acquisition of both could be seen as rescue. Only Lila had been purchased outright, but she was a woman, not a child.

Walking in the hot night air, he went as far as he could, until the ale

house lights were amber points in darkness and the voices of a few carousing men were lost to the sil^k-rustle of surf. The sky had forgotten completely its morning fire and tricked out cool stars ^{on} of a canvas as smooth and dark as Regina's hide. He squatted and placed his hands in the water. By and by the detritus of the day washed off including the faint trace of coon's blood. Returning to the inn, nothing was in his way. There was the heat, of course, but no fog—gold or gray—impeded him. Besides a plan was taking shape in his mind. A plan as sweet as the sugar on which it was based. Right, he thought, looking at the sky. Clear and right. The silver that glittered there was not at all unreachable.

The heat was still pressing; his bed partner over-active, yet he slept well enough. Probably because his dreams were of a grand house of many rooms rising on a hill above the fog.

Since your leaving with no goodbye, summer passes, then autumn and with the waning of winter the sickness comes back. Not like before with Sorrow 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 Sorrow's old sickness. He vomits at night and curses in the day. Then he is too weak to do either. He reminds us that he has chosen only seasoned help, 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 hate to tell you that even yet it is not finished. The gate is

still beautiful; your ironwork wondrous to see. The house is grand, waiting only for window glass. 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. The deacon does not come even though he is a friend. Neither do any of the congregation. Still, we do not say the word aloud until we bury him next to his children and Mistress notices two in her mouth. Pox. After we say it the next morning the two on her tongue are joined by twenty-three on her face. Twenty-five 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. The first time I see it you are shaping iron in fire. The shine of water

runs down your spine and I have shock at myself for wanting to lick there. I run away into the cowshed to stop this thing from happening inside me. Nothing stops it. There is only you. Nothing outside of you. My eyes not my stomach are the hungry parts of me. There will never be enough time to look how you move. Your arm goes up to strike iron. You drop to one knee. You bend. You stop to pour water first on the iron then down your throat. Before you know I am in the world I am killed by your back. My mouth is open, my hands shaking and the heart is stretching to break. I think if you turn and see me seeing you I will die. But when I see your face again I am not dead. For the first time I am live.

Night comes and I steal a candle. I carry an ember in a pot to light it. To see more of you. When it is lit I shield the flame with my hand. I watch you sleeping. I watch too long. Am careless. The flame burns my palm. I run away not knowing then you are seeing me seeing you.

Tr. Tk [boarding the wagon/driver touches her]

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. A boy with a pigtail sits on the wagon floor, his hands tied to his feet. He and I are the only ones without rugs or blankets covering our feet.

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 skirt, not for warmth, but to protect the letter. The cloth of food 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 a place she calls Hartkill just after midday where I disembark. I am to walk left, westward on the Abenaki trail 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 take a place


at the tail behind the others, it is already late afternoon. The others do not ask me where I am headed but after a while are pleased to whisper where they have been. By the sea, the women say, they cleaning ships, the men repairing docks. They are certain their years are paid up but hear the master say no, more time is necessary. He sends them away, north, to another place, a tannery for two more years. I don't understand why they are sad. Everyone has to work. I ask did you leave someone dear behind. All heads turn toward me and the wind dies. Daft, the man says. A woman across from me says, young. The man says, same. Another woman raises her voice to say leave her be. Too loud. Settle down back there the driver is shouting. The one who says I am daft bends down to scratch his ankle scratching for a long time while the others cough and scrape their shoes as if to defy the driver's command. The woman next to me whispers, there are no coffins in a tannery, only fast death.

The tavern needs lamplight when we reach it. At first I don't see it, but one of us, a man, points and then we all do. Winking through the trees is a light. The Neys go in. We wait. They come out to water the horses and us and go in again. After that there are scuffling sounds again. I look down and see the rope that falls from their ankles twisting along the wagon bed. The snow ends

and the sun is gone. Quiet, quiet, six drop down, the men catching the women in their arms. The boy jumps alone. Three of the women motion to me. My heart turns over 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 a cold stone in my throat. I must not 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?

I am walking among chestnut trees lining the road. Some already showing leaf hold their breath until the snow melts. The silly ones let their buds like dried peas drop to the ground. I am moving north where the sapling bends into the earth with a sprout that points to the sky. Then west to you. I am hurrying to gain ground before all light is over. The land slopes sharply and I have no way to go but down as well. Hard as I try I lose the road. Tree leaves are too new for shelter so everywhere the ground is slop with snow and my foot

prints slide and pool. The sky is the color of currants. Can I go more I wonder. Should I. Two hares freeze before bounding away. I hear water running and move in the dark toward the sound. The moonlight is new. I hold one arm out in front and go slow to not stumble. But the sound is pines dripping and there is no brook or stream. I make a cup of my hand to get a little fallen snow to swallow. I do not hear the paws or see any shape. It is the smell of wet fur that stops me. If I am smelling it it is smelling me because there is no meat in my food pouch, only bread. I cannot tell if it is bigger than me or smaller or if it is alone. I decide for stillness. I never hear it go but the odor fades at last. I think it is better to climb a tree. The old pines are good even though they tear me. Their branches sway but do not break under me. I hide from every thing of creep and slouch. I know sleep will not claim me because I have too much fear. The branches creak and bend. My plan for this night is not good. I need Lila to say how to shelter in wilderness.



Lila refused ever again to enter or go near it. It was to be the third and final house. The first one Sir built was weaker than the bark covered one she herself was born in. The second was strong—four rooms large enough for a modest family. Yet at the very moment when there were no children to occupy or inherit it, he meant to build another, bigger, double storied, fenced and gated like the one he saw on his travels. Mistress had sighed and confided to Lila that at the least the doing of it would keep him more on the land. "Trading and traveling

fill his pockets," she'd said, "but he had been content to be a ^{farmer} ~~planter~~ when we married. Now...." Her voice had trailed off as she yanked away at the swan's feathers.

But it turned out bad. When the house was close to completion he fell sick with nothing else on his mind.

Sir mystified Lila. All ^{Europees} ~~whites~~ did. Once they had terrified her, then they had rescued her. Now they simply puzzled her. Why, she wondered, had Mistress sent a love sick girl to find the smithy. Why not swallow her pride and seek out one of the Anabaptists? The deacon certainly would be willing. Poor Florens. If she is not stolen or killed, if she finds him safe she would not return. Why should she? Lila had watched with mild envy and increasing alarm the courtship that began the morning the blacksmith came to work on Sir's foolish house. Florens had stood still, a startled doe, when he dismounted his horse, doffed his hat and asked if this was the Vaark place. Lila had shifted the milk bucket to her left hand and pointed up the hill. Mistress, leading the heifer, had come around the corner of the barn and asked him his business, sucking her teeth when he answered.

"Dear Lord," she murmured and, pushing out her bottom lip, blew hair

away from her forehead. Then, "Wait here."

As she led the cow to pasture the blacksmith locked eyes with Lila before returning his hat to his head. He never once looked at Florens standing nearby, not breathing, holding the milking stool with both hands as though to help gravity keep her earthbound. She should have known then what the consequences would be, but felt sure that Sorrow, always an easy harvest, would quickly draw his attention and thwart Florens' drooling. Learning from Mistress that he was a free man doubled her anxiety. He had rights, then, and privileges—like Sir. He could marry, own things, travel, sell his own labor. She should have seen the danger immediately because his arrogance was clear. When Mistress returned, rubbing her hands on her apron, he removed his hat once more then did something Lila had never seen an African do: he looked directly at Mistress, lowering his glance, for he was very tall, never blinking. It was not true then, what she had heard; that for them only children and loved ones could be looked in the eye; for all others it was disrespect or a threat. In the town Lila had been taken to, after the conflagration had erased her village, that kind of boldness, whether from any ^{African} ~~black~~ free or not, was legitimate cause ^{Europe} ? for a whip. An unfathomable puzzle. Whites could calmly cut mothers down,

blast old men in the face with muskets louder than moose calls, but were enraged if a not-^{Europe}white looked a white in the eye. On the one hand they would torch your home; on the other they would feed, nurse and bless you. Best to judge them one at a time, proof being that one, at least, could become your friend, which is why she slept on the floor beside Mistress's bed and kept watch in case Sorrow ^{came close}interfered or Mistress needed soothing.

Once, long ago, had Lila been older or tutored in healing she might have eased the pain of her family and all the others dying around her: on mats of rush, lapping at the lake's shore, curled in paths within the village and in the forest beyond, but most tearing at blankets they could neither abide nor abandon. Infants fell silent first, and even as their mothers heaped earth over their bones, they too were pouring sweat and limp as maize hair. At first they fought off the crows, she and two young boys, but they were no match for the birds or the smell and when the wolves arrived, all three climbed as high into a chestnut as they could. They stayed there all night listening to gnawing, baying, growling and worst of all, the quiet of animals sated at last. At dawn none of them dared to apply a name to the pieces hauled away or left behind. By noon just as they had decided to make a run for one of the canoes moored in the

lake, men in uniforms came, their faces wrapped in rags. News of the deaths that had swept her village had reached out. Lila's joy at being rescued turned to ice as the soldiers, having taken one look at the birds feeding on the corpses strewn about, shot the wolves then circled the whole village with fire. The children screamed from the trees until the men heard them and caught each in their arms as they jumped. If they worried that the young survivors would infect them, they chose to ignore it, being real soldiers, unwilling to slaughter small children.

She never learned where they took the boys, but she was taken to tk, to live among kindly Presbyterians. They were pleased to have her, they said, because they admired native women who, they said, worked at least as hard as they themselves did, but scorned their men who simply fished and hunted like gentry all day. Impoverished gentry, that is, since they owned nothing, certainly not the land they slept on, preferring to live as entitled paupers. And since some of the church elders had heard horrible tales of, or witnessed themselves, God's wrath toward the idle and profane—flinging black death followed by raging fire on the proud and blasphemous city of their birth—they could only pray that Lila's people understood before they died that what had felled them

was merely the first sign of His displeasure: a pouring out of one of the seven vials; the final one of which would announce His arrival and the birth of young Jerusalem. They named her Delilah, just in case, but shortened it to Lila to signal a sliver of hope. Afraid of losing another family, acknowledging her status as heathen, Lila let herself be purified by these worthies. She learned that bathing naked in the river was a sin; that plucking cherries from a tree burdened with them was theft. And that God hated idleness most of all. So staring off into space to weep for a mother or a playmate was to court damnation. Cloaking oneself in the skin of beasts offended God so they burned her deer skin dress and gave her a good duffel cloth one. They clipped the beads from her arms and scissored inches from her hair. Although they would not permit her to accompany them to either of the Sunday services they attended, she was included in the daily prayers: before breakfast, mid morning and evening. But none of the surrender, begging or praising on her knees took hold because, hard as she fought, the Delilah part erupted anyway and the Presbyterians abandoned her without so much as a murmur of fare well. It was some time afterward, installed in Sir's hut, lonely, angry and hurting that she decided to fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother taught

before dying in agony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged white medicine with native, scripture with lore and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. Found, in other words, a way to be in the world. ^{* (over)} By the time Mistress came, she was almost complete. Fourteen years later she was irresistible.

Lila placed magic pebbles under Mistress's pillow; kept the room fresh with mint and forced angelica root in her patient's festering mouth to pull bad spirits out of the sickroom. She prepared the most powerful remedy she knew: devil's bit, mugwort, St. John's wort, maiden hair, and periwinkle; boiled it, strained it and spooned it into Mistress's mouth. She considered repeating some of the prayers she learned as among the Presbyterians, but since none had saved Sir, she abandoned the notion. He went quickly. Begging to be taken to his third house. The big one, useless now that there were no children or children's children to live in it. No one to stand in awe at its size or to admire the wrought gate that the smithy took two months to make. [description tk] But if the smithy's work was a frivolous waste of a grown man's time, his presence was not. He brought one girl to womanhood and saved the life of another. Sorrow. Vixen-eyed Sorrow with black teeth and a head of wild

only
Waiting for the arrival of a wife. Sir
~~worked all but six hours~~ ^{Slept a fine} ^{the rest of the time he labored} and Lola, brought
his dinner to whatever field or wood he
was working in; minded ^{the} ^{starter} stock and fowl;
~~he brought to the place~~; planted vegetables;
dried ^{the} fish they both caught.

All the while thinking what a poor farmer he was, ^{un}prepared for any change in weather,
unable to distinguish weed from seedling,
but good with animals and building things.
The weather had to be dangerous for her to
sleep outside - ^{otherwise} ^{most times} she nested with the
chickens until he ^{just before the wife came} threw up a cornucopia in
one day.

During all this time she must have said
twenty words other than Yes Sir. Solitude, anger,
regret ^{would have ruined} ~~she~~ ^{poiled} her had she not dwelt on those 6
years that preceded the death of the world. TK.

So that

She herself didn't know much, but she
^ did know TK

and a half
the one room
shack he
had raised

to bury nature under his control

wooly hair the color of a setting sun. Accepted, not bought, by Sir, she joined the household after Lila but before Florens and still had no memory of her past life except being dragged ashore by whales.

"Not whales," Mistress had said. "Of course not. She was treading water in the North River in Mohawk country, near to drowning when two young sawyers trawled her in, threw a blanket over her and brought their father to the river bank where she lay. It is said she had been living alone on a foundered ship. They thought she was a boy."

Not then, not ever had she spoken of how she got there or where she had been. The sawyer's wife named her Sorrow, for good reason, thought Lila, and following a winter of feeding the daft girl who kept wandering off getting lost, who knew nothing and worked less, a strange, melancholy girl to whom her sons were paying very close attention, the wife asked her husband to get quit of her. He obliged and offered her to the care of a customer he trusted to do her no harm. Sir. When Sorrow arrived, Mistress barely hid her annoyance but admitted the place could use the help. If Sir was bent on travel, two female farmers were not enough. Lila was a tall fourteen year old when Sir bought her. He had searched the advertisements posted at the printer's in town. "A likely

By the time Sir brought ^{home} Sorrow, they were a
united front in their desmay. To R. she was
useless, to Lola she was bad luck.

woman who has had small pox and meazles....A likely Negro about 9 years....Girl or woman that is handy in the kitchen sensible, speaks good English, complexion between yellow and black....Five years time of a white woman that understands Country work, with a child upwards of two years old....Mulatto Fellow very much pitted with small pox, honest and sober...White lad fit to serve...Wanted a servant able to drive a carriage, white or black...Sober and prudent woman who.... Likely wench, white, 29 years with child....stout healthy, healthy strong, strong healthy likely, sober, sober, sober, until he got to "Hardy female, Christianized and capable in all matters domestic available for exchange of goods or specie." A bachelor expecting the arrival of a new wife, he required precisely that kind of female on his land.

By then Lila's swollen eye had calmed and the lash cuts on her face and arms healed and barely noticeable. The Presbyterians never asked her what had happened to her and there was no point in telling them. She had no standing in law, no surname and no one would take her word against a white. What they did was consult with the printer about the wording of an advertisement. "Hardy female..."

* (over)

Lila watched while Mistress trained Sorrow to sewing, the one task she

liked and was good at, and said nothing when, to stop her roaming, he said, Sir made the girl sleep by the fireplace all seasons. A comfort Lila was suspicious of but did not envy even in bad weather. Her people had understood shelter for a thousand years and, except for the deathfeet of Europeans, might have understood it for a thousand more. As it turned out the sachem had been dead wrong. The Europeans^{neither} neither fled nor died out. In fact, said the old women in charge of the children, he had apologized for his error in prophecy and admitted that however many collapsed from ignorance or disease more would always come. They would come with languages that sounded like dog bark; with a childish hunger for animal fur. They would forever fence land, ship trees over oceans to far away countries, take any woman for quick pleasure, ruin soil, befoul sacred places and worship a dull, unimaginative god. They let their hogs browse the ocean shore turning it into dunes of sand where nothing green can grow again. It was their destiny to chew up the world and spit out devastation. Lila was not so sure. Based on the way Sir and Mistress^{decided to run} ran their farm, mindful of the distinction between earth and property, annoyed with the cattle their neighbors let roam, she knew there were exceptions to the sachem's revised prophecy. As it was, she trusted, more or

less, Sir's and Mistress's judgment, but not their instincts. Had they true insight they would never have kept Sorrow so close.

Hard company, she was, needing constant attention. As at this very daybreak when, out of necessity, she had been trusted with the milking. The cow, Sorrow said, had kicked when she touched her. Lila left the sickroom to mind the heifer—talk to her first, hum a little then slowly cradle the tender teats with a palm of cream. The spurts were sporadic, worthless, except for the cow's relief, and after she had oiled her into comfort, Lila rushed back into the house. No good could come of leaving Mistress alone with Sorrow and now that her stomach was low with child, she was even less reliable. In the best of times the girl dragged misery like a tail. There was a man in Lila's village like that. His name she had forgotten along with the rest of her language, but it meant "trees fall behind him," suggesting his influence on the surroundings. In Sorrow's presence, eggs would not allow themselves to be beaten into foam, nor did butter lighten cake batter. Lila was sure the early deaths of Mistress' sons could be placed at the feet of the natural curse that was Sorrow. Now, more than unreliable, more than wandering off to talk to grass and grapevines, she was pregnant and soon there would be another virgin birth and, perhaps, this

one would not die. But if Mistress died, what then? To whom could they turn? Although the Baptists once freely helped Sir build the second house, the barn and happily joined him in felling white pine for the post fence, a cooling had risen between them and his family. Partly because Mistress hated them for shutting her children out of heaven, but also, thought Lila, because Sorrow's lurking frightened them. Years past, the Baptists might bring a brace of salmon or offer a no-longer needed cradle for Mistress' baby. And the deacon could be counted on for baskets of straw berries and blue, all manner of nuts and once a whole side of deer. Now, of course, nobody, Anabaptist or any other would come to a poxed house. ^(over) Don't die, Miss. Don't. Herself, Sorrow, a new born and Florens—three unmastered women and an infant out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal they would be interlopers, squatters if they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile. The farm could be claimed by or auctioned off to the Baptists. Lila had relished her place in this small, tight family but now saw its folly. Sir and Mistress believed they could have honest, free-thinking lives, yet without heirs, all their work meant less than a swallow's

Neither Willard nor Scully - which should not have disappointed her, but did. Both Europeans

Scully was getting on in years and ^{was still} ~~had been~~ working off his passage. The original ^{le} stretched and stretched, he said, and he had long ago forgotten ^{most of} the ~~inflections~~ that extended with his ~~bondage~~. The one he remembered ~~best~~ ^{was} the other ^{an} attempts to run away. ^{involved} rum; the others ^{were} ~~an~~

Notly, younger, had plans. He was working off his mother's contract. True, he didn't know how long it would take but, unlike Scully's or Lila's, his enslavement would end before death. Saw of a woman sent off for "lewd and disobedience,"

to the colonies

recuperated certain "expenses" by

Neither both of which was conquered so when she died the father of her son, leaving the boy to his current master, for a span of time soon to end although Scully was not privy to exactly when. There was a paper, he told Lila, that said so.

Lila guessed he had not seen it, could not cipher it if he had.

He knew for certain that ~~was~~ the freedom fee would be generous enough to get him up.

He too, she thought, and perhaps have the good fortune denied Scully. No wonder Sir had no males on his farm.

If that glorious day did not arrive soon,

nest. Their drift away from others produced a self-centered privacy and they had lost the refuge and the consolation of a clan. Baptists, Presbyterians, tribe, army, family, some encircling outside thing was needed. Pride, she thought. Pride alone made them think that they needed only themselves, could shape life that way, like Adam and Eve, like gods from nowhere beholden to nothing except their own creations. [tk dreams of loss]

Lila's mistress is mumbling now, telling Lila or herself some tale, some matter of grave importance as the dart of her eyes showed. What was so vital, Lila wondered, that she uses an unworkable tongue in a mouth lined with sores? Her wrapped hands lift and wave. Lila turned to look where the eyes focused. A trunk where Mistress kept pretty things—treasured unused gifts from Sir. A lace collar, a hat no decent woman would be seen in, its peacock feather already broken in the press. On top of a few yards of silk lay a small mirror set in an elaborate frame, its silver tarnished to soot.

"Gi me," said Mistress.

Lila picked up the mirror thinking, No, please! Don't look! Never seek out your own face even when well, lest the reflection swallow your soul.

"Hurry," moaned her mistress. Her tone pleading like a child's.

Helpless, Lila brought it to the lady. She placed it between the mittened hands, certain now that her mistress will die. And the certainty was a kind of death for herself as well since her own life, everything, depended on Mistress's survival which depended on Floren's success.

Lila had fallen in love with her right away, as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow. A frightened ^{child} ~~six-year-old~~ who did not speak for a long time but when she did her light, sing song voice was a delight to hear. Some how, some way, the child assuaged the tiny yet eternal yearning for the home Lila once knew where everyone had anything and no one had everything. Perhaps her own barrenness sharpened her devotion. In any case she wanted to protect her, keep her away from the corruption so natural to Sorrow, but most recently she was determined to build a wall between her and the blacksmith. Since his coming there was a hunger in Floren's eyes that Lila recognized as once her own. A bleating desire beyond sense, without conscience. The young body speaking in its only language its sole reason for life on earth. When he arrived—too shiny, way too tall, both arrogant and skilled—Lila alone saw the peril but there was no one to complain to. Mistress was silly with happiness because her husband was there, and Sir behaved as

though the blacksmith was his brother. Lila had seen them bending their heads over lines drawn in dirt. Another time she saw Sir slice a green apple, his left boot raised on a rock, his mouth working along with his hands; the smithy nodding, looking intently at his employer. Then Sir, as nonchalantly as you please, tipped a slice of apple on his knife and offered it to the blacksmith who, just as nonchalantly, took it and put it in his mouth. So Lila knew she was the only one alert to the breakdown stealing toward them.

Florens had been a quiet, timid version of her self at the time of her own displacement. Before destruction. Before sin. Before men. ^{# Both were} Reeling from the shock of motherlessness which, Lila knew, remained alive traveling the bone. *
As Florens grew she learned quickly, was eager to know more and would have been the perfect one to find the blacksmith if only she had not been sickened with love of him. Warped, disabled, would she return with him, without him or not at all?

How long will it take will she get lost will he be there will he come will someone steal her? She liked shoes 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 stopped only when she was unconscious—not asleep because as far as the dreams were concerned it was the same as being awake.

among strangers
"I shat ~~in a tub~~ for six weeks to get to this land."

She has told this to Lila over and over. Lila being the only one she talks

to without restraint. The only one ^{left} whose understanding she trusted and whose judgement she valued. Even now, in the dark of a spring night, with less sleep than her mistress, Lila was burning something to soothe her patient, put her to sleep. Whispering and shaking a feathered stick around the bed.

"Among strangers," said Rebekka. "There was no other way for us women packed like cod between decks."

There was nothing in the world to prepare her for a life of water, on water, about water, sickened by it and desperate for it. Mesmerized and bored by the look of it especially at night when the women were allowed another hour on deck. Then she talked to the sea. "Stay still, don't hurt me. No, move, move, excite me. Give me something I can eat. Here is my spit, my peelings, my waste. Keep my secrets way down below and I will keep yours: the smell of you is like fresh monthly blood; you guzzle moonlight like Pa guzzles ale; you own this place and land is afterthought to entertain you; the world in and beneath you is your heaven and, if truth be told, maybe ours as well."

Immediately upon landing her sheer good fortune in a husband stunned her. ^(over) Her father would have shipped her off to anyone who would book her passage and relieve him ^{feeding} of her. A waterman, he was privy to all sorts of news

Already sixteen,

from colleagues and when a crewman passed along an inquiry from a first mate: a search for a healthy, chaste wife willing to travel abroad, he was quick to put up his oldest girl. The stubborn one, the one with too many questions and a rude rebellious mouth . Rebekka's mother objected to the "sale"—she called it that because the prospective groom offered "reimbursement" for clothing, expenses and a few supplies—but not for need of her daughter, but because the husband-to-be was clearly a heathen living among savages. Religion, as Rebekka experienced it from her mother, was flame fueled by a wondrous hatred. Any love of a stranger was lost in the blaze. Her understanding of God was faint—except as a larger kind of king— but she quieted the shame of insufficient devotion by assuming that He could be no bigger nor better than the imagination of the Believer. Shallow believers preferred a shallow god. The timid enjoyed a violent god. In spite of her father's enthusiasm, her mother warned her that savages or non-conformists would slaughter her as soon as she landed, so when Rebekka found Lila already there, waiting outside the one room log house her new husband had built for them, she bolted the door at night and would not let the raven-haired girl with impossible skin sleep anywhere near. Fourteen or so, stone faced she

was, and it took a while for trust between them. Perhaps because both were alone without family, or because both had to please one man they became what was for each a kind of friend. A pair, anyway, the result of the mute alliance that comes of sharing tasks, of depending on the rhythm of one to hold the head while the other one tied the trotters. Or one turning the soil while, trailing behind, the other marked open the row. And then, when the first infant was born Lila handled it so tenderly, with such knowing, Rebekka was ashamed of her early fears and pretended she'd never had them. Now, lying in bed, her hands wrapped and bound against self-mutilation, her lips drawn back from her teeth, she remembered everything, in no particular order. The first hangings she saw in the square amid a happy crowd attending. She was barely two 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 and most of her neighbors, she was present at a drawing and quartering but, although too young to remember every detail, the dreams of it were made permanently vivid by years of re-telling and re-describing by her parents. She did not know what a 'fifth monarchist' was—then or now— but it was clear in her household that execution was a festivity as exciting as a king's parade. Brawls,

or because both were hopelessly ignorant of how to run a farm.

knifings and kidnaps were so common in the city of her birth, that the warnings of slaughter in a new, unseen world were like threats of bad weather. ^{*(over 1)} The violent squabbles between local tribes or with militia that peppered this region seemed a distant, manageable back drop in a land of such space and perfume. ^{*(over 2)} *She clapped her hands gazing at* ~~X~~ Trees taller than a cathedral, wood for warmth so plentiful it made you laugh then weep for the children freezing in the city she had left behind. She had never seen birds like these, or tasted fresh water that ran over visible white stones. There was adventure in learning to cook game and acquiring a taste for roast swan. Well, yes, there were monstrous storms here with snow piled higher than the sill of a shutter. And summer insects swarmed with song louder than ~~church~~ ^{steeple} bells. Yet the thought of what her life would be had she stayed crushed into those reeking streets, spat on by Lords and prostitutes, curtsying, curtsying, curtsying still repelled her. Here she answered to her husband alone and paid polite attendance (time and weather permitting) to the only meeting house in the area. Anabaptists who were not the satanists her parents called them—as they did all non-conformists—but sweet, generous people for all their confounding views. Views that got them and the horrible Quakers beaten bloody in their own meeting house back home. Rebekka had no bone deep

- ① Even the ^{very} year she arrived. a ^{mighty} settler vs. natives
1 ~~the~~ war 200? miles south was over before
she heard of it. [1676 "King Philip's" in Massachusetts)

- ② The absence of ^{city and shipboard} stretch ~~was almost a~~
rocked her ~~senses~~ into a kind of drunkenness

hostility. Even the king had pardoned a dozen of them on their way to the gallows. Still she remembered her parents' disappointment when the festivities were cancelled. Her discomfort in a garret full of constant argument, bursts of rage made her impatient for some kind of escape. Any kind.

There had been an early rescue, however, and the possibility of better things in Church School where she was chosen as one of four to be trained and educated for domestic service. Then the ^{bigger} ~~big~~ rescue when her father got notice of a man overseas looking for a strong wife rather than a dowry. Between the warning of immediate slaughter and the promise of married bliss, she believed in neither. Yet, without money, her prospects were servant, prostitute, convent, wife—the last one the safest. ^{horror stories were told of them all but} ^(over) [Tk] The intermittent skirmishes of men against men, arrows against powder, fire against hatchet that she heard about from Jacob and neighbors could not match the gore of what she had seen since childhood. The pile of frisky, still living human entrails held before the felon's eyes then thrown into a bucket and tossed into the Thames; fingers trembling for a lost torso; the hair of a woman guilty of mayhem bright with flame. Compared to that, death by shipwreck or tomahawk paled. She did not know what the settler families nearby once knew

Children and therefore
The one where she might have some affection, .

of routine 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. Among her neighbors she was soft spoken; in the meeting house she was accommodating and when they explained their beliefs she did not roll her eyes. It was when they refused to baptize her first born that Rebekka turned away. More and more it was in Lila's company that she let misery seep out.

"I chastised her for a torn shift, Lila, and next thing I know she is lying in the snow. Her little head cracked like an egg."

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 one or another illness, and then watched Patrician, the first born, who reached the age of eight and provided a happiness Rebekka could not believe, die in her arms with a broken crown. And then to bury her twice. First under branches because the frozen ground could not accept the coffin so they had to leave her to freeze in it, and second, in late spring when they could place her among her brothers with the Anabaptists attending. Weak, pustulate, with not even a full day to mourn Jacob, her grief was fresh cut, like

hay in famine. Her own death was what she should be concentrating on. She could hear its hooves clacking on the roof, could see the cloaked figure on horseback. But whenever the immediate torment subsided, her thoughts left Jacob and traveled to Patrician's matted hair, the ^{hard dark} soap cake she used to clean it, the rinses over and over to free every honey-brown strand from the awful blood darkening like her mind to black. Rebekka never looked at the coffin waiting under branches for thaw. But when finally the earth softened, when Jacob could get traction with the spade and they let the coffin down, she sat on the ground holding on to her elbows oblivious of the damp and watched every clod and clump fall. She stayed there all day and through the night. No one, not Jacob, Sorrow or Lila could get her up. And not the Minister either since he and his flock had been the ones whose beliefs would not let them baptize her newborns. She growled when they touched her; threw the blanket from her shoulders. They left her alone then, shaking their heads, muttering prayers. At dawn in a light snowfall Lila came and arranged ^{trinkets} jewelry and food on the grave, along with scented leaves, telling her that her children, the boys and Patrician, were stars now, or something equally lovely: yellow and green birds, playful foxes, or the rose tinted clouds collecting at the edge of the sky. Pagan

stuff, true, but more satisfying than the I- accept- and- will-see- you- at- Judgment Day prayers Rebekka had been taught and heard repeated by Pastor. There had been a summer day once, when she sat in front of the house sewing and talking profanely while Lila stirred boiling linen at her side.

I don't think God knows who we are. I think He would like us, if He knew us, but I don't think He knows about us.

But He made us, Miss, no?

He did. But He made the tails of peacocks too. That must have been harder.

We sing and talk. Peacocks do not.

We need to; peacocks don't. What else do we have?

Thoughts. Hands to make things.

All well and good. But that's our business. Not God's. He is doing something else in the world. We are not on His mind.

What is He doing, then, if not watching us?

God knows.

Then they sputtered with laughter, like little girls hiding behind the stable loving the danger of their talk. She could not decide if Patrician's accident by a

cloven hoof was rebuke or proof of the pudding.

Now 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 a tub...strangers..."

Some times they circled her bed, these strangers who were not, who had become the kind of family sea journeys create. Delirium or Lila's medicine she supposed. But they came and offered her advice, laughed or simply stared at her with pity.

There were seven other women boarding the Angelus. Their backs turned against the breeze that cut from sea to port, they huddled among boxes, bailiffs, carts, family, horses, guards, satchels and weeping children. Finally, when called to board, their name, home county and occupation were recorded. Four or ^{five} ~~more~~, thought Rebekka, were servants—or said so. ^(over) One, Anne, had been sent away by her family. Two, Judith and Lydia, were prostitutes ordered to choose between prison or exile. Lydia was accompanied by her daughter, Patty, a ten year old thief. Elizabeth was the daughter of a Company agent. Another, Abigail, was quickly transferred to the Captain's cabin and one other,

She learned otherwise soon enough - soon as they
were separated from the male passengers and assigned
a dark space _____ next to the cattle. Light and weather
streamed from a hatch; a tub for waste ^{beside} a keg of ciders; a basket on a rope
where food could be let down and retrieved.

Any one taller than five feet ~~needed~~ hunched and
lowered her head; ^(to move around) crawling was easier once they
partitioned ^{out} ~~themselves~~ like spiders? ^{like street} ~~their~~ personal space.
The range of luggage, clothes and attitude spoke as clearly
as long before their admissions:

Dorothea, was a cutpurse whose sentence was the same as the prostitutes. Rebekka alone, her passage prepaid, was to be married. The others were being met by relatives or craftsmen who would pay their passage—except the cutpurse and the whores whose costs and keep were to be borne by years and years of ^{unpaid} indentured labor. Only Rebekka was none of these. It was later, after each had crafted ^{her} a tiny personal space 'tween decks—walls made of trunks, boxes, blankets hanging from hammocks—that Rebekka learned ^{more} just how many ^{about} of those who identified themselves as servants ~~were in fact felons~~: a pubescent ^{in training} girl thief, two mature prostitutes, an ex-communicated fallen daughter. ^{a professional felon} They lightened the journey; made it less hideous than it surely would have been without them. Their ale house wit, their know-how laced with their low expectations of others and high levels of self-approval amused and inspired her. If she had feared her own female vulnerability, traveling alone to a foreign country to wed a man unseen, these women corrected her misgivings. If ever night moths fluttered in her chest at the recollection of her mother's warnings, the company of these exiled women eliminated them. Dorothea, the cut-purse that she grew most friendly with was especially helpful.

"A virgin?" Dorothea laughed and announced the find to everyone in ear

shot.

"Judy, do you hear? An unripe cunt among us."

"Well, two aboard, then. Patty is another." Judith winked and smiled at the little girl. "Don't sell it cheap."

"She's ten!" said Lydia. "What kind of mother do you think I am?"

"In two years we'll answer."

The laughter was loud among the three, until Anne said "Please. Stop it. Rude talk annoys me."

"Rude talk but not rude behavior?" asked Judith.

"That, too," she replied.

"That why your family is sending you away?" Dorothea opened her eyes wide, batting her eyelashes in mock innocence.

"I'm visiting my uncle and aunt. " If the light coming from the ^{open hatch} ~~trap door~~ above had been stronger, they might have seen the deep red on her face.

"And bringing them a present, I reckon." Lydia giggled.

"Coo, coo. Coo, coo." Dorothea cradled her arms.

"Cows!" Anne snarled.

More laughter loud enough to agitate the animals ^{next door.} ~~just beyond the wall~~

~~that separated them from the stock.~~ A crewman, perhaps on orders, stood above them and closed the hatch.

Some one shouted as they were plunged into darkness.
"Bastard." ~~¶~~ Dorothea and Lydia managed to find ~~in the dark~~ the sole lamp available. *¶ crawling round* Once lit, the dollop of light pulled them close.

"Where is Abigail?" asked Patty. She had taken a liking to her the first day they set sail.

"Captain's pick," said her mother.

"Lucky whore," Dorothea murmured.

"Bite your tongue. You haven't seen him."

"No, but I can guess his table," Dorothea sighed. "Berries, wine, mutton, pasties..."

"Tormentor. Leave off. Steady. Maybe she'll bring us some. He won't let her out of his sight. Pig...."

"I have some cheese," said Rebekka. "And biscuits."

They turned to her and some one said *Arrw* "Ho, ho. Let's have tea!"

The oil lamp sputtered threatening to throw them back into a darkness only ~~a ship's~~ steerage passengers can know. Rocking forever sideways, trying not to vomit before reaching the tub, safer on knees than feet—all was almost

bearable if there were even a handspan of light.

The shipmates scooted toward Rebekka and suddenly, without urging, began to imitate what they thought were the manners of queens. Judith spread her headscarf on the lid of a box. Elizabeth, the agent's daughter, retrieved from her trunk a kettle and a set of spoons. Cups were varied—pewter, tin, porcelain, clay. Lydia heated water in the kettle over the lamp, protecting the flame with her palm. It did not surprise them that no one had any tea, but both Judith and Dorothea had hidden rum in their sacks. With the care of a butler, they poured it into the tepid water. Rebekka set the cheese in the middle of the scarf and surrounded it with biscuits. Anne offered a prayer. Breathing quietly they sipped spirited water and munched stale biscuits, daintily brushing away the flakes. Rebekka recalled how each of them, including the ten year old, lifted her little finger and angled it out. Remembered also how ocean slap exaggerated the silence. They were dreaming, perhaps, as she was, of what they fled and what might await them. Wretched as the space they huddled in, it was nevertheless blank where a past did not haunt nor the future beckon. Women of and for men, in those few moments they were neither. And when finally the lamp died, swaddling them in blackness, ^{for a long time} they did not stir.

Upon landing they made no pretense of meeting again. They knew they never would so their parting was brisk, unsentimental as each gathered her ^{be} luggage and scanned the crowd for her future. It was true; they never met again, except for those bedside visits Rebekka conjured up with such clarity.

He was bigger than she imagined. All the men she had known were small, hardened but small. Mr. Vaark (it took some time before she could say, Jacob) picked up all three of her boxes after touching her face and smiling.

"You took off your hat and smiled. Smiled and smiled." Rebekka thought she was answering the grin of her new husband, but her parched lips barely moved as she recalled their first meeting. She had the impression, then, that this was what his whole life had been about: meeting her at long last. At long long last. Following him, feeling the disabling resilience of land after weeks at sea, she tripped on the wooden walk and tore the hem of her ^{dress} ~~gown~~. He did not turn around, so she grabbed a fistful of skirt and trotted along to the wagon, refusing the hand he offered to help her mount. It was seal and deal. He would offer her no pampering. She would not accept it if he did. A perfect equation for the work that lay ahead. And the sorrow.

He seemed shy, at first, so she thought he had not lived with nine people

in a garret; had not grown so familiar with small cries of passion at dawn they were like the songs of peddlers. It was nothing like what Dorothea had described or the acrobatics that made Lydia hoot, nor like the quick and angry coupling of her parents. Instead she felt not so much taken as urged.

"My northern star," he called her.

They settled into the long learning of one another: preferences, habits altered others acquired, disagreement without bile, trust and that wordless conversation years of companionship produces. ^{Her} The weak religious tendencies that riled ^{Rebecca's} her parents were of no interest to him. In fact he shared them, withstanding all pressure to join the village congregation, but content to let her be persuaded if she chose. His satisfaction when she chose not to was plain. They leaned on each other, root and crown. Needing no one outside their sufficiency. Or so they thought.

As the years passed, having become convinced the farm was sustainable but not profitable, he began to trade and travel. His returns, however, were always joyful times full of news, his exploits, ^{TLC news} And if on occasion he brought her adolescent, untrained help, he also brought her gifts. It was some time before she noticed how the gifts had become less practical, even whimsical. Silver tea

service which was put away immediately; a porcelain chamber pot quickly broken by a crawling baby; a heavily worked hair brush for hair he only saw in bed. A hat here, a lace collar there. Silk for her; a bracelet for Patrician. Rebekka hid her wonder with a smile. When at last she asked him where was this money coming from? "New arrangements," he said, handing her a mirror framed in silver, but said nothing more. Having seen come and go a glint in his eye as he unpacked these treasures so useless on a farm, she should have anticipated the day he hired men to help clear trees from a wide swath of land at the foot of a rise. A new house; something befitting...

We are good, common people, she thought, in a place where that claim was not merely enough, but prized, even a boast.

"We don't need another house," she told him. He lifted his chin for the razor she held just under.

"Need is not the reason, wife."

"What, pray?" Rebekka cleared off the last of the lather.

"What a man leaves behind is what a man is."

"Jacob, a man is only his reputation."

"Understand me." He took the cloth from her hands and wiped his face.

"I will have it."

And so it was. Men, barrows, a smithy, lumber, twine, pots of caulk, hammers and pull horses, one of which had already kicked her daughter in the head. The fever of building was so intense she missed the real fever, the one that put him in the grave. As soon as he collapsed, word went out to the Baptists and even Sorrow was no longer allowed among them. The men left with their horses and tools. The smithy was long gone, his ironwork a glitter like gates to heaven. Rebekka did what Jacob ordered: gathered the women and struggled with them to lift him from the bed and lower him on to a blanket. All the while he croaked, hurry, hurry. Unable to summon muscle strength to aid them, he was dead weight before he was dead. They hauled him through a cold spring rain. Skirts dragging in mud, shawls asunder, the caps on their head drenched through to the scalp. There was trouble at the gate. They had to lay him in mud while two undid the hinges and then unbolted the door to the house. As rain poured over his face, Rebekka tried to shelter it with her own. Using the driest part of her underskirt, she blotted carefully lest she disturb the bores into pain. At last they entered the hall and situated him far way from the window space waiting for a glazer. Rebekka leaned in close to ask if he would

take a little ale. He moved his lips but no answer came. His eyes shifted to something or someone over her shoulder and remained so till she closed them. All four, herself, Lila, Sorrow and Florens, sat down on the floor planks. One or all thought the others were crying, or else those were rain drops on their cheeks.

Rebekka doubted that she would be infected. None of her family had died during the pestilence; no red cross was painted on their door. So to have sailed to this clean world, this fresh and new England, marry a stout, robust man, and then, on the heels of his death, to lie mattering on a perfect spring night felt like a jest. Congratulations, Satan. That was what the cutpurse used to say whenever the ship rose and threw their bodies helter-skelter.

"Blasphemer," shouted Elizabeth^e. "Truth," answered Dorothea.

(over)

^{In the absence of the women}
The moon stared back like a worried friend. Lila, snored lightly on the floor at the foot of the bed. Rebekka once thought loneliness would be her worst enemy when Jacob was away. When neither Patrican nor Lila was enough. When the villagers^{Baptists} ~~beyond~~ tired her out with talk that never extended beyond their fences unless it was all the way to heaven. Those women seemed flat to her, convinced they were innocent and therefore free; safe because

They had leaned in the door, knelt by her bed to soothe her.

I'm already dead, said — It's not so bad
C. don't tell her that, It's horrid.

How do you know?

Don't listen — she's a pastor's wife now.

Would you like some tea?

They I married a sailor — so I'm always alone.

She supplements his earnings, ASK her how.

Listen, let me tell you what happened to me.
I saw this man in the stocks — he'd made sport of
somebody, the King I think, ---

Their voices knocked against one another, just as on the
ship. They had come to soothe ~~and entertain~~ her but
like all figures, they were interested only in themselves.

The stories they told, the comments offered Rebekka
the distraction of other people's lives. Perhaps that was
the ^{true} value of Job's comforters. He lay festering ~~and~~ in
pain and ^{moral} despair. They told him about themselves and
when he felt even worse, he got an answer from God
saying Who on earth do you think you are? (back of p. 69)

churched; tough because ^{still} alive. A new people re-made in vessels old as time. Children, in other words, without the joy or the curiosity of a child. They were poor company and of no help ^{to her} with ^{that came} solitude so close to dread, that could rise up without prelude and take her prisoner. She might be bending in a patch of radishes, tossing weeds with the skill of pub matron dropping coins into her apron. Weeds she would feed to the stock. Then as she stood in molten sunlight pulling the corners of her apron together, the comfortable sounds of the farm would drop. Silence fell like snow floating around her head and shoulders, spreading outward to quiet moving leaves, dangling cowbells, the whack of Lila's ax chopping firewood nearby. Her skin would flush then chill. Sound would return, eventually, but the loneliness might remain for days. But then, in the middle of it, he would ride up shouting

"Where's my star?"

"Here in the north," she'd reply and he would toss a bolt of calico at her feet or hand her a packet of needles. Best of all were the times, not many but often enough, when he would take out his fiddle and embarrass the songbirds who believed they owned twilight. ^{A not yet dead baby boy would be on her lap.} Patrican would be on the floor, mouth agape, eyes aglow, as he summoned rose gardens and shepherds neither had

Question me? let me give you a hint of who ^{I am} and what I know.
~~For a moment~~ ^{by that time} Job must have longed for the self
interested musings of humans as vulnerable and
misguided as he was. But ^{a peek into} the knowledge ^{of} ^{divine} ^{was} less important
than gaining at last the Lord's attention. Which, she
concluded ^{he did not doubt that} was all he ever wanted: not even proof of His
existence ^{nor} proof of His power (everyone understood that). He wanted
~~just~~ simply to catch ~~this~~ eye, to be recognized - not as
worthy or unworthy - but to be noticed as a life form by the
One who made and ~~un~~made it.

But then he was a man. Invisibility was intolerable.
What complaint would a female Job dared to put
forth? And if having done so, ^{and} would he ~~have~~
designed to ^{remind} tell her how ^{weak &} ignorant ^{she was} and ^{powerless} ~~powerless~~ ^{renewed}
the news in that? What shocked Job into fidelity
~~was~~ was the message this female Job would have
known and heard every minute of her life.

No. ^{Better} ~~The~~ false comforters than none. So
she listened to ~~the~~ her ship mates

"Yes well..." + K.

He knifed me - blood all over. I
grabbed my waist and thought No! No
Swoon, my girl

seen or would ever know. With him, the cost of ^{a solitary} ~~an independent~~, unchurched life was not so high after all.

"You have never known a man, have you?"

They were sitting in the stream, Lila holding the baby, splashing its back to hear it laugh. In frying August heat they had gone down to a part of the stream that swarming flies ignored. Unless a light canoe sailed by very close to the bank no one would see them. Patrician knelt nearby watching how her bloomers stirred in the ripples. Rebekka sat in her underwear rinsing her neck and arms. Lila, naked as the baby she held in her arms, lifted him up and down watching his hair re-shape itself in the current. Then she held him over her shoulder and sent cascades of clear water over his back.

"Known, Miss?"

"You understand me, Lila."

"I do."

"Well?"

"Look," squealed Patrician pointing.

"Shhh," whispered Lila, "You will frighten them." Too late. The fox and her kits sped away to drink elsewhere.

"Well?" Rebekka repeated. "Have you?"

"Once."

"And?"

"Not good. Not good, Miss."

"Why was that?"

"I will walk behind. I will clean up after. I will not be thrashed. No."

Handing the baby to its mother, Lila stood and walked to the bush where her shift hung. Dressed, she held out a hand to Patrician who clambered up the bank.

Left alone with the baby who more than any of her children favored their father, Rebekka was reminded on that day of her good fortune. Wife beating was common, she knew, but the restrictions—not after nine at night, with cause and not anger—were for wives and only wives. Had he been a native, Lila's lover? Probably not. A rich white? Or a common soldier or sailor? Rebekka suspected the former since she had known kind sailors but, like a chamber maid, had only seen the underside of gentry. Other than her mother, no one had ever struck her. Fourteen years and she still didn't know if Mum was alive. She once received a message from a captain Jacob knew who moored often at

Swansea. Eighteen months after he was charged to make inquiries, he reported that her family had moved. Where no one could say. Rebekka wondered what her Mum might look like now. Gray, stooped, wrinkled? Would the sharp pale eyes still radiate the shrewdness, the suspicion Rebekka hated? Or maybe age, illness had softened her to benign, toothless malice.

And me? she wondered. What lies in my eyes now? Skull and cross bones? Rage? Surrender? All at once she wanted it—the mirror Jacob had given her which she quietly re-wrapped and tucked in her press. It took a while to convince her, but when Lila finally understood and fixed it between her palms, Rebekka winced.

"Sorry," she murmured. "I'm so sorry." And she traveled her face slowly, gently apologizing. "Eyes, dear eyes, forgive me. Nose, poor mouth. Poor, poor mouth, I'm so sorry. Believe me, skin, I do apologize. ~~Have mercy.~~

Forgive me.
Please."

Lila pried the mirror away.

"Miss. Enough. Enough."

She had been so happy. Jacob home and busy with plans for the new house.*^(over) The pall of childlessness coupled with loneliness had disappeared,

Her eyebrows were a memory, her cheeks collected into buds of flame, pale red.

The blacksmith, ^{who} worried everybody except ^{himself} ^{farm} in
and Jacob, was like an anchor holding the ^{place}
in ^{untrustworthy} waters. Lila was afraid of him;
Sarron ^{grateful} ^{to him} ^{but} ^{Poor Florens} Florens, ^{she was} completely smitten.

Since he
cured her

Of the three only she could be
of counted on to risk ~~any~~ ^{life} and
limb to get to him, ^{hostile} Lila would
not have; ^{pregnant} Sarron could not have.

melted like the snow showers that signaled it. Jacob's ambition, his determination to rise up in the world no longer troubled her. Perhaps the satisfaction of having more and more was not in the things themselves, but the pleasure of the process. Whatever the truth, Jacob was there. With her. Breathing next to her in bed. Reaching for her even as he slept. And then, suddenly, he was not.

Were the Anabaptists right? Was happiness Satan's lure, his tantalizing deceit? Was her devotion so weak it was merely bait? Her stubborn self-sufficiency outright blasphemy? Is that why at the height of her contentedness, once again death turned to look her way? And smile? (over)

Now, she thought, there is no one except servants. The best husband gone and buried by the women he left behind; children rose-tinted clouds in the sky. Sorrow frightened for her own future if I die, as she should be—a slow-witted girl warped from living on a ghost ship. Only Lila was steady, unmoved by any catastrophe as though she has seen and survived everything. And

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

she and ^{is} with it ^{too late?} already
will he?

They manipulated
it to ~~some~~ ^{their} ~~advantage~~ and trusted
in their own imagination

The shipmates I got on with it. Whatever life threw up.
The Baptist women trusted elsewhere. ~~not the~~ ^{On the contrary}
Unlike the shipmates ~~—~~ They neither dared or stood up to life. They
~~had~~ dared death. Dared it to erase them, to
pretend this ^{earthly life} was all, that beyond earth was nothing.
that there was no ~~reward~~ acknowledgment of suffering
and certainly no reward, they refused meaninglessness
and the random. What excited and challenged
the her shipmates, horrified the Church women.
Each set believed the other ~~was~~ ^{childish} to be
deeply flawed.

All had in common men - promise and threat
Little in common with ^{the views of} each other, everything
in common with ^{their views of} men. Here they agreed (understood)
the promise and the threat. Safety and danger.
Both sets had come to terms.

Those like Lila who had experienced ^{both} ~~their~~
salvation and destruction ^{at their hands} - withdrawn. Those
like Sarron became their play. But wasn't
that it should be? Adam first, Eve next.
The loss of Jacob stung ever more deeply
He had been the real meaning of mate

who disobeyed?
TR

apparently
knew other
females

~~I sit on a rock and eat the last of my bread making my thirst high and~~
~~strong.~~ ^{thick but suddenly the moon moves. I leave the pine tree} Night is coming fast and I am happy to find a hollow log but it is wavy
with ants. I break away twigs and small branches from a fir, pile them and
crawl under. The needles prick. The ground is damp, chill. Night voles come
close, sniff me then dart away. I am watchful for snakes that ease down trees
and over ground although Lila says they do not prefer to bite us or swallow us
whole. I lie still trying not to think of water. Thinking instead of another night,
another place of wet ground. But it is summer then and the damp is from dew
not snow. You are telling me about the making of iron things. Your father

doing it and his father before him. And you know they approve when two owls appear at the very instant you say their names, so you understand they are showing themselves to bless you. See, you say, see how they swivel their heads. They approve you also, you tell me. Do they bless me too I ask. Wait, you say. Wait and see. I think they do because I am coming now. I am coming to you.

I sleep and wake to every sound. [tk] Once I am dreaming trees walking toward me. I know it is dreaming because they are full in leaves and blossoms. I don't know what they want. To look? To touch? One bends down and I wake with a little scream in my mouth. Nothing is different. The trees are not in leaf nor nearer to me. I quiet down. This is a better dream than my Madre. (over)
~~My next sleeping is deep.~~

Not birdsong but sunlight wakes me. All snow is gone. Relieving myself is troublesome. Then I am going north I think but maybe west also. No, north until I come to where the brush won't let me through without clutching and taking hold. Brambles spread among saplings are wide and tall to my waist. I press through and through for a long time which is good since in front of me sudden is an open meadow wild with sunshine and smelling of fire. This is a place that remembers the burning of itself. New grass is underfoot, tender as

standing (there) with her little boy. She wants to
tell me something, is working her mouth. I ^{look away from} ~~ignore~~
her and

lamb fuzz. ^{and hours} I think it is hours I walk this sunny field, my thirst so loud I am faint. ^{(over) ①}
 Beyond I see a light wood of birch and apple trees. [tk] I am eager to enter
 because water may be there. I stop. I hear hoof beats. From among the trees
~~a group of~~ riders clop toward me. ~~They are~~ all male, all natives, all young.
 Some look younger than me. None have saddles on their horses. None. I
 marvel at that but I have fear of them too. They circle. They smile. I am ~~weak~~
^{(over) ②} and shaking. One pokes his fingers toward his mouth, in and out, in and out.
^{more} Others laugh. Him too. Then he lifts his head high, opens wide his mouth and
 directs his thumb to his lips. I drop to my knees in ^{miserly} weakness and fear. He
^{comes} dismounts and ~~walks up~~ close. ^{I smell the perfume of his hair} His eyes are slant not big and round like Lila's.
^{across his chest,} He grins while removing a pouch strapped ~~around his shoulder~~. He holds it
 out to me but I am trembling too frightened to reach so he drinks from it and
^{, am dying for it} offers it again. I want it but I can not move. All I am able to do is make my
 mouth wide. He steps close [^] and pours the water as I gulp it. One of the others
 says baa baa baa like a goat kid and they all laugh and slap their legs. The
 one pouring closes his pouch and after watching me wipe my chin returns it to
 his shoulder. Then he reaches into a belt hanging from his waist and draws out
 a dark strip and hands it to me, chomping his teeth. It looks like leather but I

① The shade in there is green with young leaves.
Bird talk is every place.

② They wear soft shoes but
(Their horses are not shod and the hair of
both is long and free. They say words
I don't know and laugh.

take it. As soon as I do he runs and leaps on his horse. I am shock. Can you believe this. He runs on grass and flies up to sit astride his horse. I blink and they all disappear. Where they once are is nothing. Just trees aching to bud and an echo of laughing boys.

I put the dark strip on my tongue and I am correct. It is leather. Yet salty and spicy giving much comfort to your girl.

Once more I aim north, ^{through the trees} following the hoof prints at a distance. The day ^{Yet the ground's ever moist like cold dew. (vse)} is warm and becoming warmer. ~~Now I am thinking not of dew on the ground~~ ^{fireflies in} but of tall dry grass under starlight. You hold your hand over my mouth so no one can hear my pleasure startling hens from their sleep. ^{Quiet.} Quiet. No one must know but Lila does. Beware she tells me. We are lying in hammocks ^{between} ~~trees beneath stars.~~ I am just come from you aching with sin and looking forward to more. I ask her meaning. She says there is only one fool in this place and she is not it, so beware. I am too sleepy to answer and not wanting to. I prefer thoughts of that place under your jaw where you neck meets bone, a small curve deep enough for a tongue tip but no bigger than a quail's egg. I am sinking into sleep when I hear her say ^{rum} I told myself it was rum. Only rum the first time because a man of his learning and position in the town would

make me
I forget how we are in wet ground and
think

never dishonor himself so if sober. I understand, she is saying, and obey the need for secrecy. When he comes to the house I never look him in the eye. I only look for the straw in his mouth or the stick he places in the gate hinge as the sign of our meeting that night. Sleepiness is leaving me. I sit up and dangle my legs over the hammock. ^{The ropes creak and sway.} There is something new in her voice that ^{Something old. Something cutting.} pricks me. I look at her. Brightness of stars, moon glow, both are enough to see her face but neither is enough to know her expression. Her hair is loose, strands of it escaping the hammock's weave. She is saying that she is without clan and under a ^{Europe's} ~~white man's~~ rule. There is no rum the second time nor the next, she is saying, but those times he uses the flat of his hand when he is displeased, when she spills lamp oil on his breeches or he finds a tiny worm in the stew. Then comes a time when he uses first his fist and then a whip. The Spanish coin is lost through a worn place in her apron pocket and is never found. I am already fourteen and ought to know better, she is saying. And now, she is saying, I do. She tells me how it is to walk through town lanes wiping blood from her nose with her fingers, that because her eyes are closing she stumbles and people believe she is liquored like so many natives and tell her so. The Presbyterians stare at her ^{face, her torn clothes} but say nothing. They visit the printer to

They will not let her inside
So for weeks she sleeps where she can, and eats from the bowl
they leave for her on the porch. Like a dog, she says. Like a dog.
offer her up for sale. Sir makes the purchase but not before she breaks the
Lsneaks away and then
neck of two roosters and places a head in each of her lover's shoes. Every step
he takes from then on will take him closer to ruin.

Listen to me, she is saying. I am your age when flesh is my only hunger.
Men have two hungers. The beak that grooms also bites. Tell me, she says,
what will it be when his work here is done. Will he take you with him?

I am not wondering this. Not then, not ever. I know you can not steal
me nor marry me. Neither one is lawful. What I know is that I am wilted when
you go and straightened when Mistress sends me to you. Being sent is not
running away.

Thinking these things keeps me walking and not lying down on the
ground and allowing myself sleep. I am greatly tired and long for water.

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 fence 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 for it if marauding wild

life does not. *They live or die by the whim of weather.*

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 ^{one}everybody has gone away. Then I see a *tiny* 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 choose 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 fowl}boiling.

Before I can knock, a woman opens the door. She is much bigger than *Mistress or*

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 ^{doth} ~~does~~ he abide, she asks. The rain is getting bigger. Hunger wobbles me. I say I ^{do not} ~~never~~ ^{I know} ~~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, stools and two sleeping places—a box bed and a pallet. There are two closed doors to other places and a kind of closet, dim behind with a partial wall at the rear where jugs and bowls are kept.

When my hunger is quiet enough

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's. I don't think I should begin any words so I wait for ^{Keep eating and}

the girl or the Widow to say something. At the foot of ^{her} the bed of straw is ^{a small box of straw}

~~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 frowns and

looks toward the fireplace where the kid lies. 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. You know the pale one is your father. I think I know who the other ones may be.

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 jewelry.

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

It is late, Widow Ealing is saying. They will not come til morning. She closes the shutters, 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 ^{near} ~~between~~ the sick kid and the fireplace and my sleep is broken into pieces by their voices. Silence is long and then they talk. I can tell who it is 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 baas 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 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. *A goat steps in and moves toward the straw ->*

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, Madre 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 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 not see them, I hear their talk. The Widow offers the visitors seating, they refuse, a man's voice saying this is preliminary

Nibbling, nibbling while the Widow cuts and Daughter Jane
whimpers. When the bloodwork is done to her satisfaction
she pushes the goat out the door.

yet witnesses are several. Widow interrupts him saying, her daughter's eye is askew as God made it, it has no special power. And look, look at her wounds. God's Son bleeds. We bleed. Demons, never.

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 away. 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 ^{the} a hen^s to flutter ~~out the door~~. He retrieves ^{his stick} 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 accept her—how could we not—and feed her. Which night? the man asks. This one past, she answers. One woman speaks saying I have never seen any human this black. I have ~~seen~~ ~~some~~ says another, this one is as black as others I have seen. She is Afric. No, says another. Just look at this child, says the first woman. She points to the little girl shaking and moaning by her side. Hear her. Hear her. It is true then, says the ^{first woman} ~~man~~. The Black Man is among us. This is his minion. The little girl is inconsolable, sobbing, trembling. The woman whose skirts she clings to takes

her outside where she is quickly 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 is lettered. 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} ~~minus~~ 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 frown 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 is there or fear or even disgust, but they are looking at me, my body, across distances without recognition. Cows look at me with more connection when they raise their heads from the trough. The women look away from my eyes the way you say I am to do with the bears so they will not come close to love and play. Finally they tell me to dress and leave the room shutting the door behind them. I put on my clothes. I hear them quarrel. 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. Lucifer is all deceit and trickery, says another. But a woman's life may be at stake, says 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, it seems, whether or no I am the Black Man's minion. I step into the room and the little girl screams and flails her arms. The women rush out. The man says not to leave the house. He takes the letter with him. The Widow follows him down the path pleading, pleading.

Then she returns to say they are wanting time to discuss more among themselves. She has hope because of the letter. Daughter Jane laughs. Widow Ealing kneels to pray. She prays a long time then stands saying I have to see someone. I need his witness and help.

Who, asks Daughter Jane.

The sheriff says the Widow.

Daughter Jane curls her mouth behind her mother's back as she leaves.

I am tight with fear and watch Daughter Jane attend her leg wounds. The sun is slowing down. And still the Widow does not return.

Daughter Jane boils duck eggs and when cool wraps them in a piece of cloth. She folds a blanket and hands it to me, motions with one finger to follow. We leave the house, scurry around to the back. All manner of fowl cluck and fly from our feet. We run through the pasture. ^{Their} One goat turns to look. The billy does not. A bad ^{sign.} ~~omen~~. We squeeze between the fence slats ^{run into the wood.} 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 still eat and call to one another.

We come to a stream, dry mostly, muddy elsewhere. Daughter Jane tells me how to go, where the trail will be that takes me to the post road that takes me to the hamlet where you are. I say thank you and lift her hand to kiss it. She says no, I thank you. They look at you and forget about me. She kisses my forehead then 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 me on 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 ^{climb out of} ~~walk through~~ the dry bed aware of watching trees and know I am not the same. I am losing something with every step I take. I can feel the drain. Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart. With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a shivering rabbit, a ^{chick} ~~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 pelted and toothy. Is that what my mother knows? why she chooses me to live without? Not the outside dark we share, Madre and me, but the inside one we don't. Is this dying mine alone? ^{You have the outside dark as well.} Is the pelted thing the only life in me? You will tell me. [^] When I see you I know I am full alive. Suddenly it is not like before when I am always in fear. I am not afraid of anything now. The sun's going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is my home.