



A Mercy Draft

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Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark—weeping a bit or occasionally 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 splayed in the corner of a room when you turn your head 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} ~~Indians~~, 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} ~~ten~~ times since then, so I must be sixteen. Before this place I spend my days picking okra and sweeping tobacco sheds, my nights I spend on the floor of the cook house with my 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} ~~is~~ ^{Children yet} ~~is~~ ^{still s by the fireplace} ~~room only for Sorrow to sleep~~. 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 boil 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.

Jacob Vaark galloped along, sweating so heavily his eyes salted and his hair matted on his shoulders. Already October and his horse, 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. Yet this mist, hot and rife with gnats, which could have dampened his spirits, did not. Despite the long sail in three vessels down three rivers, and now the hard ride over the tk trail, he always took delight in the journey. Breathing the air of a world so new, so

modern, so open to possibilities never failed to invigorate him. 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 Vaark 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 a colony—disputed, fought over and regularly re-named; its trade transferred only to the victor—the province of Maryland could 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. Vaark 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. All of his previous dealing with ~~the owner's~~^{this} estate had been with ~~his~~^{the owner's} clerk while sitting on ale house stools. Now, for some reason, he had been invited, summoned rather, to the planter's estate—a plantation called Bliss. A merchant 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 wide 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 wide second story resting on six pillars. He had never seen a house like it. The wealthiest men he knew built in wood, not brick, riven clapboards 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. The table waits."

Seated at a small table in the parlor, surrounded by graven idols, the windows closed to the boiling air, Jacob Vaark drank sassafras beer and studied his host, a Mr. Michael D'Ortega. Disaster had doubled, according to D'Ortega. Jacob Vaark knew all about it, but listened politely to the version this 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 crocodiles would finish the work.

Does he cut his losses and let his ship sail on to Barbados? No, thought Vaark. A sloven man, stubborn in his wrong headedness like all of the Roman faith, he 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. It began with a prayer whispered in a language he could not decipher and cross signing before and after. Varrk’s considerable hunger shrank when confronted with the heavily seasoned food: everything, except pickles and radishes, was fried or over-cooked. The wine, watered and too sweet for his taste, annoyed him and the company was worse. D’Ortega’s wife was a chattering magpie, asking pointless questions—How do

you manage living in snow?—and making sense-defying observations, as though her political judgment was equal to a man's. Nothing transpired in the conversation that had footing in the real world. They had six children, two of whom were old enough to sit at table. Silent boys, thirteen and fourteen, wearing peri wigs as though they were at a ball or a court of law. His bitterness, he understood, was 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 fortune he was amassing. Thus, restraining envy as best he could, Vaark entertained himself by imagining the couple's relationship. They seemed well suited to each other—vain, voluptuous, prouder of their pewter and porcelain than their sons. It was very clear why D'Ortega was in serious debt. Turning profit into useless baubles, unembarrassed by prettification, silk stockings and an over-dressed wife, 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 brought to table by a woman who smelled of cloves.

Tk

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} ~~his visit~~ had not been resolved. D'Ortega had described with great attention to detail the accidents beyond his control that made him unable to pay what he owed. But how Vaark would be re-imbursed had not been broached. Examining the spotted, bug ridden leaves of tobacco, it became clear to him what D'Ortega had left to offer. Vaark refused. His farm was small, his trade needed only himself. Besides having no place to put them, there was nothing to occupy them.

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

Vaark winced. Flesh was not his commodity.

Still, at his host's insistence, he accompanied him to the little sheds where, 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 Vaark 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 .

Vaark, stomach turning, nostrils assailed, 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 Vaark 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."

Vaark 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.

Vaark 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 Vaark. *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. Vaark's eyes followed the movement as the ringed fingers curled around a scabbard. Would he, wondered Vaark. 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. Vaark 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?² Where else could class tremble before courage? Vaark turned away, letting his exposed back convey his scorn. It was a curious moment for him. Along with his contempt, he felt a wave of exhilaration. ^{Potent Steady} An inside shift from careful negotiator to raw manhood. 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 found 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 ^{the} 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.
~~"I decline the favor,"~~ said Vaark, thinking, I've got to get away from this place before I lose my dinner and my temper; 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 think, 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 blacks he would not be ^{merely} ~~simply~~ in debt; he would be eating from a trough instead of silver plate and sleeping in the wild 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 ^{faith} ~~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 sin and ruined tobacco that seemed to coat his tongue.

Vaark 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 ~~only other~~ ^{always} one open on Sunday. Rough, smelly and catering to hard boys, it nevertheless offered good and plentiful food.

Tk ~~{approach to town/public house laws in colony}~~

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 secured bed space with just one man in it and 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, thought Vaark, 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. 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 felt a pulse of pity for them remembering well their 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 Vaark if he would take off his hands the sullen, curly headed girl he found half dead on a river bank. Vaark said "Yes," provided the sawyer would ^{forgive} ~~forbear~~ the cost of the lumber he was buying. Unlike now, his farm needed ^{more} ~~the~~ ^{than} 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. An absent master was invitation and temptation. In the right 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, ^{the taking of} goose girl, the one they called Sorrow. And [^] both could be seen as rescue. Only Lila had been purchased outright, but she was a woman, not a child.

^{neighborhood}
Tk inherited inland land/~~solitary~~/~~unchurched~~

The heat was pressing; his bed partner ^{too}~~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 ^{curse}~~weeps~~ 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 ~~are~~ on her tongue, ^{are joined by} twenty-three on her face. ^{five} Twenty-seven 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 Hartkill just after midday where I disembark. I am to walk left, westward on ^{the Abenaki} ~~an Indian~~ 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 close to the 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 forced 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. ^(over) The sound is pines dripping but there is
no brook or stream. I make a cup of my hand to get a little ground snow to
swallow. I need Lila to say how to shelter in wilderness.

The moonlight is new.

I hold one arm in front. I go slow to not
stumble

Refused
~~was afraid~~

Lila could not bear 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 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 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. ^(over) 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} The girl 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} the girl 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

Why not seek out one of the
Baptists. The deacon certainly
would be willing. Poor Florens,

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~~ ^{was not} ~~must be~~ 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, she ~~believed~~ ^{any black} that kind of boldness, ~~whether~~ ^{from free blacks} or not, was ~~always~~ legitimate cause 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-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 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 other children, 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. ^{She and two little boys} ~~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, a ^{or playmate} friend, was to court damnation.

Nearing the skins 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. 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 wooly hair the color of a setting sun. Accepted, not bought, by Sir, she joined the household after Lila but before ^{Flora} ~~the girl~~ 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 woman who has had small pox and meazles....A likely Negro ⁰ab_Λut 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..."

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 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} ~~them~~ 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 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. ^(over) 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 ~~she~~ ^{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 ~~curse~~ ^{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

And Lila was sure the early
deaths of Mister's sons could
be placed ^{at the feet of} the natural curse
that was Sorrow.

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. 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 nest. Their drift ^{away from others} ~~toward independence~~ 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 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 ^{barren}~~childless~~ness accounted for her devotion. Most of all she wanted to protect her—keep her away from the corruption so natural to Sorrow^l-- but most recently 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. Reeling from the shock of motherlessness which, Lila knew, remained alive ^{traveling} in 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.

"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~~ ^{human} she has
it

talks

ever ~~talked~~ to without restraint. The only one 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. Her father would have shipped her off to anyone who would book her passage and relieve him of her. A waterman, he was privy to all sorts of news

from colleagues and when a crewman passed along ^{on} 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~~ ^{an outsider} 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, 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. 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. 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 bells. Yet the thought of what her life would be had she stayed crushed into those reeking streets, spat on by Lords and prostitutes, curtseying, curtseying, curtseying 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 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 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. [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

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 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 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 more, thought Rebekka, were servants—or said so. 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,

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} their indentured labor. Only Rebekka was none of these. It was later, after each had crafted a tiny personal space 'tween decks—walls made of trunks, boxes, blankets hanging from hammocks—that Rebekka learned just how many of those who identified themselves as servants were in fact felons: a pubescent girl thief, two mature prostitutes, an ex-communicated fallen daughter. 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} ~~strange~~ 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 smiled ^{and winked} 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 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. Co, coo." Dorothea cradled her arms.

"Cows!" Anne snarled.

More laughter loud enough to agitate the animals just beyond the wall

that separated them from the stock. A crewman, perhaps on orders, stood above them and closed the ^{hatch}~~trap~~ door.

"Bastard." Dorothea and Lydia managed to find in the dark the sole lamp available. 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 "Ho, ho. Let's have tea!"

The ^{oil}~~old~~ lamp sputtered threatening to throw them back into a darkness only a ship's ^{steerage}~~lowly~~ 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, ^{what they thought were} began to exhibit 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, 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 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 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. The weak religious tendencies that riled 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. And if on occasion he brought her ~~unnecessary~~ ^{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. ^{what Jacob ordered} Rebekka did ~~as he had bid~~: 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 boles 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. "Truth," answered Dorothea.

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 beyond tired her out with talk that never extended beyond their fences unless it was all the way to heaven. ^{Those women} ~~They~~ seemed flat to her, convinced they were innocent and therefore free; safe because church;

tough because 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 with 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} ~~Later~~ she would feed ~~them~~ 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. Patrican would be on the floor, mouth agape, eyes aglow, as he summoned rose gardens and shepherds neither had

seen or would ever know. With him, the cost of 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 ^{very close to the bank} by, 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 ~~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. Please.”

Lila pried the mirror away.

“Miss. Enough. Enough.”

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

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?

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?

I sit on a rock and eat the last of my bread making my thirst high and strong. 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. 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

lamb fuzz. I think it is hours I walk this sunny field, my thirst so loud I am faint. 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 and shaking. One pokes his fingers toward his mouth, in and out, in and out. 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 weakness and fear. He dismounts and walks up close. His eyes are slant not big and round like Lila's. He grins all the while removing a bladder^{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 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 say baa baa baa like a goat kid and they all laugh and slap their legs. The one pouring closes his ~~water sack~~^{pouch} and after watching me wipe my chin returns it to his shoulder. Then he reaches into a ~~pouch~~^{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 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 ~~bare~~ 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, following the hoof prints at a distance. The day is warm and becoming warmer. Now I am thinking not of dew on the ground 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. No one ~~should~~^{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 I told myself it was rum. Only rum the first time because a man of his learning and position in the town

would 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. There is something new in her voice that 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 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}~~drunk~~ like so many natives and tell her so. The Presbyterians stare at her but say nothing. They visit the printer to offer

her up for sale. Sir makes the purchase but not before she breaks the 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.

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

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

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

She tells me her name, Widow Ealing, but does not ask mine. You must excuse me, she says, but there is some danger about. What danger I ask. Evil, she says, but you must never mind.

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

room with fireplace, table, 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 with a partial wall at the rear where jugs and bowls are kept.

Then I notice a girl lying in the narrow box of straw. Under her head is a blanket roll. One of her eyes looks away; the other is as straight and unwavering as a she wolf^s. I don't think I should begin any words so I wait for the girl or the Widow to say something. At the foot of the bed of straw is another very small one. A kid lies there, too sick to raise its head or make a sound. When I finish the food down to the last raisin, the Widow asks what is my purpose traveling alone. I tell her my mistress has sent me on an errand. She turns her lips down saying it must be vital to risk a female's life in these parts. My Mistress is dying, I say. My errand can save her. She 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 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

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. 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

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} ~~bled~~. 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} ~~on~~. Each turn to look at me as the little girl screams and hides behind the skirts of one of the gasping women. The man's walking stick clatters to the floor causing a hen to flutter out the door. He retrieves it, points it at me saying who be this? One of the women covers her eyes, saying God help us. The little girl wails and rocks back and forth. The Widow waves both hands saying, she is a guest seeking shelter from the night. We ^{accept} ~~took~~ her in –how could we not–and ^e ~~fed~~ 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 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 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 peer ^{AND shake their heads from} at the candle burn on my palm, the one you kissed to cool ^{they are} them. 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 ~~back on~~. 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. ~~Dressed~~^I 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. One goat turns to look. The billy does not. A bad omen. We squeeze between the fence slats and enter the trees. Now we walk, softly, Daughter Jane leading the way. The sun empties itself, pouring what is left through tree shadow. Birds and small animals 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 walk ^hthrough 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 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? 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.

She did not mind when they called her Sorrow so long as Twin kept using her real name. It was easy to be confused. Sometimes it was the housewife or the sawyer who needed her; other times Twin wanted company to talk or walk or play. Having two names was convenient since Twin couldn't be seen by anybody else. So if she were scrubbing clothes or herding geese and heard the name Captain used, she knew it was Twin. But if any voice called 'Sorrow,' she would know what to expect. Preferable, of course, was when Twin called from the doorstep or whispered in her ear. Then she would quit any chore and follow her identical self.

They had met beneath the surgeon's hammock in the empty ship, looted

of rice, cloth, ammunition—everything. All people were gone or killed and she might have been too had she not been deep in an opium sleep in the surgery. Taken there to have the boils removed from her neck, she drank the mixture the surgeon said would cut off the pain. So when the ship foundered she did not know it, and when all the un-murdered hands and officers and passengers escaped, she didn't know that either. What she remembered was waking up after falling to the floor under the hammock all alone. Captain, her father—nowhere.

Before coming to the sawyer's house, Sorrow had no memories of living on land and now the ship, the only home she knew, was erased as well. Except for a dim trace of Captain. After days searching for others and food, fingering spilt molasses from the deck straight into her mouth, nights listening to wind and lapping sea, Twin joined her under the hammock and they have been together ever since. Both skinned down the broken mast and started walking the shoreline. The bits of dead fish they ate intensified their thirst but it was the sight of two bodies rocking in the surf that made them incautious enough to wade away from the rocks into a lagoon just when the tide was coming in. Both were swept out to deep water, both treaded as long as they could until the cold

over came their senses and they swam not landward, but toward the horizon. Very good luck, for they entered a neap rushing headlong toward shore and into a river beyond.

Sorrow woke up, naked under a blanket, with a warm wet cloth on her forehead and cool fingers holding her hand. The smell of milled wood was overwhelming. A woman with gray hair was watching her.

"What a sight," said the woman. "What a pitiful sight you are. But strong, I think, for a girl." She pulled the blanket up to her patient's neck. "We thought from your clothes you were a lad. In any case, you're not dead."

That was good news because Sorrow thought she was. Then Twin appeared at the foot of the bed, grinning, holding her face in her hands. Comforted, Sorrow slept again, but easy now with Twin nestling near.

The next morning she woke to the grating of saws and the even thicker odor of wood chips. The sawyer's wife came in holding a man's shirt and a boy's breeches.

"These will have to do for now," she said. "I'll have to borrow something more fitting. But there won't be any shoes for a while."

Light headed and wobbly, Sorrow dressed herself then followed a scent of

food. Once fed an extravagant breakfast, she was alert enough to say things but not to recall things. When they asked her name, Twin whispered NO, so she shook her head and found that a convenient gesture for the other information she couldn't remember.

Where do you live?

A ship.

Yes but not always?

Always.

Where is your family?

Head shake.

Who else was on the ship?

Gulls.

What people, girl?

Head shake.

Who was the captain?

Again she shakes her head.

Well, how did you get to land?

Mermaids. I mean whales.

That was when the housewife named her. Next day she gave her a clean cap for her head and told her to mind the geese: toss their grain, herd them together and keep them from waddling off. When two goslings were attacked by a fox, chaos followed and it took forever to regroup the flock. Sorrow kept at it until the housewife threw up her hands and put her to simple cleaning tasks, none of which proved satisfactory. But the pleasure of upbraiding an incompetent servant outweighed any satisfaction of a chore well done. Sorrow concentrated on meal times and the art of escape for short walks with Twin, play times between or instead of weeding, sweeping, scouring and scrubbing. On occasion she had secret company other than Twin, but not better than Twin—her safety, her entertainment, her guide.

The housewife told her it was monthly blood; that all females suffered it and Sorrow believed her until the next month and the next and the next when it did not show. Twin and she talked about it, about whether it was instead the going that took place behind the stack of clapboard, both brothers attending, instead of what the housewife said. Because the pain was outside between her legs, not inside where the housewife said was natural. The hurt was still there

when the sawyer asked Sir to take her away, saying his wife could not keep her. Sir said, Where is she? And Sorrow was called into the mill.

"How old?" asked Sir.

When the sawyer shook his head, Sorrow said "I believe I have eleven years now."

Sir grunted.

"Don't mind her name," said the sawyer. "My wife calls her Sorrow only because she was abandoned. She is a bit mongrelized as you can see. However be that, she will work well without complaint."

As he spoke Sorrow saw the side smile on his face.

She rode in the saddle behind Sir tk miles with one stop on the way. Since it was her first time astride a horse, the burning brought her to tears. Rocking, bumping, clinging to Sir's waistcoat, finally she threw up on it. He reined in, then, and lifted her down, letting her rest while he wiped his coat with leaves. She accepted his water pouch, but the first gulp spewed out along with whatever was left in her stomach.

"Sorrow, indeed," mumbled Sir.

She was grateful when they got close to his farm and he took her out of

the saddle so she could walk the rest of the way. He looked around every few yards to make sure she had not fallen or sickened again.

Twin smiled and clapped her hands when they glimpsed the farm. All along the trail riding behind Sir, Sorrow had looked around with a fear she knew would be even deeper had she not been suffering nausea as well as pain. Miles of hemlock towered like black ship masts and when they fell away Cathedral pine, thick as the horse was long, threw shadows over their heads. No matter how she tried, she never saw their tops which, for all she knew, broke open the sky. Every now and again, a hulking ^{hairy} ~~pelted~~ shape standing deep in the trees watched them pass. Once when an elk crossed their path, Sir had to swerve and turn the horse around four times before it would go forward again. So when she followed Sir into a sun drenched clearing and heard the cackle of ducks neither she nor Twin could have been more relieved. Unlike the housewife, Mistress and Lila both had small straight noses. Before anything, food or rest, Lila insisted on washing Sorrow's hair. Not only the twigs and leaf bits stuck in it bothered her, she feared lice. It was a fear that surprised Sorrow who thought lice, like ticks, fleas or any of the other occupants of the body were more nuisance than danger. Lila thought otherwise and after the hair washing,

scrubbed the girl down twice before letting her in the house. Then, shaking her head from side to side, she gave her a salted rag to clean her teeth.

In the darkness of that first night, scrunched on a mat near the fireplace, Sorrow slept and woke, slept and woke lulled continuously by Twin's voice describing the thousandfold men walking the waves, singing wordlessly. How their teeth glittered more than the whitecaps under their feet. How, as the sky darkened and the moon rose, the edges of their night black skin silvered. How the smell of land, ripe and loamy, brightened the eyes of the crew. Soothed by Twin's voice and the animal fat Lila had spread on her lower part, Sorrow fell into the first sweet sleep she had had in ^{months}~~years~~.

Still, that first morning, she threw her breakfast up as soon as she swallowed. Mistress gave her yarrow tea and put her to work in the vegetable garden before leaving to fodder the stock, Patrican skipping along behind her. It was Lila who told her she was pregnant. If Mistress knew, she never said, perhaps because she was pregnant herself. Sorrow's birthing came too soon, Lila told her, for the infant to survive, but Mistress delivered a fat boy who cheered everybody up—for six months anyway. They put him with his brother at the bottom of the rise behind the house and said prayers. ^{Although} Sorrow thought she

saw it yawn, ~~but~~ Lila wrapped her tiny delivery in a piece of sacking and set it a-sail in the widest part of the stream and far below the beavers' dam. It had no name.

For three years life among them was contented. With Twin, Sorrow never wanted for company. Even if they made her sleep inside, there were stories to listen to and they could steal away during the day for strolls or larks in the forest. There were cherries, too, and walnuts from the deacon. But she had to be quiet. Once he brought her a neckerchief which she filled with stones and threw in the brook, knowing such finery would raise Lila's anger as well as alert Mistress. And although another of Mistress' baby boys perished, Patrician stayed healthy. For a while Lila was persuaded that the boys' deaths were not Sorrow's fault but when Patrician ^{a horse broke his crown} ~~broke her neck~~ she changed her mind.

Then came Florens.

Then came the smithy. Twice.

When Florens first arrived that bitter winter, Sorrow, curious and happy to see a newcomer, was about to step forward and touch one of the braids on the little girl's head. But Twin stopped her—leaning close to Sorrow's face, crying "Wait! Wait!" Sorrow waved Twin's face away, but not quickly enough. Lila,

having taken off her shawl and wrapped it around the child's shoulders, picked her up in her arms and carried her into the house. Thereafter the girl belonged to Lila. They slept together, bathed together, ate together. Lila made clothes for her and tiny shoes made from mole skin. Whenever Sorrow came near, Lila shooed her off or sent her on some task that needed doing right away, all the while making certain everyone else shared the distrust that sparkled in her own eyes. Sorrow remembered how they narrowed, gleamed, when Sir brought her to the farm and insisted that she sleep inside. Kept distant from the little girl, she behaved thereafter the way she always had—with indifferent submission to any one, except Twin.

Years later, when the smithy came, the weather of the place changed. Forever. Twin noticed it first, saying Lila was afraid of the smithy and tried to warn Mistress about him. The warning was fruitless, however. Mistress paid it no attention. She was too happy for guardedness because Sir was not traveling anymore. He was always there, working on the new house, managing deliveries, laying string from angle to angle and in close conversation with the blacksmith about the gate's design. Lila alarmed; Mistress humming with satisfaction; Sir in high spirits. Florens, of course, was the most distracted.

Neither Sorrow nor Twin had settled on exactly what to think of the blacksmith. He seemed complete, unaware of his effect. Was he the danger Lila saw in him or was her fear mere jealousy? Was he simply Sir's perfect building partner or a curse on Florens, altering her behavior from open to furtive? They had yet to make up their minds when Sorrow, returning from the stream with a bucket of water, collapsed, burning and shaking near the new house. It was pure luck that the smithy was right there. He picked her up and lay her down on the pallet where he slept. Sorrow's face and arms were welting. The smithy shouted. Sir poked his head out of the door frame and Florens came running. Mistress arrived and the smithy called for vinegar. Lila went to fetch it and when it came he doused Sorrow's skin, sending her into spasms of pain. While the women sucked air and Sir frowned, the blacksmith heated a knife and slit open one of the swellings. They watched in silence as he tipped Sorrow's own blood drops between her lips. All of them thought it better not to have her in the house, so Sorrow lay sweltering all day, all night—permitted no food or water—in a hammock under the trees as the women took turns fanning her. The constant breeze of their fans sent her back to the deck and to Captain, the tiller in his hand. She heard him before she saw him.

Laughing. Loud, raucous. No. Not laughing. Screaming. Along with the others. High-pitched and low, the screams were far away, on the other side of the white clouds surrounding her. Horses, too. Pounding hooves. Freed from below. Leaping over flour sacks and kicking barrels until the staves broke and a thick sweet blackness poured out. Still, she could not move or tear through the clouds. Pushing, pushing, she fell to the floor while the clouds covered and smothered her whole self, convincing her the screams must have been gulls. When she came to, eyes, the shape and color of her own, greeted her. The puffy clouds, mere threads now, drifted away.

"I'm here," said the girl with ^{a face}eyes matching exactly her own. "I'm always here."

With Twin she was less afraid and the two of them began to search the silent, still, listing ship. Slowly, slowly. Peeking here, listening there finding nothing except a bonnet and sea gulls pecking the remains of a calf.

Under the waving fan, drenched in sweat, dream fused with the memory of freezing day after day on the ship. Other than icy wind, nothing stirred. Aft was the sea, fore a rocky beach below a cliff of stone and brush. Sorrow had never set foot on land and was terrified of leaving ship for shore. It was as

foreign to her as ocean was to sheep. Twin made it possible. When they descended, the earth—mean, hard, hateful, too thick—shocked her. That's when she understood Captain's choice to keep her aboard. He reared her not as a daughter, but a sort of mate-to-be. Dirty, trousered, both wild and obedient with one important skill—patching and sewing sail cloth.

Mistress and Lila quarreled about whether she should be forced to eat or drink, but the blacksmith ruled. Riveted by that hot knife and blood medicine, they deferred. At the close of the third day Sorrow came out of her daze and begged for water. The smithy held her head as she sipped from a gourd. Raising her eyes, she saw Twin seated in the branches above. Rocking, smiling with relief. Now their judgment was clear: the blacksmith was a savior. Shortly afterwards, Sorrow said she was hungry. Bit by bit, under the smithy's care and Florens' nursing, her strength returned. Lila, however, became ugly in her efforts to keep Florens away from the patient and the healer, muttering that she had seen this sickness before when she was a child, and that it would spread like mold to them all. But she lost the battle with Florens. By the time Sorrow recovered, Florens was struck down with another sickness much longer lasting and far more dangerous.

It was while lying in the meadow at the forest's edge, listening to Twin tell a favorite story—the one about a school of fish girls, with pearls for eyes and black-green locks of seaweed hair racing one another, riding the backs of whales—that Sorrow first saw the smithy and Florens coiled around each other. Twin had just gotten to the part where seabirds, excited by the foam trailing the fleet like shooting stars, were joining the race when Sorrow put one finger to her lips and pointed with another. Twin stopped speaking and looked. The blacksmith and Florens were rocking and, unlike female farm animals in heat, she was not standing quietly under the weight and thrust of the male. What Sorrow saw yonder in the grass under a hickory tree was not the silent submission to a slow going behind a pile of clap wood or the hurried one in a church pew that Sorrow knew. This here female stretched, kicked her heels and whipped her head left, right, to, fro. It was a dancing. Florens rolled and twisted from her back to his. He hoisted her up against the hickory; she bent her head into his shoulder. A dancing. Horizontal one minute, another minute vertical.

Sorrow watched until it was over; until stumbling like tired old people, they dressed themselves. It all ended when the blacksmith grabbed Florens'

hair, yanked her head back to put his mouth on hers. Then they went off in different directions. It amazed her to see that. In all of the goings she knew, no one had ever kissed her mouth. Ever.

It was natural, once Sir was buried and Mistress fell ill, to send for the blacksmith. And he came. Alone. Sorrow and Lila watched him from the door as he stood beside the sickbed.

"Thank you for coming," whispered Mistress. "Will you make me drink my own blood? I'm afraid there is none left."

He smiled.

"Am I dying?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. The sickness is dead. Not you."

Mistress closed her eyes. When she opened them ^{they} were glassy with tears which she blotted with the back of a bandaged hand. She thanked him again and again, then told Lila to prepare him something to eat.

Exhausted by her weight, and resting on a mat in the shade of the house Sorrow stroked her protruding belly. In the kitchen the blacksmith was eating. Sorrow and Twin heard the conversation between him and Lila.

Lila: Will you stay the night?

He: Part of it.

Lila: Where is she? Is she all right?

He: ^{Quite} ~~Very~~ all right.

Lila: When will she return? Who will bring her back?

He: A long silence while he chewed.

Lila: You can't keep her against her will.

He: Why would I?

Lila: Then? Tell me!

He: When it suits her, she will come.

~~He did not wait for dawn~~
~~Way before light of the next day,~~ ^{in darkness} he rode off leaving Mistress still weak ^{of the afternoon}
but mightily relieved and Lila in despair. In the silence ~~that~~ followed his leaving, ~~the~~
Sorrow's water broke unleashing panic. Mistress was not well enough to help deliver and remembering the yawn, she did not trust Lila. Forbidden to enter the village, Sorrow had no choice. Twin was strangely silent, even hostile, when Sorrow tried to discuss what to do, where to go. Everything was in disarray. The weather was warming and as a result of the cancelled visit of a neighbor's bull, no cow in foal. Acres and acres needed turning, milk became clabber in the pan. A fox pawed the hen yard and rats ate the eggs. Mistress would not

recover soon enough to catch the heap the farm was falling into. And without her pet, Lila, the silent workhorse, seemed to have lost interest in everything, including feeding herself. Collapse was everywhere, so Sorrow took herself, a knife and a blanket to the river bank the moment the first pain hit. She stayed there, alone, screeching when she had to, sleeping in between, until the last brute tear of body and breath. She pulled, eased and turned the tiny form stuck between her legs. Blood and more swirled in the river, attracting young cod. When the baby, a boy, whimpered, she knifed the cord then rinsed him, dabbing his mouth, ears and unfocussed eyes. Following the expulsion of after birth, she wrapped the infant in the blanket and rested a while before squeezing her breasts til one delivered. It was the first time she had done anything, anything at all, by herself. Minus Captain or crew or anyone. Twin's absence was hardly noticed as she concentrated on her son. Instantly, she knew what to name him. Complete.

In the noon quiet of the following day, while nursing, she saw a figure climb down from a cart. It wore Florens shift and cap, but its hands were tied and it moved so slowly it took more than a moment for Sorrow to be certain. And when she lifted a hand in greeting, there was no response. Not a glance,

not even a smile at the newborn. It was as though she were seeing the ghost of Florens, a bound and barefoot one, the real one no where insight. Yet the specter had substance for, with a shriek of relief and adoration, Lila rushed down the path and, just like eight years ago, threw a shawl around Florens and held her in her arms. Sorrow lifted Complete over her shoulder and watched the two women disappear. Patting her baby's back she wondered. Did something happen? For all his kindness and healing powers, had she been wrong about the blacksmith? Had Lila, who was tender, almost servile to Florens as though she were bruised, had she been right all along? Patting Complete, with the insight new mothers claim, Sorrow doubted it. He had saved her life with vinegar and her own blood; had known right away Mistress' state and prescribed solvent to lessen the scarring. ^{the rooster had not} ~~And~~ ^{yet} ~~when he rode away he~~ ^{crowed} ~~and~~ was as cheerful as a bluebird. It was Florens who had done a bad thing, she was sure. A very bad thing to need tying up. But what could it be? Yet, knowing her all these years, Sorrow was certain of one thing: regardless of her ferocity under the butternut trees, Florens could never, would never, hurt a soul.

1/10/10
There is only a little blood and the sound is light, no more than the crack
a wing of roast grouse makes when you tear it, warm and tender, from its
breast. He screams and screams then faints. I don't hear your horse only your
shout and know I am lost. That I will never again in this world know the sight of
your welcoming smile or taste the sugar of your shoulder as you take me in your
arms when I arrive. My walking to you is hard and long and the hurt of it is
gone as soon as I see the yard, the forge, the little cabin where you are. The
smell of fire and ash trembles me but it is the glee in your eyes that kicks my
heart over. You are asking me how and how long and laughing at my clothes
and the scratches everywhere. But when I answer your why you frown. We

settle, you do, and I agree because there is no other way. You will ride at once to Mistress alone. I am to wait at the forge, you say. I can not join you because it is faster without me. And there is another reason, you say. You turn your head. My eyes follow where you look.

This happens twice before. The first time it is me peering around my madre's dress reaching for her hand. The second time it is a pointing screaming little girl hiding behind her mother and clinging to her skirts. Both times are full of danger and I am expelled. Now I am seeing a little boy come into the forge holding a corn husk doll. He is younger than everybody I know. You reach out your forefinger toward him and he takes hold of it. You say this is why I can not travel with you. The child you call Maliak is not to be left alone. He is a foundling and that his father is leaning over the reins and the horse is continuing until it stops and eats grass in the lane. People from the village come, learn he is dead and find the boy sitting quietly in the cart. No one knows who the dead man is and nothing in his belongings can tell. You accept him until a future when a townsman or magistrate places him which may be never because although the dead man's skin is rosy the boy's is not. So maybe he is not a son at all.

I worry worry as the boy steps closer to you. How you offer and he owns your forefinger. I am not liking how his eyes go when you send him to play in the yard. But then you bathe my journey from my face and arms and give me soup. Bits of rabbit floating down there. It needs salt. We talk of many things and I don't say what I am thinking. That I will stay. That when you return from healing Mistress whether she is live or no I am here with you always. Never never without you. Here I am not forbidden. No one handles my backside. No one whinnies like sheep or a goat because I drop in fear and weakness. No one screams at the sight of me. No one watches my body for how it is unseemly. With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you.

I am calm when you leave although you do not touch me close. You saddle up and ask me to water the bean shoots and collect the eggs. I go there but the hens make nothing. Madre is coming soon, I know. The boy Malaik is near. He sleeps behind the door to where you do. I am calm, quiet knowing you are very soon here again. I take off Sir's boots and lie on your cot trying to catch the fire smell of you. Slices of starlight cut through the shutters. Madre

steps from the door holding her little boy's hand, my shoes in her pocket. I tell her to go and when she fades I hear a small creaking. In the dark I know he is there. Eyes big, wondering and cold. I rise and come to him and ask what. What Malaik, what. He is silent but the hate in his eyes is loud. He wants my leaving. This can not happen. The pelt moves and I feel the itch and gnaw of teeth. This expel can never happen again.

In the morning the boy is not there but I prepare porridge for the two of us. He is standing in the lane holding tight the corn husk doll and looking toward where you rode away. Suddenly I am remembering the dog's profile rising from the widow's kettle. Then I can not read its full meaning. Now I know how. I am guarding. Otherwise I am missing all understanding of how to protect myself. First I notice Sir's boots are gone. I look all around, stepping through the hut's two rooms, the forge, in cinder and in pain. I see the curl of a garden snake edging up to the door saddle. I watch its slow crawl until it is dead in the sun.

I am clear.

The boy quits the lane. He comes in but will neither eat nor speak. We stare at each other across the table. He does not blink. Nor me. His fingers

cling like claws the doll. I think that must be where his power is. I take it away and place it on a shelf too high for him to reach. He screams, screams. Tears falling. I walk outside to keep from hearing. He is not stopping. Is not. A cart goes by. The couple in it glance but do not greet or pause. Finally the screaming boy is silent so I go in. The doll is not on the shelf. It is ^{flung to} lying in a ^{like a precious child thrown away,} corner on the floor. Porridge drips from the table. The stool is on its side. Seeing me he returns to screaming and that is when I clutch him. That is why I pull his arm. And yes I do hear the shoulder crack but there is no blood from it. A little comes from his mouth hitting the table corner. Only a little blood. He drops into fainting just as I hear you shout. But not my name. Not me. Him. Malaik you shout. Malaik.

Seeing him still and limp on the floor with that trickle of red your face ^{shouting where is your ruth?} breaks down. You knock me away. With such tenderness you lift him, the boy. When you see the angle of his arm you cry out. The boy opens his eyes then faints once more when you twist it into its proper place. Yes, there is a little blood. But you are not there when it comes, so how do you know I am the reason. Why do you knock me away without certainty of what is true. You see the boy down and believe bad about me without question. You are correct but

why no question of it. I am the one first to be knocked away. To fall and curl up on the floor. The teeth gnaw. The pelt moves. No question. You choose the boy. You make him lie down with the doll and turn to me your broken face, eyes without glee, rope pumps in your neck. I am lost. No word of sorrow for knocking me away. No tender fingers to touch where you hurt me.

Your mistress recovers you say. You say you will hire someone to take me to her. ¶ Away from you. Why are you killing me I ask you.

I want you to go. Now.

Why? Why?

Because you are a slave.

What?

You heard.

Sir makes me that.

I don't mean him.

Then who?

You.

What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me.

No. Not because of Sir. You have made yourself one.

You put me in misery.

Head bridled. Body wild.

I am adoring you.

And a slave to that too.

Don't.

A slave is wilderness.

I have shock. I am living the dying inside. But no. Not again. Not ever.
I unfold. The teeth grind and grind until the hammer is in my hand.

It is hard without Sir's boots. Wearing them I could walk a stony river
bed. Move quickly through forests and down hills of nettles. It is also hard
without Sir or Mistress' letter. They are my only protection. My way fails. What

I read

or cipher is useless now. Heads of dog's, owls, garden snakes all is nothing.

Most of all it is hard without you who I am thinking always as my life and my
safety. My safety from harm, from any who look closely at me only to throw me
away. From all those who believe they have claim and rule over me. You say I
am wilderness. I am. Are you afraid? Don't be. The hammer strikes air many
times before it gets to you where it dies in weakness. Our clashing is long yet it

frees me and ices me both. You tie me up. When the drayman comes he is afraid so you do not unbind my wrists. I settle. ^{I float} An ice floe cut away from the bank. I have no shoes. I have no kicking heart no road no tomorrow. The pelted thing sleeps. For now.

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

Tk [mistress scarred but well, Lila devotion. Sorrow eagle eyed watching her baby. Insists on another name. Etc.]

There is no more room in this room. The floor is covered. With words. From now you will stand to hear me. The walls make trouble because lamp light is too small to see by. I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other. My arms ache so but it is good to tell you this. I could not tell it to any but you. I am near the door and at the closing now. What will I do with

my nights when the telling stops? All of a sudden I am remembering. You won't read my telling. You don't know how to. Don't laugh. Maybe one day you will learn. If so, come to this farm again, open the gate you made, enter the new still empty house, climb the stairs and enter this talking room in daylight. If you don't read this no one will. These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom all across the world that is this room. See? You are wrong about me. I am wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. Without mercy.

Madre.

Neither one will want your brother. I know their tastes. Breasts provide the pleasure more than simpler things. Yours are rising too soon and are becoming irritated by the cloth covering your little girl chest. And they see and I see them see. No good follows even if I offered you to one of the boys in the quarter. Figo. You remember him. He was the gentle one with the horses and played with you in the yard. I saved the rinds for him and sweet bread to take away for the others. Bess, his mother, knew my mind and did not disagree. She watched over her son like a hawk as I did over you. But it never does any lasting good, my love. There was no protection. None. Certainly not with your vice for shoes. It was as though you were hurrying up your breasts and hurrying

also the lips of an old married couple.

Understand me. There was no protection and nothing in the catechism to tell them no. I tried to tell Reverend Father. I hoped if we could learn our letters somehow some day you could make your way. Reverend Father was full of bravery and said it was what God wanted no matter if they fined him, imprisoned him or hunted him down with gunfire for it as they did others who taught we to read. He believed we would love God more if we knew the letters to read by. I don't know that. What I know is there is magic in knowing.

When the tall man came to dine, I saw he hated the food and I saw things in his eyes that said he did not trust Senor, Senora or their sons. His way, I thought, is another way. His country away from here. There was no animal in his heart. He never looked at me the way Senor does. He did not want.

I don't know who is your father. It was too dark to see any of them. They came at night and took we three including Bess to the curing shed. Shadows of men sat on barrels, then stood. They said they were told to break we in. There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below.

Long ago

^ We sang in the barrocoons . Some of we fought. Mostly we slept or wept. Then the new men divided we and placed we in small boats. I welcomed the circling sharks but they avoided me as if knowing I preferred their teeth to the chains around my neck my waist my ankles. When the canoe heeled some of we jumped, others were pulled under and we did not see their blood swirl until we alive ones were retrieved and placed under guard. Once on the big ship we saw for the first time rats and it was hard to figure out how to die. Some of we tried; some of we did. Refusing to eat the oiled yam. Strangling we throat. Other ways too. Who could tell in that moaning and crying in the dark, in the awfulness? It is one matter to live in your own waste; it is another to live in another's.

Barbados, I heard. After times and times of puzzle about why I could not die as others did. After pretending to be so to get thrown overboard. Whatever the mind plans, the body has other interests. So to Barbados where I found relief in the clean air and standing up straight under a sky the color of home. Grateful for the familiar heat of the sun instead of the steam of packed ~~my~~ flesh. Grateful too for the earth supporting my feet never mind the pen I shared with others. The pen that was smaller than the cargo hold we sailed in.

One by one we were made to jump high, to bend over, to open our mouths. The children were best at this. Like grass trampled by elephants, they sprang up to try life again. They had stopped weeping long ago. Now eyes wide, they tried to please, to show their ability and therefore their living worth. How unlikely their survival. How likely another herd will come to destroy them. Men of heaped teeth fingering the hasps of whips. Men flushed red with cravings. Or, as I came to learn, fatal ground life in the cane we were brought there to harvest. Snakes, tarantulas, lizards they called crocs. I was burning sweat in cane only a short time when they took me away to sit on a platform in the sun. It was there I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my tribe. I was negro. Everything, language, dress, gods, tribal marks, habits, song—all of it cooked together in the color of my skin. So it was as a black that I was purchased by Senor taken out of the cane and shipped north to his tobacco plants. A miracle. But first the mating, the taking of me and Bess and one other to the curing shed. Afterwards the men apologized. And it would have been all right. It would have been good, both times because the results were you and your brother. But then there was Senor and his wife. I began to tell Reverend Father but shame made my words nonsense. He did not

understand or he did not believe. He told me not to despair or be faint of heart but to love God and Jesus Christ with all my soul; to pray for the deliverance that would be mine at judgment; that no matter what others may say, I was not a soulless animal, a curse; that Protestants were in error, in sin, and if I remained innocent in mind and deed I would be welcomed beyond the valley of this woeful life into an everlasting one. Amen.

But you wanted the shoes of a loose woman and a cloth around your chest did no good. You caught Senor's eye. I was singing at the pump. ^{A song} ~~One~~ ^{about green} ~~of the old~~ bird fighting then dying when the monkey steals her eggs. I heard their voices and gathered you and your brother to stand in their eyes.

One chance, I thought. Another miracle is required. There is no protection but there is difference. You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed and agreed to take me to close the debt. I knew Senor would not allow it. I said you. Take you, my love. The tall one was sweating, laughing, restless. I knelt before him. He said yes.

It was not a miracle. It was mercy. I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart remains each and every day.

Florens.