

A Measure of Light

A NOVEL

"A brilliant evocation of seventeenth-century England and America."

SANDRA GULLAND, author of the *Josephine B. Trilogy*

BETH POWNING

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE HATBOX LETTERS* AND *THE SEA CAPTAIN'S WIFE*

*A Measure
of
Light*

BETH POWNING



ALFRED A. KNOFF CANADA

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Mary Dyer's 1659 letter to the General Court, written from the Boston jail

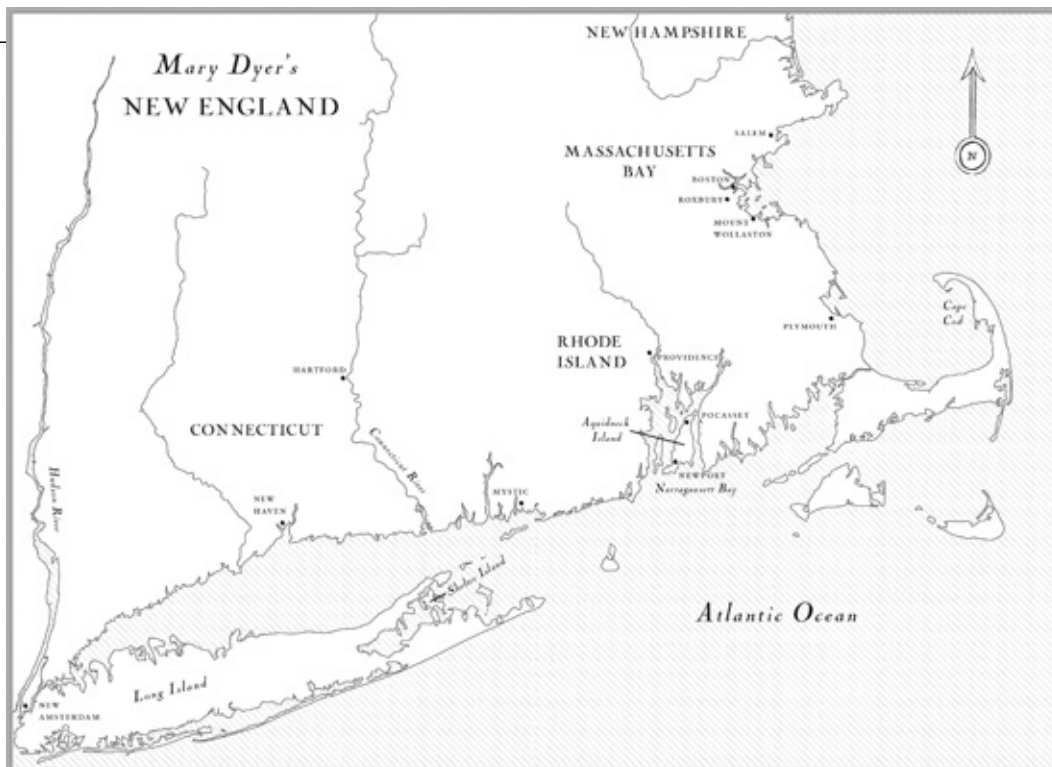
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To

my mother

Alison Brown Davis

with love



I have laboured carefully, not to mock, lament, or execrate, but to understand human actions ...

SPINOZA

Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, 1677

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These Things Are True

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I.
LONDON

1634



*We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.*

“The Canonization”

JOHN DONNE



SNOWFLAKES BLEW UP THE THAMES on an east wind. Mary picked her way along the narrow street heading to the market. It was the day before Christmas. Ropes of holly and ivy sprigged with rosemary looped across wood-and-plaster houses; the air was filled with the yeasty scent of baking, sweetening the stench that rose from gutters. She stepped quickly around a dead dog that lay in half-frozen mud, maggots teeming in its entrails.

Mary heard the screams and shouts of a crowd. The sounds grew louder, rising over London's din of bells, wheels, hammers, shrill-voiced vendors. Like a fish in a weir, she could not resist the press of bodies and was funnelled into a square where people massed before a wooden platform. Three men stood upon it with heads and arms thrust through pillories. Women and children leaned from windows studying the gallants, ladies, merchant apprentices, beggars, thieves, prostitutes. Breath hung before mouths like the morning web of spiders.

Mary found herself shoulder to shoulder with a small man. He held a rag to bleeding gum. "What was their crime?" she shouted, leaning close.

"Puritans," he slurred. Fresh blood seeped into the fabric's weave. "Who did naught but write pamphlets against the king's new ..." He paused to spit. "Archbishop."

A flash of metal—on the platform, the hangman drew his knife and stepped towards one of the three prisoners. Over the crowd's excitement and protest, a howl rose, broke into a scream. The hangman dropped one of the prisoner's ears into a bucket. Blood spurted from the mutilated scalp. People rushed to the platform holding up bowls, shreds of cloth, sticks.

Martyr's blood. People held such blood in reverence—a purifier of souls, like the waters of baptism.

The hangman stretched out the man's other ear tight as a hen's neck. A fresh roar erupted from the crowd. The knife rose again, sliced down.

Why torment a man so old? Perhaps fifty.

His skin was yellow as spring parsnip; he twisted against his restraints, his mouth a cavity. Blood poured down his neck. The hangman pinched one of the prisoner's nostrils, snagged his knife to its edge, made a jagged upward cut.

Mary heard blood rush in her own ears, suffered a drastic dimming of vision. She fought her way from the crowd, stopped against a recessed door in the relative calm of a nearby street.

She had sought nothing more than the ingredients for a Christmas pudding.

Walk, and you will not faint.

Her Aunt Urith's voice came to her, stern, practical, and so Mary took a breath and stepped forth again. Between the snow and coal smoke, the streets were dark by three in the afternoon; already, people followed link-boys who carried torches, their quivering light reflecting in diamond-shaped windowpanes.

Mary purchased veal, mutton, raisins, nutmeg and cloves. Abstracted, she neither chose nor

bargained wisely and then turned southwards, towards home, a small house just down-river from Whitehall, the king's palace.

The walk steadied her. She shifted her bundles, waited for a cart to pass, went down the short street. At its end, she could see the masts of riverboats crossing in the snowy dusk. She pushed open the oak door and set her bundles on the table. Only then, as she removed her scarf and hung her cape, did her hands begin to shake.

Upstairs in the bedchamber her breath steamed on the cold air. She stirred the coal and wound a wolverine fur around her neck and pulled a chair close to the hearth. She took up her Bible but could not read, so pressed it to her breast. Her heart beat fast and light.

The ear, falling through the air like a scrap of meat.

William was a birthright Puritan. She herself was a convert.

The door opened below and she heard her husband's voice. His steps came, eager on the stairs. He burst into the room, smelling of snow and leather, pulling off his gloves. He held a small box.

"I have a gift for—"

"William, I came upon three men in pillories. Puritans. Perhaps they were clergy, I do not know." She hugged the Bible closer, took a long breath. "The hangman did slice off two ears and slit a nostril."

He was not much taller than she, sleek as a ferret. He set the box down, held her face; she smelled the sweetness of jasmine and roses. He was a haberdasher and had a shop in the New Exchange; he washed his hands daily, for he must be gentle with the palms of great ladies, even those of the queen herself, introducing fingers into pearled gloves, delicately tugging gauntlets up plump arms.

"You were not hurt?"

"Nay, William." Her voice held the broadened vowels of Yorkshire.

His lips tightened. His hands fell from her face and he sat, bleak, forgetting the gift. For awhile they did not speak, as if the danger they faced was like shame, whose contemplation was ugly.

"Must be they were clergy," he said. "Archbishop Laud has his spies, now. They sit quiet in churches and report those preachers who refuse the new rules."

"They are required to wear the surplice."

"Aye, and must bow at the name of Christ, and must follow the Book of Common Prayer to the letter and ..." He spread his hands. "All the rest of it."

Aye, the rest.

"Many are leaving," William continued. "I hear another ship hath sailed for New England. 'Tis rumoured that Archbishop Laud may close the borders."

"Do you think we should go, William?"

He reached for a pamphlet they had been reading aloud to one another. He turned the pages, frowning.

"Boston ..." he murmured. "Its bay is 'free of cockling seas' with 'high cliffs that should out the boisterous seas.' Every family hath a well of sweet water. 'Those that drink it be as healthful, fresh and lusty as those that drink beer.'"

Mary held out her hand for the pamphlet.

" 'Wolves, ravenous rangers, frequent English habitations,' " she read. " 'Big-boned, lan"

paunched, deep-breasted, prick-eared, dangerous teeth, great bush tails ... they set up the howlings and call their companies together at night to hunt, at morning to sleep.' ” She closed the book, handed it back. “You have your lease, William, your customers.”

She crossed her arms to snug the fur closer around her neck. Brown curls, flattened by a linen cap drawn by a string at the base of her neck, framed her forehead; sensing her own doubt, she bit the lips of a mouth so wide, so sensitive, that its tender half-smile, should she catch sight of it in windowglass, bore no relationship to her feelings.

“In Massachusetts, they are free,” he said, as if reasoning with himself.

The scene swept over her like a wave of nausea. How delicately the hangman had pinched the nostril between his fingers. How carefully he had positioned the knife.

—

Propped against the bolster, naked, she stared up at the ceiling cloth. Beneath the coverlet William lay sprawled on his back, one leg thrown over hers. He slept.

As I cannot ...

She felt herself to be poised between two places of equal, but different, terrors. Here, in England, persecution. There, in New England—wolves, forests, fierce winters.

In either place, however, she would have William.

She had met him at the church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Sensing eyes upon her, she had looked across the aisle and seen a young man, narrow face framed by short-cropped hair, green eyes long as willow leaves. He had worked his way through the crowd, afterwards, and they would pass through the door together. In the tumult of the street, she could not move for the intensity of his gaze. He lifted her hand and for the first time she smelled the perfume of his gloves. Then he bowed, spoke: “William Dyer.” “Mary Barrett,” she answered. They exchanged what information was needful, and he came to her cousin’s apartment, where Mary resided, and they went about the city throughout the summer, and married in the fall.

Love for the young man mingled with another joy—the ecstasy of conversion.

A journey.

So the lecturer called it. Some, he warned, would be unwilling to “loose” themselves from all they would leave behind. Yet others, who shed all regrets and desires, might “join the company of saints,” a way that was not taken up by the “shell of religion,” as he called it, but the “one true way that leadeth unto Life.”

She turned on her side, relaxed by memory, and ran a finger along William’s collarbone and over the curve of his waist. She felt the stir of his soft prick in her hand, heard his changed breath. He rolled over, tugged at the sheet and tossed it away. Tongues—muscular and agile—while his hand slid to what was no longer hers alone but a shared secret. His fingers making her mind fly and shatter. *Journey. Join. Loose myself. Loose myself.* Pain as he entered her, and then the conjoining, surprising in its ease. Their mingled cries, the shudder of seeing *Child, make a child.*

On Christmas morning, they made their way through the palace of Whitehall, a vast warren of buildings jumbled on the north bank of the Thames. The scent of roasting meat oiled the air; servants laden with linens and steaming platters choked its alleys. Snowflakes drifted

wide-spaced, wavering, as if threaded on invisible strings.

They entered an apartment overlooking the jousting yard.

“Your coif, Mary, always tipped. There.” Mary endured her cousin’s possessive touch. Dyota, childless, adjusted the black silk, popping finger to mouth, slicking the curls on Mary’s forehead. Cousin Ralf, the king’s Master of Robes, appeared in a high-crowned hat, mustache waxed at the tips, long hair hanging in curls. In the window’s cold light, he bent sternly to inspect the yellow leather of William’s gloves. The men stood, then, looking on over the quintain and its sandbag, capped with snow.

“Business is good?” Ralf spoke with delicate respect. With two fingertips, he stroked a mole on his cheek.

“The queen hath visited my stall. I have ordered a half-dozen gloves.”

“A gift?”

“Nay, for herself. One pair is of white leather, with satin gauntlets.” William sketched curves on the air. “Silk arches on the tabs surrounding sea monsters and serpents. And a bar of tulips, carnations and lilies.”

Only sixteen, I was, Mary thought, handing a Christmas pudding to the serving girl and unhooking her cape, when Urith sent me to London. “Dyota will find you a husband,” Urith had said, with love and regret, placing her hands on Mary’s shoulders as if to reassure herself of the girl’s strength.

They took their places at a long table. Dyota fussed with her napkin, her lace collars, her garnet necklace.

Hard to believe Urith is her mother.

Urith was not only a midwife but a specialist in the healing of eyes, so skilled that a surgeon in York sent her his difficult cases. Her words were direct and honest; her hands, when not needed, took their rest.

Ralf spoke the prayer. Mary glanced at her young husband. He gave her the shadow of a wry smile before bending his head. They were seated opposite one another, close enough to touch feet. Ralf and Dyota sat far apart at the table’s ends, like royalty.

“Amen.”

Dyota rang a bronze bell for the serving girl.

Waiting, hands in lap, Mary remembered the day she and her older brother had gone to stay with Aunt Urith. Galfrid, her father, had bent to her, explaining that he had been called away from his surgery to perform an amputation and that he wished to take her mother, Sisley, to see the bluebells. “Only three days,” he had said, “and we shall be home.” *Bluebell Fields of them, spreading to the horizon.*

“The king hath brought a European painter to make portraits of the family,” Ralf said, lifting his spoon. He took a bite, chewed. His eyebrows lifted with a sorrowful expression, masking pride. “Van Dyck.” His long fingers were particular from days spent rubbing gold buttons with a chamois cloth.

“We heard about it at last night’s masque.” Dyota shaped her mouth busily around the words. “Oh, ’twas brilliant. Inigo Jones did make the set and a man named Ben Jonson wrote the words. The queen herself acted.”

Words flew between Dyota and Ralf, spoken rapidly, as if to exclude William and Mary. *Vatican envoys. Spanish diplomats.* Such a frail foundation for a life, Mary thought, eyes on her

plate.

"I spoke with the queen's adorable dwarf!" Dyota said. A line of powder crusted the ledge of her double chin. The words of a lecture came to Mary's mind.

"... a dead fly is but a small thing, yet it corrupts the most precious ointment of the apothecary and makes it stink ..."

Mary and William glanced at one another again, knowing they served as audience.

"Yesterday, Mary witnessed the mutilation of three Puritan clergymen," William said.

Burnings rose on Ralf's cheeks, his eyes watered.

"Do you know," William continued, holding his spoon with both hands as if to snap it with his thumbs, "'tis said that Archbishop Laud keeps a list of clergymen? He pens an 'O' beside those who are Orthodox. And a 'P' against those who are Puritans."

"I did *not* know," Ralf said, offended. "Where do you hear such things?"

"The Puritans of Lincolnshire have asked me to visit our people thrown in prison. Did you not know that the Tower begins to burst with clergy?"

Mary nudged his foot beneath the table, feeling that he displayed his information like wares on a table.

"You must not," Dyota breathed. "'Twould put Mary in danger. Perhaps even us."

With her vow of obedience, Mary had accepted her place in the hierarchy: the creatures of the earth, plants and animals, the lowliest; then children; then women. Then men. Above them all, God. She bore like a wooden collar knowledge of what was seemly or possible for a wife.

She drew breath, determined to voice her opinion.

"I would go myself, cousin," Mary said. She spoke calmly, cooling William's heat by buttressing his indignation. "They have done no harm. Some of them were required to answer the Visitation Articles. Nine hundred questions and every one must be answered correctly. Who could manage such a task? No one. Not even those who pose the questions."

Ralf raised a hand, flicking away Mary's words. He leaned towards William.

"I do not know who is in the Tower, or why," he said. His lips quivered. "But keep your nose out of it, William. Those who put them there know the why and wherefore of it, and are better placed than you to have their reasons."

William pushed back his chair. He glared at Ralf. "Gold, silver, lace, stained glass, the things would put in our churches. Papistry."

"I heard the queen brought her own confessor," Mary said. "And her Capuchin monks."

"'Tis nothing!" Dyota shrieked, suddenly, slapping the table with both hands. "'Tis his business. Ralf, make them stop this talk."

"Did you not hear?" William said. "Mary saw *clergymen in the stocks*. Having their ears sliced from their heads."

Ralf rose from the table. Love for his king was like a wasting sickness, Mary thought, seeing how shock rendered his skin translucent, like a porcelain glaze.

"'Tis unseemly talk for Christmas, William. You brought this subject to the table and it has spoiled the pudding. You see, your cousin could not finish."

Dyota pressed ringed hand to mouth, tears welling.

Wants me to go to her but I feel no pity ...

They did not finish their own pudding and Mary did not retrieve the plate on which she

had brought it.

In March, Mary told William. She had missed two months of her flowers.

When Dyota learned of Mary's pregnancy, she sent a letter of appeasement, with an invitation to visit.

Their time together became a matter of politeness—on Dyota's part, an avid disgorgement of court gossip; on Mary's, of answering questions about her health, which was of great fascination to her cousin.

Mary did not tell her that William went once a week to visit prisoners in the Tower, purchased and brought food, paper, and ink for them; wrote letters to his family in Lincolnshire informing them of what he heard or inferred concerning Archbishop Laud's intentions. She could not tell her of lectures they attended secretly in a Kensington home; or discuss the fact that the countryside was greatly disturbed by Puritans who went to the churches decorated under Laud's edicts—and smashed stained-glass windows, bludgeoned gold candlesticks, burned Books of Common Prayer. Or that Parliament had been shut down by the king, and that many of its members were Puritans.

Dyota bade her servant bring jellies and custards, fussed at Mary, urging her to indulge. Her eyes rested eagerly on her cousin's bosom, which swelled over the lace edging of her dress. Mary tugged at her collar, covering the plump flesh.

"Ah, Ralf and William," Dyota said, beseechingly. "Once the baby arrives they will forgive their differences. We are family, after all."

Dyota gossiped with the wife of an earl, who confessed that her husband had brought a beautiful young serving girl from the Shetland Islands and could not keep his eyes from her. Dyota had bade the woman send the servant to Mary. Seeing the girl's sweetness and wondering at her terror, Mary hired her.

Sinnie replied to her mistress in an English filled with peculiar words. She whispered her tilting prayers in Norn, the other language of Shetland. At sixteen, she stood barely taller than a twelve-year-old girl and would not meet William's eyes. Her skin was the colour of cream peppered with freckles.

On a day of cold rain, Mary and Sinnie sat by the fire in the hall of their little house. Mary picked spine and bones from the flesh of a poached carp. Sinnie pressed a coffin of sweet dough. The large room had but one high window and so by afternoon the soot-blackened walls leaned and shrank in firelight and shadow.

"Memory," Mary said. "*Do you remember the fish?* All I need say to my brother Wyl, and in our minds we will be crossing the bridge through the lilacs' perfume and the scent from the Kettlesing bake houses. And then we stop to watch the trout swimming in the Wharf Shadows a-quiver in the green water ..."

Sinnie had set aside the coffin, was peeling onions. The papery skins fluttered to the floor. She glanced up at her mistress, met her eyes and looked away.

“Do you have brothers, Sinnie?” Mary asked. She was patient with the girl, who seldom spoke and when addressed was seized with fright.

“Aye,” she whispered. Slices fell from her knife, circinate hoops juicy on the black wood. She blinked, her eyes filled with onion tears. “Two.”

“And would it be as I said? You would speak a word and they would remember, the same as you?”

“Aye,” Sinnie repeated. She took a breath, held the knife palm over knuckles, like holding hands with herself for courage. “I could tell of the greit sky over our croft on a spring morning—and if ’twere my brothers present, they would hear the dogs caaing the sheep or see the ponies with their klibbers and meshies and know what I meant if I said ’twas so clear we could see the far holmes and even the beaches of Hildesay.”

The girl’s longest sentence. She sees we are not so dissimilar.

“My brother died,” Mary said. “I did learn of it shortly before you came to us. He went to sea. His ship was lost. Now I have lost mother, father and brother. We were orphans, you see. Our parents drowned together. A flash flood caught their carriage.”

At the far end of the hall, a kettle of stew hung from the fire hook, steaming, and three-legged pipkins filled with mussels stood in the coals. Sun had not brightened the room for days. The streets were deep in black mud and the house, sprayed by passing drays, was splattered all the way to the second storey.

Sinnie looked up. Mary saw her eyes lighten with sympathy, and the hint of a sad smile quickly repressed.

In the ill-lit room, Mary ran fishy hands over her belly. She had dreamed of how she would make for her child goodness and joy such as she had known so briefly, sitting in her mother’s walled garden amidst forget-me-not and daffodils.

And now we are in danger. Here, in the place I thought to make a home.

“Soon I will feel the baby kicking,” she murmured.

“I am a craft hand with a needle.” Sinnie took a breath, lifted the knife. The catch in her voice betrayed how ardently she longed to be setting stitches in a baby’s cap rather than weeping over onions. “I can make wee caps and curches and sarks.”

The girl bent closer to her work, as if embarrassed by her confession.

Would she come with us?



WILLIAM AND MARY FOUND THE place, a narrow, tippy house on Blackfriars Street, six storeys high, squeezed by its neighbours like a book on a shelf. William knocked; the door opened a crack and a thin, ginger-haired man peered out. It was Mr. Bartholomew, who, they'd been told, was hiding parishioners from St. Botolph's, William's family's church. Laud had prevented several ships of emigrants from sailing to Massachusetts, so the family had come to London under cover of darkness.

William whispered his connections. The man vanished, reappeared. He opened the door and they slipped inside. The room was crowded. An older woman with wary hazel eyes stood at the hearth, facing the room, baby held over her shoulder, children pressed to her skirts. She watched William and Mary enter, her hand making small circles on the baby's back. Lines of worry marked her forehead, compassion etched creases beside her eyes. She observed them with an intransigence so strong that Mary felt a stab of fear.

"My name is Anne Hutchinson," the woman said. "This is my husband, Will. This is—" One by one, she introduced ten children and four adults: her sister, her brother-in-law, and two spinster cousins.

A servant girl brought a plate of aniseed jumbles. Only one window allowed the lingering evening light of May; candles had been lit, illuminating pewter plates and varnished oak. The room's ambient rustle of whisper and movement settled.

Anne Hutchinson resumed the tale she had been telling. She recounted how plague had struck their village, Alford, three years earlier, and how they had lost sixteen-year-old Susan and eight-year-old Elizabeth. Devastated, she had withdrawn from friends and neighbours for a twelve-month, seeking solace in religion. Two more babes—her thirteenth and fourteenth—had since followed and she and her husband had made the decision to emigrate. Will had sold his business, sheep and the house. They had loaded whatever belongings they would take to America onto carts and made the three-day journey to London.

The baby began to fuss and she settled it to suckle. "'Tis ever my practice to open the Bible at random to see where it pleaseth God to reveal himself. So I closed my eyes and placed my finger upon the page. It fell upon the passage in Isaiah: 'Thy teachers shall not be removed from a corner any more, but thine eyes shall see thy teachers.' Now, before my seclusion, I had been in the custom of holding conventicles at my home to elucidate the sermons of my teacher, the Reverend Cotton, for the women of the village. He had emigrated before. And thus it was revealed to me that we should go thither to the New World."

"The Reverend John Cotton?" said Mr. Bartholomew, amazed.

"Aye. He was forced to flee shortly after his marriage and did not see his wife again until pregnant, she joined him on the *Griffin*. He is now in Boston and is eager to receive us."

Mary saw Mr. Bartholomew glance at his wife, eyebrows raised; then he cast a second look at Anne almost as if he could not believe his ears. Anne Hutchinson had spoken of the famous minister as if he were an equal, an associate, the way William would speak of his fellow

merchants.

“His church was St. Botolph’s, in Lincolnshire,” Anne explained, as if geography might account for their association, yet Mary heard pride. She watched the woman’s large hand stroking the baby’s head and felt a small, urgent stirring in her womb.

Talk shifted to the voyage. The men spoke of the tools they had been advised to procure. The words—*frows, spades, axes, augers*—were hard in their mouths, making their chins jut and their eyes narrow. The women moved closer to one another, softer words blending. *Kettles, cradles, skillets, blankets*. Everything they owned was packed away in chests; none of the people belonged, anymore, to London or to England.

Sitting at a small table, William paged through the pamphlet, “New England’s Prospect.”

Mary, already in bed, put arms around her knees and studied him.

He opened his mouth as if to read aloud, then checked himself. He tossed down the pamphlet, stood, stretched. He undressed and came to bed.

Both sat against the bolster. Mary held the blanket against her chin, gazing at the window’s pale square. William leaned his head back into clasped hands.

“They call it the ‘New Jerusalem,’ ” he said.

October.

Mary woke to a violent cramp that seized her breath. Hearing her gasp, William laid his hand on her forehead. She opened her eyes as the pain faded and saw his fear.

“Go for them,” she said. “I will pray.”

He dressed, stumbling in his haste. He went to the attic door, called for Sinnie, clattered downstairs.

In thee, O Lord, she whispered, do I seek refuge; let me never be put to shame; in thy righteousness deliver me ...

—

They named him William.

He glowed like an apple blossom, wrapped in white lambswool blankets. William wrote the glad news to Aunt Urith and Uncle Colyn.

The baby had long, sly eyes, like his father’s. He glanced at Mary as he suckled, a froth of milk in the corners of his lips.

Two days later, his mouth fell slack on Mary’s nipple. His limbs were limp, his tiny cheeks rose high in laboured breath. They sent for a doctor who applied a poultice of linseed and lettuce. By the end of his third day of life, the baby was dead.

William took the swaddling clothes and bade Sinnie pack them deep in a chest. He carried the cradle to a closet beneath the eaves. Mary broke into a fever and the midwife applied her paper steeped in sage and vinegar to her swollen breasts; the doctor prescribed a paste of herbs to be bound to her wrists. William brought her a pair of gloves. Beige lambskin lined with peach-coloured silk, their gauntlets decorated with ferns of silver thread. He lifted her poulticed wrists, laid the gloves beneath her hands, stroked her knuckles. He wiped her face.

with a linen cloth.

“Mary, Mary. There will be another child.”

God was watching her, holding her baby in his arms. She saw herself standing before him penitent, weeping, although she lay dry-eyed on the flock-stuffed bolster. *Why?* More light than man, a shattering glory emanating warmth, he turned from her without answering. She felt alone in the dimming light, the last remaining member of her family. She wondered if God assumed her gratitude, since he carried her baby to the field of bluebells, sparing him all earthly sufferings. She stirred her head on the hemp sheet as this vision was replaced with another. *Punishment, not mercy.* She had refused a clear call. She had been meant to encourage William toward the New Jerusalem. For her own selfish ends she had not. She feared the voyage, the wolves, the savage forests. She had wished for a large London house with a garden running down to the Thames.

And God had led her into the presence of Anne Hutchinson. Follow the teachers.

Forgive me.



ON A NOVEMBER DAY OF bitter cold, Mary and William walked through driving rain to the house of a Puritan couple. Others joined them, and they sat grouped around the hearth, drinking rum or bastard or muscadine. They shared emigrants' letters whose pages were softened from perusal, their folds worn thin. They took turns reading aloud.

... have built a meeting house ...

... the winter safely passed. Now we do begin our planting. Cornfields have been impaled. The land is fat on the nearby islands and hath been brought into good culture ...

Building a mill for the grinding of corn. Large timber, marshland and meadow doth give a good prospect ... Beaver pelts, in such abundance that ...

Trade with the Narragansett. Deerskin, baskets.

We do put the heads of wolves on pillars ...

A woman drew a frightened breath.

"Aye, but we would have muskets," said a young man. "Think, Margaret! 'Tis the *heads* of wolves they describe. Shot dead. As some should be here." His voice darkened. "On the past Sabbath, as we were coming from church, we did see men reeling beneath the lattices of an alehouse, five of them. They were falling down, faces red as if parboiled. A woman there was, begging, thin as a starved dog, children at her skirts. The men did rip at her dresses exposing her flesh. Two of her boys did protest and one of the men struck out. We ran forward, but the ruffians ran, too. The woman was left sobbing. Her child's cheek was torn and bleeding."

In silence they contemplated how God's wrath would gather over England for such crimes for frippery and drunkenness, for excesses of wealth and poverty. They could not imagine this punishment but were certain it would come.

The men began to argue about whether they would be abandoning their church if they fled to New England. They would not, some reasoned, for they carried the flame of truth and would keep alive the pure church in the citadel of God's chosen people.

Their words were as cloaks masking the nakedness of obsession. They spread their fingers and then clutched emptiness, betraying a desire to hold firearms, oars, or the handles of ploughs.

Women spoke of more practical matters.

Will we have sheep? Make our own cloth? It seemed from the letters that every woman must be her own tailor, cowherd, malster, baker. They imagined snow falling on the clustered houses of Boston—snow so deep as to buckle paper windows. They dreaded the Narragansett Indians. They wondered if there would be doctors for their infants.

"Nay, Joan," a man said to his wife who had voiced her fears. He was earnest, urging. "Your *preachers* are there. 'Tis a holy enterprise."

Mary had regained her health. Her heart had been smoothed like sand with the waters of other women's assurances—*God took my firstborn; ah, Mary, love, they are angels, gone to Christ.*

you will have others. She carried the weight of grief.

“I agree,” she said. She held her elbows tight to her sides, folded her hands. Beneath black coif, her face bore its first, fine perpetual creases—pained curves beside her generous mouth. “I did hear a woman say that her Bible told her to follow her teachers. I believe the Lord wishes us to go.”

William spoke. “The Massachusetts Bay Colony hath moved both their charter and the place of meeting from England to the colony. A clever move. Charter, governor and General Court are all in Boston. So they make of themselves a self-governing commonwealth. They have removed themselves from the king’s reach.”

In September 1635, they waited in Plymouth. The inn’s windows drummed with rain. For days, they could catch only glimpses of the small, high-prowed ship, ghostly in the harbor mist.

Early one morning, Mary lay staring at the low plaster ceiling. Pregnant, she had slept poorly. An urgent knocking on their door raised William from the bedstead.

The storm had passed. *Truelove* would sail on the high tide.

“All hands on deck!”

Officers ordered the families below as the sailors began preparations to weigh anchor.

“Do you come, Mary.” William’s pale face was flushed with the sea light. Beside him were Sinnie and Jurden Cooth. Twenty-two, Jurden was taller and broader than William, prematurely balding, an amused light in his eyes yet thin lips down-turned as if to reprehend comment. He accompanied them as their indentured servant.

“One minute,” Mary said. “You go.”

As rowboats hauled the ship out of the harbour, she leaned on the railing, remarking the sudden separation between herself, launched on a voyage of great danger, and the land left behind—stone houses nested below the rocking masts, the sky stippled with birds that wheeled in the autumn sky.

So it may be just before death. Not knowing what lies ahead. Reaching for God’s hand.

She felt a pang of regret that the child, six months in her womb, would never know England. Ah, she thought, but it made its own urgent journey.

The deck rose and tipped beneath her feet like a living thing. As they reached the deep water, the first sail rose, luffed, wavered, then settled itself—gaining familiarity with the sky, gathering the light.

Blankets and quilts hung from post to post along the ship’s walls, swaying slightly, marking each family’s berth. Below decks, it was dark even in the daytime, and she saw a confusion of details—a child’s cap, rounds of cheese, red wool. Unbalanced by her belly, Mary grasped one post and then the next, hearing the whimpers of children and mothers’ croons, while sailors’ feet pounded close overhead. She found the blankets of their berth drawn back, Sinnie sitting in the far corner. Mary dropped beside her and leaned her head against the planks, listening to the rush of water against the wall.

I wish I could be on deck, watching England slip away.

She sat quietly, thinking that this would be one of many desires that would go unfulfilled.

“Puts me in mind of my home,” Sinnie whispered and Mary saw that her face had flushed as if she were excited. “The croft did feel like this, Mistress, just like this. I did sleep beneath the table with my brothers and sisters, all a-tangle.”

A child began a quavery wail. Sinnie wrapped her hands around her knees, buried her head in her lap.

Mary felt the first qualms of seasickness. She lay on the damp straw mattress and brought to mind anything that did not rock, sway, tip, slide. The moors, Aunt Urith’s house with its buttery stones, her first child, his gravestone a grey speck in London’s reeking din.

They were like the ship’s wash, her memories: purling white and crisp, then spreading in the moment.

Dear Lord, we beg of you, be with us now in our peril on the sea, for we do thy bidding.

The wind blew them southwest.

On fine days, families were allowed to gather on deck. The men stood along the railing. The girls lifted strings of cat’s cradle from each other’s fingers or dressed their Bartholomew dolls; boys flew makeshift kites. The women clustered in the lee of a deckhouse, shoulder to shoulder for warmth—sewing, knitting. Groups of young men—indentured servants—kept themselves, Jurden Cooth among them.

On all sides was the blue furrowed emptiness.

Mary befriended a young woman from Lincolnshire. Thin, with a stretched, eager smile, she had three children, two girls and a boy. Her husband, a wool merchant, had left a fertile farm and a business built up over generations.

“Our minister was ejected and lost his living,” the woman said. “After that we could not bear to go to church. We could not abide by the changes.”

She raised her knitting close to her face, needle probing for a dropped stitch.

“We feared the Lord’s wrath,” she said. “We had a fine big brick house. But my Henry would not build again. They say the land is rich.”

“We lived in London where my husband had a business,” Mary said. “He has brought good money to open a shop in Boston.”

Three oak chests sat in the hold. One was filled with gloves, caps, needles, everything needed to start a business. Another held guns, shot and powder and all the farming tools that William had learned would be unattainable. Her own was packed with silver spoons, kettle, dresses. Bolts of linsey-woolsey, skeins of yarn, Irish stockings. Woollen capes, blankets.

The woman put down her knitting.

“I brought the seeds of my hollyhock,” she said, wistfully. “Tall, it was, a lovely pink. I will give you some. It grew beneath my kitchen window.”

She looked at the shining waters for a long time.

“Are you frightened?” Mary asked. Her own hands were spread over her belly, receiving the baby’s kicks, like a gift.

The woman started. “Aye, but I’ve told no one. I am ashamed to say so, for ’tis God’s will that we follow.”

“God’s commands are fearsome,” Mary said. Her lips softened into a sad smile. “We are a

frightened, surely.”

She be beautiful, Sinnie thought. She curled on a pallet, watching as Mary prepared for bed. She longed to comfort her, for she saw that Mary grieved many things: her family, her time, her son, the people and hills of childhood. Sinnie’s own lost world hung in her mind like a lock the size of a fingernail. Sheep, surf and wind splined with the cry of gannets, horsehair fishing lines laid to dry. Brothers and sisters. A mother with gaunt face, eyes drained of pity. *Exhausted, Mother were. She had to send me.* A feeling came, twisted, confused. Father, too, had sent her. Her parents had embraced her. She had ridden away on a pony, at the side of her new master. Sent to a better life. Her neck, jolting as she looked back, watching as the waves waved; she saw them turn away. Bitter, her heart. And that, too, was bad. They could not have known.

William bent to enter the berth. Sinnie pulled the blanket farther across her face, leaving one eye exposed. *So handsome.* Eyes like almonds, hands of a gentleman. Of a size, they were, William and Mary, when they stood side by side at the railing of the ship.

She with that baby growing big in her ...

On a Sabbath, warmed by winds from the south, one of several ministers aboard took his turn holding worship in the open air. Afterwards, men gathered around the capstan to discuss his sermon. William and Mary stood at the edge of the group.

“He doth say that it killeth souls to be preached to by ordained ministers who are uneducated,” a man said. “I agree that we must have men of highest education in our churches.”

“Aye,” Mary called out. She remembered the words of the Puritan lecturer in London. “But I have heard John Everard say that God is in you ‘although you know it not.’ That if you are born of the Spirit, you are Spirit. So I cannot see it is of such significance that a man be educated, for he may be educated and yet be hollow within, following rituals without Spirit.”

Men turned, in their leather jerkins and hats—startled, eyes narrowed with affront. William’s arm slid through hers. She felt a gentle tug.

“Aye, she has a point,” a man said, mollifying, forestalling censure. He looked at her bellows and exchanged a sympathetic glance with William.

Mary turned away. She bit her lips, felt the heat of blood risen from an agitated heart. William snuggled her close as they walked the narrow, canting deck.

“Had you been born a man, Mary,” William said, “I believe you would have been a minister. Or a magistrate.” He smiled as if picturing the preposterousness of this.

“I have spent years making the same observation.” She looked out over the surrounding sea, its surface glitter. Beneath the fierce Atlantic sun, she felt a shift in her feelings. After the death of the parents, Uncle Colyn, a lawyer, had begun teaching her brother, and had allowed her to study alongside. Scripture, logic, mathematics, Greek, Latin, history. *You have a brilliant mind,* he had told her. *Almost like unto a man’s.* She had listened, appalled, to her uncle’s accounts of injustice, had heard enraged voices coming from behind his study door. Since Aunt Urith was a surgeon as well as midwife, Mary had stood at her side and accepted pus-soaked bandages, o

bloody bits of amputations—fingers, eyelids. She had helped bathe bodies: women dead the throes of childbirth; babies; old people. There had been no time for considerations about what a woman could or could not do in the teeming world of her aunt's surgery; or bent over in Uncle Colyn's study, dipping pen in ink, drying the page with cuttlefish powder from her pounce pot.

William was watching her—curious, unsure of her mood.

She did not return his look.

One week, two weeks. Three, four, five, six. Seven.

The king, the queen, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Whitehall, Dyota and Ralf, the tumbling bells, rattle of wheels, heads on pikes, crowd-jaunty hanging days, rats nuzzling entrails, falling ear and gaping wound and blood-soaked hair, *martyr's blood*: it all fell back. Day after day. Fell back. Dream-small and as nonsensical.

Watery soup, bearing maggots. Cheese hard as leather.

Truelove's bow rose, swivelled, fell.

Smiling, a smile not for her. He made a soft tomcat sound. Almost laughing, his eyes fixed upon her. He tugged Sinnie's ribbons. At night, when she closed her eyes for sleep, she saw the salt crusted in the corners of his mouth—his lips, caked with dead skin. Remembered his deliberate stumble, pressing up against her. *Excuse me, Miss*. Dreaded the coming day.

No man, ever. Ever.

—

From the bed, Mary and Sinnie could see the helmsman standing at the whipstaff, squinting up through a shaft of light to watch the sails.

"I will speak to William, Sinnie. He will not bother you again."

"Thank you, Mistress." A whisper. Too upset to talk. Wiping tears with the back of her sleeve. Mary gazed at her. *No wonder. Half the crew yearns to hear the burr of Shetland in her voice.*

"How did you come to leave your home, Sinnie?"

"'Twas what I dreamed. To go into service," Sinnie murmured. Her wet eyelashes were pointed, starry. "'Twas a man visiting the Earl. I was hanging fish in the skeo."

The girl's English was difficult. Mary raised her eyebrows, not wishing to interrupt, for she glimpsed truth like the corner of an envelope slipped beneath a door.

"A wee hut of stone. He asked my name and I did tell him. He said nothing but did ride away up the brae. Later, the Earl asked my father and my father asked me and I said aye. I said aye, I would go with the man to London to be his lady's maid. I was ... I was ..."

She bent as if struck with pain in her belly. Then a wail came from her and she snatched up a pillow and buried her face.

Mary sat, gripping her hands, witness to grief's loneliness. But Sinnie cried out only once and then stifled herself—rocking, rocking. The ship rolled and they slid together, pressed close, arms, hair.

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