SHE WHO IS LIKE A MARE:

POEMS OF MARY BRECKINRIDGE AND THE FRONTIER NURSING SERVICE

by

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She Who is Like a Mare: Poems of Mary Breckinridge and the Frontier Nursing Service

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Abstract

Founded in 1925 by Mary Breckinridge, the Frontier Nursing Service (FNS) brought much needed professional health care to mountain families of Eastern Kentucky. The FNS nurses, especially trained as midwives, provided public health services and trauma care as needed. “She Who is Like a Mare”: Poems of Mary Breckinridge and the Frontier Nursing Service uses historical research and speculative imaginings to create the voices and tell the stories of the nurses and their patients. Forms in this poetic sequence include found poem, song, dramatic monologue and collage.
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Introduction

Women. Horses. Babies. Mountains. Eastern Kentucky in the early twentieth century. What I first heard about the Frontier Nursing Service (FNS) seemed romantic: nurse-midwives on horseback, riding cabin to cabin through a rugged mountain landscape, delivering babies and providing whatever other medical care was needed. As I explored the subject further, however, I realized the nurses’ work was arduous. There weren’t any paved roads in the area at that time, so they used mountain trails and creek beds for roadways, forded rushing waters after spring rains, and delicately crossed the ice in winter. *If the father can get to you, the rule was, you are obliged to go with him.* Long days spent in the saddle to get to patients were followed by evenings spent documenting the day’s activities.

The Frontier Nursing Service was founded in 1925 by Mary Breckinridge. *Southern* and *aristocratic* are the adjectives routinely used to describe her background. According to Melanie Beals Goan, author of *Mary Breckinridge: The Frontier Nursing Service and Rural Health in Appalachia*, Breckinridge’s great grandfather was Thomas Jefferson’s attorney general. Her grandfather was a U.S. Senator who became James Buchanan’s vice president; during the Civil War he was a Confederate general and the Confederacy’s last Secretary of War. Her father served as an ambassador to Russia. Although Mary lived part of her girlhood in St. Petersburg, Western Kentucky – with its flatlands, lush bluegrass with sprawling horse farms and Confederate legacy – was home. Eastern Kentucky, on the other hand, was the Kentucky of mountains, hollows, and place names like Hell for Certain, Thousandstick Mountain and Hurricane Creek. Eastern
Kentucky had coal mines, deep memories of a Unionist past, and a long history of poverty.

Breckinridge’s family legacy of public service combined with her desire to turn her grief over the death of her two young children into action. She became a nurse, and after seeing the decimation of rural France after World War I and the difficulties it created for health delivery, she decided to become a trained midwife as well. While training in England, she toured the United Kingdom and observed a decentralized approach to health care used in the Scottish Highlands. Determined to implement similar models in the United States, Breckinridge saw that the eastern end of her home state was a logical starting point. Before the FNS was in operation, most babies in Appalachia and other poor or isolated parts of America were delivered by granny midwives, local women without formal medical training. Infant and maternal mortality were high.

Breckinridge took measures to avoid appearing as the Lady Bountiful come to save the mountaineers from themselves. She canvassed the region, on horseback, meeting as many people as she could while assessing both interest and need. In the years that followed she organized a local committee of advisors, purchased land, constructed a two-story log building as FNS headquarters and her home (Wendover), spearheaded the construction of a seventeen-bed hospital in Hyden, added six outlying clinics, and founded the Frontier Graduate School of Midwifery.

Much of what has been written about the FNS stresses those accomplishments, but I wondered about the individuals involved and what the day-to-day of their lives was like. I had questions. The poems that follow are my attempt to imaginatively flesh out the recorded information about the FNS. Two of the figures are real women — Mary herself
and her cousin Marvin Breckinridge (who went on to become a radio journalist in World War II, reporting to Edward R. Murrow). Others are composite figures, and in one case, I’ve chosen to invent a new name and context for an Irish nurse-midwife who did die in service. Sources for the poems include published materials about the FNS, including Mary’s autobiography *Wide Neighborhoods*, and primary items from the treasure trove that is the FNS archives at the University of Kentucky, Lexington. My work has also been enriched by my observations at Wendover and Hyden. Later research led me to pregnancy guidebooks for middle-class women that added cultural context; two papers by a leading obstetrician of the day highlighted the medicalization of childbirth that was taking place. I chose to create found poems from these texts, as well as some of the archival resources, to add authentic voices to the work.

Although the FNS history spans eighty-five years, I’ve focused my imaginative speculations on the 1930s when the service was young and growing, and before the first nurse-midwives, recruited from Great Britain, returned home for the war effort. Although the FNS should be considered in the context of the New Woman and other progressive reform movements of the era, it occupies a unique place in American medical history. I continue to be awestruck by the courage, resourcefulness and sense of adventure that this organization — founded by a woman and managed almost entirely by women — represents.
She Who is Like a Mare

Epona rides the womansaddle.
   She holds a horn filled with wheat
   in her left hand, while her right
   strokes the mane. A foal follows.

Sometimes
   Epona is enthroned, flanked
   by horses who dine on apples
   warm from the bowl of her lap.

From Gaul
   legions carried the mare goddess
   to Rome where they boxed her in
   stables, draped her with roses.

Only the Celts
   gave her sway over rivers, streams,
   begged blessings for crossings
   of both the rider and the steed.
Photograph, Date Unknown

What can we know about these women? Sixteen of them, all on horseback, panoramed in a wobbly arc shallower than a horseshoe. The photographer – we assume he’s male, given the era – positions the camera left of center.

This makes Mary, first in line, loom closest. To accommodate all, he steps back, revealing a slim foreground of fallen leaves, a slice of sky and bare branches. Do the horses jostle each other as riders crowd into place?

Do the novices grin apologies for the difficulties of lining up just so? Riders are erect. Perhaps Mary has lectured on the fundamentals of posture, but only she appears at ease, loose arms, not clutching reins or saddle horn.

From this far back the others are as anonymous as soldiers on the field, alike in gray uniforms, brimless hats. There is no knowing which are the Scottish nurses, lured by tales of horses and dogs and life in the mountains. No telling which

is the Irish girl who will die, appendix too late removed, her horse led riderless down a trail to a funeral. From here the nurses’ expressions are lost but Mary looks pleased. Her plan is working. Even now, couriers in Wendover are steeping tea.
Saddlebag Women

Some woman from other side of Kentucky means to save us from our grannies. Too much death here, she says, so she’s bringing us trained nurses, medicine. Says they’ll ride right up to the cabin to catch babies. What I say is, ain’t grannies doing that now?

We don’t need no brought on women here. Grannies know us, know whose babies are like to step out feet first into this world. They got warm hands, good sense. Don’t need saddlebags of supplies. Looks to me them nurses must not know much if they need to tote stuff.

I’ve seen these nurses. Hard looking women. Wear uniforms with britches, like soldiers. I ask, what kind of woman wears trousers? They might make it through winter, but won’t last past spring. Get some mountain mud on those fine uniforms and they’ll be gone. You’ll see.

Besides, ain’t ours to say if there’s too much death. Next thing, they’ll have doctors bringing on babies. Men! Birthing ain’t no sickness, and some of us are born just to die. That’s how it is.
Mary Breckinridge Puts It in Perspective

Today at Wendover
   two interminable meetings
   the specter of deficit by year’s end
   new reports of dysentery
   a mother-to-be who walked three days to find us.

Now, twilight on the mountain
   ashen moon
   deep stillness, until a breeze reshuffles the leaves
   hills of indigo and mauve,
   the rounded shoulders of a thousand sleeping babies
Frontier

Frontier (n.) 1. A vast, largely unknown space of land just beyond the known: As in, In May 1932 Sarah arrived at this frontier to serve four months as a volunteer courier. 2. The area between civilization and a more natural, unrefined country; a place on the edge; a dreamscape of risk and adventure. 3. An ill-defined place, wild, potentially dangerous though not necessarily including cowboys, Indian raids, cattle drives, and shootouts: Sarah’s future was a frontier she hardly dared to ponder. 4. A place without roads or plumbing. 5. A wilderness large enough to feel small in, unlike the comfortable containment of the train Sarah takes to Hazard; also, a place in which Sarah can grow (in ways as yet undefined). 6. A euphemism that daubs a romantic glow upon a region forgotten, neglected: Because no one else will, nurse midwives provide care for mothers and children across 52 square miles of Appalachian frontier. 7. A new sort of knowledge, the result of innovation, often expressed in the plural. Working at the frontiers of medicine, Mary Breckenridge decentralized medical care by establishing clinics in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky. (adj.) 1. Of, on, near or in regard to a frontier: To improve the health of mothers and babies, Mary Breckenridge founded the Frontier Nursing Service in 1925.
Mary Breckinridge Calls for Stories

This is to remind you we get no government funding. Many families can’t pay our small fees so they hew our firewood, share their gardens’ bounties. But fathers’ labors cannot equip clinics, feed horses or supply your salaries. I’ve asked you for accounts of noteworthy experiences, but received only two. How can our generous benefactors see what we do, understand why it matters, if we fail to enlighten them?

I can count births and babies, can compile statistics, but you bring life to numbers, make them add up. It’s you who navigate trails, enter far-flung cabins, see people as they are. We ask a lot of you as nurses. We need you to tell stories. Send anecdotes soon, please.
Tell It

I’m no writer, I tell Mrs. B.
“Just tell it,” she says. Nothing fancy is required.”
So here it is:

There is a rule here. If the father can get to us,
we are obliged to accompany him. No matter
what the weather nor how far the cabin,
we must go. Mountain travel is arduous,
especially in early Spring when —

No, no, try again, Annie. How would you tell this
to your own sweet mother back in Ireland?

Flood smashed through the other night
with water enough to jolt Jesus himself.
A man came for me around nine o’clock
Path washed out behind him, we took
the long way round, a most terrible trail
indeed. Raven and I saw Hurricane Creek
four times; the father struggled in water
rushing and roaring up to his neck

Pleasant fellow, this father, but he’s no
Finn MacCumhail. He’ll throw out no stones,
construct no causeway to keep our feet dry.

Near midnight another storm began
as we arrived. Wind rushed like Satan
between chinks in the walls, gaps in the floor.
And light from the coal lamp nearly danced
to death. But the young mother was calm,
thank heavens. I kept my coat on and caught
an 11-lb. baby boy at two. Before I left, mother
and babe were tucked up, asleep. The father?
He grinned and grinned and grinned.
I crossed the clinic’s threshold at seven
and tumbled myself into bed.

Such a night, but I’d sooner make that trip again
than be paired with a man set on siring
such gargantuan sons.
You’ll miss Inverness, he said,
pine for your Ma and us all.

They’ve got horses, I answered,
and they’ll teach me to ride.

Aye, there’s saddlebags to carry,
forty pounds each so they say.

There’s babies that need me.
Bairns are born everywhere.

They way they talk, Dad.
“One the edge of the dark.”

That’s poetry, that is.
Robbie Burns said it better.

You’ll be among strangers.
But those hills look like home.

Moonshiners and feuders
They call us animals, scum.

Your mind is made up then?
You’ll go off to Kentucky?

I was seeing myself atop
a mare in the gloaming.

You’ll miss Scotland, he said,
but I had nothing to answer.
Journey to Lenore

I. Traveler

Gwen rides the train that labors up hills, pulls across a vista of sun-struck mountains. She has thirsted ever since the crossing. Gwen leaves the certainty of clean sheets, adventure administered in nightly doses of *Wuthering Heights*. She fingers a talisman in her pocket, a glint of smoky quartz, from Cairngorm, her father’s gift. Mother only spat,  

*Take your temper with you, foolish girl.*

Stepping out at Hazard, Gwen waits for the promise of a horse and guide to lead her over forty miles of trail. Perhaps there’ll be a dog as well.

II. Arrival

Somewhere between Hazard and Hyden, Gwen adopts her middle name. She can’t resist the elegant L, its loops at top and bottom, the way it curls upon itself like the necks of swans. She wants to know the names of birds she sees, wants to memorize their songs. She wants to be tempered by the absence of inevitabilities.

*I will be who I am to become.*

After fording Cutshin Creek, she pauses to adjust the reins, turns in her saddle, and drops on the trail a stone the color of Scottish skies.
Kate Meditates on Hills Like Domed Temples

Mist curls into hollows, sinks into gaps, cotton batting tucked up to the chin of the mountain’s darker side. That’s just Indians, father’s voice says. Smoke from their teepees.

They’re cooking dinner.

I come from gridded streets, fathom my way to any address. No signs here, no roads. Just creek beds, deer crossings. Take the trail cut back of Monroe’s, watch for pine on your left.

I never get lost.

It seems I know these soft mountains, though no one showed them to me before. They have found me, or I have found them. Why else should father speak so in my head?
Collage: Mary’s *Wide Neighborhoods*

*This book has no preface, no footnotes
no appendix, and no apologies.*

Mary Breckinridge

Our fifth Christmas in the mountains
we rode down Hurricane Creek
while a leaky, flat-bottomed boat
made its way deeper in the yellow current.
On the edge of the dark, near a three-room house
so spacious we called it Buckingham, the boy restored
me to my work, then returned with me,
pickapack on Teddy Bear.

He had a heart big enough to meet all this vast need.

The boughs of the forest creaked in the cold
as all up and down the river the word passed,
*There’s been a shooting on Muncy Creek!*

(The gift of a refrigerator did not arrive until 1937.)

*What about moonshine?* They ask me in the cities.

We began to take in patients. Comfort reigned —
six cots on the floor, extra allotments for pregnant women,
Enos and Eva whose mother died of childbed fever,
a man halloing at the gate, and the hospital,
like the palm of a hand from which fingers radiate.
The milk cow was accorded an honorable burial
with the horses. Burned children were the most tragic.

(What nurses missed most in summer was ice.)

A woman — of good birth and breeding despite her poverty —
made the trip on muleback. The young man with a shock
of yellow hair took a lantern and went in search above
the floodwater mark. The wind was piercing.
The doctor performed one abdominal operation in jail,
another under a shade tree. Our nurses kept busy.
Kerosene lamps cleaned, unused butter churned.
The river eased down a bit when the rains stopped.

(Sometimes experience is deeply creative.)
An elderly woman came *a fer piece* to see us. Her son-in-law, not a man of these parts, offered us free land on Bullskin Creek. Rains came down all night, fords too deep to cross without swimming.

Alcohol in the saddlebags made a sound like *glub, glub, glub*)
Lay of the Land:
Sarah’s Stall Mucking Song

Bad Creek and Beech Creek, Bull Creek and Bowens
Big Bullskin, plain Big – and that’s just the Bs.
Cutshin and Elkhorn, Goose, Hector and Hell
(which Mamie insists is called Heck),
Leatherwood and Jacobs, (Lower Jacobs, that is).
Muncies and Rockhouse, Stinnett Creek – that’s the last.
Something called Greasy, what it is I don’t know,
but don’t forget Hurricane, Hals Fork and the rivers:
Red Bird and North Fork, South Fork and Middle.

No wonder I dream of Big Bad Geese going to Hell.

“Learn them by Tuesday,” Mrs. B said at tea.
“New couriers will not assist nurses til then.
Mothers and babies need our assistance, so we’ll
waste no time in search of girls too lazy to learn.”

No wonder I dream of Big Bad Geese going to Hell.

At home it’s easy finding Father’s bank and my school.
There’s a sign at each corner, no chance to get lost.
But here it’s rocks, creeks and mountains,
lots of trees and some cabins that all look the same.

No wonder I dream of Big Bad Geese going to Hell.

Still, this was my idea, (as Mamie keeps saying)
A summer in service away from our homes.
At this rate I’ll muck stalls til the middle of August,
and when asked what I saw on my big adventure
I’ll say “Nothing… but Hector the Bull and his Muncies,
on a slow boat with Stinnett, the Big Cutshin from Hell.”
Audacious

Audacious (adj.) 1. Bold, brave or daring; fearless: As in, Kate’s idols were not movie stars, but rather audacious women like aviatrix Amelia Earheart. 2. Unrestricted by propriety or a sense of shame: Kate’s questionable behavior with a young man of her acquaintance was considered audacious by her parents.

Audacity (n.) 1. Bold courage, daring: Kate’s decision to volunteer as an FNS courier was praised by many for its audacity. 2. Brazen boldness: The young man back home with whom Kate was entangled was slapped on the back by his peers for the audacity of his indecencies.
June 20, 1932

Insects rage tonight,
frenetic noise.
Locusts and I don’t know what else.
I’m accustomed to Kate’s snoring
but frenzy won’t let me sleep,
the woods a tuning orchestra
and I have fallen into the pit.
Never just one or two of anything here
but life by the dozens,
uncountable multitudes
of bugs, trees, birds, plants.

I have seen only one
luna moth,
luminous green,
large as my hand.
Lucas pitied me when I asked what it was.
Deems my life impoverished,
I who must ask
so many questions.

The moth was dying.
Eager ants fed on its body
as legs pedaled still.
*They only live a week*, Lucas said
but I doubted and took down
the Britannica.
He was right.
Their sole purpose is to mate,
not even a mouth for feeding.
Their eggs become caterpillars, pupa, then moths
on and on, life in a cycle and so brief.

Yesterday at the Morgan’s I waited outside
with horses and children while Lenore visited
mother and babe. Saw a sapling growing
out from under the cabin,
leaning, twisting to reach the sun.
Perhaps wind blew a seed there or
a bird dropped one
through the porch boards.
Such an unsound place to begin life.
Made me think of May when it looked like snow had come
to Beech Fork, whirling at our feet, clumping by the barn.
*Just fuzzies,* Lucas said, floating down from cottonwoods that line the river, their seed a small passenger.

Such a will in living things to start anew.

When you are alone by Mrs. B’s fireplace and brush your fingers across the brass plaque

*To the Glory of God*
*and in memory of*
*Breckie and Polly Breckinridge*
*Dedicated Christmas 1925*

you see this all began with death and a resolve to start again.
Horse Trading:
Mary Returns a Horse

We are returning the horse you delivered yesterday. He is too old. For a horse his age, your price is too high.

We think him not much under fifteen.

We give our horses constant hard riding, and find it impractical to buy them over ten.

Sweet feed has made him fat, an undesirable trait. We cannot keep an unprofitable horse that long.

We will send him back early next week.

If you get hold of two good saddlers – young, gentle – in fair condition, we assure you they will be purchased.
Knots

Didn’t I see Callie Young on her porch last week mending? Didn’t I say she ought not tie threads herself? Now that that baby is tangled, I hear, and the poor girl’s suffering.

Preacher binds us, woman to man, with law and promise. Come birthing though, it’s time to loosen. Open the gate, pull wide drawers, raise windows, unlace every shoe.

Whatever needs to run must run. You can’t block what wants to flow. That nurse can’t know, so you be my legs and go speak for our old ways.

Before you catch sight of the cabin, unpin your hair. If an axe is in the stump, you best wrench it out. And don’t let Callie’s mama clasp her hands.

I did all this for you, Hazel, when you were fast in your mama’s womb, then come to find your daddy cross-legged in the next room the whole time.

Once he went round, whacked the beams like God himself shaking the world right, why you slipped out, straight into my arms.

That nurse don’t know. She’ll cross Big Creek three, four times to get to Callie’s place, and you’ll have lots of straightening to do.
Preacher come last week, started on
about miracles, about Jesus and ten lepers.
_Preacherman, I told him, this old tree I’m in
can’t hold more than five sick fellows._
Not so much as a smile from him,
but when he bowed his head,
and I saw that bald spot?
I about laughed myself sick.
He ain’t been back since.

Miz Neville from other side of Bowens
come by too. I heard her a long way off,
scratching her way up the trail,
panting like a hound in August.
Held an elderberry pie up so high I could smell it.
_Save it for the wake_ nearly slipped out,
but what I said was _thank you, ma’am._
Children ate the pie.

Wendover nurse was here,
hands on her hips like a soldier.
Looked hot from that uniform,
but red-faced, mad hot, too.
Blamed Dixon for putting me up this tree.
Took all I had in me to holler down.
Soon as I knew it was the lung disease,
I asked Dixon and his boy to build a pallet
and up I climbed. So I’m near enough to see
my kin but far enough not to harm.
_Besides, Dixon asked her, what can
some hospital do that his people can’t?_

Dixon’s boy brings me food, water,
dumps my pot down the privy.
Helen washes the rags I cough in,
and the little girls scamper out
the cabin and sing me songs, ask for stories.
They grin up at me, those little faces,

I figure I must look far away
as the man in the moon.
_Make a wish on me, I tell them._
Your Uncle Hense will make it true.
Nurse says she’ll come back here,
thinks a passel of men could lift me
out, thinks she can make me well too.
My coming down will be harder
than the going up, she’ll see.

Smells good up here.
Cabin fire, wet earth when it rains.
Thought it might rain some last night
when a little breeze come through,
made leaves sway and chatter
like biddies before church.

I don’t see sky though -- trees so full
it’s always near dark in this hollow.
Come autumn and I’m still here, leaves
will float down. I’ll see clouds then.
German Theory

_Somebody round here sick?_

A voice familiar
but I could not recall
a face. How could I?
Large eyes, big enough
to slice open darkness;
a graybone man,
peering through a confusion
of chestnut leaves,
right down to the ground
right down to me.

_Well, if it ain’t that red-haired nurse._

Mrs. Neville told me about him,
said he’d moved from cabin
to tree some time before Easter.
Thought he had “the lung disease”; _Oh, he does, he does, I know it,_
she said. Who does she mean?

When the axe slipped as
Meryl Parker’s boy cut timber
in the woods, I cleaned the wound,
called for a stretcher and one appeared.
He’d made it: saplings passed
through coats; green saplings
like long, delicate bones jutting out
the red plaid sleeves. Mountaineers
watched me fumble through my
ministrations. No one shivered
but me and the boy.

When I stood at the back
of the church while Brownie
explained why bleach
must be poured down
all the mountain’s wells,
a man nudged and whispered,
What’s this about a German theory?

Germ. I said, Germ, not German. Glanced up into a grin and it was his. Back then I thought stupid and uneducated were the same.

Climbing up from the river, thumb on Mrs. Neville’s map, I hoped to find pneumonia, or whooping cough or something else.

And now I know him: Hense Morgan, late of this hollow, son of Richard and Naomi (deceased), brother of Dixon and Helen, beloved uncle to five Morgan children.

We will somehow carry him down.
Sarah’s Letter Home: Tower to Tank and Across the Creek

July 12, 1932

Dear Mother,

Remember that summer in Atlantic City? How we children begged each day for a trip to the Steel Pier. Gerald so certain he’d win games of chance, Estelle prattling on about taffy and trinkets. And me, desperate to see Sonora and the High Diving Horse. Forty feet, they said, from the tower to the tank.

You relented at last, and after the carousel, sandwiches and rests in the shade -- you could have told me, Mother, about the baby -- we filed into the arena. And oh, the build up! Hundreds of people restless in their seats. The announcer tells how perilous the dive, how courageous horse and rider, and then hush. Sonora appears atop the platform, her horse gallops the long slow ramp. A baby or a seagull cries, I hear the ocean hum, and all those people are silent. Suddenly, all around me a great cry. I open my eyes and watch Sonora and her horse swim to the tank’s edge. Such noise then, such cheers for brave Sonora.

Spring’s thaw gushes our creeks, pours water down mountains, and rivulets become oceans. To ford Hell-for-Sartain yesterday, I stood in Jo’s saddle and together we strained for the shore. I tried to envision spectators in tiers up the mountain, shading their eyes, breathless, yet the image would not come. My eyes though, Mother, my eyes were open.
Thus Sayeth the Expert:
Dr. DeLee Calls for the End to Midwifery

Childbirth is a natural process, it’s true, but it’s also pathologic, often harming mother and child. I sometimes wonder if Nature intended that women be used up in reproduction, like salmon who die after spawning.

What’s needed for safe deliveries is a series of interventions — sedatives and ether, followed by episiotomies, then forceps — all wielded by the obstetrician. Though disdained, obstetrics is high art. The midwife, however, is a relic of barbarism.

If an uneducated woman of the lowest classes can practice obstetrics, why, it must require very little in the way of skill and knowledge.

That’s what the public must think if we continue to allow ignorant women to practice our delicate profession. No wonder young physicians won’t choose obstetrics. How can they expect respect and remuneration if anyone — a neighbor, a passerby — is thought capable?

These days even the poor foreigner, crowded in city tenements, is enlightened to the value of medical attendance and demands it. As for rural areas, why, midwives are almost gone from rural Illinois. If before this week ends, midwives across America simply vanished, women would be cared for better than before. I am certain of it.
Will You Fill Their Saddlebags?

They’re riding today on America’s frontier. Up overgrown trails, across rushing rivers on their way to save a life, perhaps even two. It could be Marcus, a boy with a fever, little Sally with a broken arm, or Helen, a young mother facing her agony in a lonesome cabin. Their lives depend on nurses and the saddlebags you fill.

Frontier nurses ride horseback through Kentucky’s roughest country where roads are mere bridle trails, streams are seldom bridged, automobiles never find their way. Send a dollar to buy their horses feed, ten dollars to deliver a newborn safely into a mother’s arms. Don’t delay.

Send a check to the Frontier Nursing Service.
Sarah’s Letter Home: A Cabin in Arles

July 19, 1932

Mother, remember the museum
and the painting we admired?
Van Gogh’s bed and chair in France,
his snug little bedroom
shimmering in blues and orange?
I went into a cabin today
just as small.
*La Chambre a’ Arles* worked
in down-to-earth brown
here in Kentucky.

The husband was off timbering,
the mother there alone with
her first child, a girl in brown hair,
handmade dress. Heavy as
was, she lumbered
out of bed to make a kind of tea.
Smelled like a summer forest,
bits of plant floating,
like a creek after a storm.
I sipped politely.

The mother — barely my age —
herself already four,
living in a room bare except for
bed and table, chairs,
a kettle over the fire.
Instead of pictures,
newspaper pasted across walls,
a room blank as a cave.

I toyed with my tea, watched Laura,
who shied like a pony at first.
She twirled and sang to her doll,
then demanded a story as
Lenore consulted the mother.

I don’t know what my face said but
as we rode home,
Lenore turned in the saddle,
Just because they have nothing
doesn’t mean they are nothing.
I will do better next time, but Mother,
those chairs, imagine,
the chairs are caned just like Van Gogh’s.
Annie Sees a Haint

Stories of spirits, forced partings
of hapless lovers, the unsettled dead.
Katie and I sat up swapping tales
until the dogs barked. Barking means
babies, means a father has come for a nurse.
I dressed and went with him.
A first baby. The mother labored all night,
through the next day. By the time baby came
it was night again, later still before I left.
Riding home in the dark, near asleep in the saddle,
I saw something in the woods.

I passed through hemlocks, on into the oaks
when a possum bustled in the bush. No,
much larger and upright. The lantern lit on
flesh, bare arms and legs. A man it looked like,
with bark and branches where his torso should be,
and leaves around a puckish smile.
I stopped. So did he.
Raven crunched a twig just then,
loud in all that quiet. And he left,
this man, or tree, or bit of both.
I know I saw something.
Miss Marvin Makes a Movie:
Marvin in the River

Up to my shins in I’m-forgetting-which river,
	(crank, crank, crank)
turning and turning the Kodak’s stiff’ handle.
	(crank, crank, crank)
Mary says film it, I ask when and where,
	(crank, crank, crank)
keeping the rhythm with hands that are numb.
	(crank, crank, crank)
“Spring” Mary calls it but it surely it’s winter.
	(crank, crank, crank)
Do it again I call out and the volunteers groan.
	(crank, crank, crank)
Once more and then tea, I foolishly promise, but
	(crank, crank, crank)
get the stroke wrong and the film’s underexposed.
	(crank, crank, crank)
If only, if only I knew how to do this,
	(crank, crank, crank)
I’d make Mary proud and a movie besides.
	(crank, crank, crank)
Mountain Medicine

One thing leads to another:
a cold becomes “brown skeeters,”
then pneumonia, perhaps death.
We see whooping cough and measles,
tonsillitis, influenza, diphtheria,
typhoid, tuberculosis, dysentery,
hookworm, hookworm, hookworm.
And calamities: deep gashes from cutting
timber, snake bites, gunshot wounds,
men crushed in their own small mines,
a girl twirling in her dress by the hearth,
burned, twin baby boys orphaned,
malnourished, meat drying on the bone.
But joys too: the twins hearty, adopted,
girls in overalls like their brothers,
netting over cribs in summer, children
lining up, waiting for vaccinations,
infected tonsils removed, bodies mended.
Some battles end up wins for our side.
Expect blood, Lenore said.
Less than I thought but bolder,
brighter than imagined,
such a fluid jewel.

*More than one’s named Ruby in remembrance.*

But she didn’t warn about
the mother’s moaning.
*Keening,* she called it.

A low, endless mourning,
beast snared under the bed,
deep, deep and seeping out,
up through weary floorboards
from far below the cabin
and somewhere lower still.

An underworld lament
coiled past arrowheads
older than the Cherokee,
a stubborn seedling,
music pressed fern-like
into rock, it emerged
finally, as a new song.
Then: a baby cried and
the mother laughed.
Topography

To find McBurney’s Point, draw a line from your navel to the iliac crest, the highest part of your pelvic bone. Then trace your fingers two thirds of the way down that line. Press. If your condition is acute, you will howl.

To find your way to Wendover to the clinic at Cutshin, head east. Cross Wolf Creek, ride past the cabin where I made my last call, ascend to the meadow where I studied stars most winter nights. From there you can see down the valley to the clinic and barn.

To get from the hospital to the motor road in town, line up behind the men taking turns with my coffin. Step in behind the mourners and Raven, her stirrups crossing an empty saddle. We’ll pick our way down the winding path from there.
Miss Marvin Makes a Movie:

*The Forgotten Frontier*

Somebody said we took the roof off a man’s cabin to film the baby scene. That’s not true. He had taken the old one off himself because he was preparing to put on a new one, so we took advantage and filmed in daylight inside a mountain cabin. (I had a new camera then, one with a spring. I could wind it like a clock and it ran for several minutes on its own.) Like all the actors we used, the man and his family volunteered to be in the movie. They wanted to help the nurses who were helping them, they said. No one was paid a penny. Oh, yes, some men were given lunch at the hospital in return for helping out, but no money ever changed hands.
1. Courier’s Lament

I went to Wendover to care for the horses;
I stayed for two years instead of three months.

My mother sent me to work with the horses,
to help the nurses traverse the dense hills.

I stayed for the laurel, the mothers, the babies;
I stayed for the horses: for Paddy and Bear.

For tea at Wendover and lunch with Miss Mary,
for laughter at midnight and my dear Diane.

I’d stay for forever if Diane wouldn’t marry,
I’d stay and slop stalls for Paddy and Bear.

But I read her betrothal in a paper from Richmond
on the wall of a cabin round the mountain past Hell.

I helped the nurse with another hard birthing,
then stood in the snow while the horses breathed frost.

I’m leaving Wendover, going back to the city;
tell her I said goodbye to the horses and all.
Imagining a Horse

I am trapped
between boulder and tree
on my back
working my legs
like a bug on the barn floor

can’t see ground my body
smell of blood excrement

Sky-blinded I thirst
in my eyes flies writhe

I want her to call me
come for me,

I want to stand
at edge of river drink

Edge of the dark and
a hawk floats circles
my name wafts on the wind
I hear them coming
see men gun

oh Epona
Sarah Speaks of New Troubles

Broken as a china teacup that slips from a soapy hand, demolished like a bottle of oil in a dropped saddlebag, Katie is shattered. This new calamity has sobered us all, but my strongest friend is distraught, speaks of going home. Annie’s mare, Raven, has died. Somehow she slid down an embankment in the pasture, was wedged on her back, caught between a beech tree and a boulder. Workmen hewed the tree, but it was too late, or the fall too great. Katie, strong through Annie’s illness, is inconsolable.

Our horses are stalwart, not invulnerable. They trek long hours in all weather. We must rely on one another.
Horse Trading:
Mary Keeps a Horse

We like your mare and are disposed to keep her. You say Daisy is a fine saddle horse, easy on a rider, but may we have a statement from you declaring she is not in foal? She is fat and we cannot be sure.

If you send us a guarantee that she is not expecting, agreeing to take her back and return our money in case she is, we will keep her and send a check in payment for Daisy and her equipment ($125).
Miss Marvin Makes a Movie:
An Evening of Hoopla

Despite ball-length taffeta gowns,
despite delicate high-heeled slippers,
fifteen debutantes scamper up and down
stairs of Mecca Hall for my film’s premiere.
I try to picture them bedecked as they are
ascending Kentucky mountain paths, as if
my giggling could calm my anxious mind.
The girls usher our patrons to their seats
any one of whom, cousin Mary mentions,
could be our next big benefactor,
endower of a clinic or barn or both.

What have I gotten into now?

The hall is full and the crowd buzzes
like dragonflies in August. I am nervous.
Ruth Draper will perform a monologue,
then Tertius Noble will seat himself
at the organ to play during the movie,
my movie, my sad attempt at a movie.

Why did I agree to come tonight?

I love the city but would sooner groom
horses at Wendover than be here now.
I wish I’d filmed more scenes, edited
more capably, knew what I was doing.
If only the product equaled my vision,
if only I weren’t a perfectionist, I could
stop wringing my hands and enjoy this.
The movie that was not made about the Frontier Nursing Served starred either Loretta Young or Madonna as an intrepid nurse-midwife in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky. Viewers would have preferred a scrappier actress, but Barbara Stanwyck, Betty Boop, and Hilary Swank were already locked into a contract for a big-budget biopic about Sandra Day O’Connor or Marie Curie. Brad Pitt or Jimmy Stewart played the male lead, the stalwart, stubborn mountaineer torn between his fierce loyalty to his people and their gentle but misunderstood ways, and his love for the fetching newcomer, the intrepid nurse. The movie portrayed Mary Breckinridge as a gruff matriarch: stern with her nurses on the outside, but a sentimental pushover on the inside. Dame Judi Dench or Bea Arthur coveted the role, sure to lead to an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actress. The enduring mountain mother was played by Myrna Loy or Cher, neither of whom learned to quilt during filming. W.C. Fields or Randy Quaid was cast as the volatile moonshiner. Ultimately, the movie was titled *Mountain Babes* or *Mountain Babes on Horseback*, with a sequel in the works tentatively titled *Mountain Babes on Horseback Ride Again*, and another, after major revision and a new director, *Ninja Mountain Babes Ride Once More*. In spite of Walter Winchell’s hype on his nationwide radio show and a full segment of prattle on Entertainment Tonight, the film did not fare well during its opening weekend against the damp romance of *Titanic*, a snarling Edward G. Robinson in *Little Caesar*, or the special effects sci-fi extravaganza, *Bride of Frankenstein*. Ticket sales, however, did pick up on Wednesday nights when movie theaters included the film with a lineup of short subjects, newsreels, and Tom and Jerry cartoons.
Horse Trading: Sales Pitch

Western Union, Night Letter
Rec’d via Krypton, Sept. 17, 1932

Miss Mary Beckinridge
Wendover, Kentucky

Sure have a lovely looking plantation saddle horse to please you. She is six years old, sound, fawn color, mane and tail hazel, brown eyes, good eyes, good horse, never saw a better one. Very intelligent, beautiful mare. Smooth all over, no rough points, in splendid condition. A real plantation walking mare, will run and walk and canter; won’t trot under saddle. Been used on a large farm and I tested her within thirty feet of steam engine, fearless. Has spirit but sense. Sired by Marshal McDonald, great sire of walking horses; her dam is fawn colored mare, best walking mare I know. Won’t you meet me in Hazard? Please answer by wire today.

C.L. Campbell
This is to Inform You That

We have thirty-seven horses and none to spare. New riders must learn to saddle, bridle, girth their horses. Ask experienced riders how best to sit in the saddle without pounding the horse. Never put on a horse any saddle but his own. Cleanse all abrasions both noon and night. A horse sent off duty thanks to a careless rider costs us one dollar a day. Bad backs on our horses are as inexcusable as mix-ups in medications, as bedsores in the hospital.

If you injure your horse, we will assign you the poorest ride until you learn otherwise.
Thus Sayeth the Expert:
Nurse Scovil Speaks to Prospective Mothers

We cannot take even the shortest journey without imperiling lives. To dwell on accidents that may never happen is as foolish as fretting away the pleasures of an ocean voyage.

Instead, dwell on pretty pictures — mountain lakes in summer, a forest wrapped in winter blankets, the babe you will soon embrace — keep the ideal before your imagination at all times.

Attend concerts or the theatre (properly dressed). Occupy leisure moments with literature, attend to house plants or other agreeable diversions. Think nothing unpleasant about the ordeal through which you must pass. Put whatever excites unpleasant emotion far, far away. The crown of womanhood is at hand and soon you will ascend to full possession of your kingdom.
Thus Sayeth the Expert:
Dr. Josiah M. Slemons Weighs In on the Curse of Eve

All mammals suffer in childbirth. Anyone who observes quadrupeds prepare for delivery knows this fact. Their period of pain is shorter, true, because man’s upright posture has reshaped the human pelvis, so woman’s confinement is less pleasant than a cat’s. To those who inquire what purpose is served by pain, I urge a moment’s reflection. Discomfort — nature’s compelling call — is the alert that birth will soon occur. Without such warning, the mother might be delivered in awkward circumstances — at the theater, perhaps, while riding a streetcar — and the infant could perish the instant it draws breath. I simply cannot believe, however, that suffering is essential to mother’s love. Is gold or silver that’s easily gained valued any less than what’s acquired through harder purchase?
Dead Tired

Granny Whitcomb says she can’t help me. (Can’t? snorts Tom. Won’t, more like.) She’s been catching babies for forty years now. She did for my mama and Tom’s, and was here for nearly every baby born on this mountain. Now she says no, no more. Tom is mad, thinking she’s stubborn. Says old people are like that but that she will come round. I clambered up to her place one cool afternoon. Rhododendrons blooming along the way, pink blossoms peeking from under the leaves like fairies in a story, and me feeling like a bride going up a long church aisle to her true wedding. But GrannyWhitcomb turned away. Offered me a drink of water, called me “child,” but didn’t invite me to sit. (That’s alright. Babies can get born just fine without that old woman, Tom says.)

Granny handed me the galls, dried her hands on her apron, and said no, no more babies and turned away. Said I better get back on home before dark. Then Mama came to me when I was asleep, wringing her hands and saying, I’m not sick. Just tired. Woke up thinking maybe Granny won’t be here when it’s my time, and no one is coming up behind her.

And now I feel like I’m coming home in the dark wood, the rhododendron blossoms brown, the path overgrown and gone. I am alone in a moonless night. Who will help me if lose my way? (Tom can’t say nothing to help that.)
And Then Some

My wife Rose says she will have herself a nurse if she has to walk to Wendover herself but I ain’t sure. Mama says she had Granny Whitcomb for all her babies and ain’t we breathing still?

Maybe she forgot my sister Jane lost a baby but I remember. I was shorter than a calf back then and not much older. It was winter but they sent me out to the barn cause Jane was suffering with that baby and Granny Whitcomb couldn’t do a damn thing for her but put her blue-veined old hand against Jane’s cheek and say, *It’s alright, child.*

When it was over Papa come get me. When he said the baby was lost, I ran right out the cabin door, looking for tracks in the snow. Searched and searched till I couldn’t go no further and he had to come find me. Mama likes to say I was way up the mountain by then and wasn’t that sweet of me to go looking for Jane’s little baby?

Rose’s own mama died with a granny beside her. Child-bed fever. At the end her mama was puny as a newborn herself, Rose says. Took her two weeks to die and nobody could do nothing.

If I had my way, I’d get every last granny in Leslie County. I’d line them all up on one side of the porch, herbs and grease all ready. And then I’d get all them nurses, make them stand at alert on the other side, soldiers waiting for battle, cause this is my Rose. She should have what she wants and then some.
Horse Trading:
Gift Horse

Mr. William Kerr to Mrs. Mary Breckinridge

I sold to W.M. Monroe today a beautiful black mare, six years old, named Annette. Gentle saddle horse. He is making you a present of it. I want to ship tomorrow. Wire back today about where I may send her. Would you see about getting me a railroad discount since this mare is for your frontier service and the nurses?

Mrs. Mary Breckinridge to Mr. William Kerr

I am sure Annette is a nice horse but do not ship her here. We work in rough country, almost no ground on which a horse can canter. We carry heavy saddlebags filled with bottles for care of the sick and have no use for horses that trot. Our horses need a fast running walk as well as reasonably fast flat-footed walk. The trot breaks our bottles, the canter is impossible. Many thanks for your care selecting what will no doubt be a delightful saddle mare for hunting around Lexington.
Kentucky Mountainitus

Sewickley, Penn.
Oct. 12, 1932

Friends,

Since my return to Pennsylvania
I have contracted a grave disease.
Prognosis for this patient is poor.
Unless a remedy is administered,
she will collapse and commence
clucking like a chicken, neighing
like a horse, jabbering about tea.
Under doctor’s orders, I will arrive
in Hazard next Monday.

Will one of you meet me at the station?

Katie
Vespers at Wendover

Arrive at twilight, in-between time,
(*edge of the dark*, they call it here).
Let the terrier from up the road escort you
to the door. Mouth clichés as you enter –
it’s smaller (larger) than expected.
Consume the chicken salad waiting for you,
then wander. Note Pig Alley where people
once lined for inoculations, the dining room
where couriers poured nurses their tea.
Finger-read the hearth plaque.
In Mary’s room (*your room*) admire
her diploma, photos. Watch a daddy-longlegs
make his stilted amble across your pillow,
deem him a cordial omen. Raise the window,
stretch out across the bed, surrender yourself
to the clamorous insect night.
“Frontier” / 10:
After A. Van Jordan, *Macnolia*

“Kate Meditates on Hills like Domed Temples” / 15:
Kate is a courier I invented. Couriers were young women, generally from the North, who were daughters of socially prominent FNS supporters. They volunteered three or four months of their time to help with horses, run errands, escort guests, and prepare afternoon tea for the nurse-midwives. Minimum age to serve as a courier was 19.

“Audacious” / 19:
After A. Van Jordan, *Macnolia*

“Sarah’s Journal: Fecundity” / 20:
Sarah is another courier of my invention.

“Thus Sayeth the Expert: Dr. DeLee Calls for an End to Midwifery” / 29:

“Imagining a Horse” / 40:
Mary Breckinridge’s horse, Teddy Bear, suffered a similar accident. Workman cut down the tree and moved him to a barn, but the veterinarian’s attempts to save him failed. I have borrowed the title and been inspired by Chris Llewellyn’s “Imagining the Horse” in *Fragments From the Fire.*
“Thus Sayeth the Expert: Dr. Josiah M. Slemons Weighs in on the Curse of Eve” / 47:


“Thus Sayeth the Expert: Nurse Scovil Speaks to Prospective Mothers” / 48:

Found poem, *Preparation for Motherhood* by Elizabeth Robinson Scovil, 1896