ABSTRACT

LYSISTRATA, KENTUCKY

By Daniel S Jones

Lysistrata, Kentucky is an anti-war novel based on the classic Aristophanes play. A story of two brothers on opposite sides of the Civil War, Richard and John Bowers work to readjust to their small Kentucky town, when their actions during the war resurface in a young girl at their doorstep, who claims to be the daughter of one of the Bowers men. A novel of injury, family tragedy, and redemption, *Lysistrata, Kentucky* culminates in the kidnapping of Penelope, the ruin of Richard, and the recovery of John Bowers, taking into account a more modern sentiment as relates to war and the damage it inflicts on its participants, namely the soldiers who fight and the wives and loved ones who are left to repair the damage.

LYSISTRATA, KENTUCKY

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Too much happens. That's it. Man performs, engenders, so much more than he can or should have to bear. That's how he finds he can bear anything. That's it. That's what is so terrible. That he can bear anything, anything.

— *Light in August*, William Faulkner

CHAPTER ONE

In Lysistrata, Kentucky, gunsmiths outnumber doctors at a margin of five to one. Cobblers outnumber teamsters three to one, despite the shrinking number of horses to shoe or drive. Jugs of wheat-mash whiskey outnumber sacks of edible flour, in general, while rickety barns filled with tobacco leaves, tanned and yellowed, outnumber them all. Of all the businesses that naturally suffer at the outbreak of a war, though, tobacco growers feel the least distress in these parts of northern Kentucky, as obedient wives scour the fields to reap along side their children, even the young girls and boys, no more ready to cull leaves for market than to raise weapons for combat. Yet, what else would the fine ladies of Lysistrata send to their husbands and lovers in battle, to remind them of home with brief tastes of the familiar, otherwise than common pouches of dark chaw, to tuck between cheeks and gums, or the fire-cured variety for their snuff pipes, or the burley and air-cured powder used to crumble and roll into their cigarettes?

While the Commonwealth is *neutral* for the great war, forty-four men from town volunteer to join Lee's army, and sixty-three volunteer to fight for President Lincoln and the Union, each man choosing sides to fit his own principles, as is proper for all men of conscience, with the result that women soon outnumber the men in Lysistrata, one-hundred-twenty-seven to none. Reports from soldiers return home to families and loved ones, hurried notes scratched onto scraps of paper, and thus word spreads how Lysistratians fight against each other in Blue Gap, Virginia, then in Barbourville, Kentucky, and again in Mills Springs, Perryville, out east in Richmond, and again, further to the east and north in Cynthiana. The good women lament how, frozen or warm, their messengers' boots are bandaged together with rags, pitiful, rubbed thin by combat and marches and cold time dwindling between battle. Sometimes these live bodies carry the letters, wounded and infected with syphilis—or typhoid or pneumonia or dysentery—only to leave again, when healthier, for war Other times the soldiers arrive dead, and rarely in the clothes they wore when they paraded out of town, brass buttons most notably missing, pawned for additional rations or prostitutes.

For Nance Bowers, though, the word from Bowling Green is magnificent. Her husband is alive and, with leave in hand, will be home tomorrow for a two week's stay. She whistles a hymnal from church or the scriptures as her palms flatten lumps from their featherbed, searching for a tune or rhythm to match the name Private Richard Bowers, his short, wavy brown hair, boyish auburn eyes, and the bluish fold of his crisp Union uniform. *I sat down under his shadow with great delight*, she hums, *his fruit was sweet to my taste*. As she works, Nance imagines Richard's body as it was, long and tall, lean, unblemished with spotless fingers and neat nails. The hot scruff of his coiled beard against her body. Bed sheets, rough and woolen and colorless, she spreads across the mattress and measures fourteen warm days in these desolate February months. Richard has been away at war some fifty-one weeks. His letter from Bowling Green already feels several months old.

In the next room, Katy Bowers prepares her bed as well, trading dirty sheets for clean, though not whistling, at the news from Bowling Green. Her husband, Corporal John Bowers, will also return home, alive, for a two week rest, though despite his letters any further word of his condition is a matter of question. For Katy, the bed holds cushions and pillows she stores in a long wooden chest, props for her neck, her arms, props for her legs beneath his weight. John is a thick man, massive, only an inch shorter than his brother Richard. She finds nothing holy in the work, all for the glory of bodies, bone and flesh. In his grey Confederate uniform, Katy

imagines, John is a statue etched from granite, cut chin and shoulders, wide muscles scored with the labors of tending livestock, the childhood scar engraved on his chin. Katy sets two extra candles for the room, yellow and stubby. Her letter arrived postdated only a few days prior. No church hymnals find way to her throat, no holy passages soothe her worries. She waits at the bedside for the quiver of her husband's touch.

At the rear of the farmhouse, Suppina Bowers stares at the wall, at the seven crosses carved in its flat wooden panels, and moves only to adjust her shawl against the draft. She does not fathom her sons' coming home, through Bowling Green by different roads, and perhaps she no longer recognizes how long they've been away. Suppina is skeletal. She eats little. Her gray mane dangles beneath the chair, brushes the floor in tangles as she rocks back and forth. The night her boys rushed off, two sides of the same war, Suppina felt a burst of light behind her eyes—after their shouting, their arguments, after the fistfight—and her body numbed, all the way up to her mouth. No longer able to speak, all slurs and drool, she does not object when her daughters-in-law move into the house, take up their pining. They wrap Suppina in a shawl each morning and slide her rocker to the rear of the small house. Neither Katy nor Nance speak much to her anymore, though the old woman's hearing remains quite good, stubborn, other than to coerce a swallow of dinner, cabbage broth, usually, or to coax her from solitude and a slow walk around the cabin.

With the bedrooms decorated and mattresses prepared, Nance and Katy sit near the fireplace on a sewing bench Richard built and John decorated before the war, on two cushions Suppina sewed together before her illness. Nance pokes at the fire with a long stoke, its hard iron shaft, and watches the dance of flames and the turn of smoldering coals. To pass the hours, Katy and Nance page through their Bible finding passages that give voice to the love they feel for their husbands, an exercise Nance always wins, usually with lines from the *Song of Songs* she delivers in a limber, throaty voice. *Perhaps now is the time,* Nance thinks, *to save my love from war, to make my suggestion and see where it takes us, if we are to have them back with us, at our sides, my love for Richard alive rather than dead.* Katy grips firewood between her thumb and forefingers, presses it to her lap and waits to toss its length on the hearth. Gray smoke reaches from the fireside and waters Katy's eyes, though she does not cough. The Bible rests unopened at their feet. The women eye each other with a need to speak, look back at Suppina, lower their voices.

"If there's a way," Nance says, "to keep John and Richard from goin' back to war, would you do it?"

"It's been nearly twelve months," Katy replies. "I'd do anythin'."

"Though it's hard."

"The harder the better."

"And rough."

"This's Kentucky," Katy says. "I don't mind it rough."

"Then hear me out." Nance pulls her body forward in the birch chair and leans until she feels Katy's breath. "For the next two weeks, we must refuse."

"Refuse what?" Katy laughs and with quick nibbles bites her lip.

"Relations."

"Let the war go on," Katy says flatly.

"I thought you liked it hard and rough?"

"Ain't no way it'll work."

"It's so," Nance says. "And you'll see how. We'll show 'em to our rooms, and make ready for 'em. After twelve months, they'll be stiff as jackrabbits."

"I can only wish."

"When they beg for it," Nance adds. "*And they will*. We tell 'em that they'll only get it after they agree to quit the war and stay home."

"That's askin' too much," Katy replies. "Maybe John'll sleep through war."

"He won't. And neither'll Richard."

"But if war has changed 'em," Katy asks. "And they get violent?"

"Then grab the bedposts. It won't be as pleasurable."

"If they beat us?"

"Then use the broom handle under your bed for defense," Nance says. "As I'll use mine."

"Will it come to that?"

"You remember how they loved us," Nance says. "War doesn't change that."

Katy's eyes skirt the space between the fireplace and the wood in her lap. The smell of smoke and burning beech twinges her nostrils, until a tear forms in the corner of her eyes, unexplained, which she wipes away with her wrist. It's a plan, she knows, simple enough that no argument can knock it down, no matter how hard she tries to think her way around the situation, or come up with an alternative. Katy's grin turns to thin pressed lips. After twelve months, she's sure John will agree to anything, a function of both his makeup as a man with the appropriate desires, but also of his temperament as a husband. Men are fairly plain creatures, when you get down to it. Why must the hardest decisions, then, fall on women? *A man has his own hand for relief*, she thinks, *but a woman is forced to shape tools and other household goods to her purposes*. So with a groan Katy agrees to the proposal, despite the sour expression turning the corners of her mouth, and tosses her shaft into the fire. A shower of sparks spreads through the air, tiny white flecks up the chimney's opening. A sigh slips from her throat. From the darkness, Suppina hacks a cough and drools onto her shawl. Nance pulls a needle from her sewing box and hands it to Katy.

"Prick my finger," she says. "Then I'll prick yours."

With two quick pokes, tiny crimson beads rise from their fingertips. Nance and Katy press their fingers together and swear an oath: *I'll have nothin' to do with man, though he come with an erection. Never will I give myself willingly. I'll not lift my legs toward the ceiling, nor crouch on hands and knees. But if I break this oath, I'll end my life before again willingly touching a man*. The fresh log catches on the fire, sending a slow, warm wave through the room. Suppina feels the heat through her shawl and fixes her eyes on the pair of women at her fireplace. They have forgotten the old woman's evening tea again, which clears the phlegm from her throat and helps her to sleep. Nance and Katy pull blankets across their shoulders and chairs and fight to keep warm in the orange glow. Red coals spill through the iron chenets, then cool with gray crust on the hearth floor below.

Cocks crow over Lysistrata, come morning. Gunsmiths polish their tools and the doctor rinses her instruments. Halos of grey winter fog hang closer to the ground than to the heavens, pressed between sheets of cold air before the morning's thaw, leaving a thin layer of damp along the bare tree branches, along the prickerbushes thorny in the winter soil. Yet the Bowers women jump from their chairs despite the cold, far too anxious to waste any more time, all but Suppina, who snores unattended in her corner of the house. The fire smolders, spent wisps of smoke rise

up the flue until Katy stokes flames and restores the heat. The farmhouse is lit wick by wick as Nance scuttles through the rooms reciting her morning prayers to the God who would deliver Richard at any moment. Despite their pact, the women wring hands to see their husbands again, or perhaps they rush to braid their hair because of it.

Outside the ground is both hard and difficult. A crisscross of deer tracks, frozen in the mud, aims straight into the forest that surrounds Lysistrata, disappears in clumps of low brush where come spring the cardinals and other local birds hide from sight and predators and do not flutter to the birdfeeder Katy has propped in the yard, a pinecone drizzled with honey and covered with seed. Out in the yard, no unfamiliar animals trace near the wood-rail fence that defends the Bowers property, the one that borders tufts of brown grass stubbornly holding root and shields the livestock from predators, families of deer or the individual wild turkeys, an occasional gray squirrel poking for food and avoiding harassment. There are fewer attacks in the winter, the women know, yet no peace. The Bowers house, like all those in Lysistrata, is one-storey and plain, whitewashed on the exterior, with four windows looking out, though the only window of use this morning faces south, towards Bowling Green.

With hair braided and the animals fed, Nance and Katy hurry to Lysistrata's general store. It is nearly noon before they arrive, the time more on account of their preparations at home than the walking distance from their house to the center of Lysistrata. At the store, Mrs. Langdon minds the shelves, what with Mr. Langdon off fighting for the Union, and keeps items stocked as best she can. She is young, thin with worry. She does not say hello when the Bowers women enter, but instead moves silently from her work towards the register, where at the front counter she signs for orders that come bi-weekly by stagecoach, such as the two Bowers parcels that arrived only recently from Louisville. Nance and Katy hurry through the usual greetings and news about the war. Mrs. Langdon knows that the Bowers boys will be home and that these wives have unmentionables to be picked up, unwrapped. Her teeth bite back two months of sour envy.

"You must be excited," Mrs. Langdon says.

"Quite."

"Keep them boys on a tight leash," she says. "The women in this town are man-crazy, liable to steal 'em away."

"That's what these're for." Katy nods toward the parcels.

"They better work." Mrs. Langdon pulls the packages from a high shelf. "Times're rough. The Pollard boy's voice cracked yesterday and the women in my store 'most tore him to pieces. Luckiest twelve-year-old in town."

Katy fidgets with her package. Mrs. Langdon returns to the boxes of canned goods and begins stacking them in tall columns on the barren shelves, not once looking back at the Bowers women and their packages. Katy plucks the twine from her parcel and rips the paper, revealing a bright board box. Inside the box is a red corset, fringed with white lace, the kind cabaret dancers wear on stage, or hungry wives store away for special nights. It was Katy's idea to sell off a few of the older animals to pay for the luxury, and Nance who found the buyers and collected the money. The garter belts match the lace trimming. Katy's hands run over the smooth material and fingers the soft white fabric to her cheek. Her eyes reflect the oath and second-thoughts. Nance does not yet open her parcel—it's not for public display, she figures—but smiles knowingly of its contents, with an eye on her sister-in-law.

"I suppose these'll serve a different use now," Nance says on the walk home.

"What a waste," Katy says, the box clutched to her breast against the cold.

"You swore to keep the oath," Nance says. "I'll miss it from Richard just as much, but God himself is the guarantor."

"I know," Katy replies. "But when he's lyin' on that bed, and I'm dressed in this—them words'll seem as far away as Bowling Green."

At the house, the women hide their parcels from Suppina's sight, tuck them into the bedrooms. The old woman rocks in her chair, head motionless, as if she knows of the packages and disapproves of their contents, or hasn't noticed a single event in the house since her boys bloodied each other's noses and rushed off for war. In the kitchen Nance and Katy now prepare the homecoming meal, each with an eye on the south window. With the extravagance of the dinner, along with their new clothes, they both know the Bowers savings are spent. As a result, Nance scrapes every last piece of meat from the lamb, and though not the town's butcher, manages to carve flank from loin, to salt the legs for hanging in the smokehouse as if it were her occupation. In his last letter, she recalls, Richard praised the hardtack rations he received, dry crusty bread, and hunting raccoons and possum for stews, though they were now somewhat rare in winter. The bones Nance sets for stock in an iron pot over the fire.

Katy has less luck with the chicken, a product of nerves, no doubt, her pile of meat more shredded than sliced, as if feathering the bird likewise plucks her will for additional violence. A strange reaction, she thinks, for a woman by now used to the work on a husbandless farm, each quill rooted deep in the animal's flesh, shucked with a thick-gloved hand. Katy manages the breasts and snaps the legs, and has more trouble with the wings but eventually separates the meat from the sinew. *This is miserable work*, she thinks, *a man's rightful duty*, but it will be appreciated nonetheless, devoured. In his letters, John complains of hunger and the scarcity of even plain johnny cakes, how he's taken to theft for his daily bread, when it's an option. This isn't a fact Katy shares with the women of Lysistrata, contained in the private letters she buries beneath the bed, how the hunger is worse than battle, he writes, if only because it lasts longer. His handwriting seems clearer and neater in that message, she notes, more so than the others. Katy portions the meat in two piles, the nearer slightly larger than the farther.

At the rear of the room, in her chair, Suppina rocks to pass the day. She hears pots and pans clanking on the stove, over the fire, the mix of spoons and bowls, the rattle of flatware and clay dishes, jugs of whiskey. Over the noise, though, the smells affect her most of all—the sweet odor of sausage-and-apples, with butter sauce; the mix of molasses, eggs, cinnamon, and ginger for the ginger cakes; three jars of tart blackberry tea; the milky flavor from a pot of white beans; and trays of cornbread, with whole kernels baked right inside. The sugary smells are in stark contrast to the usual and therefore unnoticed stink of lardy candles melting to pass the day, or the tang when the winds shift and coat the house with the smack of fresh manure from the livestock. Katy breathes deep when she returns from the smokehouse holding a string of venison jerky, tough and gray, along with a small brown ham. Nance relishes the air of homecoming as she piles eggs into bowls and measures crabapples for dumplings, and cups of sugar into tidy piles.

It is late afternoon when Katy gasps. Through the window, she spots a man at the fence, through the gate, on his way to the door, a thin figure, gaunt, with crusty scars on his chin and face, the slow gait and motion of an invalid or of the elderly at Sunday services, a doddering of shoulders and shuffle of the feet in no way appropriate for a man of John or Richard's age, and yet familiar, perhaps in the stubby sway of the figure's arms and shoulders, or the bend in the man's neck as he watches the ground for his next step. At first Katy does not move, only eyes the man, as one watching a stranger, hopeful that her husband now approaches the house, fearful

as to why his usual manner has abandoned him. Pink cheekbones poke from behind the shape's lanky skin, now against the light of the house, she sees a gray uniform torn in shreds which barely clings to the frail skeleton below. His shoulders slouch under the scanty weight of his pack.

"Oh my God," she says.

Katy drops a plate of flour biscuits and bursts through the door. The rolls smack against the ground, their rounded tops now flattened against the rug. On the walk, Corporal John Bowers keeps his head low, winces when she calls his name with a hallelujah. Katy jumps towards him, crashes into his body. John crumples against her momentum, lands on his back with a groan. For a while they lie motionless on the frozen earth—she clutches his shoulders, unwilling as she is to budge from his body, and though she squeezes her yearning into him, nearly a year's worth of worry and fretfulness, he is too weak to sit forward or respond. Katy pulls her husband from the earth and notices the black wounds on his hands, then the pockmarks, and how his knapsack is lightened, seemingly emptied of the mementos she sent off with him. He reeks of liquor. Finally she has a closer look at his face, glazed with the grime of battle, and the knots beneath his eyes, allergic reactions to gunpowder and ubiquitous anxiety.

"Welcome home," she says while walking him past the kitchen feast. Katy carries the bulk of her husband's weight across her shoulders. They pass Nance on their way to the bedroom, through the trail of crumbs along the floorboards, and do not acknowledge her, the prayerful way she folds her hands. Katy closes the door. There is a heave and the sound of the mattress flattening and a cough from John certain to taste like blood. Moments of low rumbles follow until Katy reappears, alone, where she finds Nance's shoulder and sobs, not tears of joy or even relief as she had expected, even counted on, during the long nights and longer days, but the build-up and release of a year's worth of apprehension, all flustered and confused, mixed up into heaves of her chest, and a low wailing so as not to let on to John. The salty tears soak through both women now, shared—for the first, how war has ruined this once stout man, thinned him, weakened him, drained the color from his eyes, and for the second, a prayer, what unknowns lurk from Bowling Green.

"He'll be better," Nance says, reassuring them both. "Once he eats."

"This isn't somethin' food was meant to fix."

"Then God will provide," Nance answers.

With a towel Katy dries her face and contorts her bravest look. She fixes a plate of the food and returns to John, who is prone on the mattress. Nance turns to see the body through the doorway, but Katy closes the door and pulls a seat to the bedside. Her pillows are scattered on the floor to allow his body to stretch and quiet and heal. She breaks small pieces from a biscuit, tucks the morsels on his lips and presses his jaws to chew. *My best face forward,* she thinks, *the best I can give, that is what my husband needs from me right now, what the family needs from me, a strong wife and pair of shoulders, to carry us through and see these troubles clear through to the end*. The food falls from her husband's mouth despite Katy's best attempts otherwise. John groans with each swallow of food but continues to eat as if these were the first morsels to pass his lips in quite a long time. Katy shovels the food to her husband's mouth, covers the low moaning with song:

Hush little darlin', don't say a word
I'm a-gonna buy you a mockin' bird
And if that mockin' bird don't sing
I'm a-gonna buy you a diamond ring

And if that diamond ring turns brass
I'm a-gonna buy you a lookin' glass

Despite his body's condition, John watches Katy's mouth with lucid eyes. The muscles in his shoulder twitch, as if trying to move, an arm, perhaps, to wrap around his wife's body and comfort her as she works to console him. As she sings, the food on the table brushes more of its homecoming aroma over the room, like a sweet odor blended with Katy's fragrant skin, but John can barely breathe deep enough to discern either. His tongue is parched, lusting for booze. When Katy notices her husband's eyes, how they follow her rhythms, Katy blushes at first, then bends to kiss his face with slow tender motion. John does not smile, yet his eyes smolder, his arms shudder again but still result in no perceptible motion. Katy thinks to ask him to speak. To blink twice if he knows that she loves him. She thinks to ask what has happened to the bag of valuables she sent with him. Instead, Katy whispers to her broken husband.

"What have they done to you?"

"Sur-prise," John mumbles, passes over to sleep.

Katy replies with an *I know* and pulls the parcel from under her bed as she leaves. John falls to sleep before she has closed the bedroom door behind her. In the kitchen Katy stoops over the cauldron on the cooking stove, plucks the drained bones with a long fork and stirs the concoction with a tight grip on its handle. She does not speak to Nance, though the sisters-in-law sit no farther than a few feet apart. Suppina watches from the rear of the room, a face of sympathy or disdain, as if she hears every word, spoken and otherwise. When the shawl slips from her shoulder, a pendant appears loosely hanging around her neck, a silver thaler punctured at the top, clinging to an aged golden chain, a coin-and-necklace which Suppina inherited from her mother and used to say had survived the Revolutionary War. Katy approaches Suppina at the rear of the room, eyes the old woman while pouring a portion of broth and crumbles cornmeal into the bowl. *Don't give me that look*, she thinks, *women aren't the cause of these troubles*. But Suppina does not shift her gaze, does not move to swallow the soup spoon offered to her.

For Nance the preparations are finished, though the anxieties in her stomach have now begun in earnest. With nothing to distract her, and Katy gone to bed and her rustle of arrangements in the bedroom now stilled, fear sets in Nance's bones. She closes the Bible, too distracted to read. She pulls a chair to the south window and calculates how far Bowling Green is from the Union camp, how far the Union camp is from Lysistrata. Her brother-in-law was a strong man, she recalls, and carried more than enough to hold him through the winter. And look how he returned! Richard was already thin, though lovely, and could barely afford the weight he lost each summer, let alone a solid year of soldier's rations, what there was of it, as the stories she heard about the state of food on the warpath, from the other wives in Lysistrata, wasn't near as bright or cheerful as Richard made it to sound in his letters. Nance taps her feet on the floorboards, jostles her knees and legs to-and-fro, grips tight fists in her lap as her fear breeds and a light snow swirls around the farmhouse, dusting the land a powdery white. The wind kicks. A steady draft leaks through the window across her face. The hours pass.

At nightfall Nance turns towards the cool meal. She has left her post a few times to bring down the stews or scrape biscuits from the pan or sweep away the vagabond crumbs left along the floor. At intervals she arranges the tableware, resets the plates and glasses, organizes the forks and knives, and reorganizes the entire display only a few minutes later. *Perhaps Richard*

has stopped for the night, she wonders, *to stay out of the cold*. The south window is now a holy mirror against the darkness, reflections of candles and the fireplace watch her, their gaze too much a burden for her eyes, like Moses and the burning bush, something she doesn't see, doesn't want to, but yet in whose direction she cannot keep her eyes. She mouths a prayer, a new prayer hoping no longer for a happy and healthy homecoming, but for any reunion whatsoever. Nance turns the lamb on its spit when the door blows open. A man, tall, enters. His face hides beneath a floppy blue infantry hat. A thick pack rests at his feet.

"Who's home at this fine hour?" the man says.

"Thank God!" Nance cries and rushes to embrace the soldier.

"Private Richard Bowers reportin' for leave," he says. A smile spreads across his face as Nance kisses his cheek, lips.

"You look wonderful," she sighs. "Like the day you left."

"And you're a sight for achin' eyes," he says, returning the kisses. Over her shoulder, Richard sees his mother against the back wall. "How's she holdin'?"

"Nothin's changed," Nance explains. "Since my last letter."

Richard lowers his head into his mother's lap and hugs her around the waist. The odor of her body chokes his breath, despite the aroma of food throughout the house, but he does not loose his grip. For the past year Nance has sent updates of Suppina's condition to Richard as he mentioned battles all over the southern half of the country, usually to a dispatch for Union mail, where the government does the work of finding the soldiers. For this reason her letters are usually general and avoid the specifics of Suppina's daily successes and failures, as her condition often changed from one day to the next, not neatly enough for Nance's weekly letter writing. With his face in his mother's lap, the red tassels of Suppina's shawl brush against his cheek but the old woman makes no stir, only hacks a cough from her throat. Richard reaches up and tucks Suppina's medallion and chain beneath her shawl and house-shirt.

"Sit and have a meal," Nance says. "Thank God."

"Indeed," Richard says.

Richard pulls a chair to the table and heaps portions from the serving bowls and trays. First the meats pile in front of him, slices from the ham, thick chords of venison, then the lamb, cooked with a small number of spices, and the chicken with salt and some pepper. Next come the baked goods, the biscuits to sop gravies and the other juices, and cornbread he spreads with salty butter, and slices of pie and cookies, and still-warm loaves of bread.

"Tell me about the war," Nance says.

"Are you sure you can manage it?"

"I'm sure," Nance says. "Woman was created to manage."

"We're havin' a rather grand time of it, then," Richard says. "Our generals outflank theirs at every turn. Our supplies're constant. Our boys more valiant that the Grays. Which makes for noble action, on our part, at least."

"You seem no worse for wear."

"Much better, in fact," Richard says. "War brings out the best in man."

With the plate wiped clean Richard eats the vegetables, beans, carrots, yams, and the dried fruits, blackberries and cherries, strawberries and canned apples. His hands stir a furious commotion over the table, one shoveling food to his mouth and the other refilling the plate. Nance pulls away from the table, only slightly, while watching her husband's new table-manners, no longer the graceful eating of young men, quite different from the way his knife and fork used to rest like instruments in his grip, delicate and precise, to keep his hands away from

the filthy business of eating, or how he sectioned the meal into same-sized pieces, and whatever residue clung to the knife he would drag across the edge of his fork, and back again, until the food vanished from his plate, square by square. Or how, after each bite, Richard would dab his mouth with the folded cloth napkin, return it to his tidy lap, or wipe the rim of his drinking glass before each swallow; the kind of man who washed his hands twice before meals, and couldn't find the stomach to eat until he had. For Nance, the scene is a dream or some other fantasy, some consumption that cannot be real. It is now that she notices Richard's finger nails, the thick filth embedded beneath them.

"What's happened there?" she asks.

"War's not a time to keep your nails clean," he says.

With a few more bites of cornbread, Richard downs a full glass of blackberry tea, and a second glass. Nance pops the clay whiskey jug and pours her husband a tall clear glass. Richard drinks the alcohol with even sips, tilts the glass each time to swallow and sets it on the table. Leaning in his chair, Nance thinks, *he looks no different from the day he left*, if not better, as though his travels took him to some exotic place, and the last year had been spent at leisure rather than war. She searches his face for some sign of distress, but finds none, only the bright gleam in his eyes and a cock-sure grin across his lips. But the grin disappears, replaced with a scowl, when Richard catches sight of the knapsack near the bedroom door.

"What's Johnny Reb doin' here?"

"Katy just got the letter," Nance apologizes. "We didn't know you two'd be here at the same time, or else we would have—"

"How is he?"

"Lyin' in bed." Nance says.

"Sounds like a fine idea," he says while standing from the table.

A bulge grows in the lap of Richard's blue uniform trousers, which he makes no effort to conceal. Nance eyes the swelling from her seat at the table, the way it too seems larger than a year ago, as if twelve months of battle, as Richard says, have somehow made her husband more of a man, *though the thought could also be part of her imagination*, she thinks, fueled by reading only the Bible for the past year, no matter how many times she recites the Song of Solomon, the way no words or images can compare to a body, all its glory, in the flesh. Or perhaps this is her temptation, a test from the good Lord of the kind sent to old Job, to break the oath. Nance finds herself licking the roof of her mouth, tracing the hind-sides of her teeth with slow rubs of the tongue. From her throat, though, the oath likewise continues to engorge, welling between her gums and sliding across her taste buds with a salty flavor. Richard now stands with his hands on his waist, his chest puffed as if stretched on the rack. His back is turned to his mother, his eyes fixed on the braid of his wife's hair.

"Show yourself to the bedroom," Nance says. "I'll be in after I clean up."

"Be quick about it," he says, eyes fixed on the window.

But Nance is anything but quick, deliberately slow, plate by plate clearing the table, scraps first, then the unusable waste, which she carts outside to the feeding troughs, followed by the usable which she dumps into the stock pot and sets another log on the stove fire. All the while Nance repeats the oath to herself, mouthing the words but putting no voice behind them, reverence holding her tongue, rubbing the tip of her finger where her blood met Katy's and sealed the previous night's promise by the fire. Then with napkins she covers what of the meat remains and tucks the baked goods into a breadbox, what will fit, and the rest into the pie cabinet and its perforated tin face. She clears the table as she imagines Richard undressing, the drape of

his uniform, the winter air against this bare skin. Nance sets the soiled plates to soak. She eyes the door, repeats her oath one last time, this time with solid words. Her knuckles scrape the cast iron pans and wash brown water into the basin as she sings:

As the apple tree among the trees of the wood,
so is my beloved among the sons.
I sat down under his shadow with great delight,
his fruit was sweet to my taste.
He brought me to the banquet hall.
His banner over me is love.
Strengthen me with raisins,
refresh me with apples;
For I am faint with love.
His left hand is under my head.
His right hand embraces me.

In the bedroom, Richard is naked beneath the covers and stroking himself. The fist-sized lump between his legs shifts up and down in the candlelight, deliberate motion, while the damp pile of his uniform collects frost on the cold wood floor. Nance pretends not to notice as she tugs her parcel from beneath the bed and lights a second candle behind the dressing screen. The yellow paper silhouettes her body as she undresses. Nance is a tall woman with broad shoulders. Her body carries lean muscle with tight definition. Only her hands seem rough, worked. The pale skin revealed by the corset glows pink and fresh in the flickering light. Beneath the comforter, Richard's fist pumps faster at the exhibition through the screen. Nance hears the rustle of the sheets and the quick breaths her husband struggles to heave, but does not hurry. She fastens each buckle and loops each knot, thankful that these corsets aren't as difficult as the usual kind. The garment cups her breasts, *encircling presentation* the catalog said, her slender thighs held firm with garter straps and leggings and cold air. She dabs the watery perfume beneath her arms, a tiny bottle borrowed from Katy. Through the yellowed screen and its throbbing vision, Richard does not care for the delay—pulls the bedspread below his knees and exposes his warm flesh to the cold room and strokes vigorously.

"Come on," he begs.

Nance blows the candle and steps from behind the curtain. Her body glistens in the dampened light, each curve and line catching new shadows and sputter, the look on her face as she had on their wedding night. Richard's body lies exposed in the night, his shoulders somehow wider than before, muscles now in places where boyish flesh had been, his newly broad chest, burly stomach, below, the hard weight of his thighs. Nance loosens the braid in her hair with deliberate fingers, an amber shower on her shoulders, sweeps each tress clear of her chill-tipped chest, tosses carelessly ticklish locks. She places her hands on the end of the bed, leans slowly forward and pulls her knees onto the mattress, remembering that this is the same position she took, the same approach, on the night he left for war, and countless times, even, before that. But his fist stops; an ivory puddle collects on Richard's stomach.

For a moment, Nance is stunned. She watches her husband wipe himself on the comforter, shrivel, and redress while flat on his back. In a matter of minutes, Richard pulls the covers to his shoulders, snores lightly, the cool grin of relief swept across his face with each snort. Nance climbs from the bed and returns to her basic nightgown, trades perfume and lace for the smells of cooking and cleaning, the odor of a wife waiting for her husband's return. Her

body is cold beneath the fabric, spurned, though Nance tries to speak to her husband, but finds the emotions difficult to describe, shame at her husband's behavior, yet girlish excitement for his new body, embarrassment, pity, but mostly relief, that her oath has been, for the most part, untested and yet fulfilled. She lies in bed to steal warmth from Richard's slumber, until he grunts again and rolls to the edge of the bed, when Nance finally succumbs to sleep, hoping Katy can keep her commitments as well.

For the next two nights Nance maintains the bedroom routine, each night dressing in the corset behind the changing panels, moving deliberately to tempt her husband, only to watch him gratify himself. After the second night, though, Richard does not sleep when he is finished, but rather dresses, not saying a word, and slams the front door on his way out of the house. Nance returns to her sleepwear, slips her finger through the candleholder and tidies the house. When Richard has not returned after an hour or so, she finds her Bible, thick and worn, and deliberately reads through the verses, finds herself most often alternating between lines from Deuteronomy and Revelations. She reads until her eyes begin to blur, fatigue the main culprit, though the thin print and fine text of her Bible also contribute. She retires to the bedroom at last, alone, where in the morning, Richard will be asleep beside her as she wakes, as if a husband, as if nothing has happened.

Likewise for three days Katy's corset, lace and garters and all, sits untouched by male hands in its catalog box. Near noontime on the fourth day, John leans forward in his bed, regaining strength and devouring the food brought by his steadfast wife. The reddish flush of health returns to his face and extremities, bringing with it an awful thirst and appetite, which Katy slakes. She leaves the bedside only to bring more food—mostly broths and biscuits, some dried meats, leftovers form the homecoming meal, canned fruits—or to empty the chamber pot. When she is out behind the house, John swallows deeply from his flask, the yellow whiskey an unseemly medicine. Katy hangs the tattered Gray uniform on a hat stand, and slides his light baggage to a corner of the room. She sees the emptied whiskey bottles, but does not mention them to her husband. *Perhaps the alcohol aids his recovery*, she thinks, if only by reminding him of more normal circumstances. After his single word to her the night he arrived, John now speaks in short sentences, each time adding more voice to his throat, pulling more words from memory. The sound of his voice tickles her ears, and she grins as he struggles with words.

"What happened?" she asks, shooing an empty bottle beneath the bed.

"Battle's rough," John says. "Ten miles, 'bout, outside Lysistrata I's ambushed. Most damage you're seein' ain't from battle."

"What'd they take?" Katy asks.

"Ain't checked," he says. "Didn't y' look?"

Katy flattens the mattress and empties the bag onto the bed. There is less inside than she first guessed. On the day John left for war, Katy packed the bag with food and photographs, paper for writing letters, clothing for the winter months, and all his necessities. Now, a Bible tumbles from the sack, followed by a small leather journal. She finds a wooden shaving brush, its birch wood handle with blond horse bristles, tucked in a pouch. Katy holds the pack in the air and stretches her arm inside, feels each corner of fabric, turns it all inside-out. Her hand plucks nothing more than lint from the bag. Mud and battle, caked into the fabric, break off in ruddy flakes against the mattress.

"They stole your nice silver kit," she says, disappointed. "Left the damned brush but took the cup, and shavin' dish."

"Left the housewife, too." John opens a flat wooden box from the bedside, dumps its contents on the bed as well: a thimble, a cluster of silvery needles, two spools of gray thread and a strip of fabric that to Katy's eyes looks more like bandage gauze.

"That's all there is," she says. "Even your extra underwear. Everything with a brass buckle or an ounce of metal's gone."

"Sold the underwear," John admits. "For food. Brasses too."

Katy gathers the items and returns them to the knapsack, which she places beneath his uniform in the corner. John pats the mattress near his lap and Katy sits where his hand has left a large mark. His eyes glow with some former knowledge, or perhaps with the drink. He kisses her. For John, it is the first flavor of home, a taste of life before war and being away for a solid year. For Katy it's a first kiss as well, though she has kissed him while unconscious, the cold press of his lips, thinking, *I recognize this kind of movement, the way his fingers grip the sheets.* She is happy for the warmth she pulls from his body, the simple response of his hands now on her neck, the arch in his back. John slides on the mattress—*the most movement he's made in three days*, she thinks—at which point Katy stands from the bed, the words of the oath now gathering, collecting with each silent gasp in Katy's throat. She misses church most every week, but feels the breath of God on her body no less, in the form of that itch on her fingertip. Katy shivers again at the prick, the warm damp blood, and the firm sound in Nance's voice as she leads the pledge. She swallows a lump, then another. It does not clear away the night or the fireside or the promise sealed with crimson. But Katy knew it, clear as she now sees John moving closer and no doubt harder every moment, though he hides beneath the thick comforter. An oath's more than words, it's damned action.

"You'll need that strength," she says.

"I love you," he says, confused, and lies back down.

"Then promise me you'll not return to the war," she says. Katy retreats from the mattress and looks down over the bed. "Promise and you can touch me."

"I'm not sure I'm able, in my present condition."

"Then you'd choose war over your wife?" she says.

"You think I'm headin' back?"

Katy steps away from the bed and collects the dirty plates and empties cups onto a wooden tray. She nods at her husband's confession and piles flatware along side the other dishes, unsure of where to move the conversation. It is not an idea she has considered—that men, perhaps, do not want war—and Nance mentioned nothing of it when they swore the oath, yet the words fill the bedroom with a dark but delightful air, like breezes in early May, or the first taste of cider in October. *Is that all*? she wonders. *Has all this plotting and oath-swearing been for nothing? Perhaps all men do not wish to fight,* she thinks, *that some prefer a wife to a general?* Katy looks at John as a mother upon a new child, forward into their future like a red dawn, a horizon filled with something fresh and pleasant, opportunity, perhaps, or a door opening that could carry good or bad, but at the very least, something new. Immediately the future becomes clear, and the immediate steps to that future present themselves, namely, food and medicine—*costly food and medicine*, she thinks—she'll have that member up in no time. *Can't I look Nance in the eyes and say that our oath is fulfilled, and better, successful?*

"Please fetch me another jar of whiskey," John says. "I'm dry."

Katy leaves the room with the tray of dishes and the parcel from under her bed, her mind no longer focused on the present or the past, but towards the future, their future. *What are a few more nights compared to a whole year*? she tells herself. *What of a few more nips from the*

flask? Other ladies in Lysistrata report the same kind of reactions when their men first come home, the same physical problems to be sure, not in every case but in most, and very similar problems as relates to their moodiness, the desire to be left alone with their thoughts, or worse, with their memories, hauntings from the war, but that there's very little a wife or lover can do to salve those kinds of wounds, other than wait them out and provide what support they can. Katy has heard how the soldiers drink straight from the bottle for a couple of days and refuse to be touched, or even to converse, only to say a few words here or there, or like John, to demand more booze. After a week or so, though, the war washes off and their circulation improves and their minds can abandon battle for a while and focus on bodily needs that have little to do with self-preservation, quite the opposite, in fact. *So what that the bottle helps to sooth the transition?*

And if that lookin' glass get broke,
I'm a-gonna buy you a billy-goat,
And if that billy-goat won't pull
I'm a-gonna buy you a cart and bull.
and if…

Beside the fire Katy holds the parcel box in her lap, its string loosely tied in a bow, its paper wrappings folded inside. Without upsetting the carton, she imagines the corset again, its ruffles and lace, the rich colored dye set deep in the fabric, the sleek lines of her body modeled in the mirror, a frosty memory now, though not old. Katy gauges each piece of the garment, to calculate what exchange she might bargain from Mrs. Langdon at the general store. Money is scarce, she knows, and the corset remains one of the few items of value without sentiment too dearly attached. Probably around two dollars, she figures, the same as a whole bushel of chestnuts. The money will be well-spent: more medicine for his body, and heartier food, something to stimulate his appetites—*anything*, she thinks, *to bring about the healing that much faster* or start the process of returning to normal life, *perhaps even children*, the though first crosses her mind, now that the future continues to clear, *of their own family to raise* and perhaps someday love. Katy places the box on the floor and goes to the bedroom for sleep, clutching a half-filled whiskey bottle.

At the general store, Richard Bowers entertains a throng of Lysistratian ladies with tales of his braveries at Bowling Green and elsewhere. Nance no longer fights the crowd and watches from a corner of the store: how their bodies lean into his every word, how their eyes trace his uniform pants, the way they part their lips when he talks, or lick their teeth in twilight, or slap his shoulder playfully at the conclusion of each anecdote. False laughter fills her ears, a counterfeit flattery that leaks from the storefront out into the night air, each word and giggle, each glace between their eyes held a moment too long. It isn't only the Union wives either, she notes, but the Rebels as well, each powdered and dressed for the soldier who returns to an open competition, without shame or decorum or propriety, just as Mrs. Langdon herself had warned, when all modesty is tossed by the wayside.

"We must be headin' home," Nance says. "It's gettin' late."

"Go on ahead and ready yourself," he answers. "I've business to attend."

Nance turns for the door, pauses, feels the women's eyes on her, storms home. A catalog of humiliations flushes against her cheeks, the way those women dismissed her, or worse, that Richard himself seems more concerned with their opinions than with the work of the Bowers

household and the condition she now finds herself encountering. The oath creeps into her throat, not the usual feeling of power and purpose, a final goal to sacrifice her more temporal desires, but now the burn of regret in her stomach, and sets her mind racing with images of her husband and his retaliations for her temptations without culmination or climax, wondering if perhaps the oath may have been a mistake, an itch of doubt, perhaps, or a miscalculation. Nance looks back through the storefront window, how, with his wife away, Richard reaches into his pants and reveals a package wrapped in a handkerchief. In a gentle heap he sets the items on the counter one by one. Gas lamps from the street pour a dulled glow through the window.

"Now ladies," he says. "What I'm about to show you's genuine booty from the front lines."

The women ohh and ahh.

"A genuine Rebel groomin' kit." He places the objects on the counter, which reflect brassy light. "Solid silver. Sure to fetch four dollars."

"I'll give ya two," Mrs. Langdon replies.

"Are we still talkin' about the silver?" Richard jokes, fists the money. The women laugh as he leaves, Mrs. Langdon a reddish fire on her cheeks.

Meanwhile in the bedroom, Nance stands in the corset with the smoldering almost gone from her stomach, in her mind resolute that the oath is the correct thing to do, to sacrifice bodily pleasures for a while longer in order to gain something of higher value. Her hands press lace against her thighs, try to smooth its nervous wrinkles. She repeats the oath several times under her breath. When the front door opens, she imagines how Richard will respond to her demands. He will be disappointed, she knows, but will understand her intentions. After all, doesn't he fight for the Union, the side of reason and right conscience, of the freedom of man over inequity, and the march of truth in all its glory and hallelujah? She hears Richard enter the house, the stomp of his boots against the floor, and as he kisses his mother on the forehead, the creak of Suppina rocking in her chair, hacking a cough, tugging the shawl tight to her shoulders. Richard's boots move towards the bedroom, their slow hardened pound. The door opens. Richard kicks his shoes into the corner, pulls down his trousers, removes his shirt.

"Take that ridiculous thing off," he says, low-voiced and cold. "And lay down on the bed."

"Not until you promise—"

"You don't make demands," he snaps. "Just your wifely obligation. I've been home four days and you still ain't given me what I came for."

"It's important you hear me out," she says.

"Goddammit," Richard grabs Nance by the arm. "You don't think I'd go to any of them women in town? They offered as I left the Langdon's. But then I figured, why buy from her what I can take from you."

Richard presses Nance to the bed, her stomach thumps the mattress and forces air from her belly as she struggles to breathe—the corset strings tied tight already choke her breaths—to regain a mouthful of air, to shout for help, but can only muster quick inhaled panic. With these gasps she struggles beneath her husband's newfound strength. Richard grabs the nape of her neck, hair and all, and shoves her face into the mattress, leans the weight of his body on her back. *Is this a game*? she thinks, *something he imagined along the battle lines*? But the power in Richard's actions, the unrestrained violence a man can only learn in battle, clears the thought. Nance twists her head sidewise until her mouth can pull fresh air. She scrambles to see her husband's face, the fury in his eyes that she cannot place or recognize. Her hands fumble along

the floorboards for the broom handle. Though, she thinks, *what would I do with the weapon in my hand*? All the while Richard jerks the back of the corset, the burn of stubborn fabric peals across her back, between her thighs as the lace and cotton struggle to give way and finally rip. He enters with fierce, aberrant thrusts, tears her promise, and mingles seed with crimson.

> *By night on my bed,*
> *I sought him whom my soul loves.*
> *I sought him, but I didn't find him.*
> *I will get up now, and go about the city;*
> *in the streets and in the squares I will seek him whom my soul loves.*
> *I sought him, but I didn't find him.*

Nance holds still as Richard dresses in silence, until he leaves the house with a slam of the door. It, Nance knows, is a sin of the worst kind. But not nearly as bad as what awaits oath-breakers, blasphemers. She hears it from the Bible and Reverend Barber on humid Sunday mornings with her hand-fan and thin cotton dress. She hears it from the churchwomen as they gather and giggle on Sunday picnics, one of the more popular topics of conversation, usually when one of the congregation announces that she's pregnant, that while natural sex may be the necessary evil of a marriage, it is only necessary on account of the oath, the bond of matrimony. *Sin leads to hell*, she thinks—Nance's hips still flat on the mattress, jaw still clenched, breath short—*and hell leads to fire, to flame*. With a slow hand she reaches behind her and feels the blood on her body, holds her hands to the candlelight and presses a fingerprint onto the mattress. *Sin or hell*, she thinks, *damnation, fire or flame, the oath lingers unspoiled*.

In a room no more than ten paces away, Suppina clutches the shawl with a tight fist over her heart, her powers of sight and hearing never once threatened by the illnesses of her body. Blue veins bulge in her wrists, tight thin lines. In a tangle her gray hair touches the floor. She recognizes Richard's harsh voice before he emerges from the bedroom, on account of the flimsy walls, and watches her son hurry through the house and collect his things, stuff them into his rucksack, slam the front door on his way out of the house. *Something is awry*, she thinks, *let us be mindful to avoid like mistakes*. The rocker slows. Suppina slouches beneath the weight of her shoulders. She heaves twice before closing her eyes, not that of dreams and sleep, or forgetting, but the other kind.

CHAPTER TWO

Some fourteen years later, in the month of June, Nance Bowers presses a Union revolver between her lips and snaps the trigger. At the time no one figures it has a thing to do with her husband Richard—aside from his name engraved on the pistol—or what happened to Nance that particular night, in the cold and dark, during his one-week leave from the war, cut short as it was, now more than a decade gone. Gossip says Nance held a burden in her soul, clutched tight to her chest and unspoken, one that wasn't eased or released in any other, more acceptable manner, abominable as taking one's own life is, though not an uncommon practice, if one considers the Bowers history as a whole. Speculation around town is that when Richard came back for good, Nance was jealous at the attention he received, of course proud at first of her husband and his well-known accomplishments, but slowly envious of his travels, as would be natural, of the letter-friends he kept via correspondence, of the way women would crowd to him in public and the like, finally of the medals the military sent him via certified courier. But in the end, though, only speculation. Nance never mentioned a word of her situation as it happened those years ago, other than perhaps to her sister-in-law, who shared both the burden of the Bowers house, as well as marriage to the Bowers brothers, but no mention to any of the women in town, and when a women holds her tongue for so long about such obvious matters, not even to clear up her behaviors for anyone in Lysistrata, what is left for the people but to gossip?

For people in Lysistrata, though, the *Bowers Accident*, as it would be called, is the second-most astonishing event of that day in 1876, though there very well could have been one more tragedy to affix to the list, had circumstances been different or had fate become something other than the most arbitrary facet a human life must navigate; but as such, in many ways, the two instances from that day were merely branches from the same tree, sprouted and nurtured from the same wrecked soil, so to speak, an offshoot of the same cursed family. Eventually, they said, every member of the Bowers family would have to reckon with that soil and that tree, until the day all tragedy had been soaked out of the ground, or every last drop of their blood had been spilled as compensation. Leading up to the suicide, Nance seems like all the women in Lysistrata, not at all part of the Bowers tragedies, from the appearances of things, a woman they know and whose actions they can figure, talkative, an expert at masking her captivity with convincing smiles and the deliberateness of her routine, somber pain washed behind the orderliness of her household—and eventually shows herself to be a regular wife in Lysistrata's terms, albeit one who sings loud at church on Sundays no longer so much to praise the Lord, or even to show up the other families, so much as to cover over some silence that rings her ears. In fact, the women of Lysistrata will remember how Nance wears a flowered sundress that particular day, wrinkled, periwinkle from the mail catalog, how normal she looks, how the steady stare of her eyes does not flinch or turn away, how like themselves in costume and manner she seems, on the day she walks into her brother-in-law's newspaper office, tanned knapsack tossed over her shoulders.

In fact, with her long single braid, stretching halfway down her back, nearly blonde but always with the faint lingering of brunette hairs, the women note that of all the Bowers family since the war, Nance has changed almost none in her appearance, as if, they think, she were frozen in time by the event, though as of yet unnamed and unidentified, nonetheless obvious in its effect on her appearance, its effect of stopping all physical change, and other consequences of age, her exterior, changing neither in body nor in dress, though her interior state, that of her emotions and most importantly her mind, all unseen and unknowable, clearly has been affected .

She remains tall and thin, pale in the face and hands and neck, with a handsome face that speaks more to her duties and obligations as a would-be mother and wife and woman of the community than it does for younger women with similar looks, more carefree, for a while, at least, something of value to be bartered against the suitors which Lysistrata and the surrounding towns had to offer at the time of her marrying days. On Nance the expression is always the same, a hurried look, uncertain in her steps and the direction of her travels, much like the horses that get scared by coal miner's explosions nearby, or that of birds accustomed to the taunts and rocks of children. Either way the lines around Nance's eyes are more visible than they ought to be for a woman of her youth, despite the miscarriages, or her husband, tiny crow's feet that ripple out like water in a pond, though her face is not rounded, but flat and straight, forward-looking in fact, neither her dainty nose nor her proud, cleft chin to give one look back over what landscape she has crossed.

To John Bowers, seated at his desk, the woman appears as if she has broken a promise kept for many years, a strange blend of guilt and relief on her face, the kind of relief that only comes when a burden has been lifted, something heavy and oppressive that draws the tears from the woman's eyes and leaves only faint wrinkles in their place, a look he recognizes on many of the faces in town, belonging entirely to womankind, though unspoken this business of husbands and wives may pass between their glances, perhaps knowingly. John stands when Nance enters, his hands and fingers still stained from a morning's work with the livestock, hugs her as she slides her canvass bag to the floor, returns to his desk and window, which allows the late afternoon through to flood across the levee of his desk. Beyond the window, over John's shoulder, a pair of cardinals perch on branches of poplar to eye the line of dead ladybugs along the edge of the windowsill, *like popped kernels of corn*, he thinks, *red shells split open, wings spread in flightless tranquility*. John flinches when the birds peck against his building, despite the fact that he knows, come spring, they will begin slapping their bodies against the glass and jab at the prey they see through the pane. Nance does not flinch as does her brother-in-law, does not speak right away, but fidgets with the bag at her feet, touches her fingers to her mouth. Just twenty feet beyond the window, the dusty street gives way to green trees and lush, fertile Kentucky earth, though neither Nance nor John dares look out the window for too long. And yet the oily wings of birds smudge the glass as the two trade glances, a souvenir for each conflict, whitish stains with patterns like fingerprints. Nance stiffens in her chair as if preparing to speak, her fingers wrapping a length of hair until the knot in her hand is nearly the size of John's fist.

If not for the scar on his chin, the mark of a childhood fight with Richard and a pile of granite rocks in the Bowers yard, most folks in Lysistrata never would have guessed that this is the same man who left for the war all those years ago, as if that sturdy man, thick and perhaps even overweight, had been captured during one of the campaigns, and swapped out now for this thin, seemingly brittle man, jittery, no extra weight anywhere on his body. Thin legs with thinner ankles, skinny arms and tiny wrists, a writer's body, the people think, or anyone who now spends their life behind a desk, in a seat, without so much as the notion of a day's labor on their bodies, if anywhere at all in their minds. John's rounded face has collapsed on itself, the people would say as they passed by the office window, leaving only the angles of cheekbones and a long, pointy nose, two thick eyebrows to guard his brown eyes, with ears now prominent against his crop of longer brown hair. A decade of sitting slumps his shoulders and back, a condition he does not remedy when standing, but rather, walks and converses with a slight forward lean, as if his nose and chin are pulling the rest of his body, the way a hound's nose drags its master towards a sunken quarry. John wears brown pants and white dress shirts with

the collars unbuttoned, a farmer's clothes, the same worn brown shoes he purchased after the war and uses to walk the grounds of the Bowers farm before reporting to the office, as if never intending to part their company. Even on Sundays the outfit does not change, though church clothes hadn't fit John Bowers since his return from the war, and should he ever wander into the pews, in any state of dress whatsoever, it would be a miracle of highest order.

For John, a typical day begins at dawn with the rest of the farmers in Lysistrata, a ritual fueled by coffee and hearty breakfasts and the whining of cocks in the yard at the first crack of dawn to sprout on their horizons. Of the Bowers dwindling livestock, having sold off several of the more difficult animals, both in their temperament and in the amount of time, energy, and money to raise them, John attends to the birds first and foremost, feed for the chickens and hens, a check on the coup for what eggs have been delivered, a check in the darkest corners to be sure no predators lay in wait. He moves to the larger animals, goats mostly, tied to posts, and the small flock of sheep that roam and devour the grass, all that grows beyond the bare circles of land in perfect diameter from the goats and their leashes. When the feeding is done and the sheep set on their way, guarded by a dog who wandered onto the property and for whom John had not once thought to give a name, John tidies the yard as his mother would have demanded, pitching the animals' waste into a pile behind the barn, where it would mix with grass clippings and autumn's leaves and finally dissolve into the black, rich soil Katy used for her vegetable gardening. Only when these tasks were complete does John return to the house, change his clothes, and head downtown to spend the remainder of the day in the calm of his office window.

As Nance begins to speak, chronicling her daily routine in the Bowers house, the regular catalog of washings and tidying, chores relegated to her by Richard before he leaves for work every day at daybreak. With seed money from Richard, which was itself less awkward than even he had imagined, John Bowers now sits as editor and founder of the *Lysistrata Gazette*, the town's first newspaper, barely six months old, though it is mainly a recopying of stories John pulls from other pamphlets, newspapers, and fliers. Mostly, the job gives him ample time to read and escape the Bowers house, with its farm work and animal husbandry and the rest, to watch the cardinals from his desk, though perhaps more than evading his duties, the attraction of reading is the distance it places between himself and the actions of the town, comforting in its cool isolation, the utter lack of profitability or usefulness, *like a stranger*, he thinks, *in one's own land*. *The ancient Greeks sliced bird bellies and read the future in slippery gray livers*, he thinks, *and they say that the Romans watched the sky to interpret divine will from the movement of the birds—emperors caged fleets of pigeons and released them right-bound across their palace gardens to garnish good favor from the gods. Left-bound flocks made for ill omens but there is no interpretation for birds that dive head-on, only to collide against invisible blockades*. John eyes Nance as two cardinals flutter against the window, beaks clutching oak seeds, now dropped to stab at plusher quarry. John sits awkwardly behind the desk and typesetter as if behind the hollowed ground of a fortress, or perhaps an encampment.

"At night," Nance says. "I dream about Richard's battles during the war, his medals and awards in these long, endless columns—I dream about birds on my windowsill, how I aim his pistol and can pick them off one by one, you know, but more birds fly from the canopy, like leaves tumbling from the branches, each one red, suspended for a moment, like autumn, sent hurling towards me, and yet I keep firing."

As she speaks, Nance moves to the office doorway, arms folded tight across her chest, canvass bag now open at her feet. For the moment, John's window is free of cardinals, the clear Kentucky sky opened to reveal a blue canvass scattered with whitish clouds, each perfectly

formed and blowing gently across the earth, a scene John cannot watch for fear of the memories it might conger, nor Nance of the future she has chosen against. In the reflection of such beauty, the woman's face seems bankrupt, sunken eyes, overdrawn complexion, pot marks from some ancient acne. *The years*, he thinks, *have not been generous to Nance. When we were younger, didn't she seem more carefree, as much as any woman could be in Lysistrata, even with work and husband and religion, peculiar demands all, but demands nonetheless, that rendered this young, vibrant woman a husk, now that her marriage to him has revealed itself for what it is, not a sudden revelation, but a slow, methodical disclosure, unfolding over years, nearly a decade and a half?* Still, John compares her dream, those pictures and characters and actions against the costly photographs she and Richard scatter on tables throughout the house—cradling an infant relative or standing proud with her husband in front of the new church he financed—and looks down at the canvass bag. When John looks up, wakes from his reverie, desperation fills Nance's eyes like tears waiting release.

"I'm glad you noticed the bag," Nance says. She pulls the various items therein and sets noisy piles on the wide, somewhat empty desk. Here, a medium-sized basket with flowers and a thank you card at the end of a long stem. There, the slam of the Bible. Then a silver hairbrush, engraved with a crow over water. Then her sewing kit, needles and spools of thread, a device called a housewife used for quick repairs given to her by Katy. There is a set of stuffed dolls she has owned and tended since her childhood, even when her own childhood had passed, along with the propriety of a woman's owning and care for dolls, which ought to have been replaced by more motherly concerns, the women of Lysistrata would comment, as well as carved animals John had given her over the years. Despite her anguish, Nance is nonetheless proud as she works through her treasure.

"Have you ever broken a promise?" she asks, closing the curtains.

"No more than my share," John says with a laugh.

"You shouldn't laugh," she says. "An oath is solemn business."

"I didn't know."

"Aren't you worried," she asks. "Aren't you worried about the repercussions?"

"I'm not convinced there are any."

"Not that God himself is watching you, that he's tallying your account until Judgment Day? Not knowing what waits on the other side of things? None of that terrifies you?"

John Bowers does not move his mouth.

"So you'd add blasphemy to the list, along with your broken promises?" Nance says. "*The sentence is rendered by decree of the watchers, the decision is given by order of the holy ones*."

"Revelations." John says.

"No, the Book of Daniel."

"What is this about?" John asks.

"I want to know what the penalties are, for breaking a promise."

"Probably the ones that happen between the two people," John says. "Between the people who swore the oath, and no one else."

"And what of God who guaranteed it?"

"You sure you shouldn't be asking the minister these types of questions?" John asks. "Seems his jurisdiction."

Nance does not reply, now standing upright against the wall, shoulders squared and resolute, and instead hoists the canvass bag from the floor and sets it in plain sight. The desk

continues to fill with Nance's items, a complete inventory of her personal property, everything she owns outright, in her own name, unconnected with Richard or his stories from the war. She fingers the items along John's desk, assembles them in an order from the largest to the smallest, folds her hands across her lap, as if near the end of a long, Sunday sermon. John eyes the trinkets as they are arranged, notes a detail on the Bible's cover, a gilded lettering he has not noticed prior. John recognizes the look in Nance's face from a similar look his own wife often carries to bed, a look of desperation throughout, though a strange blend of the entrapment, the inescapability of circumstance, mixed with a smile, a slight turning of the corners of the mouth, perhaps a sense of freedom, having been released the burden of choice and bestowed with the grace of having all actions set forth and determined, a freedom from responsibility.

When John turns to see the look again, Nance presses the silver pistol against her mouth. The unseen birds tap gently against the window, their sound muffled by the curtains, though clearly identified. John moves to tackle her, slow motion, it seems, to stop her slender finger from its duty, thinks how this is not the Nance with the saddened eyes, though, nor the trampled wife of a cheating, violent war hero, nor the would-be mother suffering miscarriage and biting through fruitless childbirth, but rather someone different, an animal trapped in a cage, a pathetic creature that resembles a woman only in clothing and hair and accidental definition. She trembles. The empty box drops from her hand.

"What am I supposed to do?" she asks.

But her words fall on empty air. When the gunshot fires, a warm pool soaks the front of John's pants and several of Nance's treasures crash from the dusky light onto the floor and growing shadows. John scrambles beneath his desk and quakes like an animal, fresh sweat dripping down his back and each hair prickled. On the windowsill the red birds scatter at the gunshot. No light penetrates the shield of the desk. Nance's Bible slams shut against the empty canvass bag, its golden lettering now dark and useless amid the shadows. Soon, the office quiets, except for the faint echoes of screams coming from the main roads of Lysistrata, when the unavoidable crowd of bystanders elbow and prod each other, eager for first-hand gossip, each one climbing over the obstacles of their neighbors' bodies, their own obstacles too, a collection of breathing and curiosity more fitting a mob or pack of animals than anything human, pitiful, or otherwise. In the darkness, John trembles, afraid to poke his head out from beneath the furniture, to hear what song this bird has whistled, or worse, to learn the silences thereafter.

Fourteen years of dreams, fragments, really, more like pieces of sensuous information—the taste of winter on his tongue, bitter and cold and yet sweet, the smell of Kentucky soil frozen into mud beneath his feet, activated with each homeward step, the feel of the air against his skin, still wounded, still in shock from the experiences but nonetheless lightened, freed from the burdens of battle and the shiver of constant fear for his life or wellbeing, the ringing in his ears, with causes no longer present, but now a memory somehow, clear and distinct as cannon fire or the screaming of men in hospital tents or of women as they flee burning villages, the blur of color and shape before him as he climbs through the wilderness, images focused and soon unfocused—frequent John's nights and oftentimes the daylight hours as well, perhaps no longer dreams even but something more engrained, the homecoming from battle, having decided never to return to it again. And though the decision to leave the fighting was a conscious one, involuntarily do the memories of war continue, for a decade and a half, paying no heed to the intentions or wishes of the former soldier, only rectifying its own crystalline memories as facets of briefly reflecting radiance.

On the worst nights, Katy would rush for water or an extra blanket, would cradle John's head in the crux of her arm and mention nothing of his mumbling or screaming in the dark moments before he would wake, and for more than fourteen years she mentioned not a word when they had risen from bed, prepared for the day, continued on as if no horrors haunted him. On milder occasions, John would also lay awake, pressing his eyelids shut, and listen to Katy's whimpering, hear the resignation in her breathing before she rolled, utterly powerless, to sleep. Oftentimes as they sat for meals or spoke in the parlor as other married couples had, even when she miscarried little Harrison and John waited in the hallway just beyond the door, wondering as fathers will sometimes wonder, whether or not the child was his or how he would have ever known the difference, before it was too late and he'd already grown attached to the child, or worse, depended on its work in the fields and with the harvest, though for John the portion of this natural doubt was somewhat more generous than usual, slightly more suspicious, though he stiffens his body again as the fragments of the war intrude, some specter of light, once relegated to oblivion now erupt suddenly into a single feeling or impression against his body, as if recurring again as it had the first time, the burn of fire against his cheek, the sound of a bullet's pathway cut through the air, or pungent, the smell of military latrines.

For these reasons John Bowers speaks very little in Lysistrata, even when he appears to have recovered and all the women and men in town assume that to be the case, deceived as they are by a healthy body and the power of procreation, or the beginnings of it, of a man's gainful employment and general good uses to the society as a whole, despite the worthlessness of all that. Perhaps his quietness, his solitude is the reason they doubt his intentions, as a man who shields his eyes or delivers a weak handshake, how the usual ceremonies and rituals may be present, there, technically speaking, performed, but something of the heart has been stripped from them, leaving only the actions themselves as empty husks, and nothing of the spirit, of the sacrament which lays behind all human activities, no matter how dull or ordinary, so long as they are carried out with some measure of hope. Instead, John holds his words tightly against his tongue, does not allow the urges to cross his vocal chords or form into sound, but rather holds back and waits for the oncoming fragments, unsure as to whether or whence they would arrive, but certain that if he were to be in the middle of speaking, perhaps an innocent conversation or some affectionate words, that he could not control or monitor what might spill from his mouth, tongue, memory as his dreams or nightmares, though nightmares, even, do not compare to the experiences of war, no matter how gruesome, if only because the dreamer at some level in his soul knows he will wake, and that once awake, the dreams will eventually pass. Images of war do not fade, on the contrary, but only strengthen, the further and further away the soldier tries to run from them, which is perhaps why John Bowers is so drawn to books and the meticulousness of journals.

All of Kentucky is divided in three parts, he knows from the writing of his own hand, if one were to travel the entire territory and make notes of such things, the various landscapes that carve from this barren earth something for the shaping of winds and trees, something for the shaping of men's lives as they scrape for their livelihoods between the rocks and vegetation, avoid predators and feed on prey. First to notice in Kentucky, if starting from Lysistrata and heading south are the gradual hills the rise from the earth, humps and swellings like gooseflesh, some higher and steeper, other low and plodding, covered in a thick skin of grasses, ranging from green to blue, sparsely decorated with trees, as if an afterthought from the Maker, while between these hills run the beds of former rivers, perhaps ancient, mighty rivers, reduced to streams, creeks, then trickles, and slowly overtaken by grass and stone. This is the land of

Lysistrata, of hills so patient, level-headed, as to allow for entire settlements to pop up between them, as fleas settle between a dog's shoulder blades, working with the contour of the land, rather than against it. South the gradual hills intensify, grow steeper still, and more severe, pushing higher into the sky, which seems cloudy on one side of the high hill, clear on the other, as if cutting the sky in two with swift blade of the scythe, steep inclines that shape the cavernous valleys between them, house and home for thicker groves of trees, more pines and conifers, canopies of undying needles that protect the harsh landscapes below. In their push towards Heaven these hills—for there are no mountains here of the kind explorers must navigate to find other sections of our land—slip through the green skin provided by the earth, and as bone poking through the flesh, broken shards of yellow and gray poke through to light, break free from darkness and breath fresh airs, rocks, deposits of every kind crumbling when exposed to the elements, heavy rain come autumn, streams of river sent along the rocks underground, a thick freeze come winter, ice now in its crevasses, the pressure poking even more stone to light, then the thaw, gradual ease of tension, the collapse of what stones are rendered tenuous, with rockslides that thunder into the valleys, sometimes crushing animals bellow, sometimes a man who happens by, other times harmlessly caressing the valley floor with its avalanche. What is not hill or steeper hill is flatland, perfect for farming and habitation, farmhouses and harvests, scant lines of trees whose sole purpose is to delineate the land, stake the claims of property owners, or perhaps to divide fields into various families of food, crops, or commerce, flatlands marked on either side, on all sides, by the looming hills and near-mountains that stand guard on the horizon, fence-posts which give the feeling of walking on a stage of tremendous size, with those above watching those below, judging them, from a great distance. On these great plains and farmlands the sky is cloudless, filled with blues, powdery and light, somber and serious, where the land in all its monotony nevertheless reaches up to the heavens, the sky, as if its lover, perhaps, or as a child to her father, and stretch fingers to touch where the trees in their majesty and grace reach their own branches, no longer shading the earth, as many shades of green as hands that turn the soil, that hew their arms and legs and nail together houses, all a chorus reaching together for that sky, Kentucky's vault of heaven a distant miracle to behold, just beyond the grasp of fingers and sticks, stones and leaves.

Even if he could piece these fragments together, find some adhesive to paste the various strands together, reclaim some narrative of his wartime life and hold sway over it, wrest ownership from the hands of memory and its hauntings and exchange them for controlled experiences, regulated by reason or necessity or some confluence of both, where most men and women settle their accounts, John Bowers would still only recapture a partial picture of that night in the woods, the night which encapsulates his entire time with the confederates, defines it and represents it, because the range of his experience, the events as they actually happened, remain locked in the distant past, more distant every morning, and they are never all that clear to begin with, to be honest, even those who are encountering them at the time of their occurrence. Only between the covers of his books, he soon finds, perhaps in the spaces between the lines or within the very letters themselves, or the slight spaces between the phonetics, John Bowers finds the space to reassemble the pieces, and while hidden away by the stories printed and inked onto the page, protected by them, relishing in their details or observations, somewhere John's mind pieces the night in the woods and struggles for more insight into the ambush itself. How the white powder scattered along the ground, faint traces of snow that was not blown away by the wind, instead clinging to tufts of grass along the pathway, shadowed by the frames of bare trees, everything gray and shadowy in the twilight, the sun, although not yet dipped below the horizon,

nevertheless concealed in cloud and that murky darkness at the center of winter. The way heavy winds gusted from the west, clipped the hillsides and blasted past the trees, all to slap his face with a bitter chill, to rustle through his clothes and pucker every inch of skin on his body. How beneath the blusters of noise and cold, beneath the crunch of his own feet against the soil, beneath even the rise and fall of his own struggling breath, he could make out the faint sound of another body, large and human, lurking somewhere behind him, somewhere in the darkness and drawing close.

It is the pop of the pistol in Nance's hand that triggers the response this time around, not the actual sound of the gun as it fires, but the repercussion that follows, the echo off his wall and beneath his desk, the echo bouncing out into the streets and against the glass windowpanes across the street, the echoes of gunfire against the hills, rising into the cool air that so much resemble the skies over battlefields in winter, as eclipse them, but the quality of the air in the lingering trace of gunpowder that's been ignited, a spent charge, that sends his memory to the war, and inevitably to his return from it. John steps gingerly through the trees, his uniform snagging on sharp branches and his bare feet unfeeling against the ground, when the ambush appears, a ghost leaping from behind a ridge, charging towards him in what is now complete darkness, only the hurried sound of boots over the land, the snap of sticks and branches in its wake, panting breaths certain to puff white in the chilled air, and though John is not yet too weak to defend himself, he is too weak to withstand the inertia of the attacker, who pounces like a wildcat onto prey, hands extended like claws, body poised, when he slams John to the ground and the flurry of punches begins, more shots to the body and neck, thighs and shoulders than to the head, which John is as thankful for, even as the blood begins to collect in his throat, as he is for the cool flakes of snow now dancing from the sky, and the retreat of cloud-cover that breaks the darkness, though the rummaging through his knapsack has been completed, and his possessions, what was left of them, have been ferreted away to darkness and to silence again, the way the bright moon, silver against the blank nothingness of an evening's sky, fires its light in shafts through the skeletal trees, each beam like an arrow from an archer's bow, straight and true, to settle on John's face as he bleeds in the woodlands, nodding to sleep for a while, wresting his body from the ground, stumbling northbound, again, homewards, with the moonlight now surrounding him.

Meanwhile, at the Bowers house, Katy moves towards the old fireplace as if following an order, or keeping to the conditions of her long-forgotten oath, some piece of child's play from younger, more lighthearted days. Though no ghost has visited her these past few nights, she feels a presence nonetheless, a premonition, something from the past lingering in her breath, and thus she moves through the house in search of its cause, to root it out and toss the remains to fire, when she gathers a length of rope from the kitchen, stashed away in the pantry closet, where Richard stores articles of his former life, war items totaling such an amount that they no longer comfortably fit in the family's cabinets, mantles, and shelves, or framed on the walls, and have to be stored where they don't belong. By contrast, what little memorabilia John keeps from his experience fills a small box in the corner of his bedroom, a few papers and smallish, unidentified trinkets. In her mind Katy draws up a list of things she might never finish, eyes the rope and considers what Nance will have done with her life, how she has kept to something long ago forgotten, and therefore assumed to be invalid, as the concept of justice, or virtue, or a beauty that exists beyond the world of the senses, events and people, circumstances and milestones Katy would never see in her lifetime, and a few of the simple pleasures of her days like mid-summer

swimming in any of the tiny lakes nestled between the hills, her clothes dangling from a nearby branch, the excitement that perhaps some young men are watching from a distance, though modestly her neckline remains well covered in the lapping waters, and perhaps to eating dinner with John, while Nance and Richard are not home, and though silent during the passing celebration of a meal, the ceremony of forks and knives against the cold stone plates, the ritual of thirst and hunger satisfied, or worse, the life of Harrison, her lost, withered son, eyes and nose like John's but a chin and cheeks like her own, what she has missed of his life, what of his life went missing after such a birth-struggle.

Before making way across the yard to the barn, the old cabin where the Bowers once waited out the war, now a casing for field tools and stray animals to shake off the winter, Katy pours herself a stiff, yellow drink to carry along with her rope. Though John stopped his drinking a few years after coming home, Richard insists on keeping the house fully stocked with alcohol, and the bottles now line the various rooms in the house as other homes of that size might hoard books onto bookcases, or pieces of pottery and china on hutch shelves or cabinets. Katy enters the old cabin, sends a host of critters to scatter into the walls or through the sizeable holes along the floor and foundation. Sitting now at the south-facing window she watches a group of school-aged children chasing hoops outside in the dirt-covered street, rolling the iron bands with long wooden sticks, the shape of quilting needles. The drink tastes tart against her lips; Katy coughs but continues to swallow. Blank, tired thought overcomes her—the thoughts of weary, overworked mothers in rare moments of tranquility, deprived of sleep but compelled to trudge through the days, eyes half opened, mouths agape, noses wrinkled—as she practices tying the stiff knot with nimble hands, when she eyes herself in an old bedroom mirror. The reflection, of course, is not kind to Katy as it is unkind to many women after the ordeals she has faced, and though the look into the mirror flattens the wrinkles along her nose and brow, it emphasizes certain blemishes only a woman can identify but nonetheless lament, the way her stomach drops forward in a tidy roll, which she attempts to ignore. Yet despite her trouble with miscarriage, Katy more or less fits into the same clothes she wore during the war, with alterations, should she have wanted to resurrect those rags and relive the family's less affluent past. Nevertheless the changes in her body appear to her in the flash of moments such as these, reminders of something that is gone and not returning, not planning on returning in any case, or worse like a nagging feeling of something unsettled in the shadows, deserving and worthy of light and exposition but nevertheless hidden and concealed, be it the work of human hands, or of more natural causes. Katy's hair and eyes are the same sandy color, with or without the reflection, long pale lashes and straight hair she keeps at level with her slender shoulders. She keeps a clean, handsome face, if not more beautiful than Nance, definitely *prettier*, she thinks, though the work of house and family, namely husbands, the hope *for* families, leaves little time for self-reflection, other than brief glimpses in the bedroom mirror, and a gradual tossing away of the results.

An itch, long forgotten, bothers the tips of her fingers as she finishes practicing the knot, tugs it taught against itself and stretches the length of rope from hand to hand. Of the rafters, she eyes the ceiling and selects the sturdiest of the lot, a thick center beam, roughly cut in a square that runs along the length of the old cabin, a strong measure of wood where Suppina used to hang her pots and pans, but which now hangs bare and unused, for the time being, grayed wood, dusty, a place where mice and birds fight for the privilege of settling their nests. She tosses the rope over the beam, catches the end, ties off the first knot, for real this time, no practice any longer but a knot with definite purpose and intent, necessity now attached to the rope, relying as she did for it to support her weight, to hold tight, and not slip away or fray, at least not until its

work is done, when its potential accumulated into actuality. Katy slides an old kitchen chair to the beam, beneath the dangling rope when she climbs onto the chair and readies the second knot around her neck. The fibers scratch rough and dry across her skin, hot somehow, perhaps warmed by a fireside or the pressure with which Katy coils them in her arms, or now hurries to set them to their purposes. She brushes a spider web from her mouth, one of the many woven into the pattern of the crossbeams and roof. It is not right away when the flood of Katy's life passes through her mind, perhaps a few seconds only, but in the time a full mouth of air allows, Katy soon conjurs the images clear and crisp, as if her eyes were opened, and watching them for the first time.

Can I go through with this? Katy thinks. She draws another deep breath, fills her lungs with a gasp and slowly presses the air from her lips, careful to pick away the strands of web still clinging to her mouth and nose. Harrison's birth arrives first, his blotched face and body not-wriggling, like a fish pulled from the water, tired from its struggle against the line and lure, not screaming or gasping for air, the way she imagined John reading a book in the other room, eyes fixed on the page but ears focused into the bedroom to feel for her, perhaps, or to decipher whether or not it was a boy from the various groans she let loose. Then the war, as was unavoidable, how despite any of the lessons learned from it, or perhaps because of them, the war returned her husband to Lysistrata a quieter man, contemplative, nothing like the energetic, vigorous man who paraded out of town, but now a man more like a scholar, John Bowers, who spends his mornings alone with the animals and his afternoons with books and words, who can describe the sun and dawn and all its glory, but has yet to feel its warmth, or shuttered his eyes at the sight of it. Then a dark night which memory had shunned until recently, but kept always close at hand, a fireside, the tumble of logs and branches in her lap, the prick of a pin against her finger, how the conversation with Nance had gone, just the night before, the desperation of it all, a quake and tremble in her voice that had some cause behind it neither worldly nor natural, but beyond our physical bodies, and mostly how their fingertips had healed from that night at the fireside with Suppina looking on, but how in all the years meanwhile their lots had somehow declined, worse than unchanged, since their fates now hung less bright in the balance than before the war, when at least there were principles upon which to base the sequence of days. Such losses are inevitable, the women of Lysistrata say.

When she is ready, rope tied, Katy removes a parcel from her skirt pocket, a silver set, engraved, which she has kept these past fourteen years wrapped away in the darkest corner of her closet, the souvenir she sent along with John when he was healthy and alive, before the damage and ridicule of losing the war, worse, his soul or mind or spirit, a memory of precious metal she salvaged from obscurity, not that the items themselves would be lost, but that the stories attached to them, which otherwise might have faded into forgetfulness, the concealment that follows all stories that remain untold, every secret that suffocates without the light of day. Katy cradles the silver set in her hands and folds her arms across her body, mumbles an old oath as if in harmony with its original intentions, leans to kick the chair from beneath her feet, to begin the quick, brief tumble downwards, the gradual swaying in the cabin until the animals, or otherwise, discover her last willful act. At the moment of her decision, however, when the heel of her foot has yet to decide, whether to strike and end its suffering or hold, refuse the mind's order and preserve something of itself, Katy turns to see the seven crosses carved into the wall, the work of Suppina's hand, as if once hidden behind a fog now open the clear, crisp air, and lifts her own hands for the rope to free her neck from the noose, scrambles to distance herself from the chair and former determination, and it is now, clutching the silver more tightly than ever before, that

Katy thinks of Harrison as he would or might stand today, that her husband has returned from the war, damaged but returned, and how something of life erupts inside the soul when pressed to the edge of a precipice, determining for herself the resolve to try again and bear another child into the world, as if to compensate for the one lost, just at the moment when jumping over the edge seems most likely, a tug on the back, this desire for another son, another child, a return to the senses, that no matter what lies on the other side of the chasm, life here, alive, seems something to squeeze until its last natural drop, and not a moment sooner.

She does not pause before cutting the rope away from the rafter, pulls it from the wood and throws it instead along the floorboards, along side of the engrained silver set, a gift to her husband once, stolen but now returned to its owner as if after a long, perilous odyssey, though the dutiful wife and mother mentions nothing of it to anyone, for obvious reasons, not even Mrs. Langdon, from whom she acquired it, though perhaps now this has changed. Katy moves to the wall where Suppina's crosses stand stark in the shadows, and with the edge of the silver set, carves her own cross beneath the row of seven with quick, excited hacks, now an eighth to be thus remembered. As such Katy hurries from the cabin with the silver set, keeps the secret buried from her husband ever since the war, before the war even ended, in fact, though with all the kindness Richard had shown him, calling him the prodigal son and building a house large enough to fit both their families, how John may not believe it if she told him, she figures, that the complexities of family life, the way that perhaps what is passed was rectified between the men, as evidenced by their housing, and that when the storm settles and the puddles dry, it does no good to go kicking around in the dirt. Though it wasn't a week after Richard returned to the war, when John was still laid up in bed, still nursing the bottle along with his wounds, back when Katy returned to the general store to exchange her red homecoming corset for the food it could buy, *finances and such being as they were back in those days*, she thinks, *and those corsets were a pretty penny to go and sit unused in a box underneath the bed or hidden in the back of the closet*.

"Back so soon," Mrs. Langdon said.

"What a wonderful silver set," Katy said, both of the women looking into the glass case at the front of the general store where Mrs. Langdon kept the most valuable of her items. Katy recognized the stash right away, the filigreed silver, each line and thread precisely as she remembered it, the day she packed it into John's bag for marching into war.

"I just got that set in," Mrs. Langdon replied.

"Who from?"

"I thought you'd might recognize it," Mrs. Langdon said. "Richard brought that in last week when he was home from the war. Said it was genuine Confederate."

"How much?" Katy managed to ask, though the lump in her throat nearly choked off the words.

"I can trade for that garment," Mrs. Langdon offered, pointing to the corset in its brown wrapper and packaging. "But not for the foodstuffs as well."

"We need both," Katy replied.

"Can't do it," Mrs. Langdon said, with some measure of delight. "It's either one or the other."

Now the silver set rests on Katy's bedside table, having returned to the house and climbed the stairs to her bedroom, each piece polished and sparkling in the light from the window, as if a prism set in the glass, scattering light over the room, which Katy admires for a moment as she opens the closet, again, in a ritual she is sure she will repeat until she dies. She

recalls the length of rope with something of a laugh, as if that scene and its implications had been only a pretense, some cruel trick she'd played on herself and happily forgotten, and reaches for the black velvet bag to stash the silver deep inside, a bag which wipes clean the smile from her lips. Into the hallway Katy scans for anyone else who might learn the secret, a wandering set of eyes, perhaps, the kind she feels more often these days upon her back, of Richard, perhaps, but more importantly those of her husband John, whom she protects every time she turns away the feeling to confront Richard on the silver, every time she endures the knowledge of the truth which she must conceal with such medicinal lies, all for the sake of family and unity, and the forgetting of the past, gathers the silver items, ferrets them away in the closet behind a stack of long, shallow boxes, a sad deposit made with little hope or anticipation for return. Katy leaves the room and walks down the hall, past the window when she hears a faint pop in the distance, but does not think twice, just as her husband and sister-in-law end their conversation, albeit abruptly, in an office in Lysistrata proper.

On the day of his wife's accident—*accident* being what they called the act after a good deal of deliberation, before John described the event to the sheriff and a semblance of truth circulated—Richard Bowers sits in the coal company's office negotiating a new contract for a parcel of land he's staked in the western hills of Kentucky, a cluster of caves, hills, and valley-lands sure to yield high quality coal, closer to the surface than the recent claims he's staked and sold off auction-style. More than military experience, or even the new reputation he gained among the townspeople, Richard Bower's biggest reward for aligning himself along side the Grand Army of the Republic was connections to the burgeoning coal industry that filtered into the hills and areas surrounding Lysistrata after the war, now with an office on Main Street no less, to be closer to the action whenever the latest veins were discovered, or prospects for the next big haul were reported. In this regard Richard jumped on opportunity when it presented itself, his knowledge of the nooks and hidden caves of his homeland now profitable far beyond knowing where to hunt or fish or hide away.

"What size deposit do you think is there?" the spectacled man asks.

"Bigger than Erlanger," Richard answers. "At least the size of Campbell County, maybe even more than that."

Even without his uniform, or the starched shirts and silk ties he has grown accustomed to wearing around Lysistrata, once his fortunes turned and the monies from his prospecting and endeavors began to flow and provide for such luxuries, Richard's body changed from his time during the war and immediately thereafter, always a tall man, always vigorous but now with a dimension of girth added to his weight, something solid and unmoving, a thickness in the neck and shoulders, in the forearms and wrists, something substantial in the weight his cheekbones hung, filled, now stored like rations for winter months. His hair, still oiled, still dark and wavy through the front, changed as well, though now he perfumes it more than most, or wears it shorter around the ears and neck, often with tall hats or wide caps when walking in the streets. Richard's face and brown eyes are unchanged as well, other than the curious tilt when he looks too long at someone in conversation, as if prying their words and searching for falsehoods, as if disbelief has now replaced commonsense in the way he handles his affairs in and around Lysistrata.

"I've never let you down in the past," Richard says to the coal company representative behind the desk. "My claims always pay."

"The company has no doubts," the man says. "Only that your request is unusual and we want to be sure the claim will pay out."

"Peter." Richard slides his chair closer to the desk, "You said yourself the company has no use for that old cabin."

"I know."

"And the company, by way of our mutual friend, a solid patriot, has been kind enough to let me use the facility for almost a year now," Richard says. "It's practically mine by squatter's rights."

"Bigger than Campbell County?"

The men laugh, with the issue at hand on this day—right around the time when Nance first steps into her brother-in-law's office, not even a quarter-mile away, and when Katy first slips into the ancient barn to contemplate her future—is a cabin hidden in the northern woods, two-stories high but resembling a barn or a tobacco shack more than an actual dwelling place, as payment for Richard's next claim, foregoing any money or other compensation other than the building that is not widely known or acknowledged by the locals, even if one asked enough questions, as a place that polite folks didn't discuss and therefore keep their silence over, either through disgust or ignorance, though a rickety old slave prison within close distance of the Ohio River would seem to carry quite a tale with its planks and chains, if ears were willing to hear it, or if its occupants, former tenants, could somehow revive themselves, perhaps in the planks of wood or the iron chains set therein, and tell the story of their captivities. Richard knows of the cabin through his travels, he explains to the coal representative, partly through these local rumblings, though the cabin is hidden away from Lysistrata and kept apart as such from any civilization for that matter, secluded by trees and undergrowth, a place between hills that often is forgotten by mapmakers and those who carve out boundary lines.

"Deal," Peter says and laughs. "Besides, it will be a nice place to keep all your girlfriends."

When Richard hears the pop of the revolver, he recognizes the sound immediately from his soldering days, though in his mind he tries to place the peculiar resonance, something familiar in the tone or the pitch, perhaps the repercussion or the dull thud the gun makes when muted by distance, and several sets of thick walls between his brother's disorganized office of the *Gazette* and the coal company's decorated interiors. Behind his desk, the company man named Peter wipes his glasses in a handkerchief before signing the deed to the property in question, slides the paper across his desk for Richard Bowers to sign. When the transaction is finalized, the representative pours two plump glasses of bourbon to celebrate the deal, and Richard hands over his notes and surveys of the claim. The man chips ice from a small block he keeps in a cooler behind his desk, cuts the booze in dull glasses with the pieces, and shakes Richard's hand from across the table, the ice clouding slow like a glacier adrift in the bourbon. Only the tip pokes into the air, at first, the remainder drowning beneath. By now crowds of people are running down the street, towards the *Gazette* office, though Richard only notes how the drink fires in his gut, nearly forgetting the gunshot, warmth spreading like capillaries through his tall, stout body.

Major Richard Bowers now stands in the office, back stiff and unmoving, wearing a decorated military uniform, each brass and medal polished, each symbol playing its part to aid the role of solemn patriot and trustworthy businessman. The two men shake hands again and the deed to the cabin trades hands, Richard rolling the paperwork into his fist, sliding the deed into a pocket hidden away by the broad chest of his uniform, and the medals propped along the outside.

Since the war, in addition to his finances, Richard's military rank increases several times, each time by a letter sent from the government by special courier, and represented by the mounting number of medals on his chest, each more colorful than the previous, as do the heroic deeds he performed and the number of Rebels killed, the generals he personally worked with on strategy and tactics, and the cities he helped bring back to the Union, like a good shepherd, he often says, bringing stray lambs back to the fold. Not a man in Lysistrata is unfamiliar with the stories behind each and every medal, so often were they told and retold that should someone approach to be reminded, or a relative visit the town who has not heard the more significant tales of bravery or gallantry or the like, Richard is only happy to oblige, each time plucking the medal from his chest and turning it over in his hands as he recounts the tale.

With his first large sum of money, Richard sinks his earnings into a new house on the Bowers property, three stories tall with all modern conveniences, large enough to fit the family, and any children they might anticipate, whom he accepts graciously, if without incident and a longish speech on the virtues of the eldest brother in the parable of the prodigal son, a house built with large framed windows that loom over the other homes in Lysistrata. To the people of Lysistrata, it seems largely extravagant and therefore suspect, though prevailing wisdom seems to be that a man who was so successful in the defense of his country is more than entitled to reap the benefits of his service, and cannot be grudged to delight himself and his family with the spoils war has allotted to him. Richard walks through town on his way home, appears to passersby as handsome and proud as they had always remembered him, in accord with his customary appearance, the way Richard dresses carefully in his uniform, with an eye to regulate each aspect of his exterior, as if painting a barn side with an advertisement, each item precisely positioned for its effect, the effect the entire façade renders for those who encounter him. The clothes show nothing of wear or damage as he walks, no stains or tears, nothing of any hint that battle had roughed or tarnished him, no blemishes hurriedly washed away or indications of repair work along the seams of his starched shirt and pants, shoes with their military shine, medals shiny and hung in perfect rows, a gold watch and chain dangling from his pocket.

On his way home from the coal company offices, fresh deed in hand, Richard passes several large groups of people rushing against him in the opposite direction, the chatter of their hurried conversations nothing more than noise to his ears, each group headed for the center of town and the commotion there, but he considers it nothing more than coincidence, or hysteria, and that perhaps the travelers who arrive at Lysistrata annually to celebrate the country's foundation have arrived to town early, perhaps on account of the country's centennial year, and the special productions rumored to coincide with the gathering. Already he forgets the crowds, and instead congratulates himself on the transaction and considers the many uses for his new acquisition, the ways he has cut trails through the woods and set markers for himself, the way he has brought the women there in the distant shadows of trees far from the lights or prying ears of Lysistrata, most often at night but some more brazenly during the day, to a cabin set such as it is in the thick green leaves and sturdy branches that it might seem that all of creation was ignorant of its existence, that while it stands in the light and shadow of days, everything within its walls remains unknown and undetectable, where even all-knowing eyes, the way entire towns know and comprehend what happens within their borders, that even these eyes are rendered blind by the cabin and its solitude.

As the crowd against him thins, Richard approaches the Bowers house. Penelope stands motherless at the edge of the property. She is thirteen or perhaps fourteen years old, nearly six

feet tall, gaunt not from work or breeding but malnutrition, all elbows and knees, with a nest of wrangled black hair over her head, and a gray rag of a dress that barely covers her kneecaps. A knapsack is thrown over her lean shoulders, and in her left hand is a faded, yellowed envelope. Even in the failing light the girl's skin gleams from the threshold, tanned, a combination of racial features that gives her face a color and maturity reserved for women several times her age—darkish crow's feet at the corners of her eyes and a nervous wrinkling of the brow as she bites her lips—though perhaps it is her experience, the arrival to the Bowers house at the conclusion of a long journey, as it seems, waiting there for someone from the family to open the door, that carves rivulets into her forehead and chin, marks her thick brown eyes with age.

"I'm lookin' for Mister Bowers," she says.

"Which one?" Richard asks as he approaches.

"The one who's my daddy," the girl replies.

CHAPTER THREE

"Wait here," he says to the girl at his doorstep.

Richard Bowers brushes past Penelope on his way to the house, hurried, not saying a word, but instead with his eyes tracing her gaunt body for clues, some hint of a lie on her breath, or the way she fidgets nervously under the glare of his eyes, the crisp color of his uniform rumpled somewhat from being jostled by the crowds along the roads from Lysistrata, a thick layer of silt along his cuffs and trim, and by the hours of sitting at the coal company negotiations that press thick creases into the seat of his pants and shirt. When Richard passes, he sees Penelope at eye-level, as tall as she is without shoes, but is immediately greeted at the door by Katy and John, the couple with grim faces, poised to deliver the awful news of the morning's events. Katy looks up, surprised, to see the girl's tired, anxious face. John shuffles his wife back into the house and extends a hand to his brother. But Richard lingers on the doorstep, hands still frozen at his side, the look of puzzlement on his lips and brow, perhaps knowing intuitively what news is about to be delivered, perhaps shocked at the girl's forthright manner at knocking on his front door, or her height, his meticulous stare mapping every detail, slowly focusing on the yellow envelope in the girl's hand, crumpled slightly from the journey, though he has no idea how far the girl has come to arrive at this doorstep, could not fathom that sort of determination nor what she intends, other than the thought in his head of a mistaken identity.

"Who's the girl?" John asks, and closes the door.

Penelope does not move to enter of the Bowers front door. When she feels like running, like escaping back home to Alabama, to settle there, perhaps, or to keep heading north along her pathway, not to stop until she finds an open, welcoming door and family and not a doorstep, she thinks of her mother, now in the ground, first, the rough grain of the packet in her hands, the blank but sealed envelope ordered by her mother to deliver, with papers stuffed inside for only her father to read and bring to light their secrets. She presses her ear to the door, makes out the sounds of a woman's voice, that someone's wife has died, *the wife of the man who passed me at the door*, Penelope thinks, *the man whose wife has died.* After several minutes there is relative quiet and Penelope knocks on the door again to remind the people inside that she's still standing there, as if the episode on the stoop had not happened at all, as if the family had walked past her, noticed, forgotten as soon as the door swung closed, though perhaps the news of the day allowed for such forgetfulness. She looks in the front window, and instead of a reply, though, discovers the house at rest, a broom tipped against the wall, through storm windows and screen doors, and the low groan of adults in conversation, which Penelope recognizes as the same kind of arguments as at the Thatchers house, who watched her after the funeral, the night Mr and Mrs Thatcher argued over whether or not to allow Penelope to leave.

Instead, Penelope traces the front door to the Bowers house, how the Kentucky light glints through its fragments of stained glass, sends sputters of colored light across the interior—unaware of the day John Bowers hung the new door, not too many months prior, when his brother had been away on business, after a nasty storm, mostly wind and no rain, blew off the old door, along with part of the Bowers barn, and nearly half the houses in Lysistrata. How Nance crouched in the cellar with extra candles until morning and rocked in Katy's arms, a grown woman to be so frightened by thunderstorms, perhaps by the power of some God's hand, and how John told her about the new door he wanted to put on the front of the house, as a distraction, one with new stained glass and a bright brass handle. How in the morning, when the storm had passed, he'd take Nance to the general store for the glass and fixtures, if she promised to be

brave, speaking to the woman as if to a child. How he'd pick the trees from the grove and saw the wood. Nance could watch, John had said, even help, but only if she didn't cry at the thunder, mewling as a cat would at such storms, ever since the war. In its color and fragments, tiny pieces of colored glass arranged into patterns, the doorway reminds Penelope of the church where her mother was buried, not of the funeral songs or the plain casket, not of the scattered people who wished her well or brought food as some consolation, but of the glorious light bursting through those windows, and of the feeling of that light as it warmed her body.

The front door opens, preceded by a man's voice, shouting or crying in a way that usually means an adult has been cursing, the news delivered, though the words are still muffled within the house, and followed by Richard Bowers marching tall and unaffected in his uniform, bursting away from the house out across the lawn and down the street. He does not look at Penelope as he storms across the yard, though John and Katy now reappear at the door, cannot keep their eyes from the strange girl, close to the neighbor's children in age, they estimate, but still something of an adult to be standing alone in a strange city, a look in their faces as if they now knew something of the tall, slender girl on their porch, as if she were the object of the fighting or the cause of the tears, when they all very well knew it was otherwise, though perhaps an older argument now resurfaced the way mud and sediment at the bottom of a river can be stirred and unsettled in a storm. Penelope returns to the open door of the Bowers house with a smile, a grin of whitish teeth she recognizes as the very same one she used for the Thatcher children the day she left Alabama, a combination of genuine amusement to be sure, but also a twinge of fear, mixed with humiliation, that the excitement was going to be with her, on her adventures, but that in the end, with the result of her finding a man who'd only known her mother for a brief few moments, now dead.

"You're damned right I'll be there," Richard turns to say before crossing from the family's property line.

Richard disappears down the road and John and Katy Bowers stand behind the girl in the doorway, John's right hand gripping the threshold, arms bent slightly at the elbow, the smell of a man's body odor swept away by a breeze, a combination of nerves, sweat, and ink, while Katy's hand rests on the doorknob, turning it slightly with quick twists of her wrist, the faint smell of perfume, applied at dawn and now worn away by the day's activities, by running to the *Gazette* office perhaps or the steady shaking of hands in the parade of well-wishers who stopped by the house to offer condolences. Each looks at Penelope to explain herself, or to offer some kind of words for why she is there, and how, more importantly, but the girl simply shifts her weight, rustles the bag on her shoulder, and waits for the invitation to come in. The girl stands between the adults, a rounded face with wide, oval-ed eyes, like eggs fried in a pan, flat and pale, her face more inquisitive than the other children in Lysistrata, examining the strangers at the door as they had examined her just moments prior, though a word from the woman ends the investigation.

"What's she doin' here?" Katy asks.

"Mind yourself," John says, pushes at his wife with the back of his hand and returns it to the threshold.

"What's your name, child?" Katy asks.

"Penelope."

"You'll stay with us tonight," John says. "We'll find out what's going on and hopefully tomorrow morning we'll clear this up."

Penelope follows the family indoors, her body blending into the soft colors of the house, the muted interior, what she can see of the fancy, wooden furniture with its gold cushions, or

white upholstery, or the way that the gas lamps stain the walls in oval shaped marks pressed into the paint or layered over the wallpaper, no matter how recently painted or frequently re-papered, how the end tables sit at the corners of the rooms with picture frames propped and posed in various pretenses, more photographs than she's ever seen in all the houses in Dothan added together. Katy remarks to the girl how thankful she is that the neighbors and other women from Lysistrata offered to tidy up the house, what with the family to be at the burial and all, how they'd even bring dishes of food by the house, to ease Katy the burden of feeding the house amid all the funeral activities, though with Richard gone the responsibility would be somewhat diminished, though nonetheless obligated. Penelope finds a corner of the room and does not move, instead clutches her bags and tries to quell the storm of anxious feelings in her stomach, that perhaps she has arrived home, unlike all the houses and stops she visited along the way from Alabama, but somehow at home in a completely foreign land.

"I suppose you're hungry," Katy says to her.

"Yes ma'am," Penelope answers.

"Good. You and I can eat," she says. "Mister Bowers will be upstairs for a while preparin' for tomorrow's meeting."

"What are they meetin' about?"

"You," Katy says and stoops over a cooking pot that dangles over the fire with a thin iron wire, measuring spices with her fingertips and adding vegetables to taste, a casserole she abandoned to tell Richard the awful news, neglected while handling the girl on her doorstep, but now readies to eat nevertheless, chicken and vegetables by the smell of it, wrapped in a thick, crusty bread. Penelope sits at the table, admires the woman's form, compares it with that of her own mother in the kitchen, similar circumstances to be sure, the way each women moves her lips as they talk, without sound, though, perhaps repeating recipes learned from their mothers or grandmothers.

"Not at the table," Katy says to the girl, her voice quick and blunt. She points to a small corner table near the rear of the room. "You'll sit here. Where there aren't any windows."

As the cauldron bubbles Katy sets the small table with plates and forks, a pitcher of water. Her hands sweep along the countertops and cupboard doors, pull more foods and vegetables, serving bowls and utensils from the drawers and offer them to Penelope to help set the table, who pauses before reaching her hand to accept the job, trying to decide whether or not she intends to risk the unknown, the awkwardness, the perceived ingratitude, of accepting strange food offered by new hands but denying to help in the preparations. When Penelope finishes the place settings, Katy checks the dinner over the fire, as its slow simmer fills the house with a rich aroma, the smell of which sends Katy back to the time when they all lived in the cabin, though nothing of the dismal events therein, nor of the recent unpleasantries, but of the simple delight of hearty food cooking over the flame, a memory and perfume thick like warm cider on the throat, to cover over the unpleasant smell of history and gaslights.

"So," Katy says. "Penelope is your name."

"Yes ma'am."

"Well, Penelope, I suppose I'm more than curious to know where it is you come from."

"Alabama," the girl says.

"Are you kiddin' with me?" Katy straightens her body at the thought of such a travel for so young a girl. Katy stands between the girl at the table and the kitchen widow overlooking their neighbor's yard.

"No, ma'am. Dothan, Alabama's where I'm from."

"How in God's name did you end up in Lysistrata?"

"Train, mostly," the girl says. "By foot and buggy through most of Kentucky."

"To find your daddy," Katy says, this time with more accusation in her voice, some of the hospitality drained away, siphoned off perhaps, as the would-be mother and concerned wife eyes the stranger at her table, now stuffed with her family's food, and strains to see any semblance of her own husband in the girl, despite her trust in the man himself, but still searching for some hint or clue to once again rule out John Bowers as the culprit and not quite able to find that one mark to set her suspicions free.

"My momma told me he'd be here," the girl says.

"Your momma's dead?"

"Yes, ma'am," Penelope answers. "Though she didn't say here, outright, just that Mister Bowers lived somewhere in Kentucky, in this town with a funny name."

"You've certainly found one of those." Katy moves to the sink to begin her cleaning.

When Penelope finishes her meal, Katy Bowers offers the child a plate of cakes also delivered by the neighbors in her time of family distress, turns to rinse the sink, or scrape the plates into the trash pile. When Katy's back is turned, Penelope sneaks from her corner of the room and steals another cookie from the basket, careful to avoid the open window, eyes locked on Katy now hunched over the cauldron. With her hands still on the plate Penelope freezes when Katy turns to see what the girl has done, explains that she can have as many cookies as she likes and doesn't have to steal them or think she's doing anything wrong, which the girl does, but that the treats are gifts of kindness and such gifts ought always to be given out in equal measures of benevolence and without guilt or anything like it associated, particularly if her momma was correct and one of the Bowers men was her father, which would make her damned near family anyhow. At that Penelope stuffs a few more cookies into the open bag at her feet, unaware how Katy is calculating the years and the opportunities in her head, when John had been away and how far off from Alabama he'd gotten during the war, pouring over every story he has told her or the ones she's heard from the others, or remembering back to the furlough, when she found his bag all but empty except for the Bible, wondering if it weren't robbery or thievery that removed the articles from him, but this girl's mother, perhaps, in return for her favors.

"I reckon you'll be tired," Katy says. "Coming all the way from Alabama."

"Yes ma'am."

For Penelope, the bedroom resembles the one she'd left behind at the Thatcher's in Dothan, albeit nice decorations and only one bed in the corner of the room, instead of the multiple mattresses for the Thatcher children. Katy closes the door behind her, after showing the girl where to light her bedside candle if she should wake in the middle of the night to find it extinguished, or if she slept without the light, where to light it should she need to find the bathroom. Penelope drops her bag on the floor and right away looks for a place to store the letter, somewhere out of sight, but also a place where someone who came looking wouldn't find it immediately, if they did, or would make too much noise and wake her. She lifts the mattress and slides the yellow envelope beneath it, admires the bed itself, the four knobbed posts on each corner that reach up almost to the ceiling, a light brown color like the wood on the downstairs furniture. She runs her hands along the comforter, feels the alternating softness of the feathers and the prick of their harsh quills, admires both the color of scrambled egg yolk in its fabric, and the cleverness in her choosing to use the mattress as hiding place. Along the walls, toys stand piled, perhaps the untouched, unblemished toys of another child, now gone, a ghost who owned those items on the wardrobe and the others on the windowsill or stacked onto the chairs, the

wardrobe with its mirror of curved glass. Penelope pushes a small rocking horse, still immaculately painted, with no nicks or cracks in the veneer, pushes the yellowed envelope deep beneath the mattress.

In their bedroom Katy and John prepare for bed, their long nightgowns and sleeping hats still cold from the drawers, gradually warming against their bodies, the candles one by one extinguished, Katy slipping to bed before her husband, her feet tucked neatly away and her back arched against pillows and the headrest, not reclining for sleep, but propped in the darkness, her hands folded in her lap, though concealed by the blanket, nervously turn and itch, as if preparing to deliver some sermon or testimony or interrogation, while John stands at his dresser, drawers half-opened, his arms rummaging through to the bottoms, past his clothes and other articles to find what papers he can from the war in preparation for the judge's chambers, and the meeting in the morning with Richard regarding the girl's father, and which of them would be, ultimately, responsible for her upbringing, or at the very least, in signing the papers to send her off to an orphanage somewhere downstate. John blows the last candle and slides into bed, his back to his wife, the faint brush of smoke against his lungs as he shuts his eyes, unaware how Katy stirs in her upright position, the clearing of her throat and impatient coughing not enough to rouse his curiosity, as a husband will rarely disturb an argument he knows is coming, if he thinks he can starve off the words and conflict for another night, dialogue in exchange for a pleasant night's slumber. Perhaps aware of her husband's intent to ignore her, or perhaps in spite of it, in the darkness Katy shoves against her husband's back.

"What have you to say for yourself?" she asks.

"Not tonight," John answers.

"Not tonight?" Katy straightens in her seat. "There is a girl now sleeping in our house, by every account…a fifty percent chance of being yours. If not tonight, when?"

"I have a meeting in the morning with Judge Northcut," John replies. "I have to be ready for that."

"That's all you have to say? I deserve to know. Were we not married when you left—" Katy stops herself at the mention of the war, a word she has not used in fourteen years, and will not use, even now, her habit and conditioning falling back to euphemism, often calling the war by other names, such as *the event* or *the troubles* or *your past* or *that history*, or *the time we spent apart* or even *around the time your mother passed away* each phrase enough to refer to the war and John's participation in it, his escape from it, the damage he incurred while fighting it, but not the word itself, and thus the damage is not quite breeched, with the hope perhaps that he will stretch his hand for the olive branch and share with her the dark thoughts that trouble him, more than thoughts, the darkness that troubles him still in the evenings, though perhaps through a backdoor. Even in her anger, the blameless jealousy of a wife, in every way justified and accounted for, in every way her right as a wife and would-be matron to demand from her husband, information, either denial or confirmation as a faithful spouse would expect and deserve and demand, no matter the hour or circumstance, and yet even in her wrenched hands and jealousy wrapped into sweaty palms, her anger and outrage, though not yet surfaced, bubbling somewhere beneath to emerge should he confess, or should the truth leak out in some other capacity, even in her anger and suspicion Katy does not breech the unspoken pact between her desire to pronounce the word, to wrest it to light, and the sincere affection she feels for the man, like a duty, motionless at her side.

"With a Negro no less," Katy says. "She may pass as white for those who don't know, but…of all the humiliations. In my own house. A bastard girl…half-Negro, half-Bowers. The humiliation…"

"Do you think she's mine?" John asks.

Katy's hands release beneath the bed-quilt, an action she tries to undo, to re-clench the fists and refill her chest with angry air, but John's words, his question, the sound or echo of hurt in his voice, perhaps all a guise and distraction, a technique husbands use to deflect the actual argument and achieve their longed-for rest, but perhaps not a trick at all, but a wound now opened and unconcealed in the darkness, a trust violated and set loose into the room, a gust of sadness or loss like a bar of wind, pry her fists open and poke a hole in her anger, refuse to allow their shutting once again. She moves to speak, to answer his charge, but the words stick in her throat and will not proceed to sound, perhaps still heavy with bile from her jealousy, the way it chokes away other possibilities from the mind, excludes more-likely scenarios in the place of what is the worst assumption about people, believing the worst is possible in them, even loved ones whom she would not hurt or wish to hurt, nor mention the words that would cripple the man, yet waiting for them to fail her nonetheless, words she expects to hear now weighed with guilt, or perhaps with the knowledge that she has no answer for his line of questioning, has not once considered that John is the innocent and Richard the guilty, a thought and realization which angers and infuriates her all the more, having seen for the past fourteen years how Richard's reputation for respect and nobility had carried through with all the people of Lysistrata, how it fooled them and continues to do so, even when she has seen and known the truths that settle beneath that bright and honorable veneer, the damages Richard has wrought in his own family and beyond and still she trusts in his virtue over her own husband, as if by her nature, accuses John and not Richard of fathering the girl, though at the moment of coming to words, her anger bellows and fist again clenches beneath the comforter and does not ease.

"I only know your position on children," she says. "Which is why I was curious—"

"One has nothing to do with the other," John snaps, now upright in the bed as well. "We're not going to have this conversation now. I'll meet with Richard and the judge in the morning. That should be enough for you."

Katy slumps over on her side of the bed, pulling the pillows from behind her back until only one remains to cradle her head as she stretches her body flat against the mattress, the anger and precision of John's words hanging in the darkness, Katy listening to hear his body return to its restful position, but instead detecting nothing, not even the rise and fall of John's chest while breathing nor the rush of air as it passes through his nostrils, but rather a dead silence which leaves Katy again along with her thoughts, then guilt, but to thinking why John's reaction had been so violent, as if he had something to hide and is angry for the topic's being broached and her inquisitiveness only worsens the wound, recalling the words he used, the precision of language and even the way he paused between words, as if for effect, the way he annunciated the words, all as if scripted, perhaps, or a trained response he'd been storing up for years, should just such an occasion require a convincing set of sentences to quell her anger or lines of questioning. But the topic of children in general soon occupies the darkness along side Katy's bed, that John has sworn off children from the very first, after the war, again after the miscarriage, that is, and any inclinations the man might have harbored to produce children and send them into the world, any hope to further their family and give companionship to the husband and wife, outwardly expressions of their life together, perhaps even of their love, he flatly denies in the course of his recoveries, an opinion Katy figures would again pass with time, as she had once felt would pass

the damage from the war, though her hope of one day bearing children has not yet died, as has the hope of John ever coming to terms with the past. John breathes in such a way that Katy knows he is still awake, still angry, perhaps, at her questions but awake nonetheless.

"Will we ever have children again?" she asks.

John slams his knuckles into the mattress before climbing out of the bed, dragging his pillow and bed-sheets into one of the guest bedrooms, the press of his fist deep and defined in the cushion, a round blow that may be the extent of his violent streak, Katy believes, but nonetheless a warning not to follow and very well sure not to revive the conversation at the threat of something more physical in nature, though Katy does not believe or know John to be capable of such violence against her body, as all inklings of such behavior also vanished away when he retuned from battle, the prospect of killing men, enough to drain a man of all violent tendencies once his work and obligation to do so has ended, and all he is left with is the stain of its awful feeling. Katy flattens the mattress where John's fist had slammed, neatly leveling the feathers until no trace of the event remained, rolls her body to take advantage of the space, stretching her arms and legs beneath the comforter, though on her back and staring into the blank ceiling, the original suspicions no longer fresh on her mind, but relegated to the furthest corners, only to be revived should they be confirmed, instead replaced with the thought of bearing a child, the envy and happiness with which she watched Nance carry a baby in her body, the fragile way Nance touched her stomach as if to feel the baby kicking, or the way Katy would imitate the motherly actions at the time, and find herself imitating some time later, her hands now moving along the curve of her belly, though she does not realize the motion, instead remaining with Nance and the joy they shared, despite the rough circumstances of Nance and Richard's marriage bed, or the facts of the marriage itself as would justifiably prevent any enjoyment or happiness to arise out of such circumstances.

In the morning John Bowers and Penelope eat breakfast together, with Katy watching their every bite, her eyes constantly shifting between the girl and the window, back to the girl, to John, to the window, until they finish their meal and stand, all speechless, perhaps some unwilling or even afraid to speak—as in the case of Katy who still carries in her mind the sound of John's hand against the mattress, the slam of the door to the guestroom where he slept—and leave the Bowers house on their way to Judge Northcut's office, which, he explains when they turn from the Bower's yard, is in the same cluster of buildings in Lysistrata proper where they write and print the *Gazette*. John carries a folder in his left hand, a collection of documents he kept from the war, mainly his whereabouts on certain campaigns, journals that mentioned his discharge or various generals, and even several of the letters he once mailed to Katy, each postmarked from the posts and outposts where he sent home his general complaints about the war, how he missed his wife, for the most part, but also how the tread of war begins to wear heavy on his body, the litany of aches and pains, thank God no major wounds, but more than the physical how the time in the field and performing routines gives a man time to think, not just about his actions, but of the principles that lay somewhere deep beneath them.

"You fought for the Confederacy," Penelope says.

"What makes you say that?" John says.

"I saw that file in your hands," the girl answers.

"So you can read, then?" he asks, surprised.

"Momma taught me," Penelope answers.

"Did she teach you where your name comes from?"

"Yes sir," she answers.

"My wife told me that she's dead," John says. "Your Momma, that is. Sorry to hear about that. Lost my own mother. Not an easy thing to live with."

"Thank you, sir."

"We'll get this situation of your rightful daddy squared away this morning."

Occasionally John watches the girl at his side, and though ready and quick to deny that she is his own flesh and blood, a certain movement of pity crosses his heart, though he allows none to cross his lips or even the expressions on his face, perhaps even admiration for her gumption, nor move beyond his heart, the will and drive to travel as far as she had, once he heard it from Katy how far the girl had traveled, prior to their arguments, all in search of something as simple and basic, it seems, as her father. In a strange way the pity betrays a desire unwritten in all the letters from the war, having seen what actions lay at the hearts of men, the worthlessness of oaths and marriage promises, all types of vows and promises broken when the structures crumble away and leave men and women to their own devices, the kind of structures necessary to foster children, some certainty in their lineage now reflected in the girl's face and longing for just that certainty, the pity itself as a betrayal, or in the actions that follow it, John's desire never to father a large brood of children as his brother was certain to have considered, nor that he had any proof of infidelities while he was either at war or the years he lay, invalid and incapacitated as he was, but a qualification and demand nonetheless for certainty when it comes to children that he was the sole father, a guarantee that is impossible to certify, of course, and as a result he is ready to sacrifice copies of his own face and personality, tiny versions of himself to spread across the land, and now with this girl, her resemblance to the family clear as day, though denying her to be his own, deeper even than his own heart, John wishes for a family somehow independent of the Bowers family, whereby Penelope now seems the first solution as to how such a thing might ever be possible and hence the tug of pity at his heart as they approach Lysistrata.

Meanwhile Penelope keeps her hands in the jacket Katy has provided her, which, along with the fresh change of clothing and bath towel, she left on a stool outside the bedroom door while Penelope had slept. During the night, the girl imagined she heard something stir in the hallway or bump against her bedpost but when she runs her hand beneath the mattress in the darkness, as she does again at first light, panicked at first, but relieved when she finds the yellowed envelope and clutches it to her chest. She imagines the pair of hands combing over the comforter and mattress as she sleeps, a stranger's hands and yet they move with familiarity, knowing not only of the bed and sheets and bedroom but of its contents as well, hands ready to seize what they intend to steal, wrest away whatever has been stored for safety, despite locks and other defenses, to kidnap the letter and hold it ransom, though the weight of her body prevents any hand from moving that far into the darkness. That same envelope now tucks neatly away in the pocket of her jacket, though the weather is neither hot, steamy the way Kentucky burns in the summer, nor the brittle cold of her winter months. She looks often enough at the man by her side to know that he too is watching her, not so much what she is doing, or how fast walking, since, with her height, much of it in the legs, Penelope's stride can keep pace with most adults, particularly the men whose own height may be an inch or two less than her own, but keeping track of her features, as each of the Bowers had done since her arrival..

"I picked this for you," John says, and hands Penelope a long, slender flower, from the side of the road that borders the town's cemetery, with a thin green stem and clusters of

miniature flowers, each one covered with tiny hairs and bright yellow, stacked on top of one another like a stick of rock-candy.

"Goldenrod," she says.

"How did you know?"

"We have 'em in Alabama," she answers. "They grow all the way over to Mississippi."

"Is that so," he says. "Did you know they also go by the name of s*olidago altissima*."

"I've never heard that name."

"I read it in an almanac," John says, rather proud of the fact.

Penelope slips the flower in the buttonhole of her jacket careful to let the envelope inside rest for a while in its pocket, until the flower is balanced and upright, its smell of licorice tickling her nose as the two reach the crest of a small hill and from its top see the town of Lysistrata below. To the north, west, and east thick green forest surrounds Lysistrata, the only clearing between the trees for what is called Main Street, once a Chickasaw trail used for hunting, along one of the few and only continuous flat ridges among all the hills and river valleys. The city of Lysistrata sprouts to the east and west of Main Street, which itself aims north and south, about a building's length deep into the woods, with a few hundred feet cleared for yards and storage and the like, but soon enough to give way to the woods again. In the street, a dust and stone covered pathway, is enough room for a horse and buggy to make it through, but with the people also walking on the path, and the livestock following their owners here or there, there doesn't seem to be much room for anything more than a man on a thin horse. Still, Penelope listens to the noises coming from the town, not much different in kind to what she'd heard back in Alabama, nor in any of the similar small towns she'd passed through on her way to Lysistrata, a general store, a blacksmith and gunsmith and all the usual stores, though now even an office where the mining companies and railroaders operate their new businesses.

The building where John Bowers stops is the largest in all Lysistrata, the offices where city officials do their work, he explains, the office where Judge Northcut agreed to hear out the disagreement between the brothers and try to settle the matter in a civilized way, rather than have two brothers face off in a duel, which would have bee a typical way to reach settlement, more to Richard's advantage than his younger brother's. The judge's building is a block of stone unfit for its surroundings, out of place in the wilderness as gunfire in the pews of Sunday service, a building cut and formed by the work of tireless human hands, though an abomination to the earth and its greenery just in the bordering yards, rather than nature having cobbled together the structure, brick by brick, or drop by drop, as is the case with the endless caves and underground tunnels lining Kentucky's landscape. Penelope asks John about the building, if the back and insides are as strange as the rest, but he replies that the building is not strange, but architecture, and leaves the matter at that. John holds Penelope by the hand as they enter the building and walk down an empty hallway and wait to enter the chambers where Judge Northcut keeps his office. Already, Richard Bowers sits with his hands folded in a chair to the right of the judge, who himself sits behind a large desk with several small statues or figurines of bald eagles, some with wings extended in flight, others perched on a branch, heads held high. It is a dark room with dim lights hanging from chandeliers, so much so that both Penelope and John pause as they enter, their eyes adjusting to the dark as opposed to the light from the street.

"Have a seat, John," the judge says. "Richard has filled me in on the situation."

"With all respect," John answers. "I'd like to hear what he's told you before we get started."

"Just what we know," Richard says. "That this mulatto girl showed up at our doorstep, on the day, before my wife has had a chance to be buried, claiming that one of us is her father. Does that about sum it up?"

"She said that a Mister Bowers was her father," John adds to the judge. "And that her mother passed, didn't give her name, from Alabama no less, only with the instructions that her daddy lived in this town with a funny name, here in Kentucky."

"I'm almost glad my wife wasn't here to witness this," Richard says. "I scarcely have any idea how Katy can hold up during such accusations."

"Gentlemen," the judge says. "I don't wish to get into an argument here, given the trauma you've received, Richard, and you witnessed, John. I just want answers, so we can sweep this piece of unpleasant business away and get to the mourning of Mrs. Bowers, so we can all move on from here. Is that agreed?"

"Yes sir."

"Good," the judge says, now turning to Penelope. "What was your mother's name, young lady?"

"Amanda Howard."

"Fair enough, now that's something settled right from the start," the judge says. "Do either of you two boys know a woman by this name?"

"No sir," the men answer.

"When were you born?"

"July of sixty-three," Penelope answers.

"Now we're getting' somewhere." The judge writes a few notes on his pad of paper, first the date *July 1863*, subtracts nine months from that date, tallies *October 1862* and looks up from the pad. "And John here says you came all the way to Lysistrata from your home in Alabama?"

"Yes sir."

"Alright. Now what we need to do is figure out where you boys were in October of sixty-two, whereabouts during the war no doubt, and decide which of you was closest to this girl's momma at the time, since neither of you boys seem willing to fess or figure this out on your own. Am I correct in that?"

"Yes sir," the brothers answer.

"We'll figure it out though either way, by simple reasoning," the judge says. "So one of you could save us all some valuable time."

Neither John nor Richard speak to answer the question, so Judge Northcut asks them to produce whatever arguments or proof they have of their whereabouts, positions or serving under which generals during the month of October. John is first to produce documentation as to where he was stationed at the time, Perryville, he shows the judge a series of entries, as well as a few unsent letters from the time, and lastly he thumbs through his war journal again, looking for places he had marked the night previous, which Richard has never seen nor heard of, a tattered old book with black leather binding and cover, the pages inside tattered and starting to yellow, the ink crisp and black against the sheets, careful handwriting the way a man crafts each word in his head before scratching it into the paper, as if he knew as he wrote that the words would come back to the light of day and be recognized, an entry from Perryville no less, commemoration and thanks to God that he was still alive and somewhat healthy at the time, since it was his one year anniversary of fighting in the war.

"I never knew you kept a journal," Richard says. "Didn't think you gave that much thought to the war, or wanted to."

"We didn't all come back heroes," John says, returns his paperwork and journal back to the folder on the table in front of him.

"That seems settled," the judge says. "What do you have to say for yourself, Richard? Though I think I know part of this story. The *shower of bullets* story, am I right?"

Richard stands near the judge's liquor service, but instead of a bourbon, he pours himself a glass of water and raises the glass against his lips, quivering slightly. In the flicker of time between taking the drink, clearing his throat, and retelling the story of Chattanooga for the hundredth or so time, in his mind Richard traces each aspect of the story he knows he told the men and women of Lysitrata, including Judge Northcut, measured against what accounts he has heard from those who were present, how the Rebels tried to disrupt Union tactics and operations by dividing their forces, and the names of the Generals who were present in the area, Major General Ormsby Mitchel, Major General Edmund Kirby Smith, Brigadier General James Negley and the Pennsylvania Volunteers, how the Rebels camped on the far side of the river and Cameron Hill, and the Union cannon fire against Chattanooga and the Union's victory there. Then, with his throat whetted and his story solidified, Richard launches into his account of Chattanooga, almost formulaic in the way the words creep across his tongue like strangers working to stay unidentified, stories about defending the railway cars and chasing after the fleeing Confederates, finding the soldiers hidden away, who'd been tortured by the enemy for not conscripting themselves to fight a cause they knew to be evil.

"This was also the time," Judge Northcut adds, remembering the story. "When you rescued the loyal wife, whose husband and family was killed by Rebels for not joining their side."

"The very same," Richard says.

By this time, word spreads in Lysistrata, most likely from Katy telling the neighbors about the girl on her doorstep and why the Bowers men would be gone the whole day, each learning the story in whatever ways such stories are learned and passed along, so that an entire crowd of people now gathers outside the judge's office, women and men alike in their curiosity at a neighbor's troubles, elbowing each other and standing on their tiptoes to see through his window, arms against shoulders and heads butting each other in their prying ways, how the judge pulls a map from his desk drawer, *a map*, someone shouts, though none of them know why or what-for, only that Richard Bowers stands in the judge's chambers and John Bowers sits in his seat like a child in Sunday school, each face glued to the judge's fingers as he traces the map on the desk, how the young mulatto girl in the corner, *Penelope's her name*, someone will say, having heard the name from a friend of the Bowers' neighbor, clutching an envelope, though the judge doesn't seem concerned with that so much as the task at hand, which at once triggers the crowd to speculate what is inside the envelope, maybe a letter in the father's own hand, or something even more damning, or, others will say, it's only a bluff, like in a game of cards, though the conversation inside the room is a quick and seemingly decisive one, as Judge Northcut measures the distance between Alabama and Perryville, Kentucky on the one hand, where John claimed to be stationed, the much shorter line between the Alabama border and Chattanooga, which itself is a city just across the corner of Georgia, where Richard Bowers made a name for himself with bravery and loyalty, in southern Tennessee, near the border of Alabama. *Try to show some respect*, the people outside the room will say as they try to pry even further, *the man's wife just passed away*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Strange affairs at the Bowers place, what with a girl showin' up on the doorstep like that, claimin' one of the Bowers boys was her father, some orphan from the war no doubt, what with all the prostitution and whores who followed the troops and traded their bodies for food or whiskey or brass buttons. Hard to say if she's tellin' the truth, even if she has those Bowers eyes, brown and wide, the look of a skittish deer caught in the crosshairs, and even if she is one of theirs, since there's barely a noticeable difference between legitimate kids and the illegitimate, let alone difference enough to know which of the brothers did what to whom, more than a dozen years ago, that now this child shows up to find her father, with no more than a last name and an old envelope to go searchin'. Not that children of that kind are rare, or even uncommon, jut the nerve of lookin' for the man—better to let that kind of thing rest, settle, than drag it out for the benefit of nobody.

Also hard to figure on what they're sayin' behind the windows, though no doubt Richard's havin' the bulk of the time to right the record. No doubt John is denyin' the charges as well and as such no way to envy the job Judge Northcut has at hand this mornin' to decide whether or not the girl's a Bowers and from which branch of the Bowers tree. Still, the eyes are there, eyes don't lie, after all, even when the lips and tongue conspire and the mind itself gets convinced of its own false witness, so that God and the Devil even get confused, but the look in that mulatto's eyes, something Bowers in it is all we're saying, the way she watches those boys from afar, something from that line that even half-breeding can't hide.

No tellin' what to believe about that John, to hear his own brother talk about him no less, owin' to the fact that he himself won't give much on his doin's for the war, the whereabouts or whatfors, only that he was robbed tryin' to come home and that's one poor alibi for something as simple as a man sellin' off his valuables for spendin' monies, even if used for less than savory satisfactions. What if anything can you trust from a man whose brother struggles to find decent words to defend his actions? Confederates were known to frequent those kind of establishments, takin' their money, blood-money though it was to fight a war in such ways, spendin' it on all kinds of women and debauchery, and though we heard of similar stories from some of the other side as well, it's widely know how the Confederate's appetites were much harsher in their natures, much more difficult to satisfy through conventional means.

Plus, as Richard points out, the real problem is that you really can't trust the ones who went over to the Rebs, not after the way they raided Kentucky, the land of their own fathers and mothers, no trust as far as we can throw them anyway, as any man who'd volunteer for that side of things, when he had the choice to pick between the two, like Eve and the knowledge of good an' evil, who goes and picks the wrong one. A story from that man might as well come with its own shaker of salt. Not that Reb Bowers hasn't been a model citizen since, startin' up the newspaper and all, sometimes attending service, it's just that doin' penance for sins already committed can't be applied to somebody's credit, as payin' debts is hardly the sign of an honest man.

Though you'd never know it from seein' the man now through the window, they say that John started off in Barbourville, Kentucky and we're inclined to believe it, based on what we've been able to learn, which is all the harder since John Bowers is one of the few who returned from the Confederates that wasn't in a pine box, that is, and gettin' survivor Rebs to talk about the war or askin' for any kind of story or information about the battles and such is like askin' a man to saw off his own hand, or forcin' a mother to tell stories about her children who have died, just

too painful to consider as an obligation, let alone a favor, in polite society. The other Rebs who returned home are mixed up in the head in some ways or another, yellin' all the time at children and dogs and livestock, or wanderin' the streets at night howlin' at the moon.

Still, we can find a lot about what happened by goin' to the Union prisoners of war, those who served in Andersonville, Danville, or Salisbury, along with all the others, as they're the ones who had the most contact with the enemy for any extended period of time, as well as the time to put things like that to memory, and if they saw anyone from Lysistrata on the outside of their cells, we'd bet they'd remember that and be eager to tell about it.

The first thing that's clear is that John Bowers got the idea to start a newspaper right here in Lysistrata because he served much of his time under a man named Felix Zollicoffer, a Brigadier General of the Confederate Army. Most we ever heard ol' Reb Bowers talk at any one time on the war was about Zollicoffer and how he came to the conflict from Tennessee with an armful of books and papers, a politician too, no less, fresh off of creamin' the Seminole down there, a real reluctant soldier, as John tells it, who even tried to work out a peace agreement between the states, but in all honesty, how much peace could he have bargained for when the states' rights people demandin' the federal government out of their business and willing to back up their opinions with cannon-fire?

John Bowers never seemed all too interested in affairs outside of Lysistrata before the war which is why it was a shock when he joined, then even more so when he joined with the confederates, though after hearin' him go on about Zollicoffer and his ilk, it makes sense to us why he would take to a man like that, learned, educated with books, a newspaper editor and all, and why he'd continue talkin' the man up even after he died the way he did and the war's over and there's very little to gain by bringin' up one's alliance with the losin' side of anythin', let alone the wrong side of a civil war. Anyway, after Sumter, Zollicoffer switches sides and becomes a rebel, then is promptly shipped to eastern Tennessee, then to Barbourville right here in Kentucky, where he first meets John Bowers, Lysistrata volunteer.

A few of us here remember September 19, 1861in Barbourville because we fought there for the Union, some of us died there too, but we can't recall a one of us runnin' into John Bowers while on the battlefield, nor when the victorious rebels rounded up the wounded to take some of our boys as prisoners and ship south to the holdin' pens. Only afterwards from some of the other rebels in Lysistrata, the ones who would give an occasional detail, did we hear about how John fought there, was responsible for settin' some of the buildings in the camp to fire but that he generally stuck to the rear of the fightin' forces, when hand to hand combat replaced the gunfire and the general shootin' gallery. At the very least the man deserves some credit simply 'cause it was the first battle of the war on Kentucky soil and no native son worth his weight would've missed it.

For quite some time we'd been trainin' folks from all over Kentucky to fight for the Union—posters and propaganda, throwin' parades and attendin' church services to drum up support—until finally at Camp Johnson, that's Andrew Johnson, Zollicoffer decided he'd had about enough of our trainin' and exercises and sent nearly a thousand men to stop them. But we'd caught word of such a large troop and so we abandoned the whole base, took everythin' that wasn't nailed down and headed to Camp Robinson not too far away. Zollicoffer found the first camp empty, stole what he could from the supplies we'd abandoned or forgotten to take, and killed the small guard we'd left as decoy, using the victory to rally more recruits for the Southern army.

The next time we hear of John Bowers in the war is on Wildcat Mountain about a month after Barboursville, October 21st, on account that several of our finest troops died there and those of us who survived remember seein' Bowers there with our own eyes, decked out in his rebel uniform, though somewhat ragged and thinner than we'd remembered him at home, though certainly heftier then that he appears now, already thinned and worn-out from a year's worth of sittin' around and readin' books and similar such activities, unfit for a man of action as for a women to have gone off and done the fightin' for him, which they say he might have accepted—knowin' that family—but nonetheless at a distance, and it was early mornin' when the smoke is still fresh on the mountains and so visibility, like other things in the morning, wasn't quite at its highest level of accuracy. Anyway Wildcat Mountain is near the Cumberland Gap, over a ford of the Rockcastle River, which was a key position for the rebels to occupy at the time, as their intent was supposed to be to protect their railroad interests, keep the supply lines open, and be sure to knock back any Union attempts to take Kentucky or recruit more men to fight for Lincoln.

Now Cumberland is a long break in the Appalachian Mountains, covered with thick forests, high shelves of stone and rock quarries, and there are dozens of tiny and large limestone caves that poke their heads deep into the earth and some that have no light at all if you manage to squeeze your way all the way through to the insides. Irony, of course, bein' as it is that John's own ancestors found that break and passage into this side of the mountains, Dr. Thomas Walker, Richard's great, great grandfather, friend to Washington and Thomas Jefferson's own father, an adventurer who would have been proud seein' Richard's campaign through the war, fightin' for the country he helped to found, but rollin' in his grave to see the outcome from that other branch of the tree, John and his trechery, the way his own mother wept to see him off on such a mission. In any case, the rebels moved from Cumberland to take Wildcat, but they didn't know we'd already sent seven thousand troops and set them in high positions, and other places hidden by the landscape, and when the rebels started attackin' they had no chance, and since we didn't kill or take Bowers, it's a good guess maybe he spent the battles in one of those caves, or hidin' somewhere else, but either way when the battle was over and the Union won, and the Confederates ran off in the night, Bowers was nowhere to be found among the wounded or the captured.

By winter of 1862, mid-January began to freeze over the land with a steady diet of sleet and cold, thick rain. We marched to Mill Springs, Kentucky, additional coats and heavy jackets were ordered by the generals and other higher-ups, while we enlisted men waited with our bare hands and thin uniforms around campfires for the materials, supplies, and extra winter rations to arrive. Our tents were as thin as the shirts on our backs, so that was the first time any of us can remember clippin' the brasses off our shirts and takin' them to small villages and tradin' for thicker clothes, or even bravin' an Indian encampment and tryin' to barter some hide or thick blankets they used to stave off winter.

One of our men, George Thomas, in fact ran into John Bowers at just such an Indian post, and the two shook hands in a truce as they bought what they needed from the women and children, traded some talk about the war but neither wanted to give away too much about their positions or the actual state of their affairs, even though they'd grown up together as boys, which was the only reason they shook on a truce rather than duel it out in the Indian's own land, how it wasn't two boys who met in the forest but grown men, soldiers with obligations and principles that stood directly opposite of the other's. Anyway George learned how the rebels were eatin' pretty well and had taken to catchin' animals from the mountains, all kinds of wild game, and

mixed the greasy meats with their ‘tack rations and whatever canned berries or jarred vegetables they could steal.

Of course Mill Springs is where, among the almost five hundred confederates we killed there, set against the nearly two-hundred an fifty we lost from our own side, John’s beloved Zollicoffer finally met his maker, so to speak, and we heard the story straight from the man who shot him, Colonel Speed Fry, who we called Speedy. After Wildcat Mountain, he says, Zollicoffer’s job was to guard Cumberland and not to move one inch from that spot to be sure the Grand Army of the Republic made no headway against it. But Zollicoffer eyed the west anyways, towards Mill Spring, where he figured the land and position was ideal for making winter camp, and so that’s what he did, taking both sides of the Cumberland River. As we approached Cumberland, at Mill Springs, the rebels attacked us, figurin’, we suppose, that an attack in weather like that, all slippery and rainy, with poor vision and almost no way to gain an upper hand for the side that wasn’t fortified.

But Zollicoffer wasn’t expectin’ us to have so many reinforcements and on the mornin’ of battle he set out himself to survey the field and map his strategy, which is where ol’ Speedy comes in. Speedy is out mappin’ the field himself, for the Union side and since he’s workin’ in the rough land he isn’t wearin’ any clothes to identify him with either side. Just then Zollicoffer himself rides up on his horse, all proper but not in his uniform either, and begins to chat with Colonel Fry, mostly that Fry’s calculations would have him firin’ on the wrong side and Zollicoffer even warned ol’ Speedy against killin’ too many of his own men, meanin’ of course, the rebels. Zollicoffer then turned his horse and headed back to camp, at which time Fry figures on who the man is and pulls his revolver and shoots the Brigadier General right between the shoulder blades. We never tell this story around John Bowers, of course, as he admires the man and probably thinks he was killed in a more traditional way, but the way he goes on about how smart Zollicoffer was, how learned and clever and all, we sometimes want to let the story slip, just to bring him down a notch.

Perryville in October 1862 marked for John Bowers nearly one year of service in the confederate service, which is an accomplishment for any man, we understand, though something of it seems tarnished when such a good amount of service is dedicated to such a bad amount of cause. No one of us knows where he fought between Mill Springs in January and the autumn of sixty-two, though he probably fought in Richmond that August, as the rebels routed the Union in that battle, killin’ or capturin’ nearly five thousand of our men and openin’ a clear route for the South towards Lexington and Cincinnati. But in any case Perryville was another of the bloodiest battles on Kentucky soil and without his beloved Zollicoffer to lead him to fight John bounced between several companies that the South had sent to our state in an effort to keep up the fight for our land, strategic as it was as a gate to west, of course, but also its borders on the Ohio River, and not to mention all the resources we had hidden in our hills and forests.

Almost eight thousand men died in Perryville, four thousand of which were our own boys, in fightin’ that lasted from dawn until nighttime, a series of skirmishes and hand to hand fightin’, in places like Peters Hill and Springfield Pike, artillery and thick smoke from our canons and pistols, muskets, anythin’ that would fire a clean round into the enemy’s gut. Men dropped. We had nearly sixty thousand men converge at Perryville, and after a little give and take, the enemy soon realized the size of our grandforces, retreated back across the Cumberland Gap and into Tennessee, which is to say that for once the Commonwealth of Kentucky was controlled entirely by Lincoln and the Union.

From his own mouth John tells us that this was his last battle, though he is characteristically tight-lipped when it comes to sharin' details of his services there, under what circumstances he left, honorably or not, though the term is a loose one, and what we know is that John Bowers returns home to Lysistrata for good after Perryville and never again takes up a gun or any weapon against another man, which was a common pledge after the war was over but rather unusual for a man of fightin' age to proclaim with almost two years of fightin' left in the war, though there's no way he could have known that at the time. The Bowers boys, now that you mention it, came back about as different as two men could from the war, one confident and sure of himself, the other quiet and shy, though perhaps this too is a renderin' of justice for the various positions.

Of course this is neither here nor there, as we mentioned before, how John was a good citizen to Lysistrata and as much of a credit to the cause of the other side as one could be. In some ways he's Lysistrata's honest to God prodigal son. The women tell us, of course, that he was severely wounded when he returned to his wife in Lysistrata, spent nearly two years in bed, drinkin' and bitin' his tongue and all, which would explain why they'd give him an indefinite leave of absence, though the chances that he jumped the wall while on a furlough is equally as reasonable, given than deep down, if you want to know the truth, a rebel isn't the kind of man you can trust, not when it comes to loyalty.

When it comes to Richard Bowers, on the other hand, the stories are as crystal clear as a fresh lake you'd find in the mountains, perfect for fishin' and huntin'. If the two brothers were Cain and Able, then Richard was the latter, a loyal son to his mother and family name, not to mention his keepin' with the fine traditions and such in Lysistrata, with the exception of course that this Able returned un-killed from the war and it's his brother who seems worse for wear, what with his closed-off office and his nose always bent in the bindin' of a book or newspaper, the kind of Cain who never seems to make eye contact, even on Sundays, though the look in his face shows no anger or hint of ragin'.

As older brothers go, though, Richard is top-notch as well, like the story of the prodigal son again, but where the eldest son receives his due from the master of the house, a ring and robe and feast to celebrate his loyalty and hard work, where the younger son is punished for runnin' off on some foolhardy campaign, punished in his soul if not in his body, and the eldest son Richard returns from war no worse for the wear, if not a man entirely improved, to the point that he even welcomed the Rebel back into his own home, fed him at the same table and sheltered him under his own roof.

We know Richard's stories almost by heart, or as if we'd lived through them ourselves, 'cause we heard them with our own ears and over and over and have had the chance to ask Richard about them many times on one of our Saturday night sessions at the Bowers house, with glasses of scotch or brandy or any of the fine spirits Richard keeps at hand's length in the splendid house. Any man whose story holds for this many years is bound to be tellin' the truth, airtight and solid as stone, as a lie is just too damned difficult to maintain ten and twelve or so years after it's first been told, and Richard Bowers is a genuine war hero who's now reapin' the benefits of his loyalty and dedication, his hard work, and mostly, the valuable lessons he learned while fightin' for the Union. We'd doubt if a false word or thought ever passed his mind or lips, though he's definitely got a mean streak runnin' through him, especially when it comes to money, either the gatherin' of it, or the spendin' and it's no wonder how he came to financial success after the war with a disposition like that.

Of course, he fought in a different division than any of us in Lysistrata, as it was his talents had him promoted beyond our ranks early on, and he was needed further south where some of the heaviest fightin' was takin' place, and so for that reason his stories have always seemed to have somethin' of the exotic to them, like the rest of us can catch a glimpse of a war that we helped win, but only on the outskirts, from someone who was at the fieriest front lines.

Other than his week's worth of leave for tendin' to his mother, Richard's story of the war is filled with battles and marches, generals of the sort we'd imagine to get a man remembered some time after the events themselves, an attachment to things just a step ahead of his position and place in the world, but a role he played nonetheless, and an important one, given the stakes of the fightin'. We can picture him now marchin' down to Louisville to protect the homeland against the rebel attacks by General Bragg and his nasty followers, firearm against his body, canteen filled with river water, knapsack on his back and haversack stuffed with rations, heavy enough to weigh down his shoulders, but not stop the march. At first Richard was assigned to help the Indiana Volunteers, though the regiment number changed from time to time, depending on dispatches from Washington, and after a brief stint fighin' rebels along the Ohio River, he headed south and drove off the invaders at Louisville, then south again to Memphis, despite the unseasonable cold of autumn, when several of the Indiana boys succumbed to mumps, which can be the most unpleasant of diseases, given the ways a man's private parts swell and harden, accompanied by the fevers and vomitin'.

Now, a railroad was a key weapon the Union had as it advanced into rebel territory, as by rail our supplies were constant and with fresh supplies you could generally wear out the other side, or starve them off until they surrendered. Richard himself avoided the outbreak of mumps, probably because he avoided the whores who tended to follow the troops around, preferring a woman of higher quality, such as Nance, God bless her soul, but did catch the measles when in Memphis, as evidenced by the scars on his neck and arms the sickness left behind, though the illness passed of its own accord and Richard himself was first in line to meet Generals Grant and Sherman and helpin' the Union lead its attack against Vicksburg. As they moved south, though rebels attacked the rear of our forces, and torched loads of our supplies, briefly holdin' a section of the railroad but soon relinquishin' the same section to Richard and his men. As it stood, because of his defense, Grant left Richard to guard the railroad while the rest of the men marched on to Vicksburg, so important was it that the railway remain clear that he spent the next two seasons near Memphis, catchin' rebel prisoners and sellin' off their horses, right on through up until the end of spring.

General Pemberton led the rebel forces at Vicksburg, and by the time Richard Bowers arrived, there were more than thirty-thousand rebels there, readied for the attack and determined not to surrender. All over the south, he liked to tell, the countryside looked like a wasteland, trees cut off knee-high from gunfire, the grass everywhere singed and smokin' or both, blackened, the soil cracked and dry, the animals and children starvin' or on their way. The Mississippi itself ran slow and dull, as if burdened by the war and its iniquities, the way bales of hay were tightly thatched together, some not yet fully dried, but tied to the sides of houses and barns nevertheless as protection against snipers and riflemen on the one hand, and the random bullets that ricocheted here and there from soldiers in their duties, sometimes fired for sport or hunting, most of the time fired into thick woods or dark places, as a way to discover answers to your suspicions before any harm can come from the other side.

Richard arrived four miles to the rear of Vicksburg as a guard against General Johnston, who was attackin' the siege from that side with not much success. Grant and Sherman slammed

the city until July fourth, when the poundin' of canons and mortar fire at Vicksburg stopped, all of the sudden like, and when Richard rushed forward with his men, the city surrendered. Richard shook Grant's hand before the general was called off to Washington, and then followed Sherman as the two chased Johnston across the Big Black River, and then to the city of Jackson, which he took by damagin' their railroads.

Of course, as they camped at the Big Black River, ol' Richard heard about a scheme for makin' a good sum of money while they waited, between the fights and the supply runs, fightin' off rebels bands that made the wrong turn through the magnolias, a scheme that involved a treasure buried in a Negro cemetery. We laugh about it often in the Bowers' house, over drinks and maybe a game of cards, if Richard's in the mood and we have enough men and pocket money to oblige ourselves. Either way, Richard was on his duties as night watchman and spotted a man in a graveyard along the other side of the river.

When he moved to investigate, Richard found only the Negro gravediggers who reported that their master had been by, and buried what looked to be a coffin, though the owner had no wife or children, they said, and from that Richard surmised it must have been a considerable lot of money and valuables. He paid the Negroes each half-a-dollar in Confederate monies he had confiscated, to help him dig where the plantation owner had been, but after a few hours, Richard spotted rebels approachin' on the horizon and figured to be back at his post by daylight so as to be able to warn his men should the enemy try an advance.

Richard soon moved from Mississippi back north by way of a steam boat at Glasgow, in a boat he described as loaded to the point of damn-well sinkin', what with men and horses, mules and cannon, caissons loaded with artillery, crates of ammunition, even bails of hay from hull to deck and bow to stern. Of course, bein' that fire was the main concern on the vessel, they put Richard in charge of watchin' over the crew and men, to be sure no flames were started and that the boat would remain intact for the entirety of the trip to Memphis. He did a good job of it too, as we have also heard from others who were on the boat, or on the shore in Tennessee, and they arrived in Memphis in one piece, which we think was the occasion for one of Richard's medals, though we do have some trouble, to this day, associatin' each medal with each act, as it is probably hard for him to distinguish between them all, and he's more interested in the successes of the Union as a whole and not individual honors.

By October eleventh, then, Richard and his men began a long march to Chattanooga, where the rebels had surrounded General Rosencrans' army and were havin' a rough time of things, bein' under siege and attacks comin' almost daily, either in the form of direct assaults or attacks on supplies, and the like, which in some ways was worse than the direct attacks. Either way, as Richard approached Chattanooga, he found a group of seven or eight men who were hidin' out in a tobacco barn to avoid bein' forced into joinin' the rebel army. By that time in the war, he explained to us, rebels were pretty much signin' up new recruits at gunpoint, and had taken to beatin' or outright killin' those who wouldn't join of their own accord. When Richard found these men, though, boy were they happy to see the color of his uniform, and rushed out to thank him, and right there joined the march to Chattanooga.

But that wasn't all, a bit further up the road Richard encountered what we in Lysistrata had come to know as the "shower of rebel bullets" story, an account he even deemed of good enough moral instruction and little amount of tragedy to share with the women and children in town, once even deliverin' the story in place of the Reverend's Sunday preahcin', and thus landin' Richard the most admiration from the entire town, Rebel and Union alike. When Richard was closer to the actual fightin' in Chattanooga, as it turns out, he took in a woman who'd been

beaten by rebels on account of her loyalties to Lincoln, and whose husband had been executed 'cause he wouldn't join the rebels neither, and whose mother had been shot in the back for swearin' that Lincoln would soon come and whoop the rebels for their behaviors. The only way the women could escape was by abandonin' everythin', makin' a quick escape through, as Richard always put it, "a shower of rebel bullets." Richard fed the poor widow and gave her a seat in the ambulance cart, made sure she had enough to hold her until she could be treated at the Union base.

After the siege at Chattanooga, Richard led his men into Alabama, then to Raccoon Mountain, Lockout Valley, and Chickamauga. He fought in the battle at Missionary Ridge, when General Rosencrans had been removed for his miscalculations, which Richard advised him against, and waited with excitement as Grant was returned to direct command. Which of course leads to his famous march to Knoxville, back towards home, the winter campaign he's so fond to tell the ladies about at the general store, or the young boys who play ball and look to men like Richard Bowers as their heroes, how the cold months and long march made it necessary to carry only the clothes on his back, with a single blanket to protect him on the cold nights, and plenty of rounds of ammunition in case he happened to find a rebel hidin' in the snow. Rations and provisions were scarce too, as Richard tells it, though he was quite skilled at huntin' deer or small game in the countryside, owin' we're sure to the practice he received here in Lysistrata, all the while marchin' up to fifty miles a day and sabotagin' railroads, durin' the night, all with so much as a tiny morsel of meat and bread to fill their bellies.

On that march Richard vomited everythin' from his stomach but there was no room in the ambulance for him, given the state of affairs that winter, nor would Richard have taken the spot from another wounded man, we're sure. But when General Grant saw the example Richard set, his compassion and the like, he allowed Richard to ride his own horse for a few hours, until the sickness could have time to pass and Richard could do most of the walkin' himself. The closer he got to Knoxville, though, the easier the road came, which was met by a serious deterioration of the men's supplies, includin' ol' Richard.

Most of his men went barefoot, and Richard thanked the General for the use of his horse and joined the men on the trek, against a ground that would freeze at night and barely thaw to mud during the day. Yet Richard kept marchin' under these conditions, kept his brave face, and never complained about aches in his feet, up to the present day, that were the result of marchin' in those days. Eventually Richard found a pair of slippers in a deserted Negro cabin, which he wrapped with rags and used until the army finished its march and he could find more suitable provisions.

By now the whole damned town is out to see these brothers and their business aired in public, like the witch-hunts some of the old-timers still remember, back when whole towns were showin' up, some like they grew from the ground just to parade their witches through the town and dunk them in water or whatever it was they used to judge witchery back then, as if that were the way anything could be done these days, but either way the whole of the city seems to have turned, now with John disappeared from the window and Judge Northcut pacin' the floor, only ol' Richard is left standin' there and arguin' his case, though I'd hate to be on the other side of that man when he gets goin', even worse if he should somehow lose the argument and begin to thinkin' he ought to settle the account in some other way, as large and thick as he is against his own brother, that the women in the crowd, and even some of the men would shy away from that

kind of confrontation, excitin' though it would be as the usual and otherwise humdrum activities around town could use a bit of violence or some other energy to perk itself up.

With that said, of course, and with the exception of Nance Bowers, God rest her soul, the only people seem missing around the courthouse, rather than the usual folks who are never turnin' up for anythin', those who conduct even their own funerals in the midnight hours and such, that besides the usual absentees the only person missin' is Katy Bowers herself, though she could hardly be blamed for missin' this kind of spectacle, her own family bein' dragged through the mud by a man, by all accounts, she stayed faithful to durin' the war and afterwards, though it's impossible to know what happens in every bed or hidin' place in Lysistrata, to keep with a man that hobbled back the way he did and gave little to no explanation for his whereabouts or what he did exactly, but rather took to sittin' and eatin' and then finally draggin' his body from the bed to start that paper, which by all accounts is and was the best act of redemption that the man could muster, given the depths he'd sunk to, as we mentioned, and the shame he brought on his mother's family, and name.

The worst part of Richard's war story, if we're tellin' the whole story and not just the parts that favor Richard or serve to make him seem like something more than a man, but some kind of hero or otherwise, not that he ain't one of those as well, but that the war called Richard back, cut short his military leave just enough that Richard was not present in Lysistrata the night when his mother passed away, Suppina that is, died the very night he returned to the battle, without so much as a goodbye to her or anyone, but a letter he sent by carrier when he'd returned to the front lines to say he was safe and sound and the usual reports a son and husband send home from the lines, so that it was also by post that he learned about his mother's passing around a month after it happened, which just about wrecked Richard, the carin' and loyal son that he was. When the war was over, though, the hurt was compounded by the strain in the family circumstances at the time when he returned to Lysistrata, victorious as he was, what with his brother there at the end of it all, and a man's natural tendency, when he's been taught to shoot and hate at anything in gray, if he's on the side of the blue, and probably vice versa, to continue hatin' that other side even when the fightin' is over and the colors ought to go back to what they were beforehand, though it never quite seems to work that way. When Richard returned, John Bowers had been home for quite a while, a couple winters, in fact, restin' in that old cabin and bein' cared for by Katy and Nance, God rest her soul, and all the while ol' Suppina's rockin' chair sat empty, that last part of her life the Bowers women couldn't quite rid themselves of, Suppina's life as it was, her last hours spent in the corner of that room.

But Bowers men are survivors, explorers, with that peculiar kind of hunger for investigatin' and discoverin' right down in their very blood, as it was all the way back in their line, the kind of drive certain men feel to leave their mark in the world, no matter how small or large, but something for future generations to ponder or feel, some action that resonates into the future and let's them know how a man had lived, once, and had done something of value, startin' at the very earliest part of the line, Thomas Walker, the boys' great, great-grandfather. It is fittin' then, and not suprisin' at all to know that of all Dr. Thomas Walker's habits while exploring new territories, as he's the man who discovered the Cumberland Gap and as such was the first European into Kentucky, officially speakin', by way of the passage he himself named Cumberland, that first among these habits was to carve his initials, the day of the month, and the year into the soft flesh of beech trees as he passed them on his pathway westward through the wilderness. The wonderful quality of the young beech trees, which Dr. Walker no doubt knew, was, and is, that initials carved into the bark, especially the younger, tender-er bark, did not

disappear as the tree grew and replenished its exterior walls, but rather expanded along with the tree, so that impressions made, a name, a date, remained with the tree forever as a living remembrance, for as long as the tree stood, carrying with it those indelible marks one step beneath carving one's mark into stone.

Thomas Walker, by a series of extensions and branches on the family tree, is Richard and John Bowers' great, great-grandfather, which is the part of the story Richard is always sure to mention, as Dr. Walker was a cousin of General Washington himself, though by marriage, and familiar with all the luminaries of his day, includin' Thomas Jefferson—Walker himself stood as doctor to Jefferson's father, in fact, Peter, and even became Jefferson's caretaker when his father died—and Benjamin Franklin, the man Franklin County was named after. Richard fancied some of that explorer's blood still in his veins, the way Walker could spot coal deposits on the land, or root out food from an empty cave or cluster of rocks, the way Walker survived the elements and lived on the land himself, as even if the stories have been altered somewhat, or the storytellers themselves havin' some incentive and all to fib a bit or for stretchin' the truth, any man hardy enough to go wanderin' through wilderness like that, back then, was a man to hang your hat on and emulate. John mentioned it as well, though he also left out the less flatterin' details, about the man whose exploration notes and diary they say inspired Daniel Boone himself to pick up from home and head over to Kentucky.

So it isn't difficult to see why we'd be a bit surprised to relive much of this history, pokin' its head back up from the ground, what with the girl and all appearin' at the Bower's doorstep like that.. Poor Suppina, though, probably would roll her grave to see this come to pass, all the work she did tryin' to make something respectable of that family, and quite honestly we're glad she died before seein' any of this bein' brought to her doorstep. Lord knows the two boys fightin' two sides nearly did her in, though it's probably that John ran off with Lee which did the most damage, loyal mother that she was, descended from an infamous, if ill-fated line and all those children who miscarried, but either way, nothin' humiliating like this mulatto standin' on her doorstep, bold as the day is long. Can you imagine? Sharp-tongued old Suppina Bowers, spitfire old Suppina, and this mulatto child, ragged clothes, dirty behind the ears and God knows where else? From a woman who ironed her shawls after walking from the general store? Not likely. Probably better for that girl Penelope how the old woman's dead and buried deep under the soil, rather than alive and kickin' to see what her children have done, otherwise it'd be the hickory switch for all of them but particularly for her, cleanin' floors and the hardest labor, set to work despite whatever her real daddy said, Suppina standin' over the poor child like the archangel himself, Michael, sword of light like the August sun, over Adam and Eve and blockin' the door to paradise.

CHAPTER FIVE

That morning, when John and Penelope leave the house, Katy finishes the preparations for Nance's funeral, though not *her* spouse, as it's a woman's duty to care for the dead in Lysistrata, a function for which the weaknesses of men seem overly detrimental. Katy clears the table and scrubs the dishes. Not ten minutes pass when Richard enters the kitchen, though not from the staircase, and thus from his bedroom, but from the front door, as if on a morning's walk, perhaps, a rumple in his uniform and scattered hairs on his head—a cropped head of hair, neatly kept, the sign of Richard Bower's public face—far too displaced for a stroll down the stairs, but from a long, sauntering march, perhaps one of contemplation, or respect for Nance, now set to be buried in two day's time, three days being the proper time to wait. Katy does not tell Richard of the plans she has made for Nance's final rest, does not turn from the basin as she washes, the water discolored and cold in the morning, the dishes nonetheless scraped and cleaned and stacked into piles to be put away into the hutch, does not acknowledge her brother-in-law with more than a good morning and returning to the window to watch the neighbor's dogs scamper in the yard, four of them total, three black dogs chasing after a squirrel, one snapping at a redbird perched on the fence. *In light of the circumstance*, she figures, *what words would she have to offer?* Though Katy knew something had happened back then, during Richard's furlough, how Nance mentioned nothing of its specifics, she saw its results every day, even tried to pry the reasons from her sister-in-law, but without success. Nance was a woman like all the others in Lysistrata, who believed those sorts of things, bedroom things, were meant to be kept between a wife and her husband, while the only things to change were the passages she read from the Bible, no longer from the Song of Solomon.

"Has John left for Judge's Northcut's office?" Richard asks.

"Just a minute or so before you arrived."

"Was he nervous?"

"Not especially," Katy says, wiping her hands in a damp towel.

"Neither am I," Richard says. "Though it is strange that she showed up when she did."

"How's that?"

"Well, with Nance gone we could use an extra set of hands around the house to handle her share of the housework."

"It could be helpful," Katy admits.

Richard stands behind Katy, still turned towards the window, and places his hand at the base of her neck, where the shoulder touches the spine.

"And there are other obligations as well," he says. "Wifely obligations."

Like a memory or a dream, perhaps, something unconscious that can't be assessed to one's credit or against it, on account that it springs for somewhere that eludes control, no way to root it out with education or even breeding, but like a dream, forbidden, elusive, and real, temptation creeps back into Katy's mind at the approach of her brother-in-law, perhaps a fragment of her own history now returned to the light of day, though darkness and necessity also cover over her hands as she scrubs the dishes in the sink. Katy pushes the thoughts, memories, from her mind until they have all but disappeared, banished again to their place of hiding away, forgetfulness to stand for a medicinal lie, while Richard watches over her shoulder, how the dogs now snap at each others' tails, nipping and posturing for a chunk of meat, some food tossed by their owners. *Is he moving behind me*, she thinks, *preparing his hands the way he does before he would approach other women, cracking his knuckles against themselves, rolling his wrists*

together with anticipation, or with the look he often gave Nance on the coldest nights in the old cabin, a look to shun all those who saw it, even his own wife, less a look of seduction or even love, but an absolute command to obey the strict orders his body now demands, to satisfy or slake or gratify, in a darkness that also recalls former nights, a rustle in the window curtains, a dream-like experience half away, as if her body had floated above itself, watched itself, then returned in the light of revelry? Katy pictures the silver set in the back of the upstairs closet, and what frustrations Nance confided to her in her own way, never explicitly and always by way of complimenting John, *John is quite attentive to you*, she would say, or *You're lucky to have a man like John to stay by your side*, but mostly the shock of seeing her silver in the case at Mrs. Langdon's display case followed only by the shock of who sold it to her, a brother's first betrayal now followed by a second and the utter impossibility of telling John, wanting neither to stir up old memories of the war she'd swore to him she'd never reintroduce, nor to upset the basic order now ruling the Bowers house, that Richard was the primary earner and that even John's dream of the newspaper would fold without Richard's money, or frankly, his generosity, albeit a salve for a brother's guilt, no doubt.

"I expect Judge Northcut is waiting for you," she says. "Along with my husband."

Richard laughs and moves towards the door, his eyes fixed on Katy's body, she imagines, though not her eyes or face, but a slow, sad spiral down her curves and features, even less polite or appropriate as if for a stranger in the street, let alone a sister-in-law, like the dishwater now running down the drain, something dull and distasteful, something plain against the palate, a look devoid of remorse or even desire, but the blank stare of acquisition, of possession for the sake of possession. She sets her last dish to dry on the wooden rack. Katy folds her arms and faces the corner of the room, avoids Richard's eyes by watching as the neighbor corrals the dogs into her house after their exercise. Richard leaves by the kitchen door, which leads into the yard and the grove of trees towards Lysistrata proper, a shortcut north Richard knows, either by heart or by his occupation, but nevertheless a well-worn path to the city and Judge Northcut, and eventually his own brother to decide the fate of the girl, though John is a slow mover, when it comes to walking, as Richard knows, even slower when slowed by the legs of a child, no matter how long or mature.

Perhaps this is the first time Katy sees the entranceway in the shrubs and trees being used by Richard, how the bent or broken branches push easily away against Richard's hands, arms, and chest, or the way they snap back into place when he has passed through, or perhaps this is not the first time she has seen him leave the grounds in such a way, but for the first time notices how the line he takes aims straight to the north of town, rather than up and down the winding roads John and Penelope would surely be taking simultaneously. Whatever the instance Katy resolves to follow the pathway and learn for herself what Judge Northcut has to say, now suddenly reminded of, filled with shame and hatred for her brother-in-law, with nothing to do but perhaps *expose him*, she thinks, *expose the fraud and produce the silver and show Richard for what he was and is, the kind of man who robbed his own brother*, she thinks, *but what would that do to John*, what with the war ended so long ago and only recently, finally, settling in his head, as much as an experience like that can be settled, or even diminished, the hope of forgetting long dismissed as naïve, let alone impossible, again what value she would bring to raise such an issue, that despite how it might damage Richard, she thinks, *might* because his reputation stands so tall and proud for Lysistratians, more how the bulk of the injury would rest on John, no matter the revelations, and as a result, something for wishing and hopes, maybe, but nothing practical.

But there could be another way to get back at him, Katy thinks, for the damage he has done, and it involves the women of Lysistrata, the way Richard disappears for long stretches of time, something Nance complained about for years, ever since the war in fact, but could never corroborate, only a wife's suspicion easily dismissed by the women of town, who themselves may have known who the other women were, if they weren't the very same ones offering the advice. Katy watches as the bushes settle in Richard's wake, catches her own reflection in the pane of glass, the sour look on her face, especially the lips, down-turned, as if embarrassed or ashamed but at what, she wonders, filled with a desire to follow that trail off into the woods, daylight now working with her against whatever animals or men could be hiding, figuring that the same trail Richard uses to cut corners on his way through the woods might also be the trail to follow to wherever he hides his encounters and affairs, be it a tent or a second house buried in the hills. But Katy knows the danger, has seen the way Richard attacks the ones who oppose him, in business and otherwise, treated and healed with her own hands Nance's black eyes and bruises, always high on the arms or low on the back, or elsewhere on the legs where no one would see his handiwork, all the while Nance crying and making the excuses Katy learned were typical of Lysistrata's women. The flood gathers beneath Katy's skin, flushes red, pounds her feet and legs up the stairs, to Richard's room, mattress flat and sheets un-rumpled, as if not used in quite a while, to his closet where she pulls his Union revolver, damned certain she wouldn't fall victim to his fists, should they come to that, but determined to have protection against his rage, the same protection fired by Nance's right hand, though meticulously cleaned in the aftermath in Richard's military style. Katy searches for ammunition but finds none in the closet, searching every boot-bottom and bag and box but still no bullets for her protection.

The pistol settles at the bottom of a shoulder bag as Katy hurries from Richard's closet and into the spare room, on her hands and knees as she rummages along the closet floor behind the sewing kits and supplies where she has hidden the silver set by which she discovered the nature of her brother-in-law and the precious bag she uses to hold the items safe. The silver set is heavy as it too hits the bottom of the bag, Katy's shoulder dipping a bit but not by much, just noticeable should one of the women at the store stop her and ask a question, but not enough to reveal both secrets she now held in the depths of the bag, and so Katy pushes herself through the opening in the woods, soon disappears from sight of the house or Main Street, into the canopy of green and thick shade of the Kentucky hillsides, the rough undergrowth against her face with stiff leaves and prickly needles from red-berried bushes, though pushing forward through the green, following where the braches are weakest, a direction kept in her head, to find Lysistrata for a quick stop and transaction, a quick purchase of ammunition and disappears from the store and back into the woods, when she sees already several faces outside Judge Northcut's chambers, her hands now loading the Union revolver, once protected from sight, turning to look towards Judge Northcut's office but unable to see it, and pushing again forward through the bushes, eyes on the ground for Richard's trail, when she finds a well-worn path, heading due north, which she follows, one arm against the bushes, one hand in her shoulder bag.

As she struggles to find her way through the woods, now already miles from the Bowers house, already miles from Lysistrata, she recalls that morning, how Katy clutches her sheets at the sensation of falling and wakes with a cold sweat gathering along her underarms and chest, unaccustomed as she is to having a man's body beside her in the bed, let alone her husband who has just returned from a year's worth of war. She gathers herself from the shock, until she recalls the previous several days and the reasons she has slept so soundly, interrupted only by these brief episodes of vertigo. Against the freshly washed sheets, John's body smells of blood and travel

and the general stink of unwashed men, all of which Katy knows she will have to scrub away in a bath of water and lye, perhaps as soon as John rouses from his slumber, but an odor which she ignores happily on her way from the bedroom. In the main cabin, Suppina remains quietly in the corner, her head hunched into her chest and unmoving, though it is not unusual for her to sleep through much of the morning. Katy leans over the fireplace for the pot of coffee and notices that nothing hangs from the iron hooks, how the usual smells of morning cooking and brewing coffee are missing, along with Nance, who has handled the breakfast preparations since they moved into Suppina's house and long before their husbands' homecomings.

Nance does not answer after the first several knocks on the door, though Katy's fists rap the wooden panel lightly at first, afraid as she is to interrupt or wake the couple from sleep, then with more force as neither motion nor words nor the sound of creaking floorboards replace the silence with the usual morning activities. After nearly a minute of knocking she hears the slow shuffle of feet along the floor, and steps away from the threshold. As the door opens, Katy sees first the bed stripped completely of sheets, now in crumpled piles along the floor as if readied again for the laundry pile, the mattress exposed to the morning cold, with no sign of Richard or any of his belongings. Rather, Nance returns to the corner of her room and sits gingerly in her seat, then with a pair of sewing scissors patiently cuts her red corset into long, thin strips and begins to weave the strips into a thick braid, with each twist of fabric mumbling what must be verses from her Old Testament, or perhaps a hymn whose melody she knows by heart, but whose words escape her.

"We could've traded that for the money," Katy says.

Nance ties off the long braid and sets it on the dresser, her fist tight around the closed scissor blades.

"Is something wrong?" Katy asks.

Nance sets the scissors alongside the braid.

"Richard's gone," Katy continues. "I take it the proposition didn't go over too—"

"—I don't know what happened," Nance snaps, then quiets.

Katy watches her sister-in-law, the way she stares firmly at the floor as she rocks in her chair, as if trying to decide whether Nance is angry at the questioning or scared at the answer she might provide.

"Will you walk with me to the store?" Katy then asks.

"You go alone."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing."

"Then come. We need to trade my corset for something valuable. John's decided not to go back."

"Give me a moment to dress," Nance whispers.

The women do not speak as they leave the cabin, each knowing what has already happened to this town as a result of the war. In truth, if it wasn't for Reverend Barber, the war might already have torn Lysistrata apart. As it stands, the occasional shouting match or nasty exchange is all that flares of the hatred that has developed here over the past year. Not six months after the first men left to fight, when wives were forced to learn their husbands' crafts and continue their labors, already the first symptoms of division appeared among the ranks, when the general support each wife would give another, shared as they did the circumstances of being married to a soldier, no matter which side, failed, or was restricted to the holding of women's meetings such as the Union Wives club or the Confederate Wives Organization, each side held

their meetings separately in the XXX church, following Revered Barber's compromise to give Tuesday nights to the Confederate wives, and Thursday nights to the Union. After more than a year, the division is clearly set between them, not just for meetings, but the two sides of the aisle at church, or which side of the narrow roads are walked, or by the way no Confederate or Union wife would walk alone any longer in Lysistrata, for fear of the abuse she'd receive from enemy passersby.

As the Bowers women approach town, the number of women on the road increases, all of them from Union households, each rushing past the general store towards the far, more residential end of town.

"Are you coming inside?" Katy asks as she stands in the XXX threshold.

"I'm going to see what the commotion is about," Nance answers, then follows the crowd of women down the dusty street.

Nance pushes through a horde gathered at the Sally house along the edges of town, a collection of Union wives in various states of undress, or lack of the usual preparations that would have involved such a social gathering, as if each women upon hearing the news of this gathering at the Sally's drops what they are doing to rush here, knowing full well that a city devoid of men is hardly a place for the strictest modesty.

"What is happening here?" Nance asks one of the women in the crowd, a Mrs. Wills, still dressed in a night robe and slippers.

"What should've been done a long time ago," Mrs. Wills answers.

"What is that?"

"We're finally riddin' our town of Rebel sympathizers."

At the head of the mob, then, Nance watches the bravest of the women emerge from the Sally's house, arms full of stationary, or candlesticks, or copper pans, hands heavy with linens and drapes, or dresses from Mrs. Sally's closet, or toys from the children's nursery. In their eyes and voices the women unleash more than a year's worth of frustration and rage, of animals penned too tightly together who at once break free from their cages. Each woman emerges with their loot, shouts against the Rebels or for the Union, and three more women push their way through the crowd, up the lawn and into the darkness of the house, cursing the Rebels with the battle cry that they wouldn't want to be left out of the pillaging once all the good items had been claimed or destroyed. Nance looks back towards town to see if Katy has emerged from the general store, and sees the streams of women heading towards the scene. She runs towards her sister-in-law when the first window of the Sally house is smashed with a chair, then shoves her way against the push of women as the formal furniture ejects from the front room, against the cheer that rises up like a roar as the shattered glass and splintered wood sprinkles across the lawn, as the furniture breaks into pieces at their feet, paisley fabrics soiled with boot heels, the crowd bolstered by its own strength, when someone of the crowd lights a torch and without warning to those inside tosses the flame. Nance looks again for Katy and rushes in her direction, then turns to see the first rise of smoke and fire behind her, the first appearance of the feeble old men whom the war has left behind to oversee the police and fire and maintenance of the city in the absence of able-bodied men.

"What's happening?" Katy asks.

"They're going after Confederate houses," Nance answers. "We've got to go back to the house."

When the bushes thin and the path widens, Katy stumbles forward into the clearing, *if clearing is the right word for it*, she thinks, more like a gradual loosening of the forest's

stranglehold on the land, where brief shafts of sunlight pour through the branches overhead, give light to the animals beneath its protection but nothing like the comfort or warmth from the full sun in its glory. There in the midst of the overgrowth stands a cabin, two-stories high, with a chimney running up its eastern side, not a paneled exterior like the Bower's house, but a pile of connected logs, hand-sewn, as Katy recognized the uneven patterns as similar to the Bowers old house, where Suppina had lived all those years and the family crowded together before the war to cook or sing or read the Gospels, how between the logs builders like Richard and John's father used pitch to seal the house, thick black gobs of the stuff pasted in the nooks and blemishes in the wood, to minimize the cold winds in the winter and keep out the horseflies come mid-summer. Katy bangs on the shack's door with a certain amount of fear, perhaps not so much for who might be inside, nor the anger Richard would surely let loose on her should he find her having followed him to his hiding place, but somewhat comforted by the fact that she knew he would be with Judge Northcut and John by now, and failing that, how the loaded pistol in her bag will provide for alternative protection, but rather a fear from the building itself, already dilapidated and failing, as if her tiny fists could knock the structure to the ground, fragile and frail as it appeared. And yet the building withstands her knocking, and she enters, light through the building's eight barred windows, some shattered, others merely covered over in spider webs, at the bed in the corner of the front room, covers messy and mattress still warm, when Katy figures no one is there and proceeds to explore. How through the middle of the house, she notices, heavy chains are set into the planks and beams, measured in iron rings about the length of a man, to the second floor by way of a rickety stair case, how the planks smell of hay and straw, and the way gaping holes between the planks look down to the first floor, or the makeshift dividers pegged into the floor, like dressing panels in Nance's bedroom, perhaps, around four feet high and spaced, again, so that a woman or man could fit between them, shoulders turned, each connected or corresponding to a link in the massive chain running down the center of the second floor as well.

Katy returns to the first floor and rummages through a pile of Richard's papers along his desk, *perhaps I'll find clothing left by one of his harlots*, she thinks, *or among these scraps of paper some evidence from one of them as they passed notes back and forth, if the poor women could read*, something she can use to confront him, along with everything else that already rests on the surface, crusts of bread and unwashed dishes, articles of his clothing scattered around the rooms, an old mirror nailed to the wall and an old fashioned chamber set, complete with pitcher and pot, resting along side the mattress with its yellowed pillows and musty sheets. When the kitchen reveals nothing more than a cold fire and an empty kettle Katy considers for the first time that perhaps this is not Richard's hideout but rather what it seems to be from the first and foremost, a rickety old shack used by hunters and other passersby as shelter from the cold during winter, and as a free place to rest during the summer nights, or a place, she thinks, *for drunks to sleep off their hangovers*. Now the bag feels heavier on her shoulder, though she knows the silver items contribute the most weight, along with the sheer heaviness of the pistol, loaded, in her possession and imagining or recognizing the thoughts that could have passed through Nance's head when she last held it, the last time it had been loaded, a bullet for each chamber, and the uses she determined appropriate for such an arsenal to spite the husband she left behind, *a small price to pay*, Katy figures, for escaping a life with Richard and everything that went along with that, thanking God, of course, that no children were ever involved. Now in Katy's hands, or her bag, unused this time around, though ready, the pistol is warm against her skin. Her eyes skirt across a letter, script handwriting from a familiar hand.

Lysistrata July 16th
Dearest Husband,

I take pen in hand to let you know that we are all well and hope this will find you all the same at home Richard I am getting tired of the war and if it keeps up much longer you will see me coming down south to drag you home myself Lysistrata is a beautiful place now as in the woods and on the shaded hills we have plenty to eat such as it is I hardly know what to write about as there is nothing new around here today is sunny and warm but it is the same as all days out here when I feel the sun and remember the strength in your arms and the feel of your lips our love like a summer day strong and warming and bright in town the marching bands play the same tunes as when you all marched it is very warm here now and we all keep in the shade Richard, the same trees we once sat under, more, my loving husband, Katy caught a large grey squrril the other day and she was playing with him when the squrril bit her on the finger and she got mad and killed him and had him cooked for supper the 4th of July passed here just the same as any other day we get up in the morning at sunrise and go to bed at 9 o clock at night so you see we keep good hours and receive the Louisville paper once in a while and we read it over and over advertisements and everything else write soon from your affectionate Wife,

Along the edges of the desk, inside the drawers and even in stacks along the floor beside her chair, Katy shuffles several yellowed posters looking through the documents for further word from Nance's hand, knowing that all that was missing from the letter was Nance's usual way of ending letters with a quote form the scriptures, though perhaps knowing too that this was a habit developed long after the war. When no additional letters turn up at the desk, Katy makes a search of the cabin, moving around to be sure she's missed nothing, already thinking of her revenge, perhaps, or the excuse she'll give to the neighbors as to why she delayed in the funeral preparations for such a long time and returns with stacks of old slave posters to show for it, all for the story to back up her claim, embarrassment somewhat, which reminds her of the incident with Richard in the kitchen and that without any recourse but to expose him for what he is, not in any way that would keep John from harm, how powerless she has felt, all these years, down to her bones and deeper like remorse settling in the marrow or something worse that follows when justice escapes those who deserve it, and wicked men are permitted to pass themselves as righteous. Katy grabs at the gun when she sees the cluster of bushes at the far northern base of the cabin, conspicuous only since all other brushes had been cleared away from the dwelling, either by nature or by the hands of men, in this case the arrangement and lack of any similar growth at the foundation of the cabin pulls Katy closer, her right hand now warm and wet against the pistol as the left clears away shrubs and bushes to reveal a door, prickers now skewering her wrist, hand and forehead, tiny drops of his blood beginning to smear her pale white flesh. But Katy does not stop rooting the plants until she clears away the door, now with both of her hands, its gray wood, covered in patches with dull green moss, the way tiny spores release into the air, tickle her sinuses, but she catches the sneeze by gulping breaths and feeling the rush of

redemption, or gathering closer to her goal. The door gives way, the handle loose from rotten wood and the joints having gone bad, both age and weather the culprits, mostly, but also from pill-worms and potato bugs scattering in the faint light, burrowing deeper into the ground, some frozen in their place or racing for other foliage for cover, how the spiders crawl with precise steps, measuring prey. Katy tosses away the refuse and climbs through the cobwebs into the cramped space, her first swipes nab nothing, handfuls of silky web on her wrists and fingers, the room, once she steps inside, a fruit cellar like the old Bowers house used to have, no more than a hole dug into the ground, much like a grave, where the stable and constant temperature of the earth make it possible to store fruits and canned goods without fear of freezing in the winter or rotting in the hot summer months, though this cutaway seemed to Katy less like a pantry and more like a hiding place for such letters. But no letters remain to be found, only fruits and dried meats, cans and canning equipment litter the shelves of the fruit cellar, shelves being no more than steps cut into the earth, or planks of wood hammered into the dirt walls.

Katy returns to the desk and pulls through the drawers again, stopping only at a small leather book, which dry pages Katy thumbs through quickly, the paper clean and new, no lost item or some relic from a former tenant or squatter, but something here for a purpose and left open to the light, not hidden away. *Let's see what kind of man this Richard is,* she thinks, *by the very word she place sin his journal, by the way his heart spills when it feels unwatched and unfettered, what else would such a book be good for, with its carefully oiled cover and spine, and its lack of dust or water-stains, than to reveal something of the man from his own hand, in no way hidden by the fictions that may sprout otherwise from his hands or mouth or mannerisms. Katy leans against the chair, one hand still tracing the pistol, Richard's name engraved in the side, as she pages through the journal*. She reads the first page and curls her toes; the letters stand bold in neat, clear handwriting:

CONTAINED HEREIN
ARE
THE MEMOIRS
OF
JOHN MARSHAL ALLEY

Though the men in Lysistrata never mention the war in the presence of women, *their way of shielding the weaker sex,* she thinks, from the horrors of war, despite the horrors they leave behind while fighting war, and those they bring or do not bring home with them in the aftermath, perhaps not brutal stories or bloody narratives, but emotional anxieties and terror so internalized that they change the men who harbor them, not like weight gained or the way experience gives a man a certain confidence in his words and actions, but unalterably changed, at the level of God's soul at rest in their hearts, something permanent and awful, as images and memories and dreams, most especially the dreams, where inspiration usually strikes men of conscience, now replaced with screaming and sweat-filled nights, a clutching of sheets and sweat pouring, yet despite all this Katy does not recognize the name John Marshall Alley. She would have heard the name or seen it in the letters coming to the Bowers house, addressed from all parts, correspondence Richard carefully kept with his former soldiering partners. *Though perhaps,* she thinks, *this is one of the men killed with him in battle, and Richard is keeping the journal as a remembrance of him*. So Katy reads further into the journal, noting the cities and the names of generals, famous to everyone and not just the men who fought on the campaigns beneath them, as wives find many

ways to hear such stories, no matter how hard their husbands try to hide them, where she notices several details from the stories she has heard from her brother-in-law and elsewhere:

> After drilling about two months, we were provided with guns, knapsacks, canteens, and haversacks, and were ordered to Louisville, KY., which was threatened by the rebels under Gen. Bragg. We ran over the Jeffersonville railroad, crossed the Ohio on a pontoon or floating bridge, and went into camp in the suburbs of Louisville. We were assigned to the 99th regiment of Indiana Volunteers; our company was B.
>
> After scaring Gen. Bragg away from Louisville, encountering the coldest weather I ever say in the month of October, and enduring a scourge of the mumps, we were ordered down the river to Memphis; Nov. 8, 1862. While passing the mouth of the Wabash River which divides Indiana from Illinois, it was remarked that we would never all see Indiana again.

Namely how Richard's first assignment was also in Louisville, though this was hardly uncommon for the men in the surrounding states, including Indiana, Ohio, even Illinois and from as far north as Pennsylvania rushed down for the war to defend Kentucky, as the rebels saw our state as the gateway to the north, not just by land, but also strategically, to own much of the Ohio and thus access to the Mississippi, so perhaps Richard met this man Alley when their forces converged to fight in Kentucky. *The Indian Volunteers looks familiar too,* she thinks, perhaps certain that this is the very same regiment that Richard was assigned to support during his very first campaign in defense of the homeland, as he liked to say to whomever was listening, though never mentioned which company he'd been assigned to, as the journal states company B. *I'll have to have more than that*, Katy thinks, *if I'm to go to the judge's chambers with some kind of evidence*, who would probably say himself that Richard's story was bolstered and confirmed by the journal, rather than rebuked, as he even had the details of the weather correct, how Alley mentioned that autumn to be one of the coldest he could remember, which is the way Richard remembers it as well. *What I'm going to need is something definite,* she thinks, *something in this journal to embarrass him into telling the truth, or better, make his admitting the truth irrelevant, once it's clear and distinct in the light of day*.

> We were ordered about four miles to the rear of Vicksburg to prevent Gen. Johnston from attacking the siegers from that quarter. We remained here till the evening of July 4, and suddenly the dull roaring of cannon at Vicksburg ceased and soon we received word that the city had surrendered. Grant was summoned to Washington, and Sherman took the army and went after Johnston. We had a spat with them at Big Black River, and then followed on to Jackson, the capital of Mississippi. We had quite a siege to get into the city, but we entered it on the 16th of July, 1863. After destroying some railroad, we took a look at Jackson, took a swim in the clear waters of the Pearl, and returned to Big Black River where we went into camp.

More cities and names that seem familiar to Katy, the siege at Vicksburg something that all the women in Lysistrata knew about, which husbands or lovers were present, who died during the attacks or who perished when supplies had been cut-off and the rations depleted, with the women of town even organizing a food and clothing drive, those with allegiances to the Confederates, such as Katy, while the wives of the Union soldiers gloated of the impending, and ultimate, victory there. Still nothing to pin on Richard, Grant and Sherman and Johnson all part of his repertoire, his stories, even the details about the railroads, where Richard is said to have done considerable damage to the enemy forces. *Still*, she thinks, *what are the odds that any two soldiers could have such a close perception of the war? One in a hundred? Perhaps less, perhaps more*? Katy crouches low towards the desk and cradles the book in her lap, leaning against the journal with eyes and ears intent on every rustle of branch from beyond the window or creek of the old cabin's planks, tracing the pages with her fingers, line by line, looking for capital letters, names and places, mostly, or any details before she will have to return home and endure Richard again, no matter what will happen at the judge's chamber.

And then:

> After a short delay we were put aboard the big steamer Glassgow, and started up the river. The crew was not friendly to our cause and I believe they would have sent us to eternity if they could have done it without going with us. The boat was loaded from hull to hurricane deck and from bow to stern with men, horses, mules, cannon, caisons, ammunition, hay bales, and what not. A fire would have meant the destruction of everybody and everything on board. Our officers watched the crew closely, and placed guards in every part of the vessel. We arrived at Memphis after dark, Oct. 9, and slept on the rocky wharf. On the 11th, we started on a long march of 400 miles for Chattanooga. Rosencrans' army was well nigh surrounded in Chattanooga, and were suffering, so we lost not time on this march. We passed some of our old camping places, and near the place where we lost so many many the winter before. On the 3rd of November we were joined by five or six men who had been hiding away for months to avoid being conscripted into the rebel army. On the morning of November 5th, we came to a poor desolate woman who implored our protection. Her husband had been killed because he wouldn't join the rebel army; her mother had been shot for expressing her union sentiments, and she had only saved herself by instant flight, followed by a shower of rebel bullets. She was put in our ambulance and taken to Decherd, within our lines.

Katy snaps the journal closed and tucks it into the bag, again now over her shoulder, beside the Union pistol, which is now in doubt as to whether it was even a Union pistol and not some souvenir Richard picked up after or during or prior to the war, perhaps another trinket he stole or plundered somewhere along the way, an item robbed from some poor soul who wanted nothing more from war than to return home unscathed, only to find his back to be his weakest point, and when it was turned, to have Richard leap from the darkness. Katy slams the door to the cabin so hard it breaks into three pieces, disassembles as the pieces crash onto the abandoned

earth below. Katy's heart pounds in her chest as it has never done before, her blood warm to the point of boiling, not so much anger, as she figures on her own emotions, recalls the moment, the feel of a noose and thinking that perhaps this is the purpose for her reversal, now running back through the trees and bushes, aimed towards Lysistrata, prickers and pointy braches against her skin, the bag clutched to her breast with tight fists and all the while her legs churning, not so much anger as the anticipation to see Richard's fall from grace, the decidedly unchristian pleasure she imagines she will feel when she delivers the news, the onlookers, most of all the vindication across John's own face like a smile, broad and wide and knowing what his Union brother had been and was and is, a charlatan. More than even the running or the anticipation, Katy wonders that the discovery does not feel as an epiphany ought to feel, something out of the blue and unexpected, like the gift of grace from God's own hand, like a miracle or any other breaking of the laws of nature, but rather ordinary and un-epiphany-like, much rather the relief of knowing she finally has evidence, solid, tangible proof to bolster her gut reaction to the man who returned from the so-called war in his uniform, with his borrowed stories and falsified medals, his bragging and pompousness and arrogance, the condescending manner he treated John and by extension, Katy, and surmises that this could be the exact opposite of an epiphany, the opposite of a miracle too, whatever name it might conjure or contain, and it would be fine by her account, if only to know that she had Richard Bowers for all he was worth, which wasn't much, and only a short distance between her, the salvation of the truth, and Judge Northcut's office door.

What would old Suppina say, Katy thinks, *to know that all her ornery talk and bluster and the like concerning the women of our generation, the wives of her precious sons had actually come true, that the end of Richard would come at the hands of a woman, though Suppina herself should have been least surprised, bragging as she did about the women in her family and their dominance over the men, how they coddled the men for the child each provided, then, when they fulfilled that obligation, regarded these same fathers and patriarchs no more than any other item in the house, ripe for throwing away or burning when its utility waned and it began to clutter the space, began to sore the eyes just with its presence, until its very uselessness was the only redeemable quality they had, spent shells of men gathering like dust in the corner, centuries worth, in fact, then handily swept from the cabin with a stiff broom, Suppina's cleansing of the rubbish from the family tree. What would she think of the bastard on her doorstep*, she thinks, *unfortunate as she may be, perhaps even pitiable, but nonetheless the product of an unholy union, something performed in the darkest stillest night, away from the eyes of decent women and men, an act intended to be hidden away and thus held in secret, that child's father no better than the girl herself, though on her shoulders the burden will be borne, that much we women know, a bastard daughter who more than likely will live in my house, regardless of the circumstance and then what of that often-sought-after family name, oh Suppina, now the house of a bastard father and daughter, though by different meanings, illegitimate to the last, and of a slave mother no less, enough to curdle the old woman's throat should she watch what has happened with her sons, or the way we now deal with the sons she so preciously sent out into the world.*

What of the strength of women, she thinks, *among the deeds of men, no matter how sloppily they might handle them, nor with the brute force of their bodies to support them, reliance on strength and the battering of heads to solve their differences, or worse the exchange of gunfire, when a woman's lot, as it was for Suppina and the whole line of women she bragged on, to rely more on our wits and minds, more on the skills by which survival is based, no less physically able to defend ourselves, but for the same exercise and training as men in battle, with*

relative few other disadvantages that couldn't otherwise be accommodated, with the end result that our histories and families must now rely on precisely the order of things, that a woman must rummage through the affairs of men, quite literally the dalliances and trysts that they're wont to have, which in turn produce these hoards of unwanted bastards, children with no more lineage or heritage than the nameless beds or mattresses or brothels that spawned them, must rummage through these shattered, broken lives, destroyed before their births, destroyed on account of their births, that a woman must set the history correct, must take charge of the family under her care, with little or no regard for the previous generations, as much as is possible to forget such things, and create something of a future for the family, in whatever form that might take. Thus a woman's responsibility, she thinks, *is neither to the men she had married or the mothers who birthed them, not to the lines of women and men in the past, but only to what children she might be entrusted with for the future, her duty to set for them a correct path, with the highest possible advantages, and at the cost of all else, render the present day to justice, as best as humanly possible, so that the next generation of family, in whatever form they might come, if ever, might have a level field upon which to sow and plant and reap.*

CHAPTER SIX

Men will have their histories, overblown and bloated with inaccuracies, slanted and tilted towards the deeds and errors of men, which is, of course, the reason why John Bowers cannot tell that girl Penelope the entire story of his family, but the version he has heard from others, friends of his father, namely, to the point that, no matter how much he and Richard might try to focus on the actions of the men in their family's history, wars and conquests and explorations being the proof of the virility of the Bowers line—as all men are wont to explain things, in terms of other men and the way they had learned to do so, by hearing similar stories about their own father, before he died, from the men in Lysistrata, as they described their lineage and association with famous men in connection with their family's heritage—that the honest truth of the Bowers family tree was that for as far back as to its very beginnings, a succession of four women dominated the family, three of whom gave birth to a single daughter, an heiress to the family name, though sometimes lost or abandoned through marriage, a name always returned to and reclaimed, not always under the best or most ideal circumstances, in a way broken only by Suppina and her sons, all totaled, four women named Bowers who carried their own weight through the generations, a heritage which this poor girl Penelope, for better or worse, has just entered into, though not of her own accord, but in mere association with the Bowers family and the unlucky chance to have been born at the end of such a line, or what appears to be the God-awful end.

Men will have their histories, but we women will speak to a plainer truth about the succession of things, stories we tell our children to offset the inaccuracies they hear from their fathers, in the case of the Bowers family, how even more than the four matriarchs themselves, though, the lineage hinged on the presence of a single medallion which passed from mother to daughter, a silver thaler coin stolen by Agape Bowers, the first woman in the ancestral line, stolen from her husband and fashioned into a necklace, with a piercing in the coin's metal and a gold chain strung through, a possession each woman kept close to her heart and handed over to her daughter only at death, until the end of the line when it was stolen away, and thus removed, though only for a while, from the women's shoulders. The coin itself, even now at the end, though severely diminished by generations of rubbing and wear and other corrosions, still bears the delicate inscription of Saint Joachim, the grandfather of the Lord, father of the Blessed Mother, in a carving that shows the holy grandfather carrying a lamb to an altar, where a priest rejects the gift, while at Saint Joachim's feet, there rests a bushel basket filled with doves, and a man's walking staff which rests along the ground. Perhaps the grimace on the good saint's face lends portent to the histories that will unfold around the medallion, or perhaps the weight of the lamb in his arms is too much a burden for a single man to carry, or perhaps Saint Joachim grits his teeth beneath a pair of pressed, frowning lips, to know what sacrifices parents and grandparents make for their children, only to realize that their own histories will reflect backwards upon the lines and lineages that preceded them, with very little hope to escape their shadows.

Ladies of the jury, through the window we see our wretched child, you Penelope, your red eyes at the Judge's words, the gentle trace of saline, rivulets, streaked dusty against your soft features, though of mixed blood. You must learn quick the brand of justice in this world of men! How did you come to find such a city as Lysistrata and why? How such a father as one of these two men? The case can be made for either, each for true fatherhood, so at the least your

questions will be answered, though the answer in either case will seem less than desirable. In John Bowers you will find a gentle hand, not prone to shouting or violence, but also a father of no accord, a wash-ed up man though still in the years of his prime, broken by war and without the sense to strengthen himself, a father who fought against your very freedom, rebelled against his own country and family, and of what account could such a father be for a tall, slender girl like you? In Richard Bowers, you will find a sterner hand in terms of justice and obedience, now a widower and likely in need of feminine care, the charms a young girl might bring to the house, the light and airy ways about them, to console this hero from the war, this stout, upright gentleman, of considerable wealth—no small thing for a girl to consider in a father—though with his stern hand and his mother's strictness you will also have a motherless home, and thus a father with wandering eyes, and hands, and little guarantee that you alone will be the child to carry on the Bowers house and name, eager will he be to foster new children of his own legitimacy!

To our eyes your life has been the gathering of branches for a great fire, the slow, steady collection of twigs and sticks, of logs and fuel from such a long distance as Alabama, jewel of the South, Dothan, the city of your birth, each step under the weight of your bundles until the sticks and firewood are set now before the Judge. Beware how you stack these pieces at the feet of men, who care nothing for the struggle which has brought you here, the earnest desire to warm your hands at a hearth of your own, to warm your body against a strong father's love, to feel his gentle arms around you, protecting you from the harms you have surely seen on your journeys, the loss of your mother not the least of them. Beware that the kindling pile have a solid foundation, the largest logs at the base, arranged in a square, the way log cabins had been built by our ancestors, or leaning against one another as the natives built their tee-pees, only then placing the smaller sticks and twigs, pinecones dipped in wax for kindling, the handfuls of dried leaves to catch the spark, set deep inside the sturdy stacks of solid, dried, parched wood, that they might catch.

Sing of Dr. Thomas Walker who carried that coin—when it was still a coin and not this talisman—along with entire bags full of others, some identical to it and others from every corner of Europe that stamped its own money, carried that thaler and its scowling saint all the way from Albemarle County, Virginia to the Cumberland Gap, as the Bowers men, without fail, would have explained, on his journey through the western wilderness, set out in the late winter of 1750, when he had been married for nearly ten full years, left his wife and children for this expedition, a family that would eventually total a full dozen children. Rain hampered the opening days of the journey, an expedition to explore the unknown lands beyond the mountains, in the spirit of the hearty ancestors who founded the land, or so they thought at the time, despite the fact that men and women had thrived there for centuries, as evidenced by the trails blazed through the trees or the settlements where Walker and men like him often traded with the natives, and men of European stock, who abandoned home and children and the civilized world for trails ridden by horseback and the thick rain-pour of March weather, and the drudging of shallow streams and rivers for perch, mullets, and carp, all the while pushing westward, visiting with settlers along the way, trading goods for services and goods for goods, corn of the highest value, as meals for the horses, clay jars of whiskey for the riders. Because of his experience, they say, Thomas Walker led negotiations for all purchases, as well for the lodging and meals they found from pioneers along the way, who'd set farm houses and posts as safe-haven for journeymen or the occasional trappers who scoured the earth for game, or who, when their nerve was high or their

prospects low, hunted the deer, elk, or buffalo for their meat and skins, for trading with those native tribes who did not migrate elsewhere to warmer climates.

Thomas Walker stood more than six feet tall with the features of an honest man, cut chin and jaw, now covered with a thick reddish beard, a straight nose and cheekbones, both pink in the cold winter air, a set of vigilant ears, useful for survival and a pair of bluish eyes that impressed the women in Virginia to the point that if he weren't married, they say, in their refined opinions, he soon ought to be, and thus they did not blink when told of his twelve children, but rather wondered as to the qualities of a wife who would settle for such a meager total. In addition to his public figure, the posture and gait of a respectable man in Albemarle, Thomas's body was likewise built for its secondary purpose, the taming of the western wilderness, having already completed an expedition through Tennessee seven years earlier, as evidenced by his large shoulders and solid forearms, a broad chest, and the remarkable thickness of his thighs and calves, a man who seemed closer to a god than to any mortal born of women, but a man much rather supposed to have emerged whole from the mountains themselves, chiseled away at his own body until free from the stones, then lumbered to earth to take a wife and settle the countryside for entire generations of Walker children, each staking claim to their father's greatness. They say that the smile on his face, an attribute of good humor as it seemed to most, particularly the women, actually reflected the man's character, back when, more than property or wealth, a man was defined by his fortitude and principles, that smile projected outwards a glimpse of his inner strength, both fire and spirit, a way for others to know the man at first glance, to gauge his worth and merit and honor, an expression of the man's nobility, at such a time when both nobility itself, as well as a man's possibility for holding such things, were still relevant and alive.

Walker saw the settlement as his men pushed through the woods of Kentucky, figured it empty or abandoned or worse when through the trees they pushed and had a closer look upon the encampment, much more like a city, built along the side of a good-sized river, with a fence wrapped around their land, caught halfway between winter and spring, and gates set up in measures, facing north, south, east, and west, in the shape of a square, equal on all sides and dug into the soft earth with posts, and three rails running parallel to the ground. Within the fence, the streets formed a grid, each angle squared against the next, with perfect intersections of dirt, evenly spaced, and a center square which seemed to be the center of the town's activity, with its largest buildings, no more than cabins and barns, but centralized, and therefore the most important. The gates of the fence sat open, whatever wind blew through the trees and plains, the crops would be planted all along the pains and the high fruit trees that would feed their roots deep into the soil and drank from the wide, majestic river, that Walker concluded the inhabitants gone, dead or killed or wiped away by disease, or famine, or out preparing for crops or chasing livestock, he had seen most about everything as relates to the ways settlements like these had perished, but saw no signs of trade from the outside world, nothing to indicate they spoke with their fellow men and women, only the crude woodworking of a self-sufficient clan, separate from the technologies of the world, the finer crafts of carpentry and metallurgy and animal husbandry. With caution Walker dismounted his horse and walked slowly towards the gate, his eyes wide as a hunter's might be on the hunt, or that strange moment when he feels he might have become the hunted, though agreeable in no way to such a bargain.

Thus, when Dr. Walker approached a settlement at the upper- and western-shores of the New River, where the waters were four-hundred feet across, the man appeared as a vision from some distant world, to the inhabitants of the religious Kentucky village, though the name

Kentucky was not yet in common use, an enchanting vision to the young Agape Bowers in particular, a young woman thirteen years old, who had sneaked from her midwifery post in the stables to see for herself this captain riding his team across the river, shirking her duties to the Order so as to witness how he pulled both horses and men through to land, saved the animals from trouble or the men from their own foolhardiness, men and beasts otherwise doomed in the waters but for some act of God or other powerful being, a halo of good-will across the man's brow and forehead which guided him safely across and seemed spectacular to her young, impressionable eyes. Once on land, the exhibition team followed closely behind Dr. Walker as he approached the village mill, a tight line of beasts and men who eyed the girl as they passed young Agape at the stables, men hungry from their travels, their homesickness offset only by the excitement at the new lands they encountered daily, the prospect of riches that awaited their successful return, men whose shadows bent low and humbly on the ground beneath the mill, the tallest structure visible on the land for miles, other than those wrought by God himself, trees and mountains, crops of rocks, or the dismal wintry sky above. At the sight of such a convoy, though, most of the villagers fled the mill for hiding places or safer ground, until the threat passed, all but Agape, who emerged from the stables, her hands still moist with birth, a slender girl with straight brunette hair that dangled along her back all the way to her waist.

"Young woman," Thomas Walker said to the girl, having dismounted. "Tell me where the men of this settlement might be found. There will be a shiny coin in it for you."

"Most of my brothers have stopped their work to join in prayer," she said. Agape stared at the bag of monies from the man's pack. "Others have fled at the sight of your convoy. My father will be retuning shortly with the men."

"And how many brothers do you have," Walker laughed. "That they should inhabit such a large settlement?"

"We are all brothers here," Agape said. Her cheeks filled with crimson as she spoke. "Brothers of the Euphrates."

"I have heard of your order," Dr. Walkers said, now also smiling at the girl.

"We are also called Duncards."

"That is the name I have heard used for your people." Dr. Walker opened the moneybag and sorted through the coins.

"Here you are," he said, handing a gold coin to the girl.

"What of that silver piece?" Agape asked, pointing her slender finger towards the thaler.

"Gold is more valuable," he answered and closed the pouch.

At the sound of words, then, dozens of men appeared on the land, as if materializing from the air itself, gaunt figures with straggly beards on their faces of all colors and lengths, some curly and other straight, but all unkempt, with unruly hairs in every direction and mouths overgrown by thick covering. Each man wore plain clothes, the color of wool that has not been treated or dyed in any way, the color of sheep and lambs who work under the watch of their shepherd, each man with a straw hat on his head to protect against the elements and a pair of thick moccasins, the kind the natives made from the hides of small animals, strung together with sinews, then decorated with colorful beads Soon the tired faces of the women of the Order appeared as well, far less in number, their clothes the same color as the men; they wore skirts rather than trousers, flowing material that scraped the earth as they walked, while each of their hairstyles resembled that of Agape, who stood motionless in front of Dr. Walker, flat and straight and long, with the older women in the community having tied their own long strands into a bun at the crowns of their heads, a woman's pride being what it was, according to the Holy Word,

that is, a woman's hair ought to remain uncut along with her chastity. Then down a clearing Agape's father rode on a mule, Elijah, and stopped between his daughter and the strange man speaking with her. Elijah Bowers was a short, stocky man, one of the only such bodies in the entire settlement, but with piercing eyes and a harsh, if not violent, look about him, hands covered in grime, sweat stains around his armpits, neck, waist, and back, smelling of toil.

"Do you plan to marry this girl, stranger?" Elijah said to Dr. Walker.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Then stand away," Elijah said. "Only a husband may stand so close to a woman in public."

"All apologies," Thomas said. "I was unaware of the custom."

The crowd dispersed as Elijah extended his hand to the stranger, a gesture which received no small attention from the crowd, as they seemed poised to strike against the strangers, should Elijah have but waved his hand differently, or shouted at them to charge, and yet their amazement did not subside when Elijah led the convoy to his own cabin, just off the dirt square that served as the center of the community, passed a small, empty fountain whose intent was to serve the settlement at its base with waters pulled up from the water table, but dry from winter and disuse, as those of the Duncards found it easier to draw their waters straight from the river, then past the fountain to the community church and meeting hall framing two sides, and two cabins framing the other. Dr. Walker walked along side the stocky man, assuming him to be the leader of the Duncards, with Agape trailing behind, her eyes not once leaving the long coat-tails on the stranger's jacket, turning the gold coin over in her palms until the sweaty metal felt as if it had been pulled from a smoldering fire, though her mind recalled the brilliant gleam of silver from the man's moneybag and mapped ways for her young hands to find her way back into the man's purse and snatch the treasure, at a distance far enough that she could not reach the stranger and his companions, though close enough to hear what the men spoke of as they approached the house, introductions of sorts and the sharing of general information about the land, how Thomas Walker and his party left from Virginia not ten days prior, remarking on the game available for their meals, as well as the fish and willingness of others along the route to trade for food, or offer meals to the travelers without so much as asking for a payment of any kind. When the party arrived at the cabin, Elijah turned for his daughter, and waited for her to approach the threshold before entering himself.

"Ready the supper meal," Elijah said to her. "And be sure there is enough for each of the men."

"Yes, father," Agape answered, beaming, then disappeared into the house.

"We do not have beds to offer you," Elijah said. "We do not believe in them, as soft resting places make for a devil's playground. As Brothers of the Euphrates we abstain from physical pleasure, but for procreation and the continuation of our social ways."

"My men and I will sleep with the animals," Dr. Walker answered. "And will abide by your customs for the length of our stay."

We have never learned what happened to Elijah's wife, it is worth noting, Agape's mother, as the name seems to be destined for silence, a kind of veil across her face, the forgetting and concealment that comes when daughters are born and their mothers are never to be found, leaving the girl's care only to her father, which means with little regard for the truth of histories as we've begun to lay forth here, but rather, a filling of the girl's head with the expectations of men, worse, the breeding of a marriageable woman without the guidance of those who have been married, to learn from their experiences, a condition which we understand plagued the Duncards

and their kinds, similar sects being scattered all along the hillsides. Some say the Duncards held their wives in common, which would attest for such a lack of lineage, with fathers dwelling in their homes while the children and the mothers passed between the men as if common property, no more attached to a husband than a man is attached to his livestock, items he would sell should the buyer offer the right price, or the need for other goods should become so dire that he's willing to part company at a reduced rate, but in any case a system where the men must keep track of their children, though never fully knowing which belongs to whom, a state which fosters the feeling of community, they argue, since fathers would raise every child in the community as if it were his own, knowing very well that he might be feeding a child under his own roof that belonged by nature to his neighbor, and the likewise chance of his own flesh and blood sleeping under foreign roofs. Of course, when the first generation of daughters has been born, and grown into marriageable age, the awkwardness of the situation becomes clear and the men of the settlement are left with little alternative but to tender their daughters to travelers, the ones they could, the rest resigned to keep among themselves, incest no deterrent in the frustration of month-long celibacies, or to the men from distant villages, as not knowing which man is the father of which daughter, the chance for incest increases, and despite what the Bible might say of such things happening in the past, no matter the circumstance, incest was, even then, a kind of transgression reserved for the worst kind of sinners, and thus something the leader of the community, Elijah Bowers, avoided and measured against with the diligence and meticulousness of a philosopher king.

Thus, when the men had washed and gathered around the table, Agape was left alone to feed them, although other women in the community proceeded to cook the various portions of the meal and deliver them to Elijah's door, as reverence for his status, Dr. Walker believed, these same women, few in number as they were, did not remain for the serving of the meal, which Agape handled with great difficulty, though the hunger and appreciation of the travelers and her own father's patient way with his daughter, despite his outwardly, physical nastiness, allowed Agape to deliver the food until every man at the table was fed and satisfied. In fact the women moved from house to house in an all but nameless fashion, cooking and preparing meals for the men in their kitchens, moving to the next husband or brother when the previous meal had been completed, a nomadic wandering that occurred nightly, as meals taken during the daytime consisted of far less complicated fare, and the nightly swapping of cooks then led easily into the nightly trade of wives from house to house, sleeping mat to sleeping mat, under the cover and concealment of night, when the identity of both brother and sister, father and daughter, mother and son might be somewhat concealed and the business of perpetuating the Order unfolded, ended, rested for the brief span of darkness which night allowed, then resumed the following day in a separate cabin, the same routines and obligations and itinerancy, albeit to occur in a different, if not familiar, place. The meal itself consisted of breads and vegetables, with small portions of venison and roasted game, though the Duncards elsewhere had been restricted from eating flesh. Elijah as a host explained these situations to his guests, how their supply of grain and vegetables could not sustain the group, hence the necessity for meat, then concerning the sharing of wives and the prescription of foods, as if the two were equal in their significance, to the travelers' amazement, often referring to passages in the Bible, of Abraham's wives, of the indiscretions of the forefathers, of King David and his lust for Bethsabee, the lesson being that God, from such sin and terrible lust, could bring about such goodness, in this case the child Solomon, from even the most repugnant, base actions.

"Amen," the men said.

At the conclusion of the meal, Agape led Dr. Walker and his men to the various stables where she worked as a midwife for the animals, as her knack at delivering the offspring alive surpassed both the abilities of any of the other women in the Order to perform the same feats as well as surpassed her own proclivities towards any other means of employment within the community. Agape led each of the men to their stalls, huddled the animals together in a single space, then cleared away the dirty floors and tossing fresh hay to the ground for their packs, each toss of the golden straw followed by an apologetic arrangement along the floor, as if embarrassed for the condition of the offerings, an admission that these men, despite their role as travelers and therefore rough men of the wilderness, had nevertheless been accustomed to finer arrangements, or in any case, arrangements that did not smell of animal shelters or the reek of soiled hay. Man by man the travelers then took to their stalls, turned down their rough beds and scattered their packs as protection both from the cold and from the elements of their rooms, while Agape tethered the men's horses to the hitching pole at the end of the row of stalls, at last coming to the final boarding room, the barn itself, half-emptied of its store of straw, already, where she struggled to open the door, but then finally showed Thomas Walker to his quarters. The girl trembled slightly as the man brushed past her body on his way into the barn, the hard muscles of his shoulders and chest clear and distinct beneath his clothing and jacket, pushed the girl aside as if branches along the wooded paths of Kentucky, no more aware of her weight or size or stature than of the other trees he had passed along the way, carved his initials into, and yet when their bodies touched, shoulders mostly, some arm or elbow in contact with the other, Thomas Walker relented for a moment, slowed his steady, march forward, a determination which occupied every step he made, paused this very same purpose and fortitude and turned towards the girl, extended his hand to keep her from stumbling.

"Excuse me,' he said. "I didn't mean to trample you."

"You didn't," the girl answered.

"A man could find many comforts," he said. "Living among so many wives."

"Our teachers tell us not to seek pleasure, as if there were nothing more. That is why we do not prepare meals as flavorful as we could for our Brothers, or why husbands do not take their wives to soft beds."

"Do you believe that?" Walker asked, moved closer to the girl on the bench.

"I believe in the good of the Order."

"What you know of the world, at such a tender age!"

"I know only that men shall be happy in the afterlife," Agape answered. "That sins in this world shall be punished in the next, before we can enter the kingdom."

"You are God-fearing then," Dr. Walker said. "A good quality for a wife."

Agape blushed at the Doctor's words, at the mention of the word and that he had continued on the line of husbandry and the rest, a subject not unfamiliar to the girl if not for the occupation that filled her days, the cause and effect which as a result produced the animals under her care, acts she had witnessed numerous times in the stables and barn stalls and grazing fields, the collision of bodies in quick, furious encounters, the separation of their parts then, as if relieved, the way nature provided for its own regeneration in these acts which though tempting, in some way seductive, if only for the watching of them, occurred in the most natural, least exotic settings, the dirt of the earth, the nip in the springtime air, or the lush fields of grass where the animals would lay their bodies, where the females emerged pregnant and the males trotted off for other distractions. Agape turned to the stranger, thought to change the conversation to more appropriate terms, though her tongue failed. Thomas Walker moved about the barn, preparing

his bed, did not know that in addition to denying the flesh, the Duncards refrained also from baptizing their members, a quality which would have alarmed the devout Christian from the eastern coast, whose own twelve children had been baptized in accordance with decent laws, as an un-baptized child who died before receiving rites was doomed to purgatory, if lucky, but doomed nonetheless on account of the original sin which stained their soul, though young and fresh and inexperienced, and capable of no action for its own merit or detraction, but stained nevertheless and doomed when sanctity and the cleansing of waters had not been applied to the infant's head and body. Thomas Walker approached the girl, resting his hands on her shoulders, straightening his back to its fullest height over Agape, her slender body a mere shadow against the man's size.

"You resemble one of the daughters I left at home."

"Thank you."

"You see," he said. "There are some pleasures which a wife is entitled to enjoy, even if she does not share stories of her pleasures among those with whom she lives."

Agape's long skirt gave way easily in the night, followed by her blouse, the warmth of Walker's hands against her speechless body moving in tandem with his words as they echoed in her head, though she did not resist, but rather awkwardly turned to lean against the bales of hay, as she had seen her animals do countless times, hindquarters exposed, only to be spun around by Walker's hands, strong and firm, then the arch in her back against the floor, the weight of his body now squarely on her stomach and chest, arms pinned at the wrists over her head, as if with one hand the man restrained her, nothing of the wonder of the grazing fields nor even the curiosity of watching the horses with their mates, or the goats who climbed each other while corralled along the roads, hoofs on backs, nothing of the mystery of the act, nor pleasure nor pain, but entirely human, eyelash to eyelash, breath overlapping breath, nor even relief when it had ended, but a sudden panic in her chest and thighs, the image of her father now hovering over her in the place of Dr. Walker, his patience dwindled away only to reveal the anger and fury pent up in his features, the shortness of breath that filled her lungs insufficiently to quell the fear of the creature, perhaps only the sensation of one, slowly tumbling in her belly, a thought for the delivery of children and the reaction of her father's hand, of the Brothers who watched her daily and kept her to her routines, of the disgrace of the women as they reprimanded both Agape and the child in her belly, though perhaps now only seconds old, perhaps a few minutes, as the course of nature presented itself to a girl of that age, that every insemination led to a birth, now tears welled in her eyes as Thomas Walker reclined on his jacket and blanket, his pack used as a pillow beneath his head. Agape wiped her eyes and scrambled along the floor of the barn for her clothes, then tucked her body against Walker's to cuddle against the cold air she now noticed leaking into the structure from the outside, her head nested neatly under his arms, the smell and taste of his body still fresh in her nostrils and tongue, though his body did not move when she wedged against him, did not give, but felt warm and comforting nevertheless, as her own father had once cradled her for warmth, though under different circumstances, and with different results.

"Are you crying?" he then asked the girl.

"No, sir," she answered.

"I had hoped it would be your first," he said. "You can rest here for a while if you like, but in the morning my men and I will be heading out again."

The girl had no intentions of spending the night, if not for the wrath of her father and the other Brothers of the Euphrates, then certainly for the cold and damp of the barn itself, no matter

how fresh the straw might be, no matter how comfortably she might rest or sleep or dream against the stranger's body, but the sting of the man's words, something harsh and cold, something dismissive, was a new tone for Agape to hear in a man's voice, something of a task having been performed, a duty requited and the flat, voiceless quality of his words to send her off, to cut short the warm period of enjoyment she felt when nestled against the stranger's body and now the smack of cold air and language, the realization of what Thomas Walker had told her, and thought to answer the man's words, but he rolled over to sleep and did not move as she stood away from him. Agape quickly rummaged through Thomas Walker's bags, and not finding what she looked for, finally slid her arm and hands into the bag under the man's head, and from his make-shift pillow pulled the bag of coins form the darkness, then replaced the bag once she had removed the silver thaler from earlier in the day, and tucked the prize into her own clothing, before standing away from the man on the ground and closing the barn door behind her. Agape wept as she headed back for her father's cabin, not a long walk, past the row of men snoring and asleep in their compartments, when the flush of humiliation filled her cheeks and neck until she almost burst at the thought of what had happened, the regret, as an older woman might have felt, or at the very least the sting of betrayal, to have been used as such and then coldly tossed back to her father's house, now at the front door and clutching the silver thaler in her fist, a consolation, so that turning around again and walking back to the stables, Agape aimed to keep the stranger in her camp, untied the horses from their posts and smacked each animal in the hindquarters until they trotted away.

In the morning, Agape roused her father from sleep, as was her first duty of the day, to ensure that Elijah was awake before dawn and properly on his way before the first rays of light warmed the community and began the day's worth of chores, though for her own part Agape, like the other women of the community, kept time in their bodies, as if each beat within their chests kept the moments in order, aligned as they must have been with the sun and stars and moon, so that the women woke without so much as a complaint or need for some external stimulus, but rather as part of their duties to the Order itself. Agape hurried from the room when her father had risen from bed, anxious to avoid his eyes as she gathered his clothes for the day, but then hurried away to the kitchen when Elijah began his morning prayers, a ritual Agape had only missed occasionally over the years, though an omission that would be rectified at the communal prayer later that morning, though still prior to dawn and the workday. At her father's command Agape roused the visiting men as well, rather than waking each, though, as she would have done for members of the community, Agape banged a long stick against the stable doors, walking the line with the length of wood in her hands, banging each door then moving to the next, until finally stopping at the barn door where Thomas Walker had slept, where the barn door was already swung open, the articles inside already rolled away and gone, leaving only the flattened straw where Dr. Walker had slept, and the kicking of dirt where he roused himself awake. By now the other explorers had risen from their own stalls and began to emerge, dreary-eyed and groggy, each walking in a slow haze towards the cabin, towards the kitchen where Agape would serve their meal.

When she entered the cabin, however, she found the men immediately roused by a disturbance, or perhaps two disturbances, two calamities that pulled the men into conversations in varying directions, whereby those who had arrived late, as had Agape, learned of the troubles one at a time, the men now clamoring in a circle around Elijah, who stood calm and unmoved at the center of the storm, along with Thomas Walker chief among them, whose equally stoic demeanor and bulky stance seemed crooked by the news, or by the apparent lack of urgency on

their host's behalf. Agape entered the room and heard the commotion, watched Walker now for the third time, though in many ways the tingle in her arms and legs, the tingle between her thighs gave her the impression that it was for the first time, and thus something to be remembered, and so she pressed the thaler coin between her thumb and forefinger and patted her hand against her belly as the men argued.

"And I tell you we plan to conduct the ceremony on the morrow, at dawn, as is our custom," Elijah said.

"Which ceremony would that be?" Thomas Walker answered.

"We are both men," Elijah said. "Don't play coy with me. A father can see the look in his own daughter's eye. Nor are my ears deaf to the workings of a stable in the darkest, stillest hours."

"I cannot be bothered with this now," Walker said. "We must look for our horses. You can do with me as you will once they are found."

"Very well," Elijah Bowers answered. "We will send out a party, our Brothers will ride with you as guides, and once the animals are found, the ceremony will be held in our usual rite and services. Only then may you leave to continue your expedition."

When the men had galloped away the women of the community converged onto Agape's house, hurried the girl to the community building off the central square, filled her head with excitement and anticipation, began the hemming and stitching that would result in the wedding gown she was to wear the following day, when the men returned and the community was to celebrate her wedding, however an unfamiliar term that institution was to the girl, though observant as she was, the major facets she had already gleaned from watching her own father's interactions with the women of the community. With lengths of fabric and several needles moving at once, soon the wedding gown took shape, thinned in every way to fit the young girl's body, slender at the shoulders and waist, flat at the bust, tapered at the legs and yet the garment still hung loose on her body as she stood amid the circle of women who tugged and pulled the dress to make it fit, a dress each of them had worn in their capacity as bride during the years, a single dress to honor the chosen girl of that particular day, tailored to her body in the single act of uniqueness they would experience for their entire lives, as even the thrill of labor and childbirth had been relegated to a communal function, a duty performed for the good of the Order, the credit for which fell to the fathers who planted their seeds, though unsure as they were of the actual, natural father, as they were of a system that resembled a lottery, where each many by virtue of lots, never cast as in dice or draughts, but an unspoken election sanctified by Elijah himself, so that every birth congratulated a father and fed him well, while the mother grunted in darkness until the cutting of the cord. For the entire day and through the night the preparations continued, though the women only knew that the men had returned, that the visitors had found their horses darted off in various directions but all found and relatively unharmed, by the sounds of the men in Elijah's hall, the traditional meal the father would throw to celebrate the marriage of his daughter, which generally occurred as a way for the community to introduce itself to the groom's family, if fortunate enough to be outside the community, as a chance to forge new trade partners or form alliances with neighboring posts in case of native attacks or the unusually brutal winters that demolished lands and livestock.

As she readied for the ceremony, hidden away from the women and their prodding, for only weddings and burials were causes enough to vacate work, celebrations so vital to the community, as deemed and explained by Elijah and the other leading Brothers, that warranted time away from their work to celebrate and cherish the time with their community, as she

prepared for her ceremony, Agape turned the thaler over in her hands in secrecy, until one of the women saw the trinket, then snatched it from the girl's hands, each admiring the silver piece then turning it over to the next, until in the motion and activity, and the final adjustments to the dress and its plain decoration, Agape lost sight of the coin and slumped in her chair, pouted until the women summoned her to perk up and relish the day, as it would be the only day, they said, she would have to relish. When Elijah approached the building, to conduct the wedding ceremony, Thomas Walker and his band of men in tow, just before they entered the room, one of the women draped a necklace around Agape's neck, who had punched a hole through the coin and looped it with a thin stand of sinew, tied the pendant around Agape's neck and kissed her on the cheek just as Elijah and the wedding party entered the room. Side by side with Thomas Walker, Agape seemed even younger than her age would have appeared, even to the community Brothers who witnessed the ceremony, or the women who stood outside, noses pressed to the window to hear Elijah's voice as he read through the rite. Dr. Walker looked twice at Agape in her whitish dress, the first as if to remember her body and form from their previous encounter, to refresh his memory and to see if perhaps the darkness of the stable of the lateness of the evening prompted him to some foolhardy action, then a second glance, accompanied with a smile, to see the girl's round face, pretty if not matured, the hazel color of her eyes and the tender, bud-shaped pout on her lips, his eyes piercing her own, eyes which she could not remember seeing from the stable, their encounter on the floor, could not see past the darkness to recognize the man's glare or the blank stare of men in the act, that foolish grin they cannot help but deliver, a look she could not now place on the man at her side, whose hand Elijah joined with her own, who now led her back through the door, to the outside of the building, where the remainder of the community waited and cheered with a loud hymn of celebration and praise.

In the dark evening that followed her wedding day, when Agape saw a trunk of her possessions on the step of her father's cabin, and the gathering of Walker's men and horses, now readied, as it seemed, to depart once again, and the procession of Brothers who emptied the celebration hall, however quietly and tacitly they celebrated such events, to line the pathway heading west into the outside territories, only then did the reality of marriage, what was expected of a wife, not the commonly held women of the Duncards, but the duties of a wife outside their world, not only the wifely role she would play for Dr. Walker, a companion in his tent for cold nights, or as receptacle to his passions, but that she would not be shuffled between familiar houses, clutched by familiar, if varying, hands, and altogether taken from her father's home. Confusion filled her eyes with thick, heavy tears, though they did not yet fall, not when the groom trotted his animals to Elijah's doorstep, not when the men exchanged words, handshakes, and a sack full of coins, Walker now leading away a new horse in his convoy as well, from the father of the bride, nor did she cry when the women of the order kissed her cheeks and returned to their homes, bewildered as Agape was by their behaviors, that such ceremonies should end in such awkward goodbyes, as if they would never see one another again. The girl only cried as Elijah hoisted her belongings onto Walker's caravan and did not say a word to his daughter, but rather quietly loaded the parcels—her eyes asking for reasons for his actions, the way young children still trust their parents for guidance, though the picture gradually cleared for her with each unvoiced moment—then bent to take his daughter's foot, raise her to the horses, to the husband equally quiet at the transaction, equally complicit, tears of a young girl rather than the woman-like responses she'd been trained to present, the adult-like responses she had been taught to perform as if out of instinct, a demure pressing of the lips at shock or disappointment, a pressing of her flat palms together as sign of her humility and subjection in the face of her male

counterparts, the acceptance and turning towards duty upon betrayal. The only solace Agape could find or take through the final ordeal of kissing her father and watching his body shrink on the horizon, nor along the pathways stretching even away from the Duncards was the thaler necklace now dangling around her neck, a light weight, as close to a careless or carefree weight as she would ever know.

Some time later, Agape woke from a sleep with the sudden, uncontrollable urge to vomit. Her sides and stomach cramped until she could only crawl from her empty tent, not unusual since Thomas would often rise before dawn to scout the day's travels, her back in severe pain, a crawl along the wet grass and stones, while still no light poured from the sky but the pitch of night, its canopy of stars and partially covered moon, all sifted through the thick fog that rolled whenever the cold airs settled within the hills or valleys, at the very depths rendering the world unintelligible with thick white mists, so that all Agape had to navigate was the feel of the grass and stones in her hands and knees, and the urge that pushed her as far away from the camp as would have seemed appropriate. The discomfort began, perhaps, a week ago, though Agape had no recollection as to the very first instance of the discomfort, only that she and her husband had ridden for easily a week's time, with the thought that perhaps all the riding had inflicted the discomfort, their nights being spent in the business of newlyweds, their days in the company of Walker's men, exploring, mapping, trading with natives or other adventurers whom they happened to find along the way, each to a man taken aback that Walker would have a wife on the journey, each sympathetic to the girl with tokens of affection, sugared candies mostly, or perhaps a sash or pouch of beads for her handiwork. All these trinkets she stashed in a small bag in her tent, which she used as a pillow, but none of which eased her pain in the early morning, dawn now bright on the horizon, beginning to burn away the evening of fog, with Agape still hunched over the wet earth, her body alternating between heaves and rest, no sounds of her camp or Walker's men between the violent contortions or moments of respite, until the sharpest pain poked her in the belly and sent her over on her back, clutching her side, a pain so precise she could not lend voice to it to either yelp or shout or even cry.

Agape returned to the camp clearing, her empty stomach still queasy but looking forward to the meal one of the men in the convoy would have prepared for her, who saved a portion of the men's early meals for her, kept warm near the fire coals in a covered tin plate, the rows of tents for her to tend while the men were away, a camp, though, now an empty space of land when she arrived, a terrain marked only with her own tent and the blackened rings of campfires now extinguished, the water pales toppled and emptied next to the ring of dirt and stones, returned to find only trampled grass and unmoved stone and latrine ditches carved into the ground. At first the scene appeared as if in a dream, accompanied by the return of the ache in her lower body, and though Agape roused herself with these pains, then also pinched her arms and tried to force her eyes open, the campsite remained abandoned, her eyes open the entire time, the pain undeterred, hurried to the tent where only her own pillow and bags and clothing remained, any and all trace of Agape Bowers ditched from the men's caravan and set neatly inside, by all accounts a thorough and measured calculation, precise distances and opportunities weighed until a favorable situation arose and Dr. Thomas Walker cut loose his obligation, though to the girl now kneeling at her tent door, none of these implications were obvious. The sharp pain again poked Agape in the belly, doubled her body into the ground, but this time her throat mustered enough air to let slip a groan before writhing again on the grass. In her agony, Agape prayed to the saint on her necklace, a sobbing prayer for salvation in the form of rescue, learned words and utterances from her hymnals and sermons delivered by her father, which now seemed like

another lifetime, some other girl who lived in the world of the Duncards now replaced utterly by the wife who accompanied Thomas Walker through the Kentucky wilderness, a prayer to a saint who appeared, if not in his original form, then in the form of a Shawnee hunter who gathered the girl's body and effects, deposited her in an outpost nearly to the Ohio river.

To John Bowers we turn our eyes, voices, how calmly you sit the Judge's chamber, how peacefully you seem to state your case, extend your paperwork, trust in that to save your bones and make your case, though we all know of what sort a man fought for the side you chose! Do you believe your Confederate papers will save you in the eyes of the law? The very same law and system you wished to supplant with lawlessness, anarchy, the rule of unmentionable cruelties? Is this not the perfect irony, for the Rebel now to crawl back to the Union's justice, the Union's representative arm, the law, seeking to vindicate himself in the Union's eyes, for a crime so low as the rape of slaves, the fathering of mixed children, not that we ladies would hold the children responsible for her parent's crime, but pity her in turn, perfect irony in an action and result entirely unforeseen? We watched you grow as a child, from a round young boy to this thin rail of a man, unable to place our finger on you, less so now through the pane of glass than ever before, though your gentle manner and ways perplex us to no end, how two sons raised under identical conditions could turn out so differently, as you turned from Richard! How your minds, conditioned by the same mother, poor, vicious Suppina, could have blossomed into such different men! But now the law has you both, has your evidence, both the result of the action, this girl, and the man who committed the crime, and whatever papers or testimonies you can provide, you'd be wise to conduct yourself humbly in the eyes of the law, and we women, who remained steadfast to the ideas of justice and lawfulness, while you broke free to the south to commit your atrocities.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Eight months later, Agape Bowers squatted over a thin layer of Shawnee-woven blankets, a pain in her lower back so extreme that she could but gasp at its intensity in the cold wilderness on the outskirts of that trading post, a settlement to be named Lysistrata, shortly, though merely a rough circle of cabins around a single square of land cleared by our own ancestors, the trees and undergrowth still thick from nature's design where the pain in her back suddenly turned and Agape then gave birth to a tiny daughter, whom she named Harmony, recalling the word from her lessons with the Duncards, there in the wastelands of Kentucky with the wild turkeys and deer and wildcats prowling along high vantage points. Alone, the shiver of birth eased Agape's mind, the familiarity of it all, muscles contracting, constricting then releasing in thick bands around her body, as if it were any of the animals in her care, any of the hours she spent coaxing these beasts to spill their broods, not the flush of blood to her muscles, the steady, measured breathing, slow and calm and deliberate she had seen those very same animals perform, sometimes pacing around her tent, other times crouched on hands and knees, gently rocking to and fro as if to encourage the parcel in her belly to turn and present itself for delivery, finally grabbing hold of the braches of a beech tree, those low to the ground and flexible, while she squatted, the pressure of the child's head now blanching its canal, the numbness and euphoria of the passage of its body through her own, finally the joyful tying off of the cord, then biting it to release the child into the world. Harmony Bowers, as her name may very well suggest, cried loud into the woods and December sky, once emerged and cleansed in another blanket provided by the natives, to the delight of her mother, who leaned back against the beech tree that had supported her, the strain of the exercise like a blush across her cheeks, chin, and forehead.

Rather than invite this young mother into their camp, to take pity on such a girl with that peculiar burden, having heard as they did how the child's father drifted away in the night, aware of the rescue by the natives, their care for her demonstrated by rendering the girl to lands inhabited by pale-skinned people such as herself, trusting as they did that like would tend to like, rather than the circumstance of the girl and her daughter shivering in the stretched hide of animals, sewn together by native hands into a meager tent to starve away winter, though insufficient for comfort, more than sufficient for survival, and in any case more than the like-skinned women and men nearby deemed, for their own reasons, to offer. Rather than any of this knowledge, or perhaps despite it, the inhabitants of the trading post fulfilled what they saw as their sole obligation to the girl in the least possible means, by delivering a tin plate of food every dawn and dusk to a tree stump near her campsite, and to collect the emptied plates, licked clean, in exchange for the next day's meals. Even this small token was subject to great debate at the pulpit, whether or not to harbor sinners in their mist, nor allow for such adultery to continue, if not thrive, by the very food of their good and noble soil. They might hardly be blamed for their mistreatment of the early Bowers clan, if mistreatment is even the proper word, or appropriate for the measures they took to sustain the young mother and her child, so much as adulterers, bastard children were as shunned as they would be today, as evidenced by the commotion over Penelope Bowers, for example, and so though the treatment seems harsh, ought we, the present, judge the past by our own standards or rather by the standards and circumstance which those people found themselves under?

From the beginning Harmony spoke quite rarely to the other children who sprouted along the early streets of Lysistrata, as they would meet at the river while drawing water or run in the same fields for their play, a girl of fierce individual spirit, Harmony was often seen pummeling

the other children, from when she was as young as two, though no larger physically than any of the others, including the boys, she nonetheless found her way through the world, all in full sight of her mother, pushing away her adversaries and tackling what required knocking down. Soon, as happens with all groups of children who tired of being pushed around for Harmony's pleasure, they rebelled against her, again, as do all those who lack the physical gifts to stand up to those more powerful than themselves—or as it seems among adults, those who lack bravery—in a way that requires nothing of physical prowess and entirely on the workings of the least noble muscle in the human body, the tongue, shouting insults at the girl, the length of her hair already unfashionable to the children's eyes, other comments concerning her ragged clothes or the general lack of toys and such the girl and her mother were forced to endure, but mostly the shouts and laughter focused on the tent which Agape had carefully built around the original dwelling she received those winters ago, a series of patchwork and animal hides, anything of protective value found along the way Harmony's mother flattened and sewed along side her dwelling, until the girl's house, as the children put it, looked no better than a rag pile, and not a prosperous one at that. So when Agape died and Harmony received the thaler necklace, in a ceremony at her deathbed with little emotion or sadness, but merely the passing over of the single valuable in the Bowers name over to the single survivor of that legacy, none of those same children, now some twenty five years later, in 1776, were surprised to hear that Harmony Bowers disappeared from Lysistrata, either, as they said, run off with a British general, or perhaps north into Canada to trap beaver and sell their hides, or even westbound with the tribes of natives sent along that way for land.

In truth, however, Harmony Bowers carried her thaler necklace far to the south and east of Lysistrata, still in the territory known as Kentucky, very near the Virginia border, filled with the sentiments of the times, that foreigners were stirring up the natives to fight against the newcomers to the territories and lands, namely the British, to burn the settlers' forts and outposts and the like, though the natives leveled no such attack ever against Lysistrata, perhaps so hidden away from the other sites that it wasn't deemed important, or perhaps too small an outpost to consider, or that the people in Lysistrata from the earliest times dealt fairly with the natives who hunted on the lands, allowed them passage as they migrated north and south along their pathways. With more than just a mere sentiment in her head, though, since Harmony Bowers was no woman of thought or idealism, but rather running with a drive in her belly like a house-fire, wild and uncontrollable, which seeks only fuel for the furthering of its rage, rather than any end or culmination, respite from its fury, Harmony headed south through the countryside to join the fighting and set her aggressive behaviors, natural to her nature and well-honed as they were, to set those activities for something of good use, the arena of war being the only place and time where aggression and violence have a natural and accepted role in the course of affairs, other than in times of self-defense, or defense of loved ones. In the dead of winter,, Harmony bundled her body in the materials of war, muskets and munitions, even a dagger she received from the Shawnee and kept hidden in her boots, slashed at her hair and smeared her smooth face with soot to roughen up her feminine qualities, a face which, despite the rough actions and tougher, nastier tongue, was quite rounded and, though none would say it to her face, pretty.

Of course everyone knows that women have been discouraged from fighting in wars for as far back as there have been men to fight in them, which was every bit the case in the time of the Revolution as it was during our most recent conflict, women relegated to the homestead, for the mustering of supplies to send to the soldiers and then asked to muster the courage for awaiting their returns, in whatever forms they might have been, but always duty and obligation

borne with a grim, stern expression, never more than a grimace on the lips and a wrinkle in the brow, no tears or wailing or bemoaning the fate of their loved ones, which was a kind of burden not unusual for them to take at the time, nor is it now, and thus for the most part they flourished under their constraints if only because they'd gotten so used to wearing them, how a time of war merely extended and exasperated what was a typical and usual circumstance. But some women were not destined for the role of waiting while the country's fate was decided, some women moved to take the reins rather than succumb to them, and as such Harmony Bowers arrived at Floyd's Royal Spring, near what is now Georgetown, Kentucky, in all appearances and mannerisms a soldier, a male soldier, what with the winter wrappings concealing her hips and all other feminine areas, the black marks on her face, as we mentioned, giving Harmony the look of a man ready to kill, and moreover the rasp in her voice, intentionally emphasized, giving her the sound of a man as well, especially when she entered her name in the roll as one Samson Bowers. She delighted in the sights and sounds of fighting, of the skirmishes in and around the creek's lower banks, the stories of scouting troops hunted down by the natives and killed, or of the natives captured and tortured before their eventual executions, a manner of battle beyond the usually and typical rules of war, if such things exist, as fighting in the wilderness often produces more nastiness in its battles, the distance from more civilized lands perhaps the initial reason, or the despair at the thought of utter destruction, cut off from all possibility or hope of aid, salvation, against the backdrop of the uncivil, unruly, lawless state of nature, in which every animal, men included, must scratch and kill for their rights, for survival, or risk the chance that their enemies will not harbor such pities or fellow-feelings, but rather blood-lust, driven by the desire for land and what water and food men pull from it.

Floyd's Royal Spring was a military opportunity and a fresh creek of clean water when the settlers arrived to it, bubbling up from the ground, most likely one of the many underground rivers or collection wells that race beneath the Kentucky soil only to pop its head up to the light of day, run its course for a while, duck again back into the shadows of the underground. McClelland's Fort, then, an outpost not unlike Lysistrata in its purposes and intents, though larger and in an area ripe for more commerce, more travelers, and therefore more trouble, a wooden garrison built to protect the very spot where the creek first erupted from the soil, originally so as to keep a constant grasp over the supply of fresh water, for man and beast alike, but the nature of things soon demanded that the men of McClelland's Fort soon expand their holdings, find more land to feed and shelter the children they were now producing, the growing number of mouths to feed and new settlers to accommodate and less and less land to be able to accommodate them, as the fortress and population scared off much of the game who once watered at the base of the creek, and so the men soon wandered into the surrounding lands to hunt for food. When Harmony Bowers arrived on the scene, known to her cohorts as Samson, a private and shy individual who, from the first, relished battle and very little else of the soldier's life, already had the native tribes launched their first attacks on the fort, with the grievance that the settlers there had invaded their hunting grounds, more sacredly held by those tribes than to the newcomers, on account of their peculiar religious holdings, but not in the least bit more vital, as all creatures must fill their bellies with what surrounds them, and thus will kill other men and women for those lands, those resources, otherwise perish in the harsh late-December cold or freezing rains, or blasts of powdery, concealing snow. Under the ferocity of such attacks, then, the soldiers barely noticed anything particular or peculiar of the member of their ranks, as she swore herself into the service of her nation, other than her capacity to kill enemies, the commotion of battle augmented by the neighboring settlers, who from a wide area now

descended on the fort for protection, overwhelmed as McClelland's Fort was with requests for assistance and aid and support, and thankful for any new set of arms and shoulders, now matter how slender, despite being thickened with unnatural means, blankets and heavy shirts and the like, to fight off the attackers and help defend the nation in their own tiny corner of it.

On the first day of the year, 1777, when the natives stood at the face of the fort, and the soldiers bunkered behind the thick wooden walls and prepared for the eventual attack, it was the newest soldier among the ranks, Samson Bowers, who first noticed how the Indians had been armed with British firearms, how their organization resembled more the British formation of rows and columns rather than the typical or more accustomed native fighting techniques of scattered attacks, sabotage, and surprise ambushes deep in the woodlands. Right away the generals at McClelland's Fort sent riders east to the capitol, to ask for aid against what was a different enemy than first recognized, or hoped, though they supposed aid was already dispatched, already on its way, though each soldier in the ranks knew and understood the distance it would take for the rider to communicate any word of their position or situation, let alone the perils of traveling alone during times of war, to the point that the option remaining for those at the fort was to fight as if no reinforcements would be coming at all. When the natives breeched the wall, as their numbers and ferociousness far surpassed those of the soldiers in the camp, as would be expected of those who have it in their minds that they have been robbed of their rightful territories, to fight all the more fiercely than those who were defending a land not their own to begin with, immediately soldiers fled the garrison, took to the woods where they were cut down easily by the enemy troops waiting for just such a reaction, though not Harmony Bowers, who instead targeted enemy soldiers as they entered, unleashed her musket-fire on every body which seemed a threat, bayoneting those closest to her, rushing to reload, often fending her position with the dagger close-at-hand, then blasting away when the musket was loaded and ready for use. Thus the battle was an awkward series of intense periods of action, the loud blasts of gunfire and the smell of discharged power floating low to the ground, the thud of men's bodies on the ground or of the native's arrows, axes, and even knifes piercing flesh, followed by periods relative calm, the reloading of weapons, the hunting of prey, the settling of the smoke and dust and the soaking of blood into the earth.

At such a reloading of her weapon, however, an enemy of some rank, as evidenced by his facial decoration and war-clothing broke the silence with a throaty war-scream and charged at Harmony with a large knife, hand to hand combat still preferable to this soldier as he advanced, at which sight Harmony leapt from her crouching over the gun, unable to complete the reload in time to cut down the enemy, and sliced the native's chest with two quick cuts from her blade, precise in their aim, wounding the enemy though not mortally. The native then turned as Harmony charged, perhaps surprised at such a blow having been dealt, and fled from the charging soldier through the waves of men dying in each other's arms, the bodies scattered on the ground, blood dribbling into the creek over which they fought, though none with a mind on such goals or objectives, only to kill and avoid the fatal blow, past the broken gate of the garrison and northbound through the woodlands again. Harmony followed the trail of blood left behind by the wounded soldier, the crisp, dead leaves and frozen grasses providing clear direction for hunting down the enemy though at such a distance from the garrison that now all sounds of the battles were mere echoes in the distance, muted by trees and undergrowth, so that all the sound remaining to Harmony's ears were the sounds of her own feet scampering northwest through the forest and the huffing of breath from her lungs, and the trembling of animals who scattered from her as she moved closer to the kill. With several twists the enemy tried to evade his pursuer, to

no avail, with the effect entirely opposite as he would have intended, that of putting Harmony into familiar territory and thus the military advantage, as she cornered the enemy into low ground, pounced on him, delivered the kill despite the pleas for mercy which she could not understand, and would not have heeded had she understood, despite the relative distance between herself and the battles, a thirst for the kill as certain as the taste of food on her lips and tongue, wiping the native's blood from her body, clutched her knife and then rushed back towards the fort.

Harmony stood on a ridge and watched the victors burn the wooden outpost, the very beginnings of their triumph, having driven all the settlers into retreat, or worse, killing them as they fled or lay wounded on the ground, the urge immediately in her legs to run for the battle and kill while there still remained the opportunity, but something other restrained her body, a thought, perhaps, or merely an instinct even lower and more basic than the necessity to kill, that of survival, and recognizing certain death when it appeared on the horizon, death which carried no point or reason, as if death during times of war could provide sufficient cause. Nevertheless measuring her chances and determining the best course of action, Harmony headed north again through the woods, stopping on her journey only to bury the Indian she had slain, now that the battle had ended and their status had been equaled again, reminding her of something old and distant, like an unpaid debt, that of human beings deserving of a burial place rather than the artificial moniker of enemies, the less fortunate to be picked apart by winter-starved animals, without protection from their claws and mouths nor from the elements. Her hands carved a shallow hole into the ground, by no means deep enough for a casket or the usual ceremonies of a burial, but enough to fit the warrior's body beneath the surface, dragging the body of what Harmony now saw as a boy's body, no more than fifteen or sixteen years old, thin and wiry, though equally deadly as that of an older man, and no younger than the boys who fought by her side at McClelland's, though resembling a child to her now cradled in her arms, something fragile about a life cut early or the twist of chance that he charged this particular soldier, a women whose single inborn talent was violence. When the body had been covered with dirt, a slight mound above the soil though concealed for the most part, Harmony slumped over the grave, the moment and opportunity for reflection, perhaps even consideration, seized her with a simple observation—that with her war experience, and having traveled already so far from home, what was there, back in that outpost worth returning for?

The wood-frame buildings in Lysistrata had grown since Harmony had been gone, expanded both upwards and sideways, with fancier signs posted out front or even bolted to the buildings to hang over the thresholds, fancier than they'd been just a year before when she departed, to the point where as she approached, Harmony looked twice at the city of her upbringing as if her own mother had reappeared, herself gradually changed over time, recognizable down at its core, but with enough accidental changes to make the process of identification that much more difficult. She wandered in the wilderness for a while after McClelland's, not on account of losing direction or not knowing where to go, but in the decision itself, a process so unfamiliar to her nature that Harmony often spent entire days pacing the woods, remembering the glorious battle in full detail, the choice between more battles, more glorious details, or the singular pleasure of a triumphant homecoming, all the while surviving with her skills as a huntress and honing the story of her battles into neat, exciting commentaries, no matter the outcome. When the weather turned cold again, Harmony approached Lysistrata with the particular intention of finding as many of the citizens she knew, those she grew up with, and telling them every last detail of her service to the cause, for bravery and gallantry and even

the killing of the Indian warrior, all stories which would go over well with the citizens and their children, hungry for any news as they were, so concealed away from the action of battle, stories she knew would sound best at one of the saloons, having practiced them at such lengths, buildings with swinging doors still recognizable on the horizon as she drew near, where the clink of beers and the roar of admiration would drown the laughter and mocking she still heard in the quiet hours of midnight, or while sleeping in the drafty tents with her mother, or within the soundless din of battle. Headed towards the saloon, Harmony passed over the grounds where she'd been raised, now an empty flat of land with a year's worth of overgrowth, no sign of the Shawnee tent or her mother's improvements, nor anything but a few worn patches of earth where their bodies had once laid, once eaten, where Agape would have cradled the young girl as an infant, and again when the taunts intensified later in life, areas of brown, bald earth beneath the frost, veiled slightly, but visible as she passed, not stopping.

"What can I do you for?" the keeper asked as Harmony leaned against the bar.

"Whiskey," she said.

In the military uniform, the men of the saloon did not notice anything unusual about the figure who tapped the bar with her fingers and waited for the yellow drink to pour, as the town had grown accustomed to seeing soldiers pass through Lysistrata on their way to and from the battles, did not notice the delicate fingers wrapped around the glass, or the smooth, hairless neck that swallowed the drink without the benefit of an adam's apple, nor the delight she took in recognizing several of the men her own age now slumped over the bar or active at the card tables, a delight that mixed well with the whiskey, the burn down her throat like anticipation, like a creature tasting the civilized world, forgotten, almost, but now recalled as if for the first time. Harmony finished the drink and ordered another, swallowed it as quick, with a few eyes on her from around the room but with most of the men paying attention to their own hand of cards, or the women to the men whose laps they balanced on, arms wrapped tightly around their shoulders and neck, whispering in their ears to pay the fee for the upper rooms and an hour in privacy, and pulled a chair to an entire table of men she recognized, for the most part, from her youth—the exception being a single unknown man, handsome with bright blue eyes and a mustache curled over his lips—seated along side three of the Mullin brothers and their companion John Sherman, unchanged now as they were then, the four pairs of dead-eyes and mops of unruly brown hair, all dirt-curls and unkempt and laughing, probably mocking something or other about the women who ignored them at the other tables, or the men who stared earnestly into their cards and placed small, conservative wagers. The men did not stop their conversation when Harmony pulled her chair to the table, thought the mustached man eyed her with his thin lips unmoving beneath his facial hair, did not stop when she ordered another drink from the bar and drank it quickly in their sight, though the remainder of the saloon paused, as if waiting for the reaction, delayed as it was and therefore, perhaps, they expected, more violent or focused when the blows finally arrived.

"What word from the front-lines, solder?" one of the Mullin brothers asked.

"Came from McClelland's near the Virginia border," Harmony answered, her voice deep and throaty. "Routed by Indians."

"Not a smart thing to take 'em on their own ground," the men said. "You're lucky to be alive."

"Took my share of the enemy," she answered.

"Then what're you doin' in Lysistrata?" another of the brothers laughed. "Seems a fighter like yourself belongs closer to the action, not out west where there's no enemy."

"I could ask the same of you," she answered.

Harmony stood from the table—as did the Mullin brothers and their companions, perhaps ready to fight over the insult, but with something holding their fists in check, guilt perhaps, that the soldier had risked and returned, shame at having their cowardice called out in front of such a crowd, in their own town no less, but standing nonetheless across from the soldier and ready for the fight—and removed her uniform jacket, followed by her cap, revealing, among other smells and qualities, first a crop of shorn hair, still longer at the neck and ears than a man's but in no way woman-like, and second, the body of a woman, thin shoulders and wide hips, albeit the gaunt frame of a woman who'd lived off the land for so long, digging for roots to boil or waiting for small game to scurry from their homes in the dead of winter, to the point that without her uniform, Harmony resembled a woman more then, perhaps, than at any other time in her life, even when her hair braided long down the center of her back, or the times few and far between when she wore a dress, a resemblance all the more drastic in contrast to the war-talk and consumption of alcohol that immediately preceded. The men at the table stumbled back for a moment, each puzzled as to the creature now presented to them, strikingly familiar but entirely foreign to their daily routines, the hourly consumption of booze and the fighting that followed, the harsh words waiting at home from their wives or the ruckuses their children held in store for when they tried to sleep off their hangovers, each to a man unsure as to what the protocol was for a woman soldier, perhaps for impersonating a soldier the rules would have been more defined, but for hitting a woman dressed in a soldier's gear, and to pass herself off as one who fought, or even killed in battle, struck them as more than little unseemly, both the woman's misconduct and the thought of striking a woman, more so that a woman of any decent standing would appear in a saloon, consume alcohol in public, or consider such a guise and ruse to begin with, at which point one of the Mullin brothers smiled wide and shouted.

"For Christ's sake, it's Harmony Bowers."

The sound of that name ricocheted through the saloon, triggering the people's memories as clearly and distinctly as the smells from their own childhood, the Mullin brothers wearing their recollections in broad smiles and laughter across their faces, of a mother's freshly-washed, sun-dried apron, or the taste of tobacco and sweat in their father's stern right hand for punishment, or the blood that once rushed to their faces, a strange blend of adolescent desire for the girl, a nameless ache somewhere low in their bodies that they could not satisfy, coupled with the immediate nned to mock or hurt the object of their affection, to reduce her to something less powerful, something without the power to wrangle their bodies in such ways, to manipulate them with a flip of her hair or the way her eyes bore through what meager defenses they threw up. Not just the Mullin boys and their companions, but everyone in the saloon recognized the name and conjured the same image to their minds—with the crowd in the saloon now standing, more people rushing in from the street to see the commotion, having been told of the return of the Bowers girl, her guise as a soldier and the rest, until the saloon stood packed with citizens each vying for a peek at the spectacle—images of the Indian tent pitched well away from the center of the town, past the cemetery fields in fact, its rigid, stubborn poles wrenched into the ground and its flaps of animal hide leaking winter's air through to the interior, the annexes and additions old Agape, worn down, abandoned Agape, managed to erect so that mother and daughter could lay flat from head to toe while they slept, or the rings of dirt around the base of her neck, dirt that never seemed to scrub off, likewise from girl's knees and elbows, if scrubbing a child was ever part of the Bowers family ritual, until such point that even those who did not originally know Harmony Bowers soon came to know her from the descriptions of those in saloon, and everyone had the singular look of pity in their eyes, not the pity that inclines men and women to help each

other in dire need, but the kind that stares, jaws agape, on the verge of mocking laughter, all the time thankful it is not the observer but the observed in the position of such ridicule. Thus when the Mullin boys began to laugh, the sound from their throats and bellies was contagious, soon infecting every set of lungs in that saloon, Harmony Bowers standing in the middle of it all as she had when she was a girl, fists clenched so tight her hands blanched, her lips quivering, her face on the verge of tears, soon switched to something all the more natural in defense of such pities.

Harmony Bowers lifted a chair and cracked it against the eldest Mullin's head, leveling his body to the ground in a single motion of rage and retribution, violence as answer to their amusement, as that force which wadded their laughter into a single bundle and launched it from the room, the saloon now silent as a hillside come midnight, no light anywhere to shed on the deeds of men and women, only the commotion of what followed such attacks, Harmony Bowers swinging the chair in pieces against the other men, handicapped as they were on account of hitting a woman, though with enough booze in their bellies not to care for those sorts of rules, rather taken as they were by the general rules of saloon brawls and combat, to hit or be struck, which was why they did not complain of Harmony's blow against their brother but rather sought to avenge it with fiercer, sharper blows. Without much provocation the whole saloon spilled over into violence, the men landing punches over lost gambling debts or stumbling backwards as the result of receiving them, inflicting them, some of the women in their low-cut outfits and black leg-nettings scrambling for higher ground, others joining the fight , to avenge themselves the wrongs brought against them by some of the regular patrons, while at the center of the commotion Harmony fended off the Mullin boys with every once of skill and anger she had honed at McClelland's fort, not to mention the time she spent brooding in the wilderness, until such time as the men, through sheer numbers, had forced her to the ground and began to level fists and boots against her body, and Harmony Bowers reached for the knife in her one boots, to level the score, the struggle of the men's arms as they stopped what they knew she was reaching for, instead taking her body up over their heads, now joined by several other men, including the man whose name she did not know, his curled mustache unaltered by the ruckus, hands grabbing at her body in ways not typical in fights, sexual grabbings that ended more at her neck than breasts, knees and thighs more than elsewhere, opportunists seizing what they saw as their one chance for such experiences, before tossing Harmony into the street, more of dropping her on her shoulders and head from the height of several men's shoulders, the din of the brawl calming as the deputies arrived, the saloon eventually returned to its business of flirting and gambling and pouring stiff drinks.

"You were gonna get yourself killed in there," a man's voice said..

"I don't need no man to pull me from my troubles," Harmony answered, with her last strength clasping her hands at her neck, feeling for the thale necklace that was no longer there, though the words distracted her from this search, if but for the haze and stupor of the brawl, words which amounted to the first conversation Harmony ever had with John Cadmus Shirtliff, whose name she would learn soon after passing out that day, on account of both the whiskey and the repeated blows to the head.

Most couples tell of romantic, or at the very least partially impractical, courtships, even back then, when marriage was a sterner business, stories that over time mellowed from more harsh realities into tales of men courting women at a distance, mustering the courage to ask their fathers for the privilege, no matter what the original circumstances were, and shaped more by the sentiments of the times the stories were told, rather than, perhaps, what occurred as honest to

God truth. Harmony Bowers' marriage story, however, from the first included the bar fight and a bout of unconsciousness that lasted for four days, of the lost thaler necklace and the series of tragedies that she'd endured to the point where Cad Shirtliffe carried her to his apartment, a single room for rent over the general store, included the look of her protector as she recovered, of a cold introduction and gradual warming, of the first time he kissed her while tending to the bruises on her face, of their first sexual encounter when Harmony was strong enough to climb on Cad's body and take advantage of his broad thighs and shoulders, handsome face, the tickle of that mustache against her cheeks and body. The ceremony itself, a somewhat odd and vastly under-attended affair several weeks later, was witnessed only by the judge and the Mullin brothers, who agreed to stand over the bride and groom after being assured the bride would not again turn against them, and that the groom would promise several night's worth of tabs at the saloon over the course of the next few months.

On their honeymoon Harmony Shirtliffe learned two things about her husband that she had not known previously, firstly that he worked as a cartographer for the government, sent to Lysistrata to help map the new territories and provide future explorers with reliable passages west, and secondly, that the man was far less handsome with his mustache shaved, a surprise he unveiled as they headed off with their camping gear to spend a week in the thick, shielded woods to the north of Lysistrata, beyond the people of town, the way they now laughed at the couple together, Harmony's reputation quickly returned to that as it was before she left, no matter her war stories, which none quite believed anyway, or the ears pressed against the thin walls of their apartment when the mattresses squeaked, or when Harmony let loose a groan high into the night. Both such revelations immediately lowered Harmony's opinion of her husband, the mustache being a matter of preference and attraction, the man's occupation the far more damning evidence, as in addition to the low pay, a man who spent his days seated at a desk, drawing lines onto large tracts of paper seemed to her something less of a man, men being those who sweated and grunted for their daily bread, who worked fields or crafted goods, men whose bodies grew strong beneath their labors, who ate and drank and swore and made love more like animals than like men, rather than those whose bodies wasted away, became something weaker and less virile the more they focused their attentions on the non-physical aspects of their work. The couple found a secluded spot in the woods, a brief clearing beneath a canopy of high beech trees and pitched their tent, setting up camp in a way unhurried and lacking the passion of honeymoons, though once Harmony dragged her husband into the tent she did not let him step outside for the remainder of the trip, a full week, only to relieve themselves in the bushes or cook brief meals over the campfire, at which time Harmony described her war stories in full to the man beneath her, and listened as Cad explained the reasons his service included the drawing of maps rather than fighting. On the final day, when Harmony had had her fill of the man's excuses and perhaps already regretted the marriage, thankful in ways to have a companion, something she had not experienced since her mother had passed, but bucked just a bit with the reins, like a dog snapping against a leash, any animal accustomed to freedom of motion and thought and responsibility would, when constricted in such ways, just when her tolerance had reached its natural peak, Cad handed Harmony a wedding gift, which she snatched from his hand with a word of thanks, more like a look of accusation, the thaler necklace, of quickly retrieving that she assumed had been stolen.

"It fell during the fight," he explained. "I wanted to give it you at a special time."

A year in Lysistrata can pass with such quickness, don't we know it, even with all the events of town and the families with their tragedies and comedies and all the daily struggles that

came with living in an outpost town as Lysistrata was back then, all the more quickly when Cad and Harmony Shirtliffe all but disappeared from sight, once their honeymoon had ended, periodically trading their furs at the general store for supplies, hides no doubt captured and skinned, not to mention cleaned and dried by Harmony herself, as there could be no telling what Shirtliffe did during his time in the apartment, none of our own mothers or grandmothers as witnesses, other than supposing how Cadmus spent his days carefully drawing maps as carefully as he avoided his young wife's anger, prone as she was to settle arguments with fists rather than words, though a large man himself, no doubt fearful of what the former Miss Bowers could inflict on his body. There was also no witness of the day the government man arrived from Washington, looking for a woman who claimed to have fought in the war, under the alias of Samson Bowers, a woman they'd only discovered by chance, as one of the officers at McClelland's bluff had wandered into the woods to use the latrine and happened to watch a soldier, dressed in full gear, stoop over and relieve herself, in the clear and plain sight of day, an honest to God women in their ranks, though saying nothing as the attack drew high, though keeping his eyes on the female soldier, now in search of this heroic woman, for the witness also recalled the tremendous way she defended the fort, even in a lost cause, directed to the apartment above the general store where none from town had gone, with an envelope in his hand certain to contain something of a soldier's pension, which at the time would have amounted to more money than Harmony Bowers or Harmony Shirtliffe had ever seen or held in their hands, though most soldiers we know received land for their troubles, but again maybe they choose not to advertise how they'd been tricked, set her portion of land to interest, and left it well enough at that. In any case, nearly a year to the day of the saloon fight, then, a year's worth of rumor and gossip about what Harmony Bowers had actually done in the war, how she ran off and worked in various brothels were the most common, followed by those who claimed she hitched west to join the settlers that ran to the wild, rough as she was, Harmony Shirtliffe and her husband emerged from the apartment, money in hand, with the look on their faces of redemption, fists full of money, drawing the look of envy from the men and women as they walked over to the builder's and laid out their plans to build a house on Agape's old piece of land, an envious look part shame-faced, at her heroism being confirmed, part the faces of pure resentment that old families and neighbors bear to see their poor brothers and sisters lifted to something of wealth, perhaps even equaled to themselves by the monthly envelopes of soldier's pay.

Standing at the worksite, just months after the first pension money arrived, Harmony stroked her stomach as she watched the workers cut notches into the long timber logs, deep squared cuts at the end of each log to allow for stacking, and as they set the walls of her new home into place with shovels-full of black pitch, like a glue to hold the frame together, her hands starting at her navel and stroking upwards along the center of her body, then returning, to move left and right, each time tracing a circle around the belly button, the cool prickle of her fingers a delight only matched by knowing how the other families in Lysistrata watched the worksite up on the hill and from their windows muttered to themselves how a Bowers girl had graduated from a Shawnee teepee into a sturdy log cabin in such a short time. Her dreams to that point had intensified, no longer the simple fears she had grown used to since her time in the war and before, now a clear and distinct scene, feeling, of propping her back and elbows against a stiff mattress, spreading her legs until an ache pulled at her groin, the feeling of a weed slowly growing inside her body, wriggling its roots and vinery down through her body and out beyond it, staring down between her legs at the green and brown undergrowth as it spread out into Lysistrata, covered each building and house, choked off the water supplies and blocked all light

from the sun, thriving as it did on their land and resources, the choking off of land and animal and family, the lingering thought of body fluids wiped from her mouth and hands as she returned to watch the scene, determined as she was to keep the pregnancy a secret from her husband until that night, when the main beam had been lifted and the major work of the house completed, with the relatively simple work of the remainder of the roof and the installation of windows and a front door, all easily done by Cad himself, though he would pay the men an extra day's pay to return in the morning and finish the work.

In the house Harmony saw something for her life that to that point she had not encountered, though her decision to leave the war might have qualified, if it took into account anything other than survival, which, in such a case, wouldn't qualify as foresight or anything human, as even the lowest animals run from danger when they know they cannot kill and enemy or that they lives are at risk, hope most would call it, some glimpse for the future that could be improved from the lives she and her husband had been forced to live, a glimmer of hope that was unfamiliar to a Bowers girl as were the funds she used to pay for the house or the husband at her side building it, nor the house itself, all sturdy at the foundation and strong in wall for protection against the winter months, unfamiliar but now at hand, and thus inching towards the familiar with every moment. Harmony caressed her belly and pictured the future in this house, generations of Shirtliffe children in the yard, perhaps near a garden she would plant, growing vegetables and some crops along the land perhaps as her hobbies as the years grew and her inkling for such things increased, children who'd play in the house and learn from their mother what she'd learned form the war, self-reliance and discipline, the ability to stick up for one's self in a fight, no matter the circumstances, in every vision her children as improvement over the life she had lead, not in a way to apologize for it, but rather with the recognition that women and men, mostly women, must do the best with the life they have been given, and that conditions change from generation to the next, with a mother's hope only being that the next set of circumstances be kinder to their children, that their children will be able to manage what situations will undoubtedly arise. As she lingered on thoughts of the future, Harmony's hand abandoned the smooth stroking of her belly and ascended to the thaler necklace draped between her bosom, the warm feel of the medallion between her fingers, thoughts of her own mother showing the necklace to her as a girl, explaining the story of Saint Joachim, who for twenty years begged God for a child, bringing his offering of a lamb to the Temple and the priests turning him away, how the angel Gabriel appeared to the shepherd in a field, and told Joachim that his wife was now with child, a daughter who would bring great joy into the world, but an even greater sorrow for herself, a promise that he would raise the girl then find rest along side his wife in the garden of Gethsemane, returned to her mother's face when she had finished the story and tucked the necklace away for another time, now with a strand of gold through the thaler to replace the worn leather strap, and with a look sometimes at Harmony of the great joy the angel spoke of, other times the pain.

Cad shouted to his wife to come closer, away from the edge of the woods, her dreams, and see for herself the raising of the center beam, sturdy and thick, already balanced on the shoulders of a dozen men, with a call that went out to the neighboring farms, houses, for any strong-backed man, any man with healthy shoulders and a firm grip, to come help the setting of the beam, with Cadmus standing at top of a ladder at the edge of the house, guiding the wooden post to its final resting place, his eyes fixed on the notches in the wood, aligning them perfectly, barking at the men to shift slightly, forward, again, backwards just a step until they had the position just right. Slowly did the scene unfold for Harmony, her hands thrown up from her

belly, the necklace set bouncing violently against her chest, the sound of the worksite and the colors of the land blurring together until all Harmony saw was the stumbling of sturdy-bodied men onto the ground, their burden slipped, a scream like an echo resounding from her throat, perhaps already the second or third such scream, but only now registered in her ears, the slow response of her body as she moved to run towards the accident, as if in a dream where she imagined being chased by the Mullin boys, where her body wouldn't respond, a drudging of feet and the ache in her legs dropping her to the ground, pressing her there, pinning her hips and shoulders low to the earth, as if bowing towards some holy altar, her arms extended flat along the ground, the sickness in her belly erupted, choked by the panic already occupying her throat, until in a sudden rush the world snapped back into order, colors returned to the dead ground and barren trees, the sounds of men yelling for help and struggling to pull the huge log from Cad's chest, the utter motionlessness of his body beneath the weight of the bulwark, other than the gradual soaking of crimson into the earth.

Of course, in hindsight, knowing what we now know of the Bowers family as a whole, some say that old John Cadmus Shirtliffe was thrown under by a force far beyond his control, or that he must have known somehow what was coming and arranged those men to stumble, or that he must have thrown his body under that beam voluntarily, perhaps from the top of that ladder catching his own glimpse of the future that would unfold in that piece of property, what had already occurred with Agape and what would soon come with the child, a man not as oblivious perhaps as a wife might think, taking notice as they will how a woman will excuse herself early in the morning, before eating breakfast even, rush away without so much as an explanation, deriving as men might that every sickness a woman encounters must have some relation to childbirth, and thus seen for himself the children and children's children, perhaps even the judge's office room where two unnamed descendants quarreled over who was the illegitimate father between them, on account of a mixed-breed girl from some far away state, or perhaps knowing his own role in the Bowers line when it came to men, and decided that a quick exit suited his tastes and purposes best. In any case, Harmony emptied her tears at the building site, more for her fatherless child, probably, than for the man she only half-tolerated during his life, though as he was part of some ideal picture for her, the husband which every respectable, moneyed woman had, along with the child, still thriving in her belly, to the point that she cried not a tear at the man's funeral nor at the burial, when they lowered his casket, store-bought and shiny into the cemetery just down the road from her newly finished cabin. All the more amazed were the men and women of Lysistrata, particularly the men, when right after the burial she did not return to her home to begin the tasks of decorating or mourning (we never have learned just who finished the work, what remained after the necessary cleaning) but instead headed to the sheriff's station in the middle of town, marched into his office, which also acted as the legal center for the town at the time, and changed her name officially, then and there, not an hour after her husband was set to rest, changed her name back to Harmony Bowers, returned to her home and began to finish the work on the house that the men had left for her, the nailing of flat wooden planks to serve as the interior walls, handfuls of nails and a single hammer at her disposal, until the entire house was finished and Harmony could close and lock the door to the outside, waiting to deliver her child.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Next we turn to Richard, hero of our eyes, hearts, a model for our sons, and we dare say some of our husbands as well, upright and noble in your uniform, handsomer by far, than the other men of your generation, strong of conviction and business sense, as our husbands have more than once gotten the short end of the stick in their dealings with you! Yet you are a credit to your family and line in that we resent you nothing of your success, your service to the city and country a credit not easily erased, not easily forgotten by we women who keep tallies of such affairs, who forgive your indiscretions, and, some of us, who participate in them as well. How have you found yourself in such an office, arguing such an abomination as the fathering of an illegitimate child? Have you not to simply lay out your evidence and be done with the matter? Is it not a simple matter of setting the terms, making your points, drawing distinction between your brother's deeds and your own? Why then do you pace and dally in the Judge's chambers, walking this way and that, waving your arms and raising your voice, though we see only the bulges in your neck and the strained convulsions of your face, the walls especially well-built in the Judge's chambers, rather than settle the matter and resume your rightful place in our esteem and good graces? We stand behind you as we would any great man from our ranks, a boy at first, unfortunately raised by Suppina, though she be one of our own, who often sent you out in dresses and the like, till you were old enough to escape, to the taunts of the other children, though now those same taunts you have returned in full, through the splendor of your living, of the house and hearth of brick you have built to warm yourself and your progeny!

Then in the line stood Violet Bowers, her heritage and, thus, her future, determined the day Harmony died in her sleep and left the thaler necklace for the next generation to bear, a tall, muscular woman, Violet, resembling more her father, long since dead by their daughter's twenty-seventh birthday, unmarried despite being the best-looking of the Bowers line, as all rumor and photographs confirm, a balanced face with slender nose and almond-shaped eyes, petite cheekbones and a smile that opened without much prompting, again more like her father than the line of Bowers women, but a smile which also revealed the streak of mischief, being her mother's, and her grandmother's daughter, and thus more willful and determined than any man could, or would stand, to suffer in the institution of marriage, or any other type of arrangement. Thus as her mother had before her, at the outbreak of her country at war, Violet Bowers rushed to the heart of the battles and intended to volunteer her services, though rather than a south-eastern route, Violet hurried all the way to the east coast, to Boston, in fact, to defend her country and the nobility of her family's occupation in the disguise of a man, raised as she was on interest and accustomed to hearing her mother's accounts of the battles, what opportunities lay in store for a woman willing to deceive in order to achieve them. Before leaving, she entrusted the family farm to the men Harmony had hired to tend the land she purchased with her money, the land which in both food for her table and the revenues it yielded, had provided Harmony the means to raise Violet in relative comfort, perhaps more so than many of the other children in Lysistrata, so that when Violet rushed away that summer, these workers were surprised in no way to see her go as they were honest enough to keep to the business of the farm in her absence. Thus, when Violet took the medallion in her hand, on her northeastern journey, she thought of the fortunes her mother had experienced, all the good s in her life rather than the catastrophes, which for the necklace was the first time in its life that someone had attached any feelings of luck or disadvantage, any moralizing on the item at all, objects being as neutral as they are in the affairs of men and women, only good or evil in their implementation, or in the case of the thaler,

when so much misfortune compiles together in a single item that the object has no choice but to endure the burden of human evaluation.

Violet Bowers arrived to find the Atlantic Ocean a misty gray lapping of waves, disorganized and violent, and nearly fainted when she saw the bustle of activity, the smell of fish mongers in the streets against the salty sea air and Massachusetts swelter, a road paved with rounded, reddish bricks and the stalls surrounding Faneuil Hall, more like a church than a marketplace, tall as two houses, red brick to match the streets, with a white and rounded steeple, itself topped with a grasshopper weathervane, rows of windows pouring light inside onto the vendor's stalls, tables and benches to line both sides of the building as Violet passed, mouth agape at the breads and pastries of every kind, meats and cheeses, clothing and tankards, stalls for beer and tea, shopkeepers tending to customers rather like parishioners or church-goers more so than those with monies jingling their purses, in their intensity, and the desperation of the salesmen pitching their wares, no different than preachers working to convince their disbelieving flocks, or chiding the stragglers and strays who fell from the holy message and refused all invitations to return to the fold, these salesmen far less compromising, initiating the bargain, hawking their wares until the weary customers either succumbed to the pressure and bought the goods, or ran off even more disenchanted from the stalls. With her own purse of coins Violet approached one of the pastry carts, and chose from its baskets a square of bread that contained sweet chocolate on the inside, pulling coins from her purse, setting them on the table in order to count the correct price, dragging each coin into a single pile until she reached the sum, as she had done her whole life in Lysistrata. As every traveler knows (even those who haven't been to Boston or any other city of such size) showing your money is never a good idea, particularly for women, as the display invites pickpockets and all sorts of miscreants, which for Violet was an unfortunate turn of events, even in the broadest of daylight, as she leaned to take the pastry from the table and two men bumped into her, a rough exchange of elbows and shoulders, confusion mostly, puzzlement, until Violet regained her senses, slid her hands back to the table and found her coins removed, the vendor's face as vacant as the empty leather purse in her grip.

"Where has my money gone?" she asked, but no one replied in the din of the marketplace.

On her way from Faneuil Hall, distraught in her quick retreat from the marketplace, Violet passed the staircases leading to the second level of the building, each platform lined with men, some in their city clothes, perhaps recently purchased in one of the nearby clothiers, cuffs pressed and creases in their pants sharp as bayonets, others in shabby farm coverings, stained with mud that did not rinse in the rivers or washbasins, each man apparently now an equal in line, their values no longer in their occupations or standing among their fellow citizens, but solely valued for the utilities of their bodies, each now waiting to volunteer to defend the country yet again in its infancy, the tables of military men eagerly writing the names into long ledgers while the men spoke of atrocities committed against the fatherland, of the brazenness of British fleets and intentions. For a moment Violet thought of her mother as the faces of men blurred in her hindsight, standing in such lines the last time war threatened their country, now a chance for veterans to regain their camaraderie and an opportunity for younger men to prove their worth, but she did not stop on her way from the building, aimed straightway for the ocean, its vigorous mist and regal violence, where at a point on the docks, where the waters all but surrounded her, the damp humidity in her lungs as equally drenching her feet and legs, the faint tips of land appearing on the distant horizon, perhaps chimeras or illusions, perhaps clouds rolling low along the sea-top, perhaps Violet's imagination longing for the witches of Salem she had heard, whose

trials she had followed through what scattered accounts reached distant Lysistrata. She then pictured herself back in Faneuil Hall, lengthy hair shorn close to her scalp, sharing in the very same line as the men, though Violet had intended to use her money to rent a room, perhaps buy a set of men's clothing and join those soldiers to fight, all plans and strategies carried off now by the damp air on the shore.

"Come in from the dark, lass," a woman's voice called to Violet from behind.

Violet turned to see an older woman, thick at the shoulders, waist, and thighs, approaching from the lines of darkly lit houses further inland from the shore, a motherly look in the woman's face, caring and calculating, the remnants of dark hairs still visible on her upper lip and chin, now pink and exposed in the night, her eyes half closed behind their lids, with only the dark black of pupils peering out to the world.

"I have no money for a room," Violet replied.

"A woman's place is not in the darkness," the woman said.

Violet's eyes adjusted to the bright lamps of the woman's home, a tall, long building with at least a half a dozen windows overlooking the darkness of the Boston streets, passed dark alleyways which she had never experienced in Lysistrata, their confined spaces walled off with brick, impassable corners and the unknown lurking at each step, perhaps women and men who lived in such places, as Violet imagined hearing breathing or low groaning voices, though such a thing was also unheard in her hometown, while the gaslights of the woman's home, and the very size of the building gave Violet a feeling of comfort, where the darkness and strangeness of the city gradually warmed, as the darkness in her eyes dimmed in the soft orange flames, the memory of her missing purse fading as well each moment her eyes adjusted to the light. Without so much as an introduction Violet watched as the woman hurried off through a set of doors that led to the kitchen, another brightly lit room, leaving Violet to scan the interior and figure what she could of the place, a meal most likely on her mind immediately, the fright of the robbery less serious as the realization that without her monies she could not afford the disguise she would need to join the military, a warm meal, hopefully, from the other side of the doors, what stuffs the nameless woman could muster at such an hour. Through the hallways and the visible corridors, a set of stairs down at the end of the hall, the house itself appeared quiet and peaceful, though from her seat Violet heard the settling and creaking of a much older home, the floorboards bowing and bending as if under the weight of bodies, the knocking of pipes inside the walls, the wind through drafty windows that sounded more like the whisperings of many women and men, lovers, perhaps even giggling or the other passionate breaths that fill the night with a certain music, unspoken in the daylight and forbidden by preachers to enjoy, nevertheless recognizable to any man or women of the right age and experience, though the darkness of the house concealed what Violet could have learned from any causes for these sounds. Instead Violet folded her hands across the tabletop and waited for the woman to return with her food, perhaps now thinking as her mother would have done, rather than sit idly by and allow the weight of circumstances to stand in her way, but rather, what actions she might for herself take, what initiative was fitting for a Bowers woman, who, despite their budding history of misfortune always seemed to find another way of settling scores, and thus Violet stared into the lamps and considered her options, to find quick employment and save the monies, to join the fight when first able, and mostly to inquire as to the kindness of the woman now bringing a full plate to the table, what her name was, and the gratefulness for her generosity.

"Call me Ms. Wood," the woman said.

"Violet Bowers."

"Where are you from?"

"Kentucky," she answered. "A small town in Kentucky."

"Came to see what the city could offer a girl like you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"We'll look after you," the woman said. "What happened? Left behind by your man? Robbed of your money?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"I take in all kinds," she said. "Until they can get back on their feet."

"I am much obliged," Violet said.

"Are you, now?"

The woman lit a small candle and waved her hand for Violet to follow down the dark hallways towards the rear of the house, where a wide staircase led upwards, stairs covered with thick red carpeting and tiny brass rivets holding the flooring down, with brass railings curved in thick, sweeping lines, though no painting or artwork on the walls, which seemed strange, if but for the general quality of the rest of the house, as it seemed to a girl from Lysistrata with no more experience of the world than what she could read at home, or what she had learned in her brief hours along the Atlantic seaboard. Violet followed the faint light to a landing at the top of the stairs, where half a dozen other women sat in round chairs, each lined with more red fabric and brass buttons, each half-clothed or in some similar state of undress, women younger than Violet, to her eyes, though like Ms. Wood, each plastered with thick, colorful makeup, that in the shadows gave their faces several years of unearned experience, gray flickers of age against the pale youthfulness of their bodies and skin, covered as they were in various underwear and unmentionables. The women smiled as Violet passed, speechless as if hushed beforehand by Ms. Wood, some code they kept to and did not abandon, their eyes following Violet as she passed on her way down the hall, glances to measure and summarize, looks to evaluate and appraise, so used these women were to bringing new members to their fold, the endless hunger for more girls, younger girls, if not younger in age than in experience, a drive and desire no doubt filled by these women in their waiting area, each with a door and a bed waiting for the next fare, though to Violet, thankful merely for the room and hospitality, at one time in the hallway congratulating Ms. Wood on the number of strays she'd managed to raise without obvious benefit of a husband, as if she had never heard of a brothel, as if she had not passed these women and their inquiries and noticed their differences, but rather only as other unfortunates as herself, some act of will, a deception, not as honest women in search of a helping hand, a stepping stone to more noble pursuits.

"Here is your room," Ms. Wood said. "I will be back later to check on you."

Perhaps it was the giggling of the women as she passed their ranks on the landing, or the manner of their dress, or the very differences in their features, skins, faces, eyes, that, while unnoticed at first, gradually dawned in Violet's mind, or perhaps the obvious questions any women ought to ask under such circumstances, questions that involve the reciprocity of all things when it concerns a woman's care, be it marriage or prostitution, each an exchange more or less sanctioned and carried through by the world, one in the darkness and the other in the light of God's church and the official papers sworn to in the sight of witnesses, or the noises she'd heard in the lower rooms now amplified, the thin wooden walls through which she heard the unmistakable grunting of men, sweaty, desperate men pounding away at some nameless girl beneath their weight, perhaps one of the girls from the staircase and perhaps one of countless others who used these rooms for such duties, then, perhaps, the raising of these men in chorus

with the squeaks and squeals they demanded from the girls beneath them, their names called into the night, or the banging of headboards, when such luxuries permitted, against the walls, rhythms from several of the rooms against the voice and the groaning of the floor beneath their activities, the rustle of money on the mattresses or the fists of coins and cash exchanging hands, the odor of sex and tobacco seeping through the drafty rooms, of passion spent and exhausted and rectified by the gold or silver or paper that traded hands, all sounds and experiences wrapped together as Violet rested on her own mattress. For a moment Violet comforted herself by stroking her thaler necklace between thumb and forefinger, by imagining that perhaps several kinds of women lived under the roof, some of that profession and others like herself, that each girl, with her own room and meals provided, was left to earn her money as she saw fit, but for the generosity of Ms. Wood and the opportunity for most, she figured, in such a town would inevitably bring the kind of men who frequented such places, their bags of money, until the sums and offers grew to such an amount that the quickest earnings went to the girls most desperate to earn them, a series of choices Violet drifted to sleep thinking she had yet to be in such a position to make.

"Are you sleeping?" Ms. Wood yelled from the other side of the door, her fists banging loud against the wood. "No one sleeps at this hour."

Dazed, Violet ran to the door and swung it open.

"I've brought you your first," Ms. Wood laughed, and pushed a young man into the room, past Violet's arm.

"There is a mistake," Violet said.

"No mistake," the woman answered. Then, turning to the man, she said, "See, I told you. Her first night."

The man grinned but showed no teeth from his enjoyment, nor any sign of amusement at the misunderstanding.

"Two hours." Ms. Wood slammed the door and shouted from the hallway.

With his left hand the man covered Violet's mouth and with the right he struggled to tear away the clothing between her legs, the shock at what had occurred during the past few minutes paralyzing Violet on the mattress, still somewhat dazed at being woken from sleep, stunned by the odor of fish and booze on the man's skin and clothes, not merely a moderate drink after supper, or of a market shop's handling of fish, perhaps even pleasant as he sold his catches to fine women and men, but the stench of drunken lechery mixed with slaughter and fish-blood on the man, stale ocean water, of fishhooks and gutting boards, of rotten innards and perhaps very little else, soaked past the man's clothing and into his hair, his flesh, stronger and more pungent as he undid his own pants and shirt, exposed more skin to the cold air, all motions one handed, the confusion in her eyes masked only by the determination in his, having shoved her to the mattress when she slapped his face at the advance, having punched her twice in the stomach to loosen her grip in the corset strings, the tug of her hair and head against the mattress as he climbed on top of her, pinning her shoulders, spreading her legs with his knees, all the while wordless and inhuman, only the burn of anger in his eyes, frustration, the momentary flux of power in his polluted blood at taking control of this woman on a mattress, all other aspects of his life powerless and impotent, the lowest rung on a seaboard occupied by such men, now rendering his mastery in what way he can, not over other men via occupation or standing, but fists and knees and penetration against a creature, who, in a fairer fight, without the elements of shock and surprise, could have offered more challenge, and exacted as many wounds as she endured. The man's throat opened with a faint grunt, his limbs slackened against her body and gradually rolled over on the mattress, asleep as soundly as violently he'd been just moment before.

Violet rummaged along the floor to find the man's pocket watch, cheap and second-hand as it appeared, though accurate in time, the entire encounter lasting a brief few minutes, the other rooms seemingly silent now in the night, perhaps with all the men now spent and the women counting the earnings, making two piles of their money, one for their own pocket and one for Ms. Wood, the floorboards silent as the bedposts, the windows filled only with cold air from the street, rather than the warm breath of women and men, and now with the silence of the night broken only with the clock's ticking, tucked the watch away into her fist, and removed her torn clothing in the darkness and then, finding a knife in the man's pocket, hacking away at her own hair until the long dark curls dropped onto the floor, until Violet's head of hair fit neatly beneath the man's cap. The man's other clothing hung nearly fitted against her body as Violet snuck down the hallway to the staircase, patting in her coat-pocket the man's wallet and purse, enough money for a reputable room and several days' worth of meals and recovery and perhaps a new set of clothes for her disguise, the current shirt somewhat tight around the shoulders and chest, the pant-waist held tight with the man's belt, the shoes fitted with socks and two handkerchiefs shoved into the toes, a quick walk past the empty chairs and dark, quiet rooms, doors closed, no sign of Mrs. Wood, past the kitchen where her empty dinner plate still sat, and out the door into the humid Boston night.

Violet woke with a shiver, her back against the hard, damp floor of the rowboat's deck, the sun a dull blur behind the layers of fog and the early morning mist still hovering over the ocean waters, yet to warm in the summer heat, the taste of brine on her tongue, lips parched and cracking until the traces of blood themselves only crusted away with a wipe from her sleeve, as the other soldiers had done while laying in wait, Violet's first mission and duty with the Marines stationed in Boston, to hunt down pirates, who themselves worked for Britain, or for their own greed, sacking U.S. ships along the harbor and carrying off their goods for the black market. With the rigors of basic training avoided on land, as the demand for soldiers outstripped the military's ability to properly train and prepare new recruits, Violet found her training on her first missions by watching and following the other soldiers, the incident at Ms. Wood's brothel already fading in the light of such excitements as battles and war, though rarely speaking at all, a characteristic not uncommon among the men, serious as they were with the business of war, that none attempted to pry from Violet's mouth what this new soldier among them was not prepared to offer willingly. In truth they had encountered no pirates, neither the romanticized version she had once imagined, nor the more brutal kind, mercenaries of all nationalities and creeds who for the value of a sack of coins plundered what vessels they could, oftentimes acting on behalf of both sides of the war, to the point that the nationality of the ship under attack determined the nationality of the attackers, so long as the stream of payments continued uninterrupted and the demands of commerce continued to launch ships into the cold harbors. Violet leaned over the side of the shallow skiff, her two partners amused that she still succumbed to sea-sickness, even after two weeks on the water, more than enough time for the average soldier to gather his sea-legs, though completely unaware that their newest member was in fact a woman beneath the thick, heavy uniform, a recruit at the top of her form, as measured by her superiors, her face concealed with the grime and muck of the ocean's slop, her sickness this morning coming at the arrival of another Marine patrol, with orders to return immediately to land, for which Violet was secretly apprehensive, as the more contact she had with other soldiers, the more chance she had of losing her disguise, orders to report back to base and prepare for a major offensive to launch in a matter of days.

In August of 1812 Violet Bowers set out with all the other men on the USS Constitution, her disguise sound and solid, never once betraying her secret to the other men she bunked with deep inside the battleship, careful as she was to use the latrine when the men had gone to bed, or before they woke in the morning, her body adapting to the disguise as well, never demanding anything for itself during such hours and holding all off necessities until Violet was sure to escape notice, or the way she volunteered for scout duties when her cabin was due for bathing, instead wiping herself with rags while posted high in the Constitution's network of sails and canopies, a myriad of triangles, and poles topped with tiny perches, where Violet could hide for much of the day and stare out into the waters of the Atlantic, where the ship intended to battle the HMS Guerriere. The Constitution was a long, slender ship, tall in the harbor with its masts painted white, though dulled, and a whitish strip stretching the length of the ship's side, broken only by the holes where cannons would poke their heads into the open and fire on opposing ships. If any of the fellow soldiers suspected Violet and her trickery, they made no mention of it, especially when the cannon fire began from the Guerriere, tremendous explosions muffled against the open sea and sky, the bracing of the soldiers upon that first anticipated impact, the thud of the artillery against the Constitution's heavy sides, and the hoorahs that rose from the men, reaching all the way to the highest fighting-top where Violet sat perched with her firearm and picked off British soldiers with carefully aimed shots, her familiarity with guns part of every girl in Lysistrata's training, as the cannonballs fell harmlessly into the ocean, whereby the Marines began to call the ship amongst themselves *Ironsides*, round after round of fruitless enemy fire, until the ship became *Old Ironsides* to the men, and woman, protected by its layers of wooden siding, thick oak of various ages and depths, which repelled every attack until the Marines plucked the surviving British from the waters, held them as captives in the boat's hull, and sunk the Guerriere until its frame and deck and all disappeared beneath the green waters, a scene which Violet watched from on high, to the horizon to scout for the Constitution's next victim.

The men of the Constitution shouted upwards to the soldier perched on the highest mast, laughing, calling the lone creature a "star-gazer" as if as an insult for not coming down more often, for not mixing among their ranks. In truth, Violet preferred the heights of the mast and its solitude, especially during the nights, when the light of the sun ducked away and the clarity of stars spread across the sky, nothing of land or noise to pervert the view, other than the wash of the waves against the boat's thick sides, or the random rustlings of men in their slumber. Though unaware of their names, nor even their proper orders, Violet soon learned to draw the ancient pictures of these stars, pokes of light, and found the collection of bears, crabs, archers, gods, dogs, utensils, fish, great heroes, unfortunates, spiders, swans, and all the rest, held her breath at the northern lights, each dusk excitedly propping her body for the celestial parade and demonstration. With her knowledge of the stars, Violet became a favorite of the ship's guides, when even the captain would consult the soldier's opinion when the course required setting, and as such the star-gazer came closer to control of the ship than any of the men in the hulls or decks, more powerful than she, perhaps, more cunning, more ambitious in their own desires to overtake the captain and rule the waters, but never with the access Violet enjoyed. Though when the captain invited the star-gazer to descend and give her bearings, she refused, preferring to remain on her heights and send down the measurements as requested, with no interest at all of what occurred in the world below.

Leaning against the perch, Violet paused from her duties as the men beneath her celebrated, the air a bit colder at the heights of the ship's firing-tops than down on the decks

where already the spirits and whiskey plundered from the British vessel were opened and the men celebrated their success, tobacco as well, the officers allowing such revelry in reward for the day's victory, as well as for the success of the ship's magnificent hulls, and in the solitude of her post felt her stomach tighten, perhaps from the salty air, then again, perhaps from not being adapted to life on the high seas, at once an altogether experience than the shallows waters of the bay, her fingers slipping beneath the layers of uniform until at last reaching the skin, pressing against the spot where the tightness occurred, the flutter or quiver she felt beneath her skin around the belly, though for some time hidden by the battle and its excitement, by the thrill of shooting men from some distance away, the nameless work of the sharp-shooter, but now with the din of battle settled and the din of aftermath now underway, the pains in her abdomen intensified. Violet pressed the thick muscle where her stomach had been, though always exercised, and even more defined now after the rigors of military life had flattened her stomach and even carved the first traces of definition in her body, now all progress halted, the processes that would make of her form a man's body, instead the thick round muscle now plumped from her belly, a pouch that extended beyond her belt, hung over its leather, were she to stand and reveal to the men below the secrets of her body while they drank and shouted into the night air. At once Violet knew it was a child, her sole encounter at the brothel now a bright light against her eyes, not brilliant or stunning but blinding and awful, the taste of the man's tongue against her cheeks and gums, the reflex to gag at his every move, each new fish-odor that sprouted from his body, the discomfort of penetration and the stickiness that followed, though a majority wiped away into the bed-sheets, apparently not thoroughly enough, and from her stoop Violet tried to figure a way to escape the situation, perhaps to jump from the mast and crash into the men below, all at once a viable option in the face of her situation, where the men could scoop her body from the deck and discern in the corpse the woman in their midst, her secret concealed as much with the uniform as with the marksmanship demonstrated during the battle, a long, graceful dive into the hard wood below, the rush of wind against her face as she tumbled and the relief that awaited upon impact, though her palm remained flat against the muscle in her stomach, and the tiny jabs beneath her skin turned her form the ledge and back to watching the horizon for enemies.

For nearly three more months Violet Bowers stretched her soldier's pay to live and hide away in the dark corners of Boston through the end of summer and early autumn, the change of colors in the trees outside her window surpassed only by the drop in temperatures at night that leaked through the panes of glass and the windowsill, or the chill of early morning before dawn when Violet would sneak from her boarding room to the marketplace for the bland fruits and vegetables, the jars of broth that sustained her pregnancy and its sicknesses, the gradual plump of her belly larger and more pronounced each day, storefronts and open arcades where she heard the news from the war, and all other daily occurrences, how Congress rewarded the leaders of the Constitution gold and silver medals for their victory over the Guerriere, and the crew to divide their share of fifty-thousand dollars by virtue of their heroism and the general lift to the nation's spirits such a victory provided in the face of so often being set back by the British. She grabbed at the produce and tucked it away in a shallow basket under her arms, all the while the eyes of other women would trace her body and detect the bulge in her shirt, most offering a look of disdain at such happenings, their eyes following from her torso down the length of her shoulder and arm, along her forearm and wrist, until finally settling on the empty ring-finger she took no measures to hide from plain sight, as if proud of her act and its accomplishments, though a rare few women, religious women by oath and devotion, or the rare minister's wife, could offer only

wordless solidarity, or at best dropped an occasional coin into her basket and patted the unfortunate girl as she passed. All the while, Violet's hair gradually returned to a more acceptable length, for any of the women in Boston, or Lysistrata for that matter, though she continued to wrap her head in scarves and handkerchiefs whenever she walked in public, certain to cover her face as well and to avoid the more heavily trafficked agoras, where the chance of bumping into her former shipmates was highest, though the Constitution itself had shoved off once again to battle, this duty headed to Brazil to defend all interests there, or worse, to bump into some reminder of Lysistrata, what with the distractions of war all but gone and Violet left to her room for the vast majority of days, to contemplate the child in her belly, first and foremost, an exercise which always led to Lysistrata, her own mother and her upbringing there, to guess at the year's harvest and if the hired hands were keeping to their end of the bargain, but also of the shame of having to return to such a town, not only having seen for herself what worlds larger cities might offer, but to know that in the minds of the townspeople, her pregnancy would seem nothing more than a continuation of her family's long, sordid story, if not as exciting or exotic as her foremothers, than equally as ruined, yet another unmarried mother to bring yet another Bowers child into the cold, tragic world.

And yet when the money began to dwindle, not from excess spending or carelessness as she first demonstrated upon arriving to the city, but rather the slow emptying of the pockets which day to day survival in such places demanded, Violet packed her few clothes and spent her last remaining dollars on a stagecoach that would drop her off a few day's walk from Lysistrata, resolved in her head to ignore as best she could what would certainly be a delight they took in her misfortune, to reclaim the farm and make for herself an honorable life, mentioning nothing of her experiences in the war as her mother once had, for such talk would only fuel the gossip among the ladies as to the circularity of certain families and the unavoidable nature of Bowers women to both seek trouble and at the same time have it find them so thoroughly. On the stagecoach Violet mostly, uncomfortably slept—an uneasy rest filled with the same dream, repeated time after time, of a young woman falling from the sky, never hitting ground but endlessly approaching it, endlessly heavier than the moments prior, with a chorus of redbirds chirping past as they circled around their nests, as if a school of fish in shallow waters—taking an occasional look around, cold as the coach was as it rumbled westward through thick groves of trees and an occasional stopping post in the larger towns, all other times focused on the child in her belly, one hand draped across the ever-rounding growth from her body, the other hand upon the thaler necklace, as if the same motion for each, wondering what circumstances had led to the creation of each, the history that would be told of each, the future each would have to endure on account of its relationship to the Bowers and their succession of women, until Violet finally succumbed to sleep and encountered the dream yet again, each time more and more resentful of the child in her belly, not as a reminder of the night itself, of the attack or the shame, or as some shallow recollection of the man and his odor, nor even of the opportunities this child, with its existence, had snuffed, more excitement amidst the military, perhaps, a chance to travel the world, the limitations of parenthood far more pronounced and inflicted on a woman than a man would have to endure, hopping port to port as they were wont, nor even of the intrusion on her body, its distortion of her form and mood and health, but rather a resentment for the reinforcement of what her mother had for so long fought against, the idea that the Bowers women were ungodly and loose, rough and ungentle creatures deserving of no more than a Christian's pity and a few scraps, an idea now embodied in the child within, moreover, that it

was the touch of this very same child in her belly, a warm press of the palm and fingers, that kept Violet perched to the fighting-top of the Constitution, rather than that long and final plunge.

Violet Bowers returned home to find Lysistrata much as she had left it, the people of town shocked to see her in such a state, but not yet quite willing to help her along the road, though nothing of that response, the town's response, surprised her. On the other hand, the families living in the Bowers house, when she opened the door, the women at first startled by the intruder, rushed to the scene to find Violet Bowers and helped her into the bedroom, as if recognizing her, along with the late-coming men, shouting orders at their wives to care for the women, who she was, as if they'd never seen Violet's face before in such light, and forgotten since she'd gained so much weight on account of the child, so that in the bedroom Violet found herself surrounded by a cluster of women each experienced in the labor and delivery of children. At last spring arrived to Lysistrata, a season which the women in care of Violet knew would pry that baby from her belly, the house in wonderful shape as the men had worked in various ways to improve it, to build new furniture and decorate the bare walls with carvings, to install new planks into the floor and even to make a rocking chair for the living area, which the women took turns using to calm their children to sleep, the season of warm air and heavy rains in Kentucky, the smell of new life like leaves on the beech trees, a season Violet loved, the ache and stinging pain in her lower back excruciating as she tried to find a comfortable way to rest in her bed, all positions failing, when at last the first ripples of labor shook her belly in wide, thick muscular bands, reaching out from her spine and wrapping around her belly, as if two arms locked around her body in a tight squeeze. Right away the midwives moved into position, shuttling the children outside, but for a few of the older girls whose job it was to bring fresh water to boil or blot whatever blood or fluids might flow with towels and sheets, the women taking turns pressing the small of Violet's back, just above the tailbone, most often with their fists but also with warm towels, moving Violet until she crouched on her hands and knees, arched her back, poked her butt high into the air, with the contractions that grew more frequent and powerful as the minutes and hours passed, all the while asking Violet what name she'd picked for the child, if it were a boy or a girl, knowing very well it would be a girl, on account of the way she carried the baby so close to her body, trying to ease the pain of back labor by rocking Violet's bottom up and down, when combined with the pressures on her back.

"Git the tub," one of the women said, and right away the young girls began to fill the tub with water from the stove.

Violet calmed for a while in the warm water, now naked in the sight of the midwives at their craft, but for the thaler necklace they all noticed on her neck, perhaps because their husbands had mentioned the talisman and how it passed from mother to daughter, until finally the touch of blood rose up from the bottom of the tub and colored the water, like wisps of crimson smoke from a fire, curling upwards in slow motion, as if immune to the activity and excitement of the birth itself, a calm natural progression of cause and effect that surfaced and puddled in the tub as the women hoisted Violet from the water, toweled her body, and returned her to her hands and knees upon the bed, rocking her pelvis again, now with one of the larger women pressing the tops of Violet's hipbones together, as if to widen the baby's passage in accordance with some ancient and well-proven technique, learned at some distant past and thus handed down from mother to daughter every time nature took hold and the process of birthing children placed these women together in confined rooms, with only their own knowledge of what was to happen guiding them, a knowledge as natural and unassuming as could be, rather than the ideas of men, who waited in the outside room as if across the gorge from hell to heaven, avoiding

for their own sake what happened on the other side of the door but at all times riveted to the words and grunts, the low muffled work of a woman in the exercise of labor, her lower back on fire with the child as she began to push, the urge no longer controllable, shouting to the women that she had to push, then squatted on two feet, the women crouching and rocking her pelvis until all at once the pain in her back ceased, something inside Violet's body turned, and the woman delivered a strong, healthy girl to the world, the child itself flat on her back, staring up into the ceiling.

"Call her Suppina," Violet said to the women. "Star-gazing like that on her back, sure to face the heavens now as any baby that's ever been born."

At last to poor Katy, redeemed Katy, to some degree, who backed away from the precipice only to find herself entwined in a far more complex web, of fathers and their rightful daughters, of brothers long at odds, now forced to settle their accounts, though what hangs in the balance is far more precious than money or counterweights, but a child, a girl, who must be trained as a woman if she is to survive anything in Lysistrata, an obligation that will fall to you, no matter how difficult it may seem, or how hard you will try to shirk the duty. Run quickly through the woods, blinded by rage and righteous indignation, blinded by the branches whipping against your cheeks, run through the woods from that forgotten, shunned, forgettable place, a cabin where the unspeakable has occurred, again and again, though we do not dare dwell on the thoughts for long, but rather relegate such places to the darkest corners of the past, and hope they will die there as well. Have you not looked into the family you inherited, the proud line of women who carried that name, that burden, long before you? Take strength in their strength, courage in their courage, but stand among them proud in your accomplishments! Hurry quick to the scene, and do not delay for rest or thirst or the weight of what it is you come to bear, but to this town and gathering, to this Judge's chambers and the men therein, to this girl who rocks alone in her chair, moving to some distant music, unheard by our ears but clear as a cardinal's voice to her own, hurry to this place and bring what it is you have discovered, the eyes and intuition of a woman so far beyond those of men, a woman's inkling for justice, for the spark of justice.

Not with flint will you arrive to this kindling, this crowded square, not with the stone and hammer will you set this pile of logs ablaze, but words, the merest of articles we might ever carry in our possession, accounts and stories, narratives buried away and the sorting of which will decide the fates of these we now see through the window, stirring violently, dried and parched like firewood, neatly arranged, the sturdiest logs at the bottom, to burn the slowest, the longest to catch but also the longest to burn, while inside the kindling waist to ignite with your touch, to smolder, spread, catch and grow, flicker from yellow to blue to white, all from the touch you will bring, the thickest smoke to rise from the bundle and choke off the crowd, render us, them, we unable to see or smell or even hear, but hot and noisy! How they will rush for buckets of water to erase the blaze, how the men will scramble for blankets to smother the flame while it is still young, still growing, will move to stamp her out but will fail in their hurriedness! Shall we women stand idly by and watch as the flames grow, devour them, smoke them out? Some will feel the itch to help their husbands, brothers, sons, but as a chorus we will hold them in check, until the last branch in burned and the fire calmly dies, by its own spent fuel or the rain of God to soften our burdens.

Of course John and Richard Bowers no doubt know of this history as they sit, stone-faced in the judge's chambers, perhaps they even heard it from Suppina's mouth before she went dark, a chain of stories as familiar to them as their own childhood, at the same time unfamiliar, cloudy and distant though it be at their ages, yet part of their memories and thus capable of being remembered, should they take the time to remember it, occupied as they are now with Judge Northcut's office and the matter of the young girl Penelope, her audacity, lack of decorum, looking for answers that other, decent families are able to conceal, of the arguments through the window as to their whereabouts and what-fors during the awful exercise of war. Then again, perhaps they are as ignorant of these women in their blood as most men are of such things, having heard the stories no doubt from their mother and having the stories in turn obliterated by the men and their fanciful tales, if not outright falsehoods, for the sake of puffing the young boy's chests and giving them cause to answer their problems with gunfire and fists, though admittedly, for the Bowers family, this was an exercise of more feminine roots than any of the men, until the current brood.

Men being as they are, though, we'd doubt if anything of these stories are in their heads, even now, no thought or concern for their mother or the line of women who brought them into the world, the damage they're doing those very same women now dragging the family's dirtiest deeds through the streets of Lysistrata, not to mention the inexcusable shame and humiliation one of those boys has brought to the house, this girl's quest, the circumstances of that child's conception and birth, the indecency of a girl that age traveling alone, something our daughters would never have done, nor thought to do, of all that might happen to a young women on the many roads between Alabama and here, especially for a girl of such build, such maturity, as to tempt a man, being as they are, who might act on such temptation regardless of the child's age. Though, perhaps the Bowers boys are considering their mother, at the very least, wondering what she would have said about the whole affair, though unpleasant to think about for too long, perhaps the boys sit motionless in the judge's office on account of motherly shame they feel, even from the grave, rising up from that other world and filling those boys with the disgrace they ought to otherwise feel on their own, raised as they were to feel such things when the actions warranted, the picture of Suppina rocking in the corners of that old cabin, or the streak of anguish in her face the night they went to war against her wishes.

CHAPTER NINE

In his chair, Judge Northcut seems to John a spitting image of what his beloved General Zollicoffer might have looked like, had the General survived the battle at Mill Springs, had he noticed the enemy in plain clothes, had he been less careless in battle and allowed to grow slightly fatter in the chest and belly on the remainders of war, allowed to age his face with heavy wrinkles around the eyes and mouth, his hair to thin with worry and more mature responsibilities. Judge Northcut is otherwise a tall man, thin in the arms and legs, with a widow's peak that shapes his hair into three distinct sections, two slightly wavy, chestnut tufts over his ears, which connect at the back of his head, and a single island of hair, also the darkest shade of brown, though speckled with some lighter, greyer hairs, that like a wave flourishes forward onto the man's brow. His face, likewise, falls long and thin from his hairline, with thin brows as if penciled in two arches over his deep, wide eyes, brown as his hair, with a pointed goatee, an unkempt tuft of hairs to cover his chin and upper lip. With his high white collar and black bowtie, his silk vest poking from behind a tailored uniform jacket, Judge Northcut looks every bit the man who arrived to Lysistrata after the war, a native from the east coast, Connecticut, with ambitions to rise to power in the western lands, part for the adventure of the wilderness, as he saw it, partly for the upward mobility such enterprises allowed. Behind his grand, imposing desk, on the wall over his shoulder, Judge Northcut's diplomas hang on the wall to remind visitors of the man's pedigree, thick script on parchment paper denoting his schooling at Exeter and his law degree from Yale, which to John seems something as from another world, where the language and perhaps even the currency is similar to that of Lysistrata, but where nothing else resembles the life he has come to know for himself.

John stares at the stem of goldenrod in Penelope's lapel, thinking, *there, the map is the answer! The answer couldn't be clearer than two lines on a map, one longer and one shorter, which is all anyone will need to know about the matter. I'd never have been close enough range to father this girl, though I never even thought to figure on where Richard stood in that respect, though even the judge must know deep in his heart that Richard was the one, and to think they brought me all the way down here for such a simple matter, one look at the girl and you can see his mark all over her, as a father is easily traced in his children, not only in their looks but in their actions as well, though she acts more like Mother than Richard, what determination it would take to travel all the way here, to a foreign place like this and to search for a man who abandoned them long ago, with only a name to produce and knock on doors, given her condition and all, all the more brave, not as Richard would have been, more accustomed to joining with others and becoming a leader when the crowd was largest, rather than the solitude of travel this girl has done, as Mother would have, same stern press on their lips, same half-closed eyes staring two paces ahead on the road, greeting no one, asking nothing of them, other than an answer to the question she carried from Alabama. Just like Mother*, he thinks, *the way she presses that flower to her chest, with a flat palm held perfectly straight against her body, patting it several times, sometimes out of nervousness, but mostly when her mind wasn't paying much attention, or the way she presses the flower between her thumb and forefinger and tilts her neck slightly to the left to sniff the flower, the curl of a smile on her lips, as Mother once had, like that flower was a secret only she knew, a secret they traded back and forth between each other Funny thing about children*, he thinks, *the way they act like folks they've never met, like the blood in their fingers and hands moves of its own accord, same blood as moved a generation or two before, different bodies, different times, different motives, but the same blood .*

A child, John thinks to himself as Richard argues with Judge Northcut over the map and its findings, *is it any wonder why she wants one so bad and I have to fight it off at every turn? A child acts of its own accord and its own blood, but even though I have no control over its actions, to a point, all its actions reflect back upon me, as the father or producer or up-bringer of this girl. Even were the child to be proven mine, I am in no condition for the raising of children,* he thinks, *neither in occupation nor emotional state, no matter that Katy thinks a child will force me to mature, to outgrow it, though she's afraid even to mention the word as I am reluctant to speak it aloud, as if such a responsibility could have any positive effect on men, though perhaps for women it is different, as Katy has also mentioned, nothing in my nature to handle such responsibilities, nor room on my shoulders for more than I already bear, and, she claims, I am denying myself an heir and progeny and a glimpse of life beyond my own, as if such a one existed, nor if I were to revel in it should I be proven wrong, as there seemed to be no such life on the battlefields, no grander place we sent those boys, theirs and our own, other than the cold plots of earth that house their bones, that a child of such things would give any immortality to me, asleep as I'll be, or worse, shuttled off to the place where all men are sent who take the life of another, no matter the circumstances, excuses conjured by the bishops, generals, and higher ups, to ease our minds as they send us to battle, all this the responsibility of a child is supposed to offset? What a house I could provide for children,* he thinks, *not only of my brother and our generation, but those stories of the line in its past, this city and its claustrophobic conditions, with a job that barely provides food and clothing for myself and wife, let alone a brood of children each demanding feed and shelter and warmth, all on what we can barely scrape by on, but for the generosity of my brother, with all that comes with it, that I am in no way fit for such an honor as fatherhood, parenthood, or the perpetuation of my own features in some unfortunate creature who should happen to be sprouted from my body.*

Though perhaps it is that young girl's face that haunts me, he thinks, *that clouds my thinking and will not let me the chance, will not allow the thought to arise that I might wish to father children and introduce something of good into the world, the way she struggled at the side of her father and brothers, thought trapped where she did not belong, yet victim to the same rules of war that claim all those who fall from them, to kill or be killed, or simply to die without ceremony or purpose, the ricochet of bullets or cannon-fire indiscriminate when cutting down targets, the target only a way for those who fire such weapons to strip the men and women on the other side of the field of their humanity, or of any obligation to stop their madness for fear of repercussions, in this world or the next, though repercussions in this world seem only to survive into the next battle, or worse, survive this war until the next, her eyes clear and blue despite the smoke and sulfur, a child's eyes, looking to me as one to her father, for answers, for explanation, the kind of inquisitiveness all children no doubt approach their parents with, questions of life and the fairness of things, simple matters of nature and science and social conditions, which hand to offer to a lady, or the way to thank a gentleman for some courtesy, all questions they will come to me for answers, as if I possessed them. How then could I raise such creatures, fill them with knowledge I do not have for myself, as if knowing my own limitations were a satisfactory answer for children in search of certainty or truth, when I all I could offer were my most recent opinions on the matter, perhaps what I had learned while reading or from other men of knowledge, each time pretending to have knowledge of something when in fact I was merely pretending, passing along answers that other fathers no doubt concocted to answer their own children in times of war or extreme agitation, when any answer at all will do, if not for its accuracy then for the sake that it was an answer, delivered by a man in authority. What a look*

that girl gives to me, asking me the value of things and at the same time condemning me for lighting that wood to flame, all the while intending to kill me if she could, to rescue her family from the flame and set it upon me, the violence and conflict in our eyes, all eyes, to be so uncertain as to our purpose and meaning, yet so certain that we must kill others in order to gain something of it.

"And what of the girl's—" Richard pauses before speaking, as if bringing himself to say something he knows is unpleasant, but nevertheless necessary. "What of the girl's race? We must be certain the girl's, origins, do not become a public matter."

"A good sentiment," the judge answers. "But impossible to impose."

"The information already seems to be common knowledge," John says, pointing to the crowd gathered outside the window.

Or worse, he thinks, the judge speaking now to Richard, to calm his anger from erupting, himself pointing to the crowds gathered outside and his responsibility, or need, to keep a public face in the time of such trials, *to raise a child in such a world, where war balances on the whims of men in distant offices, distant homes of no quality or measure similar to the homes or offices we sweat beneath, no hint of the toil in our blood, on our hands and shoulders, but where power dwells, in the ability to send men to die, the sons of men like me, my brothers and grandsons drafted and conscripted, armed and trained, shuffled off under the command of more men, dissimilar in their own rights to men like me, though at the very least a partner to the battle, and thus redeemable*, he thinks, *unlike those men in far-off offices, where our sons and daughters, if I should believe the old wives-tales, seem to them nothing more than figures on a map, advances or declines, gains or losses like money shifting from one column to the next, where on paper the lines between victory and defeat are often forged and crossed and double-crossed, a back and forth of advance and retreat, constant smudging of the lines until the final outcome when peace is finally, at last, mercifully negotiated. But for sons and brothers and men like me, there is only duty at the behest of men whose judgment is impaired by their distance from the natures of things and their own political notions, careers, the vary same judgment that floated them to such posts, a disengagement from the realities men like us face, that once the line from victory to defeat is crossed, there is no coming back across that border, no magician, no strongman, no musician, no savior to resurrect these boys, these bodies from their shallow graves, if lucky enough to receive them. This is the world to introduce a child?* he thinks, *where men butcher each other, some only boys, in the name of flags and banners, in the name of patriotism, of country, or worse, in the name of God, to slice other boys, other men, through the chest on account of some river or stack of wood in the wilderness, or a ridge of granite and pine, all to hoist our flag where once their own flag stood, so that men and boys, sons and brothers die for the sake of a few colors dyed into flimsy wool? For this I am to bring children into the world? To set them as pawns into the hands of men who will never see the colors of their eyes, will never hear the sound of their voices, will never know the smell of their hair while sleeping but who will, without any knowledge or insight, send them to die nevertheless?*

"Perhaps we ought to send her away,' John says.

"An orphanage," Richard says. "That's the first good idea I've heard all day."

"Better for her there than in our house," John answers, turning to the judge with Katy's previous concerns echoing in his voice.

"Not possible, as far as I know," the judge says. "But, though, I'm not certain how they handle these kinds of matters. My understanding is that the Beechwood Home, which is where I presume you mean by an orphanage, will not take children unless both parents are deceased, and

proven to be so, or entirely vanished. This girl still has a father, even if he won't fess to it, and I won't bother a place like Beechwood simply on account of a man's not wanting to own up to his responsibility."

"Will you at least look into it?" Richard asks.

"I'll send word," Judge Northcut says. "But that doesn't change or stop the business at hand."

"What of the crowd?" Richard asks.

"It is no business of theirs," John says. "Though like everything else in this town, they will work to make it their business."

Katy, he thinks, *if she had any fears like these, she never mentions them, even after the superstitions would have gone away naturally, and we'd have been able to talk about what had happened to her, the stillbirth and all, the way we never mention my own family's miscarriages, though the crosses on the old house-walls told the story clearer than any words might have tried to tell the same, as if by refraining from using the words, or speaking the word, or acknowledging the crosses or that pain Mother bore in her chest, as if ignoring the very thought of such an event were enough to ward it off, to keep it far enough from us that we might overcome what history and our own bodies had brought us to the threshold of experiencing. Instead Katy took to spending the hours with Nance, who herself must have suffered something like pregnancy and losing a child, though never once large enough in the belly for anyone to notice, other than perhaps the usual weight gain that a woman will go through as she gets older, the two of them hiding away in dark corners of the new house, where the walls and shadows would conceal them and the whispers they exchanged, though perhaps it was silence shared between them, an unspoken bond, kept wordless by the very-same superstitions, but only a look between them, an understanding of the fear that set in their bellies along side the children, fear of loss, of falling down the newly cut stairs or riding in a cart along bumpy roads, or any of the other activities which might have upset them, her, Katy, the way she seemed more delicate, somehow, as her body prepared for the labor of childbirth, fragile not in body, as her chest and hips broadened, as her arms and ankles thickened, more sturdy than ever before or since, but fragile in her face, the eyes especially, some knowledge about the tenderness of life, its vulnerability, its utter weakness, both at its inception and at its cold, solemn end, which renders every mother to bite her nails and twist her hair into tight, nervous curls, wondering if she has the capacity to carry through nature's demands, nor any wish to do so, given the brief span her child will have to walk the earth, should one survive its transition from warmth and hearth into the brittle air. But I wouldn't know*, he thinks, *if these or any thought like them ever once crossed her mind, though perhaps if I had spoken to her of my mother and of what was contained in her blood, and her blood alone, not something transferable from mother to son, but a curse of the women in our family and them alone, a father's voice and a husband's voice, if that boy could have heard me through the skin and muscle, would have recognized my voice against the countless others heard throughout the day, distinguished from the bumping of chairs or the rattle of pots and pans, of a husband to coax from her what she'd been carrying in her mouth, against her tongue but would not, did not relate, not during the six months I knew of her term, the cramps and pains that doubled her body over, sent her to the bed or against the furniture, with a groan echoing from somewhere deep and inhuman inside her body, perhaps of devils working their mischief or angels rendering the work of their master, when all I could do was support her weight on my shoulders, when I was there, or try to rub where I thought the culprit had nabbed her, or simply settle her down until the burning passed, sometimes with traces of brown blood on*

her legs or clothing, unsure as to what my role would be, what my place would be, unable to take away the pains she felt, nor the cause of them festering in her body, right up until the final hour, when she called for Nance to take her into the bedroom and lock the doors, Nance's hurried call for more women from town to come and assist, of Katy's shouting that she intended to push, felt the deep need to push, to pee, to press against the object in her body and push against the thought, fear, of what had happened in the past, to push against the baby in her stomach until it all resolved itself.

But there I stand, he thinks, *speechless for my own part on the other side of the bedroom door, in the hallway, though what would any man worth his salt have done at that point? His back against the wall, still on his feet, bent at the knees, face and head buried in his hands, what would that man have done in that situation, that helplessness, when he lacks the power to change anything of the situation, despite all his skills or knowledge or experiences, despite all the horrors he has seen or witnessed or ignored or contemplated, but powerless the hour of his wife's trial, impotent to help ease her suffering or the speed the child's delivery, not that her body rendered anything other than the cramps and side-aches, as when she called out that she was intending to push, she said she felt something ease inside her body, as if an onion dwelled inside her, its layers slowly peeling away, revealing the fresh, whitish core, pain drifting off as petals of ruddy skin, but rather the fear in her face, bolstered by the experience of the women now in the room with her, mothers all, except for Nance, grandmothers in other cases, each with encouragement and the special skills they have accumulated over the years? What can be said of that man in the hallway, the way he sobs like a child at the sounds of his wife's grunting in the bed, or the sound of vomiting from the younger mothers in the group, who may have given birth but never witnessed one of this kind, that something has gone wrong and the unusual sickens these mothers, so accustomed to such rooms, from when they were young girls, to assist the women in their families with births and the like, the unlikelihood that anything would have seemed foreign to their eyes, nothing so grotesque as to make them physically ill, other than some deformity in the child itself, or some horror of the mother's disfigurement, or perhaps knowing what future the child will be born into, and thus sickened at the thought of aiding such a journey, rendering so helpless and defenseless a being as a child to such a man who cowers in the hall as if from battle itself, unwilling to look enemies in the eye, for lack of certainty that such a thing as enemies exist, rather than all unfortunate souls who must dwell for a while then pass, but now even the older women have stopped their talking, their encouragements hushed, while the sick young mothers are spoken to with harsh words, to gain control of themselves and to assist the mother who is in the most real, dire, situation. What brand of man, what hero stands aside in the hallway and catches his own tears in the palms of his hands, watches them puddle between his legs onto the floorboards beneath him? Closes his ears to the silence from the other room, fills the silence with his own misgivings? Is this the sort of cloth from which a father is cut? Who trembles as his hand reaches for the doorknob, who pulls it back as many times as the hand moves upwards to the knob, as if of its own volition and will, the body's understanding of what is good and right so far surpassing the soul's or mind's that it must act against these so-called higher faculties in order to do what is expected, dutiful, right? Until at last the arm and shoulders join in the conspiracy, followed by the chest and legs, all limbs and appendages of the body in unison to reach for the door and peer inside, to offer the help a husband owes the woman he has impregnated, the woman he has inflicted such pain and remorse upon, all parts of the body but for the neck, which remains loyal to soul and mind, and does not turn, at first, to look into the small opening between the door, now, and the doorframe, a crack of light slowly*

revealed to be the huddle of women around the bed, the reflection of a man cowering in the hallway to spite his body's inclinations.

Through that door, he thinks, *Katy looked as if she was going to die, the pale skin on her face and arms and legs nearly white as the sheets, all the rest of the room covered in pinkish blood, perhaps already flowing freely from the child or the mother, perhaps from the women in their attempts to stop the tearing or keep the pressure on her back as Katy pushed, through the crack this reddish, bright red, bright crimson shower tainted everything and everyone in the room, something primal in the way they reveled in the fluids, slipped on puddles of it on the floor, ran it through their fingers and wiped it against the brows as they labored, though from the crack in the doorway only the narrowest sliver remained visible, just enough to see the anguish in Katy's face—is the child yet born, or have I missed the whole thing,* he thinks, *did it happen at that point where the body had already been delivered, perhaps in that blackish lump I saw upon the bedside, nestled gently in cloth but its face and arms black as night, though not so much black as the deepest of all purples, the color of the severest bruise, knotted as it was from the ordeal, perhaps this my son, now swaddled in funeral robes, or coaxed to life with repeated slaps to its back to suck that first gulp of air, or then again perhaps nothing of the sort, that the child had yet to be delivered, though the outcome would be the same, each time the idea replays itself, and I am confronted with children such as these, girls especially, though for no good reason as my stillborn child was a son, and heir, someone to break finally the tyranny of women on our house, though when I see girls such as these, twirling flowers in their hands or oblivious to the workings of men, grown adult men, I see my own cowardice again rear its head, that before knowing it was my child's first and final hour, the coward again huddles in the hallway, muttering the countless names we had discussed, as if by attaching a name to the creature, by calling it from the light, that the son might obey his father, might listen one time to my voice and do as I beg, names such as Alexander and Julius and Darius that I had picked from any of the books in our possession, all rejected as too old-fashioned to Katy's ears, others with unusual or tempting meanings, as if a child's name somehow influences the way they live their life, Lysander being among my favorites, meaning liberator, emancipator, or Philip, as my son would have been a lover of horses, enjoying the casual trotting around the yard and streets as he would have more adventurous chases and explorations, all on horseback, though Katy hated them all, especially names like Sophronio, the self-controlled, the balanced, the even-keeled, or worse, Achilles, whose name means he without lips, but also dark and brown, Panos for rock and Cyril for lord, Benedict and Crispus and Aegis all rejected, though I mutter each name in the hallway as if it might stick to the child by some natural process of selection, where the unnamed child will hear the sound of my voice and respond in some way to the name, the proper and correct utterance like a magic spell, some incantation to fill its lungs with breath and pump the blood back into its veins, though from the hallway no such miracles occurred, but rather, the final sad wailing of my wife, the door still opened slightly, though my figure no longer with the courage to stand in its shadows, the crying of the attendees, mothers who had lost children of their own or who caught other lifeless babies during their rounds and duties, until the weeping resembled too closely the scene on a battlefield after the fighting has ended and the families arrive to gather their dead and valuables, that I hurry away from the scene, crouch in a chair and find the first book my hands will open, as if I had heard nothing, saw nothing, felt nothing of the matter, and bring my solace to the bedside when Katy has had the opportunity to rest.*

Penelope sits in her seat, eyes fixed straight ahead, not at the judge or his desk, nor even the wall behind him—decorated with diplomas and other such papers each with fancy script

handwriting and the signatures of powerful men, some with the Commonwealth's seal and others with the markings of schools and legal bars, of those who stand by to accredit Judge Northcut, to give him the authority to sit behind such benches and render judgment on those without the paper pedigrees—but rather to stare beyond these material images, perhaps backwards into the past and memories of her mother, or ahead, when she will live with either of these two men, or neither of them. She flinches only at the discussion of the orphanage, temporarily loosening her grip on the stem of goldenrod in her jacket, resumes the twisting of her fingers around the flower, bringing the blossom to her nose and smiling to herself at the scent. The girl seems hardly moved by the evidence of the map, nor certain as to what it means, as the men in the room appear hardly changed from when they entered, each man denying his role and the judge working to sort it all out without resort to violence or the family's disintegration, though both seem as likely options, even when the judge believes he has said his last. Penelope stands from her chair, as the men argue some point of contention, perhaps of the accuracy of maps or of the unreliability of John's paperwork, though to her ears the sounds are all the same, worthless noise, and moves to the window, where she for the first time sees the crowd of grown women and men standing outside, much like the church processions she remembers from home, or the picnic gatherings that followed services on Sunday afternoons, when she places her hand on John Bowers shoulder, as if a thank you for the flower, its moment of relief in such unusual circumstances. At this moment John eyes the girl and catches what for a moment seems like a glimpse in the mirror, perhaps the tilt in her head or the unconscious way she rocks forward and back as she stands and peers out the window, perhaps more clearly even than his own motions and habits John watches Suppina rock from her toes to heels, as she had before the ordeal and becoming paralyzed and John smiles for a moment to see something of his mother brought to light, albeit in an unexpected form.

How the scene must have been all too familiar for Mother, he thinks, *yet another child born lifeless, another fruitless labor and the long season of depression and anger that follows, yet another cross for her to carve into the wall, to join the seven others, sisters I never knew, who never survived the ordeal of birth or who died soon thereafter, seven crosses carved with the same knife, passed down from her own mother and her mother before her, thick cuts in the hard wood, deep cuts from a steady hand, the concentration on the act one way Mother would distract herself, they say, from the pain of her ordeals, some certain achievement, something accomplished she could carry through to full term and admire days and years afterward, though admire is hardly the word, perhaps ponder or contemplate or loathe. Though she offers us no consolation of her own, dead as she was, her ghost trapped on some distant shore and unable, or unwilling, to visit us in our time of need, did not present herself to the birthing room nor in the clean up or aftermath, did not thank the nurses who entered her house nor guide us along the way to a recovery, but a silent figure anchored to the past, so that only Nance could console Katy in the months that followed, the assurances that more children would come and would erase the memory of that day, that labor, as if new life somehow remunerates the old, though her verses did not help:*

> *Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.*

Still Mother must have seen the ordeal, have known its heartbreak and the wrenching of guts that followed more like war than any other procedure, no doubt, when loss is survived only

by guilt, though for Mother the feeling must have been dulled over the years, the more accustomed she became to carrying children to term, only to leave the nursing room empty-handed, that perhaps her own mother and their mothers, the line of Bowers women Mother used to speak of, proudly, with a measure of disdain at my having been born a man, and Richard too, second-class offspring in her eyes, and a disappointment in the eyes of her own mother and the rest, the first Bowers not to yield daughters for the line, the first to ruin her womb with more than one birth, two sons no less a disappointment than the seven daughters she lost prior to us, every day our faces standing as reminder of her miscarriages, the physical pain and anguish, compounded by the weight of her history, the disapproval that must have haunted her dreams, perhaps more, if their own shades had thought to return and give the woman, their daughter and granddaughter and great granddaughter, something more than guilt to keep her awake at night, how Suppina Bowers was born with all the hell-fire and rambunctiousness of her grandmother Harmony, but without any war to fight, nor did she have the looks or gumption of her own mother, Violet, which determined at an early age what life for Mother was to encompass, let alone any similarity whatsoever to the distant Agape, the woman who began the Bowers journey westward only to end up here in Lysistrata. What kind of woman could undergo such ordeals and refuse to offer any help when she watches another suffer the same traumas?

John feels the touch of his mother's hand upon his shoulder, jumps at first, settles when both Judge Northcut and Richard ask if he is alright. *Why do you startle me?* he thinks, *am I not trying to do what is best for this girl, that no young woman should grow up without the benefit of a family, both for her own protection but as well for the stability such women bring to the men of these homes, but more in my thinking for the family most of all? I know already the look in her eyes and the way she moves like Mother, the way her teeth bite her lower lip as she sits impatiently, the way her impatience must be inherited, as if the women of her blood have skipped a generation, passed over the end of the pure Bowers line in favor of this new mixed breed, a splash of novel blood to give satisfaction to their thirst, this girl without a father but with five mothers, and counting, at the very least, watching over her moves and decisions, ready to strike down on the fathers or brothers or husbands who dare oppose their wishes, or the way she smiles when behind the teeth and lips she is planning an escape, plotting her escape and simply waiting for the proper time to burst free, as Mother had done at my own birth, they have told me all the stories of my father's death, the way he waited at my bedside while mother recovered from the labor, the way he cradled my body despite Mother's commands that he was not to touch us, as he had not touched Richard upon similar commands, how Father chose that moment to disobey., that moment of all others, as if Mother's words carried with it the weight of every Bowers woman, and thus ought to have been obeyed by a simple man as my father, but he ignored, and raised me to his chest, delicately, as a man who had yet to hold a single child, a single body from his wife's ordeals, pressed my head against his chest and whispered something into my ears, which will not resurface, but at the very moment when a father's love ought to have been purest, or its most powerful, at the realization of the life entrusted to him and the awful duties that entailed, not merely the proper raising of a life, the moral raising of a child in such times, but the awesome responsibility at having created a life from nothing, the responsibility of a god who created for the sake of creation and now cradled the results in his hand, though lacking any knowledge of what the future would hold, not to mention the omnipotence to guarantee that child's safety and security, nor even the unsurpassable capacity to love, though with a child against his heart, Father must have felt he'd reached as far as was humanly possible in that regard. They tell me the load was too much on his heart, in fact, and when Father*

collapsed, it was either the burden of his love, finally expressed, or the years of labor and hard work that wore out his body, or lastly the will of Mother and her kin finally crashing down on Father until he could no longer bear the burden, a burden lifted by death as easily as Mother changed her name back to Bowers and raised us as such, with no more thought or sentiment than changing the wash on a clothesline, or wiping away the crust of a casserole from the bottom of a pan.

Suppina, he thinks, *flaunted the thaler necklace in her possession, especially to her sons, that she'd rather have the necklace buried with her in the grave than to see it in the hands of her own offspring, so dissatisfied with our births that she'd rather the line end against her rotten body than to see it perverted in the hands of men, switched over to a talisman for our sons, should we bear any to the world, and spoil what memories she held of the women of her line, the women of my own line,* he thinks, *though they seem no more my own than the trees bordering on our property, to provide us shade and leaves to rake in autumn, some even yielding fruit for our lips, but in the end property of some foreign hand, some jealous owner who would, if available, slap our hands as we tasted the fruit, or even denied us the pleasure and responsibility of raking up after them, each leaf a reminder, small and rounded as the thaler itself, which she guarded in her fist each night while sleeping, as if she knew her sons would some night sneak into her bedroom and reach down her blouse to examine the treasure, only to find it sharply hidden from their grasp. She never once,* John rubs his hands together as the judge makes yet another appeal to Richard to admit to the infidelity, though Richard for his own part offers another challenge to the authenticity of John's documents, *mentioned Father's name, and only from the courthouse records would we have known William Gary Bowlings, the name of our father dead before his time, or perhaps dead at the right time, knowing how it was Mother would choose to send us into the world, apprentices at every turn, her sole pride in the unity with which we stuck together, and the way we dually defended the honor of our family, as she tried to forge it, named as we were after our mother and the recipients of so many taunts and challenges from the other boys, that over time I am sure she grew to respect her sons, the both of us, to coldly respect the way we had remained close throughout our youths, perhaps even bordering on love, but the shadow of those crosses on the wall, their images pressed into our minds through nightly prayers, Mother's hand on our shoulders pressing us onto the floor, our knees rough and painful as she prayed, fingers in our shoulders like an eagle's talon as we recited our lines to appease her, so much so that all the love Mother had stored for her children was spent on those etchings in the wood, spent on the bed while giving birth to our seven dead sisters, spent in the hours mourning their losses and lamenting what fate had provided her. Though didn't she raise us with the utmost duty, feed us and clothe us and teach us right from wrong, or at the very least how to determine it for ourselves? That despite all that had happened, managing the farm and land and property on her own, raising the two of us in such close proximity and fashion, didn't she uphold her basic duties to raise us to be ready for life, when it should arise for us? No, it was all too much for Mother and she raised us as best she could,* he thinks, *even though behind her actions there was nothing of the love mothers show their children, rather than obligation or duty, which makes services and actions palatable if nothing more, but love, which renders all action and sacrifice as valuable, even necessary, in the light of that love which sprouts in children and manifests itself in the daily surrender of one's own life for the sake of another. From Mother, we earned no such surrender.*

But she paid for all her sins against us, he thinks, eyeing Richard from across the room, a smile creeping across John's face as he pictures it all, the night of the argument, of the fight, *the*

first time in my life I drew blood from Richard in all our years of growing up together and him taking advantage of me as the younger brother, as an older sibling like all the others in Lysistrata, to pin my shoulders against the ground with his knees, his open slaps against my cheeks, or the way he dangled his spit over my face, sometimes slurping it back into his mouth with a smile, sometimes letting it fall cold and sloppy against my face, into my mouth, open with screams, challenges that continued when we were older, but with more force behind our maturing bodies, fists in the place of open palms, louder, more masculine shouting, curse words and threats, hurried chases around the yard and the pummeling that followed, always the elder brother with his edge in strength and speed and experience, always eager to prove his superiority over me—even when Mother scolded him for his actions, Richard stood, almost proudly before her, as if grateful for the chance to stand before her and explain his dominance over me, to prove himself a man in her esteem. It began with words, as I remember it, not about the states and their right to secede, not about slavery or the common-held rights of all men, nor of a sense of moral duty one way or the other, not even of an obligation to follow where the majority of men from Lysistrata had gone, along with a good part of Kentucky in general, but rather about the roles our forefathers had played in the founding of the Republic and to what disservice it would be to them, should I leave and fight for the Confederacy while Richard remained with the Union, not so much that we'd be against each other in war, but that the ancestors would have been betrayed by one of their own, fighting against the very country they fought so hard to found, a position Richard repeated each time with his index finger, crooked and pale, extended straight into the air, as if pointing to the heavens to exclamate his point. I told Richard, he thinks, *to forget his ancestors and that I had wanted no part in them to begin with, that the old stories were a fraud, made up by the old men of town to give the family some semblance of respectability, as in truth we were merely a line of bastards and widows, a line from which I was more than happy to sever myself from, now that the war had given the opportunity for such a clean break. Richard leapt across the table, his fist full of my shirt-collar and his left hand a knot against my shoulders and head, as we tumbled backwards over my chair, I caught Richard with the fated punch, straight across the nose, from which I can still hear the snapping sound and the smell of blood gushing from his nostrils, though he continued to hit me with even more force, I laid back on the ground as if a child and waited for our wives to come and separate us, all the while my eyes on Mother as she rushed in from outside with the livestock, the look on her face I like to think as regret, a lifetime's worth of the pain and rejections she dealt to us all wrapped into a single moment like a sharp pain up her arms that led straight to her heart, an instant of lament, apology, or of her world come crashing down, of the children she ignored all collapsed into a second's span of time, everything now suddenly dear to her heart, and lost, once we had drifted so far apart, and at the same time utterly unattainable, like Orpheus,* he thinks, *when he turns for Eurydice, and watches her shadow retreat forever into the underworld.*

Of course in time Richard's nose dried and my bruises healed, right up until the day we set off on our own paths, having spoken nothing of a word to each other as side by side we gathered our things from Suppina's house, our wives brokering what necessary communications were between us, but all the while Mother's look unchanged since the fight, when she collapsed on the floor and foamed at the mouth, when she grunted and squealed and writhed on that same floor before going entirely limp in the arms and legs and neck, perhaps on account of the words that entered her ears during our arguments, about the family's history and all, perhaps at the recognition that we were the only children God saw fit to bless her with and that she'd

squandered the opportunity, for which the Lord keeps a special place in the afterlife, one of discomfort and regret, one surely fitting for the woman, though my own mother. How this girl's face resembles Mother! Why am I unable to turn away? At the sight of Mother's collapse, not so much a noise or racket, but the soft crumpling of laundry from the hanging line, the sound of leaves against the earth, red and orange and yellow, each turned slightly at the edges, crispy in their lightlessness, when of course Richard, the good son, immediately came to his senses and tried to pry himself from my body, at which point I rushed to take my final shots at his unprotected face and body, landing several good punches while Mother gagged, my fists now smudged with Richard's blood and snot, the breath of Mother's stale air now overpowering the cramped room, overtaking even the meal cooking feverishly over the fire. Several women rushed to the house, after Richard and I, in what was our last collective action, hoisted mother into the rocking chair and draped a long blanket over her body, and after our wives discussed the possibility of moving into the house to care for her, and to remain close while we were away, which had already distressed the two of them to the highest degree, women arrived to the house carrying their husbands' medical bags, having trained along side for a short period of time, so that Lysistrata would not be left without any medical care, women with dainty hands against the large instruments, unfamiliar eyes to examine Mother and her condition, with their recommendation that she remain still and not move from the seat, as if the old woman had any inclination otherwise, for at least a month, then a strict regiment of thin broth and boiled vegetables to cleanse her body. So at last, when the day came and Richard had already left for war, I hoisted that rucksack across my shoulder, having been filled with what Katy saw fit to send along with me, pictures and paper for letter-writing, some valuables to use for trade should times become harsh, as already the reports from the front lines had indicated, my shaving kit, and several sets of clothing for the winter campaigns, as it was uncertain as to when I'd be allowed home for leave, as we discussed, having spent the night in Mother's house, one final romp with my wife under her roof, no less, within earshot, and in the morning I sent Katy to the fields so that she wouldn't be near to complicate the departure, turned at the door to see Mother as she was, an invalid in the rocking chair, the gray hairs from her head still tangled and a mess from the fall, her shoes still laced tightly around her feet, black and shiny, but for the smudges where the floor had scuffed during the ordeal, then finally the blank expression of her face, un-quivering lips, unyielding cheeks or chin or forehead, the only spot of weakness on her body residing in the eyes, a look of contrition perhaps, or loss, or penitence, I like to think, upon seeing me, perhaps for the last time.

Richard bursts from the room out into the crowd, his hands hard against the wooden door, which he slams behind him, shaking the etched glass where Judge Northcut had carved his own name, Richard's boots stomping down the entranceway and out into the open air. For John and the judge, the room falls suddenly still, once the rattle of the glass calms, until the room lingers with Richard's remaining words, *Nonsense, all of it, there's no way to prove any of it!* with which he leapt from his chair and made his grand exit. In his hands, John folds the papers from the war and returns them to the folder. For Penelope the men and their actions only prompt another sniff at the goldenrod, though in her eyes perhaps already she plans her response to this madness, the mention of the orphanage in the first place, but far more for the mention of her *breed*, as Richard had put it, now for the first time feeling the blood in her skin, her mother's blood, heating and rising in her body and clashing against her father's, the feeling of shame as she'd felt only a few times before, but somehow new, as if all eyes had descended on her through the pane and see through her whitish skin and blended features, could judge her home and

mother by the scant knowledge of her arrival, the inglorious details they traded back and forth with each other between their turns staring at her. Judge Northcut walks to the door and rests a tall, squared hat on his head, black to match his suit, and John Bowers follows, clutching the folder and papers, extending a hand to Penelope, watching the delight fill her eyes at the blossom's fragrance.

"I suppose we ought to follow him," John says.

Katy sent me notes about her, he thinks, *updates in her letters on Suppina's condition and circumstances with the doctors, as if I had asked for them in my own letters, perhaps her own sense of duty poking through to light, that a son ought to be concerned with his mother's wellbeing, in the case of a mother like Suppina, each time she drank a new helping of broth or digested her vegetables properly, the first time they carted her body around the room and called it exercise, every cough and wince and hacking noise recorded onto paper and sent along with the other general workings of home, always leading with reports of Mother before telling me of her own loneliness, the time apart, the frustrations of dealing with Mother's stubbornness, which she knew of but had never experienced first-hand, as I always stood between them to cushion the blows, or the faithfulness she swore to keep while I was away, then ended with her flowery signature along the bottom-most edge of the page. Most of the letters I've thrown away, some during the war but many afterwards, either torn and tossed out with the scraps or burned, set to fire in the hearth to watch their edges slowly curl in the flame, then catch more violently, bright flashes of yellow and orange gradually fading into the crisp black ash that settled in the letter's stead—all but for a few moments when Katy somehow reached through the letters, focused not on Mother and her own hardships, but trying to understand what the war had done, was doing to me. When I returned home, then, I knew precisely how Mother and the house looked, though my eyes were bruised nearly shut by the ambush, how the entire scene would appear upon my return, Katy and Nance huddled by the fireplace, Mother slumped in her chair, the stare of complaint on her face for the meager, tasteless food she had recently swallowed, or the exercise they had forced upon her, her will to rot in that chair until the final breath of her life, so much so that I didn't need to see them when Katy carried me through the house, hoisted me into bed where I drifted in and out of darkness, the only warmth in my body from the flask I managed to keep from the attack. Mother did not greet me when I emerged from the room, did not flinch a muscle or bat an eyelash, did not so much as quiver her lips when I stood before her, somewhat healed, in the body at any rate, standing before her with no words between us, only the blank stare of a mother who has exhausted all the words she intended or chose to say during her life, an emptiness in her eyes as if I were no son to her at all, a stranger perhaps wandered in off the road, a man who dwelled in the house as a boarder or a guest, with no more history between us than any foreigner or unfamiliar person, nothing even of my birth or childhood, the flowers I used to gather for her in the yard and tie with string, leave them on her pillow as a gift, or of the anger and frustration erupted in her collapse the night we left, but an empty pair of sockets, nothing more, as if her body had already made the transition to death, with only the consent of her mind to completely vacate the premises. When she died, and I found her body slumped, chair vacant, stopped a tear welled in the corner of my eye, and otherwise would have fallen, perhaps even more, but this, I told myself, was not a woman deserving of tears.*

CHAPTER TEN

"Confederate nonsense," Richard Bowers says as he rushes through the door. "Every word of it."

Richard pushes into the crowd of people gathered, women and men from his path, each wondering what has happened to prompt such an exit, or such a violent response, them all now waiting for Judge Northcut and John Bowers to follow Richard into the street and clarify the situation, to set the details and name the name of the guilty, perhaps not of law-breaking, but adultery, no less, and mingling the races in such ways. Nothing is changed in Richard's stance, chest still puffed outwards, head still high, arms and legs slow in their deliberate manner, the swing and gentle motions the town of Lysistrata had grown used to seeing in their streets and storefronts, though Richard moves his hands toward his face more, and more often, biting at his nails more than they have seen in public, though everyone knows his nervous habits, having lived for so long in such a tight space. But when the Judge and John Bowers do not follow, nor does Penelope leave the Judge's chambers, though the girl now remains in the doorway, perhaps intending to follow the man who is now lecturing the people of Lysistrata, and not the Bowers man through the window who shakes the hand of Judge Northcut, the people wonder among themselves as to what had happened and why and what Richard's shouting in the streets is all about.

"All trickery," he says. "And forged documents, though it pains me to say it of my own blood. And to think that my own money, hard-earned, paid for the printing press itself, the very same, in that office."

The crowd asks Richard what he means, trying to read past the look in his eyes to see whether or not this is merely grief overtaking him from the death of his wife, in such tragic circumstance, or something newer, a concern or affair for the living.

"What's worse is that Judge Northcut himself, an honorable man, I would have thought prior to today, is now sidin' with a man who fought for Lee and the Confederates, over and against a man who fought so valiantly for the Union. Can you imagine? A judge, in his full and official capacities, to side with a Rebel over one of his very own?"

As more people funnel from their homes and the fields, more ears crowd together to hear Richard proclaim his innocence and describe the scene in the judge's chambers, all the while the groans from the onlookers, their breathing, the shuffle of their bodies, sometimes applauding, other time yelling disapprovals, still other times simply swaying or holding steady, all against the backdrop of Richard's deep, clear voice, culminate into the sounds of a carnival, perhaps a subdued one, or a mob more prone to listening and reasoning than mobs are wont to be, but a noisy gathering in Lysistrata's center, which in turn attracts even more bystanders to abandon home and work and duty to pry on the neighbor's arguments, now aired for everyone to see and judge and condemn in public. Each new set of ears and eyes asks for and receives a retelling of the story from the beginning, from the nearest member of the horde, whoever has been present longest, each detail recast and item retold, where words somewhat change but the general, most basic meaning is upheld, until after a while the actual story of what has happened retreats into a murky space that expires between the judge's chamber door and what half-truths Richard now launches to the choir of willing ears, now even more perverted by the retelling and chain of hearsay.

"Isn't it already clear? John Bowers is the father of that child, not me. John Bowers, the Confederate, the Rebel, the traitor who abandoned the country our mother and father and

ancestors fought so hard to establish and cultivate, how he turned his back on them and fought for the side of slavery and misery and injustice? I ask you, what principles would a man need to father bastards, more than these? For my part, I stand by my record, here in Lysistrata and in the war, that an honest, straightforward man could not have done any of these things, despite what a red line on a map might say."

"It can't be," the crowd says.

"It is so," Richard says. "Though I would not hold any of it against my brother, flesh and blood, but as it stands I cannot have this liar and adulterer, and forger-er, living in the house I must now make for myself as a widower. All of you here know our condition, how we share a single roof over our heads, my roof, and now must surely recognize the dilemma I find myself in. I am forced to choose between throwing my brother and his wife to the street, for the sake of protecting my own dignity, or sacrificing my own well-being and, nay, sanity, at the hands of this evil influence for the sake of my brother. But as I am a man of conscience, there is a third alternative, it seems to me, one that provides for my own restitution and vindication, and for my brother. Today I have arranged ownership of a small house to the north of the city, rough though it is in the woods and hidden away. To show that I am no hard-hearted man, I will give this house to my brother, that he might not wander the wilderness, but can shelter his wife therein and perhaps have a family of his own, along side this bastard girl."

At that Judge Northcut and John Bowers emerge from the courthouse, Penelope behind them, the girl shielded from the crowd which now stares at the judge for answers, having heard Richard's testimony and finding no cause to disagree with what he says, or challenge it, or dispute any of the claims set therein, due in no small part to his reputation and record, but rather with the look of children for their parents, perhaps wisdom, but most likely for the solidity of answers that come from those in authority, if not for their own certainty, the certainty of the answers themselves, for sure the certainly that comes from the saying of them by figures with power or influence or both. John Bowers does not move from the judge's side as Northcut explains what has happened in the office, at first scolding the people as it is impolite to eavesdrop on anyone's private conversations, let alone official business conducted in the city's buildings, no matter that the incident is neither public in nature, nor necessarily under the court's jurisdiction, but that in any case, when combining the child's birthday with the whereabouts of the two Bowers men, both during the war, and drawing a map between these places it was clear that Richard Bowers is the father of the girl. At the judge's words the crowd roars, though it is impossible to tell the difference between loyalty to Richard Bowers, and thus loyalty to the Grand Army of the Republic and all her veterans, a roar against Judge Northcut for his decision and against the decision itself, despite what evidence could be mounted for or against, perhaps a roar to spite evidence, all forms of proof and trickery one could muster, or, the roar against Richard Bowers, for those who trusted in the judge's authority and decision, more so than his own, a dilemma of authorities, after all, as he was the man they designated to solve these very same riddles and crimes and what would it say of the people who entrust a man to make their decisions, then disobey the decision once he's made them?

In either case, or the countless others that could explain the noise and clamor surrounding the courthouse, Judge Northcut takes Penelope by the hand and walks her past John, down the set of stairs, where Richard Bowers stands, mouth agape, unsure if it is fate that is handing over this child, no matter how unjustly or inaccurately, or some form of devilry that now consumes his fellow citizens and their leaders. As the girl passes, John Bowers breathes for what seems like the first time since he emerged alongside the judge, a heave of the shoulders, neck and chest that

culminates in a long, drawn exhale and the requisite filling of the lungs in turn. The crowd is all but silent as the judge moves the girl to her rightful father, only breaths or coughs, only the shuffle of feet against the street, or the sad pity they feel for some reason they won't recognize or inquire into, some source in them that knows a bastard child, a girl no less, mixed in race and heritage, without a mother's influence, far from the customs and land that raised her, now entrusted to a man, who, despite his record, it appears fathered such a child in such a way, abandoned her, and now is forced to take her back under his roof, to raise this girl without the sound benefit and guidance of a mother. But at that point where the judge and Penelope pass, John reaches and pats the girl on the shoulder, steps in front of her before she moves too far away, and adjusts the flower, tucked into a buttonhole on her lapel, so that the long, slender bloom of the flower stands yellow and upright and as such, brushes against Penelope's chin.

"Go on with your daddy," the judge says.

"Not until I've said my piece," a woman's voice shouts from the crowd, now stronger, repeating the words again and again as she pushes through the crowd, now recognizable.

"Not until my piece," Katy says as she pushes up to the judge. "I have evidence."

"Evidence?" Richard says. "Judge Northcut already made his decision."

"This pertains to Richard's service in the war," she says to the judge, ignoring Richard's commentary.

"How so?" Judge Northcut asks.

"Let me read from the book," Katy says with a smile, broad and filled with satisfaction. The words are clear and loud, a voice the people of Lysistrata have never heard from this woman, any woman, and some comment to each other on the fact, how the voice seems stronger and unwomanly, more a man's voice in its confidence and strength, neither demure nor receding nor bashful nor dainty, though these discussions are quickly shushed as Katy Bowers reads the accounts of battle from the diary of John Marshall Alley, the Indiana Volunteers and the ice cold wintry months that neither man had ever before experienced, Memphis and points south, Johnston at Vicksburg and the Big Black River, all Richard Bowers' stories revealed, not only to those who heard them first hand—for it is now when the crowd, those in the middle of the proceedings understand what it is Katy is reading to them, the honesty of source material—who trusted the man's liquor and home and storytelling, but those who also heard of the stories, second-hand admirers who trusted the accuracy of their sources, when at last Katy Bowers arrives at the story of the Union widow, saved, now not by Richard's hand, but the genuine heroism of Marshall Alley, Katy's throat clean and obvious, her eyes never once leaving the page to glance in Richard's direction, never once filling themselves with the crowd or the strange, admirable girl or the golden flower in her lapel, or even that loyal husband, but keeping with the words and script, waiting only until she has read each and every relevant section, each story Richard Bowers stole and retold, recast in his own image and reveled in false glory for, only at the end of all this, moving to his face, to capture for herself a glimpse of final victory.

Richard smiles as the book is read, to the amazement of all who watch as his network of lies untangles and exposes on the gravel and dirt of Main Street, perhaps a smile of being caught, they wonder, though it does not seem to be that pushing across his face, none of the remorse or guilt either, or even relief at being emancipated of such a burden, to carry out false witness for such an extent and long period of time and consistency, to lie, but rather of a man who has just heard a piece of wonderful news, the kind of look Nance Bowers one day wore through the streets of town, with letter in hand from Bowling Green, though the town must now wonder when and how such a letter was sent that way, with the knowledge that her husband was

returning from the fiction of war for a truncated week's stay, in such a way did Richard now walk among the crowd, not once fearful for their wrath or attempts at justice, even retribution, nor more their opinions of him at having been exposed. Instead, Richard climbs the stairs and stands beside his brother and Judge Northcut, his smile not fading in their presence, though both men now wonder what Richard has up his sleeve to be holding forth in such a way when so much of his story has been reduced. The three men now stand together, head and shoulders above the crowd, while Penelope remains in the street, clutching her coat pockets, the goldenrod stiff against her chin, and watching as Katy closes the journal and the smile on her own face flattens.

But Richard does not speak through the smile that only widens as he stands before the crowd, which by now includes at least one member, if not all, of each family in Lysistrata. As for the crowd, between the accusations and the new stories brought by Katy Bowers with such conviction and the evidence of a man's own handwriting, in a journal from the war no less, with stories, each and every one of them corresponding to one or more of Richard's accounts, they shout all the louder for Richard to rebuke the claims, to end his silence and defend himself, why the details all appear the same, though perhaps rearranged or reconfigured but nevertheless the same stories told by two different mouths, one living and thriving in Lysistrata by means of the very same stories, another set told by the handwriting of a dead man, presumably. Otherwise how could Richard have come by the man's journal, so intimate and personal an effect that no man would allow it to be separated from his person, nor taken, nor stolen, unless he had fought until his last breath defending that thing and only when his last energy had been spent, would loosen his vice-grip from the leather and binding and pages, preferring death to losing the very contents of his mind and soul at war? More and more the people shout for some resolution, a quick solving of the mysteries and a return to the Lysistrata that stood just moments before, with Richard Bowers as their hero and their hero in war first and foremost, the proudest chin among them, each taking a measure of pride in his accomplishments, each believing that some of his valor and bravery, his soldiering, dwelt in their own bodies, by virtue of their sharing home and land and water and air and childhood with him. When they shout their last encouragement and list their every memory of his adventures and accomplishments, Richard waves his hand.

"She is telling the truth," Richard says. "Those are the stories of John Marshall Alley, and as such, I was not anywhere near Alabama when this girl was conceived."

"Forget about the girl!" the crowd shouts at Richard. "Explain yourself."

"My sister-in-law is entirely correct in her comments, and though she frames them as an accusation, which is, I think, an incorrect approach, the content of her discovery is nonetheless accurate. Due to the extreme secrecy of my actual maneuvers and operations during the war, mainly as a border patrolman along the Ohio River, where I conducted secret raids on enemy forces, while defending Union interests from Rebel attacks, I have been forced to conceal these, my actual duties, with stories of more conventional merit, as is the case with Alley's collection. But as it is in my best defense to offer the truth, I again submit that I was nowhere near Alabama nine months before this child was born, nor at any time. I was at all times, every day, in fact, in the hills and woods of Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, even Illinois, defending the Union, though secretive as to the specifics of my details I must remain. But as it stands, those are the stories of Mr. Alley and as such, I could not have been near Alabama when that girl was conceived."

As Richard speaks, though, the reactions vary according to the ways each member of the crowd enters into the discussion, with no one admitting to a position that contradicts the one they carried in the first place, no matter what evidence or authority determined to be factual or not, no

attention paid to the facticity of what happened, be it by a man's handwriting, the authority of the judge, or even the commonsense account of what happened and when and by whom, based on a decent understanding of what the parties agreed had happened. But still the question lingered in their heads, even the most settled and unchanging minds, an open mind being representative of a higer quality of man and women, something noble in the lineage of ignoble, brutish human history, or any such history of rape and destruction brought about by the alternative, the closed mind with all its arrogance, conviction, and stupor, a question of whether or not to believe the man, *simple enough*, they think to themselves, each one in her and his own way, in words, but when turned towards the practice of such principles, whether alone or in such a group as gathered together, a task more difficult when the mind and heart want to decide one way, the way based on history and good feeling, as minds and hearts are wont to judge, or the solid testimony from the body, namely the gut, which sends its signals and waits for vindication, sometimes hours, other times decades, perpetually losing small battles against the heart and mind, but always, in the end, proving itself victorious when it comes to the final and ultimate judging of human affairs.

In Katy's hand the journal suddenly becomes heavy and hot, like a cauldron handle that has set for a day over the stove, the way that even with towels wrapped around her hands, as protection and support, how even the hot metal seeps through the defensive layer and eventually makes the cauldron too hot to handle, with the commensurate amount of panic and fear that accompanies such discoveries, panic at where one will draw her next breath, fear as to where these new breakthroughs might lead. She opens the heavy pages again, the thick binding and weighty leafs of paper, how the ink bleeds through the pages and pulls down the thought that she had at one time in the brief and immediate past had victory and vindication over Richard, more vindication, really, and exoneration, the removal of a heavy and burdensome weight, which for a moment left her shoulders and head and body, quit dragging on her back and thoughts, elevated for a brief moment over Main Street, plummeted down with all its severity and ruin and tongue-biting and enduring Richard's smile and advances and condescension, plummeted back towards the earth and all its weighty contents, slamming into the journal in her hands, poor John Marshall Alley and his thoughts and dreams and experiences trumped, trampled, repurposed and now another burden for Katy to bear. She tucks the book into her bags as she listens to Richard's victory speech.

For the crowd the news sweeps over their faces and hair, bonnets and mustaches like the wind of relief, a cool breeze against the cheeks in the face of a sweltering Kentucky summer, as the words brush one by one against their ears, again, as if they had known all along what he would say and how he would react, like knowing the script of a play before its delivery, anticipating as much how Richard would redeem himself any more than the fact than he would redeem himself. *It couldn't have ended any other way*, they think to themselves, smiles growing on their faces, even Judge Northcut himself, though he should have been more impartial on the matter, perhaps not smiles of happiness, as deep in their memories each had their own encounters with Richard to remember and to temper what they saw but never to tell or speak of with others, but smiles perhaps of knowing that men like Richard Bowers always escape the thickest trouble, if not by their virtue then by their slipperiness, which itself, they believe, is also a virtue, although never wishing to be the one in the crowd to stand out and say something contrary to the Richard Bowers mystique, even though if they had found the words, they would never have been alone, or even challenged, and would have found a rather willing chorus to listen and spill their own stories, the men all having encountered his anger in some form or another, usually over

business transactions, like the time he slammed a pot of coffee against the wall at Mr. Ives' store, for something as trivial as a delivery of reading chairs not being ready in time, or the countless passes at the countless wives, daughters, and unmarried women in the crowd, everywhere and all the time, neither subtle nor discreet, nor with any shame as to the circumstance, including church picnics and other children's baptisms.

Perhaps it is the girl's height that finally triggers the memory, or the way her face seems both bright and cloudy at the same time, as if viewed through a veil of smoke, or her hair that refuses to remain set and still and orderly, despite Katy's best workings that morning before breakfast, though it is perhaps mostly her age that carries John Bowers backwards, over the blocks and obstacles he has set along the way back to the war. John skirts his eyes everywhere to avoid the girl and thus avoid the memory, a skill he's developed and mastered these past ten years, when finally he decides to try and take control of his war experience and by that of course he means to banish it away to darkness and forgetting, that certain shutting of eyes, looking now upon any face in the crowd that presents itself, the judge, his brother and wife, the now long-emptied buildings or even the people who have turned form the crowd and are heading home, figuring the excitement's all but over, but in the end each turn or revolution of the head, each avoidance, brings John back to the girl with the goldenrod in her lapel, and thus to Barbourville. How he'd been sent by Zollicoffer along with eight hundred others to take Camp Johnson, only to find it abandoned, not entirely though, but defended by a group calling themselves the Home Guard, the kind of defense that pulls the planks from all bridges into town, the Cumberland River, on that foggy morning when they attacked the locals and locked them into the barracks of Camp Johnson, a Saturday perhaps, or Sunday, though the days have long since dispersed into one long event, how Zollicoffer ordered the soldiers to burn the camp, with the prisoners inside, and the last face John remembers entering the barracks, that of a young girl, noticeable because of her height and by the fact that she didn't belong on the battlefield, perhaps having wandered there as a nurse or nurse's aid, or delivering a message to her brother or father, now also locked inside.

"Kentucky, you mean, not Alabama," Penelope says.

At what seems to be the final word, Penelope reaches into her coat pocket to take the envelope and deliver it to the man pronounced by the judge to be her father, this man named Richard Bowers, to hand over what was rightfully his by her own mother's wishes and instructions. *This scene and crowd and all seem strange,* she thinks, *nothing like in Dothan,* the back and forth between anger and acceptance, they way these people hinge on the words of the judge or of Richard, but mostly something unsettling about a mob in general, not that the crowd in Lysistrata had devolved into such a mob or unruly group, but that a collection of that many people, all receptive and willing, filling with energy at every turn, is likely to move in unexpected directions, and that's the kind of power, sheer number for sure, but also its unpredictability that gives a mob such a brutal and absolute force. Penelope pulls the envelope from the darkness of her jacket out into the light of day, the first such light it has seen for as far back as she can remember, though in the light it seems strange somehow, foreign, as if it had not been carried at all from Alabama to Kentucky, had not been intimately tucked away all these miles and all this time, as if someone had just shown her a new envelope which she could not recognize. She closes her eyes as Richard readies himself to speak again, and right away the envelope becomes familiar again, the coarse paper, each wrinkle and fold that happened along the way, the bent upper right corner flicks back and forth nervously between her thumb and forefinger as she walks or sits still or waits to see what will happen next.

"How's that?" the judge asks.

"I wasn't conceived in Alabama," the girl repeats herself. "Beg your pardon. I was born in Alabama, you have that correct, but my momma told me it was here in Kentucky, in one of those pens they used to hold slaves for shipping south, where she met my father. She said the man who captured runaways, called him a bounty hunter, locked her up very near a river, and visited one night… she gave me this envelope to show my father, that man named Mister Bowers, should I ever meet him, though she didn't ever tell me what was inside."

Penelope hands the envelope to Richard

"A bounty hunter indeed," Richard says. "Now we're forced to rely on the witness of a child, all on account of…"

Richard Bowers does not finish, instead shuffles the envelope in his hands, the door at his back still open to the judge's chambers, a breeze across his fingers as he tries to guess what the contents might be. The young girl alternates her stare between the yellowed envelope in Richard's hands and the blank expression on his face, as if examining each feature to record it to memory, or to catalog each aspect, every trait and characteristic, and measure that list against another list she had carried just as far as the letter in the envelope, a list in her head of features and similarities, dreams and hopes too, if not much farther, in fact, than that. But the girl does not speak, instead allows her eyes to roam past Richard's face, just for a moment, to look inside to the courthouse, around to the crowd that had gathered to measure the quality of life of all the people now waiting to witness the final airing of the Bowers family business, perhaps, the culmination and climax and apocalypse of it all, or to imagine herself as one of the inhabitants of Lysistrata. Richard avoids the girl's eyes when he opens the letter and thinks *why am I nervous to open a letter from a strange girl in my own town?* and right away he sees that it is not a letter at all, but a register of names torn from a larger log, familiar in an unsettling way, with frayed edges along the left-hand side of the page and perfect script handwriting like the kind found in court documents and such, and Richard's eyes scan fast and cursory, his stomach souring, watching the list until his eyes find an underlined name, and nothing more distinctive.

Names	Age	Sex	State/Origin	County
A				
Adams Charlotte		14	f Kentucky	Fayette
Adamson Ned	30	m	"	"
Adamson Ned	30	m	Missouri	Lafayette
Althouse Pleasants	22	-	"	St. Louis
Allison Dick	13	m	"	"
Allison Major	18	m	"	Lafayette
Allison Patsy	22	f	"	"
Allison William		16	m "	"
An Dolly	17	f	Kentuchy	Fayette
An Mary	15	f	"	"
Anderson George		17	m "	"
Anderson John		27	m "	"
Ann Delia	18	f	"	Jefferson
Ann Eliza	15	f	"	Fayette
Ann Frances	14	f	"	"
Ann George	17	m	"	Jefferson

Ann July	20	-	“	Fayette
Ann Mary	05	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Ann Mary	13	f	“	“
Ann Mary	16	f	“	“
Ann Mary	16	f	“	“
Ann Mary	17	f	“	Jefferson
Ann Mary	17	f	“	Shelby
Ann Mary	18	f	“	Jefferson
Ann Mary	19	f	“	Fayette
Ann Merria	30	f	“	“
Ann Ruth	16	f	“	“
Ann Sarah	17	f	“	“
Ann Sarah	22	f	Tennessee	Shelby
Arnold An Clarra	20	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Arnold Malinda	21	f	Missouri	St. Louis
Arnold Jane Malinda	17	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Arterbury Lou	18	-	Missouri	St. Louis
Authur Lewis	22	m	“	“

B

Ball Lucy	14	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Ball William	11	m	“	“
Banks Jack	21	m	Missouri	L afayette
Barker John	23	m	“	“
Barnes Sam	24	m	Kentucky	Fayette
Barnell Tim	11	m	“	“
Barton Elija	15	-	“	“
Bates Oleavia	20	f	“	“
Bates Olivia	20	f	“	“
Bates Priscilla	19	-	“	“
Baxter John	15	m	“	Fayette
Beatty George	28	m	Missouri	Lafayette
Bell George	21	m	“	St. Louis
Bell Jane	20	f	“	“
Bently Catherine	19	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Benton Charles	21	m	“	“
Benton Green	13	m	“	“
Billingsly George	22	m	Missouri	St. Louis
Black Alfred	24	m	Kentucky	Fayette
Bledsoe Celia	23	f	Missouri	Lafayette
Blewett Mary	17	f	“	“
Boggs/Baggs Mary	14	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Boggs Smith	24	m	“	“
Bonnyface Lucy	16	f	Missouri	St. Louis
Boon Julia	15	f	Kentucky	Fayette

Boston Newton		14	m	“	“
Bradshaw Dicy		24	-	“	“
Brastoin George		20	m	Missouri	Lafayette
Breckenridge Henry	22	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Bright Sarah	15	f	“	“	
Bronson Isabella		40	f	“	“
Brooken Dick	23	m	Missouri	Lafayette	
Brown Bob	24	m	“	“	
Brown Elijah	22	m	“	“	
Brown Elizabeth		14	f	“	“
Brown Harret	14	-	Kentucky	Fayette	
Brown T. Mary		16	f	“	“
Brown Nice &2mo. Child	24	f	“	“	
Brown Ann William	25	-	Kentucky	Fayette	
Browning Josephine	16	f	“	“	
Bruce Maria	20	f	“	“	
Brurn Howard	24	m	“	“	
Brurn Jefferson		21	m	“	“
Bryan Frank	18	m	“	“	
Bryan Bell Mary		03	f	“	“
Bryan Milly, mother	22	f	“	“	
Bryan Sarah	24	f	“	“	
Bryan Stephen		25	m	“	“
Bryant Edward		20	m	“	“
Mary Bryant	13	f	“	“	
Buchner July +3children	27	-	“	“	
Buck Ann	26	f	“	Jefferson	
Burman Harvey		23	m	“	Fayette
Burns Larnud	26	-	“	“	
Burns Larrinda		28	f	“	“
Bush Elija	17	-	“	“	

C

Caldwell Stephen		18	m	Kenctucky	Fayette
Caldwell Lizze		20	f	“	“
Cameron Giles		23	m	Missouri	Lafayette
Carr Henry	20	m	“	“	
Carr Viney	18	-	Kentucky	Fayette	
Carr Viney	18	-	“	“	
Carter John	18	m	“	“	
Cary Peter	38	m	Missouri	St. Louis	
Cavinaugh John		20	m	Kentucky	Fayette
Chalk Ellen	14	f	“	“	
Chase Jane Mary		15	f	“	“

Cheatham Joseph		21	m	Missouri	Lafayette
Chenault Smith		21	m	Kentucky	Fayette
Clack Louis	20	m	Missouri		Lafayette
Clasy An Lucy		13	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Clay Henry	24	m	“	“	
Clay Henry	17	m	“	“	
Clay Laura	16	f	“	“	
Clement Rebecca		23	f	“	“
Click Patsy	16	f	‘	“	
Cobb Nancy	16	f	“	“	
Coffee Sally	24	f	“	“	
Coffey Salley	23	f	“	“	
Cogswell Charles		25	m	Missouri	St. Louis
Cogswell Willis		25	m	“	“
Coleman Louisa		15	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Coleman Moriah		37	-	“	“
Collier Hannah		25	f	Missouri	St. Louis
Collin Matilda	18	f	Kentucky	Fayette	
Colwell Catherine	15	f	“	“	
Combs Emily	20	f	“	“	
Cook John	20	m	“	“	
Cooper Emily	19	f	“	“	
Cornelisen Minta		49	-	“	“
Crow Jim	20	m	“	“	
Cruce Elias	26	-	Missouri		St. Louis
Cruce Katharen		24	f	“	“
Cummings Kute		15	-	Kentucky	Fayette

D

Davis Ann	17	f	Kentucky	Fayette	
Davis Ann	15	f	“	“	
Davis Catherine		16	f	“	“
Davis Ellen	15	f	Missouri		St. Louis
Davis Lizzie	15	f	Kentucky	Fayette	
Davis Washington	18	m	“	“	
Day Daniel	14	-	“	“	
Denny John	23	m	“	“	
Denny Milton	19	m	“	“	
Dickerson Matilda	10	f	“	“	
Do David	18	m	“	“	
Do George	18	m	“	“	
Dorress Alice	13	f	Missouri		Lafayette
Dorress Dick	18	m	“	“	
Dorress Eveline		15	f	“	“

Dorress John	21	m	“	“	
Dorress Mary	19	m	“	“	
Dothy Sarah	15	f	Kentucky	Fayette	
Dotty Rose	12	f	“	“	
Doup Charles	25	m	“	Jefferson	
Downs John	18	m	“	Fayette	
Doyel Jerry	16	m	“	“	
Drew An Eliza	16	f	“	“	
Dudley Ann	16	f	Kentucky	Fayette	
Dulin Amanda	13	f	“	“	
Duncan Armand		17	m	“	“
Duncan George		20	m	“	“
Dutton Jane Matilda	14	f	“	“	

E

Edward Charles		09	m	Kentucky	Fayette
Edward Stamper		27	-	“	“
Eislow? Rodah		24	-	Missouri	St. Louis
Elen Manda	18	-	Kentucky	Fayette	
Ellen Mary	16	f	“	“	
Ellis Harret	35	f	“	“	
Elizabeth Mary		15	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Ely Henry	18	m	“	“	
Ellitt Andrew	18	m	“	“	
Embry Bob	15	m	“	“	
Embry Samuel	19	m	“	“	
Embry Scott	19	m	“	“	
Emby Jim	26	m	“	“	
Evans Charity	26	f	“	“	
Evans Vicy	14	-	“	“	
Eveline?/Suilda?		11	-	“	“
Eves Jane Luck		15	f	“	“
Everett Neal	19	m	“	“	
Eulow Washington	08	m	Missouri	St. Louis	

F

Farris Tom	16	m	Kentucky	Fayette
Faulter Wilson	13	m	“	“
Figg Lewis	18	m	Kentucky	Fayette
Flegen Andy	21	m	Missouri	Lafayette
Flectcher Edward		21	m	Kentucky	Fayette
Fisher Lavicy	16	-	“	“
Ford Nora	12	f	“	“
Franklin# Augustus	22	-	Kentucky	Fayette
Freed George	27	m	Missouri	St. Louis
Fuder Easter	15	f	Kentucky	Fayette

Fuder John	15	m	“	“	
Fuder Mary	11	f	“	“	
G					
Garnet Anthony		20	m	Kentucky	Fayette
Garnett Amanda		21	f	“	“
Gay Early	11	-	“	“	
Gay Peter	19	m	“	“	
Gillmen Ann Mary					
2 chil	24	f		“	
Golding Elija	15	-	“	“	
Goodwright Ann		14	f	“	“
Grant Emeline	14	f	“	“	
Graves Diane	22	f	“	“	
Graves Lewis	20	m	“	“	
Graves Marth	22	-	“	“	
Graves Moses	22	m	“	“	
Gregory Motana		20	-	“	“
Green Amandy		16	-	“	“
Grubb Frank	25	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
H					
Haiden Roberta		12	f	Missouri	St. Louis
Hall David	23	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Halley Calvin	33	m	“	“	
Halley Susan	25	f	“	“	
Harlan Eliza	20	f	“	“	
Harper Cary	19	-	“	“	
Hathoway Charles	22	m	Missouri		Lafayette
Hathoway Elvina		15	f	“	“
Hawkins Adaline		22	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Hawkins Andrew		22	m	“	“
Hawkins Drucilla	14	f	“	“	
Hawkins Jim	14	m	“	“	
Hawkins Liz	14/15	f		“	
Hawkins Noah	18	m	“	“	
Hayes Nannie	10	-	Missouri		Lafayette
Hays Jane Eliza		15	f	“	“
Henderson Pricilla	18	f	“	“	
Henry Charles	13	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Henry John	21	m	“	Jefferson	
Henry John	30	m	“	Fayette	
Herd Ellen	18	f	“	“	
Heukle Issac	25	m	Missouri		Lafayette
Hiate Emanuel	17	m	Kentucky	Fayette	

Highby Ann	13	f	Missouri	St. Louis	
Higgins Lewis	22	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Hill Edward	17	m	“	“	
Hill Nicholas	18	m	“	“	
Hill Simon	24	f	“	“	
Hocker Higgins		18	-	“	
Honerker Samuel		14	m	“	“
House T. Joshua		24	m	Missouri	St. Louis
Houx James	20	m	“	“	
Howard Amanda		24	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Howard Henry	8	m	“	“	
Howe H. Lewis		16	m	“	“
Hoy Thomas	23	m	“	“	
Huff Joe		19	m	“	“
Huffman Jane	18	f	“	Jefferson	
Hundley George		24	m	“	Fayette
Hurst Spencer	22	m	Missouri	Lafayette	
Hurries Alfred	48	m	“	St. Louis	

I

Irvin Richard	23	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Ish Joe	17	m	Missouri	Lafayette	
Isom Lewis	48	m	Kentucky	Fayette	

J

Jackson Cynthia		22	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Jackson Henry	21	m	“	“	
Jacobs Surry	21	-	“	“	
James K. Mary		15	f	“	“
Jan Mary	16	f		“	
Jan Patsey	12	f	“	“	
Jane Mary	05	f	“	“	
Jane Mary	16	f	“	Jefferson	
Jane Mary	17	f	“	Fayette	
Jane Mary	18	f	“	“	
Jane Mary	18	f	“	“	
Jane Nancy	10	f	“	“	
Jane Patsy	22	f	“	“	
Johnson Mary	14	f	Kentucky	Fayette	
Johnson Maryann		13	f	“	“
Johnson An Mary		24	f	“	“
Johnson Sally	22	f	“	“	
Johnson Tom	12	m	“	“	
Jones Charles	26	m	“	“	
Jones George	30	m	Missouri	Lafayette	

Jones Thomas	24	m	“	“	
K					
Kane Peter	15	m	Missouri	St. Louis	
Kearn Irvina	18	f	Kentucky	Fayette	
Kenny Allin	14	-	“	“	
Kenny Jack (husband)	24	m	“	“	
Kenny Patience	16	-	“	“	
Kenny Rody (wife)	22	f	“	“	
Kidd Ellen	14	f	Missouri	Lafayette	
King George	19	-	Kentucky	Fayette	
Knight Morton	19	-	“	“	
Kune Aaron	29	m	“	“	
L					
Lane Issac	17	f	Kentucky	Fayette	
Langford David	18	m	Missouri	Lafayette	
Langford David	18	m	“	“	
Layson Jesse	16	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Layson Margaret	14	f	“	“	
Lauderdale Jesse	18	m	Missouri	Lafayette	
Lauderdale Richard	20	m	“	“	
Lee Ann	13	f	“	St. Louis	
Lee Betsy	17	f	Kentucky	Fayette	
Lee Frances	16	f	“	“	
Lee I? Hannah	10	f	“	“	
Lee Kitty	20	f	“	“	
Lee Margaret	18	f	“	“	
Litton Arion	14	-	“	“	
Lockridge Margaret	15	f	“	“	
Lockridge Margaret	16	f	“	“	
Long Matt	13	m	“	“	
Lorrey Ann Rose	17	f	“	“	
Lysle Mary	15	f	“	“	
Lucy Mary	12	f	“	“	
M					
Mack Ann	15	f	Kentucky	Fayette	
Magee Lewis	25	m	“	“	
Malern Nellie	17	f	Missouri	St. Louis	
Marshall Caroline	16	f	Kentcuky	Fayette	
Marshall Jesse	24	-	“	“	
Marshall Mary	15	f	“	“	
Marshall Jane Mary	16	f	“	“	
Marshall Sarah	23	f	“	“	
Marshall Sarah	20	f	“	“	

Marshall Tom	19	m	“	“	
Martin Ben	21	m	“	“	
Martin David	40	m	“	“	
Masey Emily	13	f	Missouri	St. Louis	
Mason Florida	15	f	Kentucky	Fayette	
Massie Taylor	22	-	Missouri	Lafayette	
Maupin Eliza	12	f	Kentucky	Fayette	
Maupin Martha		13	f	“	“
McAlister JaneLucinda		16	f	“	“
McCord Hildah		20	f	“	“
McCormick Mary	17	f	“	“	
McFall Ellick	20	-	“	Shelby	
McFarland Cass		18	-	Missouri	St. Louis
McFarland	20	f	“	“	
McGee Mary	20	f	Kentucky	Fayette	
Middleton Tom		18	m	“	“
Mitchell Adam		21	m	Missouri	Lafayette
Mitchell Guy	23	m	“	“	
Mitchell John	21	m	“	“	
Monday Tom	10	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Montgomery Jim		14	m	“	“
Moore Jane	18	f	“	“	
Moore Lewis	21	m	“	“	
Moore Martha	17	f	“	“	
Morland Taylor		13	-	“	“
Morrison Jim	13	m	Missouri	St. Louis	
Mountjoy Jennie		16	f	“	Lafayette

N

Napeth Roland		23	m	Missouri	St. Louis
Nash Netty	20	-	“	“	
Neal Edmund	20	m	“	Lafayette	
Neal Lucy	18	f	“	“	
Nelson Kate	24	f	Kentucky	Fayette	
Newby Henry	15	m	Missouri	St. Louis	
Newman Dick	35	F	“	“	
Nickols Flelrn or Flew		26	-	Kentucky	Fayette
Noland Wash	25	-	“	“	
Northcutt Bob	20	m	“	“	
Northcutt Catherine	23	f	“	“	
Northcutt Daniel		24	m	“	“
Northcutt Ellen		15	f	“	“
Northcutt George		30	m	“	“
Northcutt Jane	20	f	“	“	
Northcutt Emily		15	f	“	“

Northcutt Frank		22	m	“	“
Northcutt Hildah	16	-	“	“	
O					
Oldham Bob	20	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Oldham Liza	28	f	“	“	
Outcatt Susan	19	f	Missouri	St. Louis	
Owens Jack	18	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Owens Mary	18	f	“	“	
Owens Rose	12	f	“	“	
Owins Martha	15	f	“	“	
P					
Parish Lewis	20	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Parish Isaiah	18	m	“	“	
Patterson Alick		18	-	“	“
Patterson Fanny		14	f	“	“
Patterson Frank		19	m	“	“
Patterson Squire		14	-	“	“
Penniston Caroline	16	f	Missouri	Lafayette	
Pettis John	25	m	Kentucky	Fafyette	
Petett Hilda	16	-	“	“	
Pigg Gorge	22	-	“	“	
Pittman An Sally		14	f	“	“
Pope Caroline	40	f	“	“	
Pope Elija	14	-	“	“	
Porter Amanda		18	f	Missouri	Lafayette
Porter Kitty	16	f	“	“	
Porter Peter	20	m	“	“	
Porter Tully	12	-	Kentucky	Fayette	
Poter John	15	m	Missouri	St. Louis	
Poter Lewis	23	m	“	“	
Poter Phillis	19	f	“	“	
Pullum Laurind # 2yr chi		17	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Prentice Henrietta	20	f	“	“	
Price Bill	16	m	Missouri	Lafayette	
Price Jerry	25	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Price John	24	m	“	“	
Pride Charles	-	m	Virginia	Richmond	
R					
Rafle Fanny	12	f	Kentucky	Fayette	
Raly Elizbeth	23	f	Missouri	t. Louis	
Rayburn Jim	20	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Reed Elija	20	-	“	“	

Reed Logan	22	m	“	“
Reed Louisa	15	f	“	“
Rice Jacob	30	m	“	“
Richardson Clarisa	14	f	“	“
Riddell William	25	m	“	“
Rimy Gorge	16	m	“	“
Robards Charly	19	-	“	“
Robeson May	14	-	“	“
Robinson Jane Mary	15	f	“	“
Rockwell Louisa	12	f	Missouri	St. Louis
Roiston Frank	23	m	Kentucky	Fayette
Rout Nature	19	-	“	“
Rout Nelson	40	m	“	“
Rufas George	31	m	Missouri	St. Louis

S

Salter Charity	18	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Salter David	16	m	“	“
Salter John	21	m	“	“
Samuels John	15	m	Missouri	St. Louis
Samuels Sarah	22	F	“	Lafayette
Sanders Edward	22	m	Kentucky	Fayette
Sanders Issac	17	m	Missouri	Lafayette
Scott Ed	26	m	Kentucky	Fayett
Searcy Alshy	14	-	Missouri	St. Louis
Selby William	18	m	“	“
Shaw Hannah	14	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Shawhan Lafayette	17	-	“	“
Shearer Luther	20	m	“	“
Shelby Turner	23	m	Missouri	Lafayette
Smith Henry	23	m	Kentucky	Fayette
Smith Jack	16	m	Missouri	St. Louis
Smith John	19	m	Kentucky	Jefferson
Smith Lotty	17	-	“	Fayette
Smith Malvina	23	f	Missouri	Lafayette
Smith Pamela	15	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Smith Robert	22	m	“	“
Smith Tillman	20	m	“	“
Smith William	12	m	“	“
Smock Sam	24	m	Kentucky	Fayette
Snell William	26	m	Missouri	Lafayette
Spears Walker	29	m	Kentucky	Fayette
Stamps Arrow	22	-	“	“
Stanly Catherine	16	f	“	“
Stephens Ruth	15	f	Missouri	Lafayette
Steverson Patsy	19	f	“	St. Louis

Stewart Isaac	23	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Stivers Angelina		14	f	“	“
Stone Henry	17	m	“	“	
Storm Charlotte		11	f	“	“
Storm Margaret		15	f	“	“
Storm Ann Mary		15	f	“	“
Sullivan Alfird		11	-	“	“
T					
Talbut Orange	21	m	“	“	
Tasscott Milly	17	f	Missouri		St. Louis
Taylor George		21	m	Kentucky	Fayette
Taylor John	21	m	“	Jefferson	
Teclm (?) Armstead	24	m	“	Fayette	
Temple Flora	19	f	“	“	
Theffer Eliza	18	f	“	“	
Thomas Frances		20	f	“	“
Thompson Alfred		16	m	“	“
Thompson Evaline	32	f	“	“	
Thompson Jim	22	m	“	“	
Thompson John		16	m	“	“
Thompson William	21	m	“	“	
Thornton Ellen		16	f	Missouri	Lafayette
Thornton Will	19	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Thurnate Jane	17	f	“	“	
Tibel Daniel	31	m	Missouri		St. Louis
Tofer Bob	18	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Tribble James	26	m	“	“	
Trotter George	19	m	“	“	
True Elleck	21	-	“	“	
Tucker Charles		20	m	Missouri	Lafayette
Tull Abram	19	-	“	St. Louis	
Turner Tom	21	m	“	“	
Turpin Elizbeth		18	f	Kentucky	Fayette
V					
Veach Terry	15	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Vivian Burton	25	m	Missouri		Lafayette
Vivian Henry	17	m	“	“	
Vivian Henry	13	m	“	“	
Vivian Jane	22	f	“	“	
W					
Waggoner J. Lucinda	17	f	Kentucky	Fayette	

Walker Charles	18	m	Missouri		St. Louis
Walker David (brother)	12	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Walker Emily (sister)	10	f	“	“	
Walkek John	17	m	Missouri	Lafayette	
Walker John (whte boy of color)	12	m	“	St. Louis	
Walker Polly	06	f	“	“	
Wall Thomas	16	m	Kentucky	Shelby	
Wallace Peter	23	m	Missouri	Lafayette	
Walters Jane Eliza	19	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Ward Matilda	14	f	Missouri	Lafayette	
Warmunck Wesley	16	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Washington Edward	14	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Washington Gen Geo.	15	m	“	“	
Washington George	22	m	“	“	
Webb Charles	25	m	Missouri	Lafayette	
Webb Jack	24	m	“	“	
Welch Lee	23	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Wert Grace	18	f	“	“	
Whealler Harriet	23	f	“	“	
Whisakee Lane	24	-	“	“	
Whisaker Eliza	28	f	“	“	
White Ed	18	m	“	“	
White Eveline	17	f	“	“	
White John	18	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Wilkinson Ceasar	19	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Williams Alfred	20	m	“	“	
Williams Anthony	26	m	“	“	
Williams Edwena	16	f	“	“	
Williams Eli	25	m	“	“	
Williams Henry	23	m	“	“	
Williams Jane	18	f	“	“	
Williams Margaret	19	f	“	“	
Williams Mrtha	18	f	“	“	
Wilson Green	10	-	Missouri	S	t. Louis
Wilson Malinda	21	f	“	“	
Wilson Harry	17	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Wilson Henry (bro)	18	m	“	“	
Wilson James (bro)	20	m	“	“	
Wilson Minor	22	m	Missouri	St. Louis	
Wilson Tim	23	m	Kentucky	Fayette	
Wilson Phebe	16	-	“	“	
Wisdom Betsy (moth of?	40	f	Missouri	St. Louis	
Wisdom John	06	m	“	“	

Wisdom Moses		13	m	“	“
Wisdom Stewart		10	m	“	“
Wisdom Tom	15	m	“	“	
Woods Nat	17	-	Kentucky	Fayette	
Y					
Yager Ann Mary		15	f	Kentucky	Fayette
Yancy Henry	20	m	“	“	
Yardenshire Henry	30	m	Missouri		St. Louis

“Who is Amanda Howard?” the people shout when Richard says her name aloud, reads the only name underlined in the entire document.

“I have no idea,” Richard says to them.

But already the division grows in the minds of the people who compose the crowd, now bustling with an energy all its own, poised as if on the edge of a lever, at the moment perfectly balanced, with the same number of people giving Richard the benefit of the doubt as those who have already removed it and replaced it with guilt, for some, the evidence provided by papers and documents, obviously, they think, concealed away from tampering and any other mischief, the kind of proof that goes beyond doubt, beyond the meager testimony that words or memories can provide, an account not of things the way we wish them to be, or perhaps even remember them as being, but an account of things the way the were, and are in a way, unchanged as history must be, if any sense is to be made of all this experience, piling up through the ages. For the other half, though, documents such as the kind from the envelope, the kind gone for by lawyers and judges and all the like-minded people, are even less trustworthy than the other kinds, with more stock placed into the words of a man, the sound of his voice present and the judgment of his character immediate, more trust to be placed in the goodness of men rather than in soul-less papers that could be easily forged, run off on some printing press and passed off as legitimate, because in the end, of all the words to be printed or pasted onto documents, of all the potential for forgery and the like, in the end all human beings have is the testimony afforded by another man’s voice, and the look in his eye as he delivers his defense, and no other way to know the contents of his soul, his motive, or the circumstances of his presentation.

“That’s my momma’s name,” Penelope says. “I told you in the office. Howard is my last name, though my father goes by the name of Bowers.”

“This proves nothing,” Richard mumbles.

But already the crowd holds its breath as Richard’s eyes move through the pages. He shuffles the papers several times, folding the yellowed parchment over onto each other. The judge moves from his stance to watch over Richard’s shoulder, to read for himself what the words say and why it is that despite his words, the color seems to drain from Richard’s face, all of the sudden, as if remembering an encounter long ago, despite his best efforts to keep his hands steady and not let anything affect him outwardly, particularly the memory of a night, a dark night, perhaps, buried deep in the woods beyond all light and civilization, when he thought he was alone with just his own heart and God’s, though not entirely alone, as it turns, but accompanied and therefore in need to the privacy and solitude one imagines his God to enjoy but which none can ever seem to find while roaming the mortal earth. There he was again, standing in that cabin, the shelter of trees to guard him from earthly intruders but without protection from whatever punishments the final judge keeps in store for liars and blasphemers, adulterers and

sinners of every sort who ever laid eyes on the ten laws, two tables, and turned his back to virtue and the light—towards a girl, a bedpost. Finally Judge Northcut snatches the papers from Richard and reaches the bottom of the stack, there and then, in Richard's own hand, to eliminate any question or alibi, the notice of sale:

> I will arrive in Natchez about the 20th of October and have with me the best lot of Negroes that I ever sold to that or any other market. They are a select lot,—likely and certain. All told I will have, there, several full boat-loads, about the time named not less than 245 negroes and they are all young. Among them will be found all descriptions of servants, field hands, house servants, carriage drivers, blacksmiths, &c. I have three of the finest seamstresses and mantua makers that have ever been brought to the South.
>
> I am resolute to sell this valuable lot on most liberal terms and would like to see interested purchasers on my premises, Forks of the Road near Natchez before the lot is diminished. RICHARD M BOWERS {signed} Lysistrata, Kentky. Natchez papers and New Orleans Weekly Delta are requested by advertiser to copy. OCTOBER 1862.

"Penelope, did your mother ever describe the place where she encountered Mister Bowers?" Katy asks.

"Yes ma'am," the girl answers. "Said it was a tall building, loosely stacked logs, more a cabin than a house, and better suited for livestock, and with a rope of chains bolted to the center, and with men chained to the second floor and the women on the first to do the cooking and to keep logs on the fire. Momma called it a slave ship, just built on solid ground, and flipped."

"I tell you I was in a house this morning to match her description exactly, where I found the journal. Due north," Katy answers. "Hidden in a cluster of trees and undergrowth."

"That is the cabin we traded to Richard for his claim." a voice shouts from the crowd, that of the coal worker from Richard's meeting.

Now Richard stands amidst the crowd, stunned perhaps, though from his face there is no discernable room for an emotion other than shame, humiliation and his deflection of the people's glare as they clear a path for him to leave, some less willingly than others, perhaps wanting to corral the liar and bring him to justice on the spot, while others, the ones who yield their ground, perhaps more interested to let the man leave, a spot of humiliation to be sure, not only for the deeds he had done but for the way they all believed him, the way they now ask among themselves, *has everything been a lie?* they think, *it cannot be from such an honorable man,* but one among them will say, but *that is the point, he is not honorable, what we know of his honor is what is false* and the people of Lysistrata turn on Richard Bowers, as those who might dwell deep in a cave since their birth, believing that their campfire and its flames are all the light the world has to offer, suddenly taken from the cave and forced to look into the sun, hold its glare, the blank spots of light against their eyelids and the pain of staring into brightness when emerging from dark places, and when the pain of the realization is too much, that the war hero the town had hung its pride on for nearly fourteen years, even longer if you count the years he actually spent fighting, though now they know it wasn't spent fighting at all but sabotaging the

very cause he said he was fighting for, traitorous work, the people thought to kill Richard Bowers then and there, perhaps not to kill, as one of the more rational throats would holler, but if not to kill than definitely to punish and not justice by the law or by the courts but a mob's justice, swift and angry, fitting to the crimes no less, a physical revenge, some measure to exact from his body, having grown proud and thick on Lysistrata's praise, now an empty shell.

In the face of such a crowd, Richard feels in the depth of his pant pockets for the medallion his mother used to wear around her neck, the silver coin Suppina called a *thaler*, resting in the darkness of his pocket with its golden chain intact, which, despite the chilly night air, and the cold, clammy skin in his palms and fingers, begins to burn his hand, though not with smoke or anything otherworldly, but an earthly and all too common impetus, the glare of a mother at her son's misdeeds, guilt it is called, though often by other names, and though Richard feels the medallion against his skin, it is his mother's memory that causes the pain, the burning he rushes to extinguish but cannot, since Suppina is long dead and her arms, therefore, stretch across to her son and implant their blame, coupled with a sense of shame at having fathered any children at all, information never once intended for his mother's ears, but now under the circumstances of this child's conception, an encounter she would have called wretched without so much as batting an eye, nor with consideration that a mother might look upon her own child with some measure of pity, as Suppina was not a woman with that peculiar capacity. Richard spills every wrong he has ever done in the war, not just as pertains to the girl, but every slight or sin, no matter how minor, and the people stand all of us stunned and somewhat embarrassed and ashamed for him, even if his own mother would not have done the same, though someone shouts that this is one of his tactics, to confuse the crowd and tug at their heartstrings and avoid his just desserts. They hear him out, though, supposing that sometimes, a soul can get filled up with its own transgressions, and at some point there has to be an overflow, sometimes in spite of the owner's attempts to stop it. At that point it becomes a matter not of will or willingness, but of quantity, mass, and volume, and like any container the soul simply spills what it can no longer hold tight, and so Richard let us know how he was recruited to the business of bounty hunting and all the rest.

How a Union man, also from Kentucky, but from further north in the Commonwealth, with land bordering the Ohio River and with a nose for these kinds of business transactions, approached him with the proposition. How the man already owned the slave jails and the boats for driving the cargo down the Mississippi to New Orleans or anywhere in the state of Mississippi, that there was a premium to be paid at that point, due to the war and slaves scarcity and running away and being freed by the Union in towns where they'd beaten back the Rebels. That the man offered Richard easy money and control of several routes along the way, the kind of money that weighed heavy on a man's belt, all gold and silver, no paper money, to hunt through the woods and dark places of Kentucky, hills and caves and ravine bottoms, searching for escapees and how to capture them, usually during the day when they slept, and chain them and round them into jails scattered on the land, load them onto the boats and float them down to auction where the price would be highest. Then to come back north to Ohio, which attracted runaways like moths to a flame, a promise of something better but ultimately more danger than salvation, if Richard or any of the bounty hunters happened across them, usually hiding out on the land where most folks would never think to find them, most folks who weren't Richard Bowers, the man said, with his particular knowledge of the landscape and his expertise for survival.

Before long the crowd grows restless and begins the angry words and gestures any mob of people are wont to undertake, when they feel they've been betrayed and taken advantage of, or worse, tricked and fooled like children who believe what they are told on the surface of what they are told, soon revealed with age and experience to be false or worse, intended for trickery. Several of the men approach Richard directly, stand chest to chest against the man in his bright uniform and drown their voices in a single tirade, a litany of the betrayals, every deference they paid to him on account of his service, the bills waived or torn in half, the preferences allowed to him when items ran short in the general store, or the way his mail was delivered before anyone else's, despite the number of people between his house and the town, even allowing him to pass first when on the street, or helping him dismount his houses as if a boot-boy. With every word and slight the crowd puffs its chest a little more forward, presses that much firmer into Richard, no arms cocked for fighting, no legs set for pursuit or trampling, but the signals clearly standing by, their nerves ripe to pounce should the command be given, muscles, tendons, and fibers ready and willing to answer the call. Already Richard works his way among the heated crowd, locates its thinnest flank and pushes forward, as one would expect from a military man and for that reason ironic in the person of Richard Bowers, to the north side of the courthouse, where only moments before Katy had emerged with her journal in hand, *which started this entire chain of events,* Richard thinks to himself as he pushes past the remaining people.

By the time he disappears through the underbrush and into the northern woods, the mob has already swung to and from both sides of the pendulum concerning his fate, that signal now given for the bodies to bite their tongues in favor of more physical violence, beginning with the scramble for weapons of every kind, shovels and axes, planks of wood, rough and sewn, whips and spikes and more than a few polished pistols, though these remain concealed like resentment in the vests of the men who secretly wish to exact that sort of revenge, all while others rushing to ignite torches for their search, though still daylight, as if mob justice might only be dignified while under the light of burning rags, oil-soaked, wrapped around the ends of long sticks, and the entire mob milling for a moment, like a beast, wounded, unsure of itself, as if to determine how to keep in the body and form of a mob while scattered through the woods along no more than Indian trails, in some places narrow enough to let no more than a boy or small child pass, let alone hundreds of justice-seekers, ending then, there, knowing full well that Richard's knowledge of the woods is far too extensive, surpassing any understanding or experience of the mob, *he'll lose us in no time*, someone will shout as the collective fire dwindles, smolders, peters away until only the fantasy of burning down his illicit house, razing that cabin to the ground, is the only recourse the mob has before it eventually disperses, dropping individuals again to reclaim their daily tasks, the voices of wives and children now discernible, and return home for their evening meals.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

She was trying to get my attention again, he thinks, *working hard to show me that she wanted something from the kitchen, though she was probably scared that one of the neighbors would come by, or maybe see through the window, or that her husband would burst through the doors right as she was enjoying her fantasy on the kitchen floor, or bent over the sink, perhaps, maybe even in one of the kitchen chairs but either way she's been asking for it for a long time now, I knew it even before the war, that she knew she married the wrong brother, but I'm sure she felt trapped like there was no way to satisfy what it was she felt when she saw me sitting next to her husband at the table for a meal, comparing the two of us and always realizing the choice she had made. Of course,* he continues, *that is how she learned of the journal, because she's been following me to the cabin, maybe even watching as I brought my girlfriends here, probably on her tiptoes at the window to see the way I treated their bodies and probably more than once wishing through the bars to be in their places instead of her own, that she probably also stumbled into the cabin and found the diary there, though I should have hidden it away, or better, but how was I to recognize that she'd go to such measures to follow my every move and desire me from afar? That's how she knew where the cabin was, where the diary was,* he thinks, as if settling the account in his memory, *and she probably guessed at what the reaction would be, that they'd ban me to this cabin, that I'd bunker myself in for the fight, grow lonely during the nights, then maybe she figured to come by some night and satisfy her own desires, figuring I'd be prime for the taking, and some night, not right away, that would be too obvious, but maybe a week or so after the fact, to work her way through the woods and come to me, come for me, bringing food and a blanket, perhaps, to lie on the ground, her body, because she'd know that with the nights getting colder eventually I'd have to burn my blankets for fuel.*

Ingrates, Richard thinks, *for everything I've done for this town and now these people, with their eyes, to judge me, now to have to endure their stares, as if I were the criminal in this case, and not their success story who brought with me all the new businesses, the coal companies never would have found this spot on the map, nor would the railroads have bothered to come by, if not to our town itself then at least close enough by that we could use the rails. Did they think to pay me respect when they traded in their dirty field clothes for nice pants and shirts, jobs with the companies instead of bloodying their hands against the harvests, or offer once to thank me for the years of hard work I've done so that they could enjoy the things they have? When I came back at the end of the war this city was nothing more than a corral and all these fine citizens, who now comb their hair in wild pompadours or hike their skirts in stores and restaurants like city dwellers, who those same people lived off of manure and sweat and wouldn't know the finer things if it hit them between the eyes, no matter how trained they were to read the soil or know when to feed the livestock. I was the one working day and night, when they slept quietly in their houses, content with what the land had been giving them. To treat me like a rebel come back from treachery, is that what I deserve, like the lowlife who now lives in my house and has no doubt their admiration at this very hour, those who slinked back home and curled away for the better part of a year, all the while those of us with ambition and more, a plan to make something better for himself and his future family, his entire town no less, that now even some of those former confederates were standing in the crowd just then, were the loudest voices against me, though that comes as no surprise as every man will shout when the chance comes up to shift the peoples' eyes away from his own misdeeds and towards those of his neighbor. Those very same treacherous eyes fell on me in the crowd, though it will take them some time to find me out in the*

woods, I hear their voices call for fire, some of them, others for a beating or the rest, though will they spend their nights thinking of me when they rest and sleep comfortably in their gas-lit homes and with running water and plenty of dry firewood for their stoves?

They won't stop until they grab me by the neck, Richard thinks as he whips through the trees and undergrowth, the thick green branches, many armed with thistles, thorns, or other prickered weapons, careful not to travel in a straight line for the cabin, where he figures his best chances for defense and thus survival lay, but rather in the motion of a snake upon the water, any of the poisonous kinds, who slither to and fro, back and forth from side to side while they approach what they intend to snare, wet their mouths with toxins and wait to devour. *They'll come to burn it down*, he thinks, *to raze my cabin to the ground, but I can't let that happen.* Along the way, Richard notices several new rock formations, not new in their formation but new in that he'd never noticed them before, the kinds of configurations he'd made a good deal of money on in the past and would again in the future, should he escape with his life and figure some way to gain his revenge on the people of town. Richard at last scrambles from the thick confusion of the woods and into the clearing and panics at the silence that greets him at the front door to the cabin, the murmur of animals in the surrounding woods and the echo of empty sky above, now grey and overcast, concealed by the canopy of trees overhead, the coldish shadows cast between the impressions of leaves against the earth, all sounds and sights that should have registered as familiar, if not comforting to a man who spends his life outdoors and surrounded by the same animals but something nevertheless new about their calls and scuttling and therefore unknown, and therefore dreadful. *I'll bunker the place*, he thinks, *make a defense, make them come after me, capture me, though not alive.*

Richard rummages through the base of the cabin, picks through the broken pieces of door and climbs into the darkness, retrieves several tools, an axe, a hammer, a jagged saw, before emerging again to the light, disappearing within the work of the house. *A bunker to make my last stand*, he thinks, *when they come to burn me alive*. *The crowd from Lysistrata long since dispersed from the woods, now quiet as rabbit hunters, even the most vocal members of the mob having calmed and readying their ambush, free from any explicit thought or disturbance*. Richard nonetheless rushes from here to there within the cabin, gathering materials in fear of what he imagined them to be plotting, tearing down the loose partition walls from the second floor, cubicles which once held slaves until they could be marched and loaded onto the riverboats and shipped south, stacked the thin wooden panels at the entrance to the cabin, gathered together the lengths of chain from all corners of the building, the main chain, thick and weathered with use, he coils beside the growing piles of wood, the smaller, individual chains he lays out along the grass and dirt beyond the threshold. When these articles are collected, Richard moves to disassemble all the available wood and metal inside the cabin for his barricade, leaving only the mattress and the potbellied stove to remain intact, along with the bricks surrounding the fireplace, all else he gathers outside, in the fading light of day, when at night he continues the long process of stacking the wood against the house, nailing what he can to the outer planks, weaving the chains between to make it that much more difficult for an attacker to enter, that much more difficult to escape, leaving only the front door unprotected, which he will defense with a barrier built from the inside.

After several hours in the bunker, Richard thinks, *They plan to take my cabin by siege, to draw me out like a rabbit or wait it out until I can't take the treatment any longer, or run out of food, though my rations will last me well into the winter, and by that time they'll have to rush in for me*. By now the floorboards surrounding the mattress have been loosened and in most cases

removed, leaving enough room for a platform which enables Richard to walk around the cabin, which now resembles the building of a cabin rather than one that had been standing for at least fifty years, checking through the jail bars at each window for the advance of enemies, but with enough of the hidden capacity of the cabin exposed to reveal the arsenal of weapons he has stored in the cabin's flooring, as well as the tins of food he has buried away, provisions he intended should he ever be stranded in the cabin during a winter storm, but which now serve an entirely new purpose, though without water the siege could prove effective, even with holes punched into the roof, strategically placed, that would catch as much drinking water as he'd need, provided Lysistrata's rainy season arrived on time and in full force, and the barrels Richard salvaged and set beneath the perforations to provide him with relief. Like an animal, the kind that are caged against their will and against their nature, when each and every of their natural tendencies to scurry or gallop or fly are blocked by bars or doors or fences, Richard's mind focuses only on the obstacles in front of him, as if his eyes are kept forward by a set of blinders, constantly trying his defenses for a possible weakness, mapping his enemies plans and plots and lines of attack, though unlike animals, thinking these strategies and erasing all thought from his mind, keeping a blank slate of concentration, eyes and ears focused into the woods, to guess and anticipate the oncoming attack.

Richard climbs to the second floor of the cabin, now vacant and stripped of all its qualities, any material that was useful for the barricade, and carries with him a rifle to perch atop the structure and fire on any intruders, be they friend or foe, since from the second floor it would be impossible to tell and too late to ask questions and qualify an intruder before figuring friend from enemy. As Richard stiffens his back against the upper frame of the house, with the thin, holey roof inches from his head, he recalls the feel of the hard wood against his spine, and his countless hours spent in perches such as these, when hunting, above the deer and wild turkeys that roamed the Kentucky woods, or the helpless Rebels he spotted and watched during the war, *there he was*, Richard thinks, *traveling alone in a time of war, not much sense in his head to be doing such a thing and just asking for trouble, maybe not from the younger bandits in the woods, usually scared off by a gunshot or a man with ample shoulders, but asking for real trouble, the kind only ended with robbery or something worse than a beating. I'll follow him through the woods, make a sport of it, try to guess what he's got and what he'd be doing this close to Lysistrata, this part of the commonwealth when so much of the battle had happened to the east and south, very little in these parts but for skirmishes or the occasional Rebel raid on Cincinnati. It was damned cold,* Richard thinks, *with snow already on the ground and the animals had pretty much gone in for winter, though deer could still be found, if you went out for them in morning or late at night, follow them from a safe distance, eye them with your firearm, wait for a clearer shot, then fire and retrieve the prize, some still fattened up from their gorging when the fall arrived, more thinned by the cold and weather, thinned by the lack of food available to them and the like. Make a game of it,* he continues, *follow the poor bastard along the ridge, to keep my advantage over him and watch from up high, then when he hits the shallows and is least able to fight back, though his bag seems a little light there must be something of value in there, something to barter away or melt down into coins, what with Rebel monies circulating everywhere, though a quick trip to Tennessee or Mississippi or anywhere along the river I could exchange the paper money for something of value. Just there, over the ridge, his feet have slowed and perhaps he's decided he's come far enough and needs to rest, which makes for easier prey, he ought to be there by now and I could make the quick escape back over the ridge and into the caves.*

Perhaps it is two days later, perhaps less, when the animal-like awareness dissolves and Richard, still clutching his musket, still counting on his ammunition, begins to think again the way men think, not merely of fighting or self-defense, but of the concerns that dwell beyond his own body and well-being, which means that for the first time, Richard begins to think of the scene in Lysistrata, though leaving out what is embarrassing or contradictory, as all minds do naturally in such conditions, and instead focusing on the results of what had happened, of his departure, and thus Richard considers his child, assuming John and Katy have taken her, having puzzled over the accusations of the past several days, coming to terms with the girl's height and look and all the rest, if only to get back at John and the treachery of Lysistrata. *I'll be damned if that Rebel raises my child*, he thinks, *that confederate and his treachery trying to teach my daughter right from wrong, a lesson he so much as never knew and couldn't learn, not with his mind having chosen sides*. When the animal fully leaves his thinking and leaves only human considerations, Richard resolves that a father's duty is to protect his child from any harmful influences he sees as threatening her, *I'll have to get her back*, he thinks, though along with fatherhood and responsibility, the calculations of a political man also reenter, and thus, *No way in hell any of them in Lysistrata would give me that girl to care after*, he thinks, *though maybe if I get word to John he'll be relieved to know I want to take the burden from him, as no man wants to raise another man's child, related or otherwise, especially a girl being as little help to his own duties around the farm, but I can't show up at the house, not without the mob assembling again and maybe rekindling their fires, so what I'll do is write a letter, leave it for John somewhere in the city, get word to him to send me my daughter, otherwise a father can't be held responsible for his actions in defense of his own kind, and if I have to burn down that house, my own house built with my own money and sweat, then I'll come by night and torch that house and steal that Penelope away, save her from the wreckage and leave John and Lysistrata to pick through the remains.*

By God, he thinks, *but I knew it then as much as I am certain of my own standing here and thinking about it, as certain as can be, what with the doubts in my head on all other matters, but for the stare of God down the back of my neck and the spitting image of that girl on our doorstep in the twilight, with the death on me like a Sunday suit and nipping at me for something to eat, John and Katy tagging along behind as well, as it should be with me being the eldest, that I proceed first from such formal occasions, how the dusk framed her face, the long, tall body that girl carried all the way to my house. I didn't even need to see her face*, he thinks, *just the way her arms swung at her sides as she waited, the conscious shifting of her weight between her feet and the long slender arms and bony knees, even from afar, how much like my own body it seemed! As if I had stepped back in time to watch myself in a mirror, her feminine form not yet changing her appearance from any feature or distinction with those of boys of the same age, all growth and gangly elbows and uncomfortable, ill-fitting clothes. That I didn't need to see her face, not once in passing nor on my way from the house, by her body alone I knew it and as such needed to fight all the harder against the custody, since it wouldn't be too long before the people of Lysistrata began eyeing the girl more closely and seeing what my eyes had been trained to see for more than thirty years, its own self when presented with it*, and then, *knowing full well, perhaps even waiting for the day, what with all the nights in the cabin, surrounded by beds of women, all the pretty slave girls from everywhere in the south, days spent washing them down and such, muscles and hair and all, it was bound to come back in this form sooner or later, though impossible to guess at how it could come about*.

At that Richard climbs through the fortified cabin, careful not to overturn or disturb the positing of his defenses, then hurries through the woods, watching the hillsides for tiny clusters of rock where his ambushers might be hiding, each crag and shadowy place noted until the forest thins and Lysistrata proper emerges from the wilderness, though to Richard the town feels foreign, as wild men and women must have felt, the very first ones, when fleeing their own hideaways to encounter those first patches of civilization, *second-comers* they'd have been tagged, subject to the worst kinds of maltreatment for the privilege of their defense and maintenance, encouraged as they were to adopt the subtle rules of their environment. Richard licks his palms and straightens his hair, wipes the smudges from his face with the sleeve of his shirt, tucks and arranges his clothes as best he can, as if the mere shadows of the city are enough to enforce the social codes of proper dress and hygiene. But other than the shadows, the town is empty when Richard arrives, and so he pries open the window to Judge Northcut's office, the lights out and not a sound in the hallways or in the streets beyond his window, other than those of birds, perhaps, or any animals moving along the street, civilization no more than a pass-through, a crossroads to travel on their way to green pastures or more appropriate homelands, where Richard takes the judge's pen and paper set to compose his letter to John, though neither lengthy or well-detailed, as if the brief days in the forest, the sleepless hours holed in his barracks awaiting attacks that had yet to come, that this time away had already stripped the powers of language from his hands, though not yet the powers of speech, though untested, and the note now written in sloppy handwriting, consisting of simple, direct communications—*I'm coming for my child. You cannot keep a child from her father*—and when the letter is written Richard climbs back through the window and heads towards the Bowers house, still amazed somewhat, frightened in the half of him that is not amazed, but suspicious that the town is abandoned, emptied and unusual for any time in Lysistrata, especially with the visitors would be in town for the country's centennial, who probably gathered as well to condemn him, as little of the whole story as they knew, but especially in the wake of such an exposition as he had just put on for all of them, when such a show and disturbance would have, in days past, produced countless days of debating in the streets, business stopped and halted to figure on the matter.

But when enough of the empty space unfolds in front of him, like a clearing in dense woods, with the town as a frame for a picture not yet painted, like a stage with its curtains and set, all props arranged, ready for action, and yet no actors, dialogue, or story moves along its theater, when enough silence fills his ears to know that the people of Lysistrata are not simply hiding from him, or waiting to ambush him from behind the horse-tying posts or stacks of staved barrels outside the general store, but that they are truly gone, home probably, Richard clutches his letter and reads the stage and frame, finds the details along the street and posted to the walls, posters in fact, depicting the Stars and Stripes, a flag waving, with the words CENTENNIAL printed in large type along the top of the poster, nearly the size of a bedroom mirror as it hangs on the walls and posts along the street. *So they plan to carry out the centennial year celebration without me*, Richard thinks, *without their war hero, the genuine kind who sacrifices for their sake and not for the sake of his own self, what will they have to celebrate, to break open their clay whiskey jars or soft glass canters, to roast their meats or stuff their pies with spring's bounty? Cowards*, he concludes, *cowards all, who'd rather rally behind something as fragile and worthless as fact, fact as told to them by a judge and scraps of paper, rather than the deeper truths of the matter, who has been more useful to them in the long run, but that is the definition of a coward if I've ever met one, those who take their bearings from papers and the like, rather than the sweat a man pours from his brow, or the hard labor his back endures*. And Richard

reads the remainder of the flier, still holding the letter in his hand, though now not folded but rolled into a thin tube of paper, there along the bottom of the poster, where the corner of the American flag dips almost to the edge of the poster, Richard tears the poster from the wall when he reads the words PRINTED IN LYSISTRATA KENTKY BY JN. BOWERS in very small print, but legible, the shreds of poster now scattered in the street as Richard marches towards the Bowers house on his way to deliver the ultimatum.

To make matters worse, he thinks as he makes the turn from the city proper onto the road that winds towards the house, *now he's a regular man about town, probably with my seat at the diner table or at the restaurant, but it shouldn't come as any surprise the way the crowd latches onto the one they think to be the winner, when the bandwagon is empty it has the most room to take on passengers, though they probably went to him the very same day, when he led my daughter back to my house and laid her there in the bed I worked to buy, they came up to him and offered their apologies and then mentioned how the centennial posters still required printing and that they'd be delighted if he'd do the work, almost as a peace offering for all the years, they would think, they had the man wrong, or some wrong opinion of him, based on the evidence at hand, and he'd accept the work thankfully, without sayin' too much as he does, and now here's the proof of the transformation, one brother replacing the other in the eyes of the city. Of course*, Richard thinks as he approaches the cemetery just over the next hill, the last landmark between the city and the Bowers house, *he's using the printing press I bought for him, can you imagine that? The nerve of one man sending another off into exile, his own brother, without so much as a peace offering extended to me, his flesh and blood, but instead reveling in his newfound fame and goodwill from the community, and gladly accepting the work and money attached to it, work to be done on the machines I provided in a blind fit of compassion, though now I see how compassion is like the breaking of a glass jar, where every shard and sharp edge eventually finds its way back into your heel. And I still remember the day I bought him that press, the months he spent wandering my house, moping, really, with a sour expression and so very little to contribute to the general good that my heart moved for him and took pity for him, at which point the downhill spiral began, but how could I have known it then, when I asked John if there was anything I could do as his older brother to help snap him from the dark months, his doldrums and aimless wanderings around the house, even before that child he lost, so that when he mentioned to me how he fancied himself a newspaper man, that such a career would really lift his spirits and give him a sense of purpose and stature among the townspeople, meager as it would be to start, he admitted, but eventually some place of standing among their number, I was more than happy to oblige my own flesh and purchase the printing machine, and set a deposit on the building's rent, despite his first betrayal of our mother and her cause*, Richard thinks, *and now this his day has come, with my legacy and even all traces of my body and accomplishments have been swept aside, John has achieved his sought-after acceptance in their eyes, though he has abandoned his own family to achieve it.*

He's finally done it, Richard thinks, *finally stabbed me in the back in a way that he thinks I can't recover from, as if all those people in the town held any influence over me, that I cared either way what they thought or think of me and what I've done with my life. No, John always tried to replace me in Mother's eyes, even when we were children and I would collect acorns from the yard to keep it clean and neat, just as she liked the yard, and then John would follow, usually an hour later, with a bigger bag filed with more acorns, gathered together from all the neighboring yards, just to show me up*, he thinks, *and now this, with Mother looking down from Heaven or up from hell, though it's no son's business to know the sins of his mother, it's even*

less of his business to decide which way she'll be heading when all is said and done. How comfortably John must sleep at night in the bed I made for him, bought for him, living the life I provided for him, the sacrifices I endured all so that Mother's dream of uniting the family and keeping us under one roof could remain intact, to have it destroyed in this one act, this child merely the catalyst for John's designs, merely the trigger that set loose his intentions, to show me up in front of Mother's watchful eye, and prove himself to be the brother of worth now that she's dead, in so far as he failed to present himself as such while she was living, having chosen against the side of her ancestors, the side of the Union. Richard pulls the silver thaler medallion from his pocket and sets it beneath the floorboards of the cabin, thinking, *John would die if he knew I pulled this from her belongings, though she asked to be buried with it, what good are medallions for the dead? No, he has taken his revenge and sleeps well at night knowing that he proved himself, all smug and self-satisfied, to her, so now the score is unbalanced in his favor and that of everything she ever taught us was how God always kept an even balance, always squared the score, that everything cold someday warms, everything wet someday dries, everything bright one day dims, and that every victory John ever wins will always be roundly met by a victory of my own, at his expense. Now for the settling of scores…*

At the edge of the cemetery, though, where for decades the Bowers have gone to settle their dead relatives into the ground, Richard rounds the final bend towards the house and stops to watch in the distance as his own family, very much alive, now offers a coffin to the cut earth, John at the head of the grave, then Katy, and then Penelope, a line of family dressed in loose black clothing, Katy and Penelope with their faces covered in dark veils, their chins tucked into their chests, while the Reverend stands at the foot of the grave, reading in a voice that cannot be heard at Richard's distance. At the head of the line John stares out across the cemetery, his body frail against the landscape, his knees and elbows locked in place, hands folded across themselves as his lips mumble along with the ministers' incantations. Likewise, the family stands motionless as two gravediggers lower the casket into the dirt, all motionless except for Katy, that is, who heaves, noticeably, her sobs and moaning voice a low echo across the yard, which Richard hears and recognizes but does not register for additional consideration. Instead, Richard thinks, *now they have replaced me with my own wife, banished me with not a chance for reconciliation nor any way to redeem myself in their eyes, a permanent sentence declared on me, that I may have no reentry into their group, no way to regain good graces once they have been wrested away from me, though their motives are flawed as their reasoning, for what does it matter how a man gains his wealth, his money? Ought it rather*, he thinks, *be how a man spends his money that defines his place among fine women and men, the uses towards which he devotes his resources, time and talents, that of all the ways to earn money in the world, none stands much higher or lower than any of the others, and thus with the gathering of wealth a draw, what separates the honorable from the wretched is the way in which those funds are sewn back into the community and what harvests are reaped from the labors. But instead, the world is turned backwards on itself, where the highest things are rendered lowest, and the wretched ones, who make their choices for injustices, are somehow elevated to positions where their motives cannot be questioned, their actions having been forgotten or willed away, as if the two were different, now with John standing in my place at the head of the family and Katy sobbing my tears, standing as witness alongside my own daughter, mourning the death my wife, though they shed no similar tears for the taking and use of my other property.*

Who chooses the casket and the manner of a wife's burial, Richard asks, *if not for the woman's own husband? Whose decision is it the dress she wears to her final resting place, to*

ensure its modesty and decorum, and what the ordering of her hair will be, for likewise considerations, the color of her skin and body before the casket is shut and sealed away forever, since I am certain it was not a decision or set of decisions that I wished for, and yet there she is, in a box my hands did not carve and in clothes I did not select, lowered into a ground I did not agree upon and being now covered with dirt I did not sanction. Utter madness how this world has flipped over against itself, as if flames struggling for dominance in a fire with no conscience as to which of their kin they devour, only seeking to grow stronger, hotter, in the blaze, feeding as they all must on the same kindling! With the added insult, he thinks, *that my own daughter, flesh and blood though she is, brave and beautiful as she seems in the distance, each a memory of her mother can I recall, but nevertheless she must have been both fair and beautiful for producing such a pretty daughter, that such a half-bred daughter is meant to stand over the body of a woman she did not know and act as sole witness to this death in her father's stead, a father she has been forced to abandon to the wilderness and live with my brother, flawed as he is, though a rising star in terms of the neighbors and their beliefs, no matter than even a burial has been perverted to honor the living rather than the dead, and to deny the one living creature whose right it is by the contract of marriage to manage every last detail of the event so as to bring a fitting end to the contract's terms, struck while living. No daughter of my body will grow under such conditions,* Richard thinks, clutching the letter and hurrying away from the cemetery, ducking low along the roadside until he reaches the Bowers house, *but I must deliver this message before the family arrives home, for fear of what ambushes John has set for me, should he see my eyes or determine my intentions with Penelope.*

The second-story bedrooms along the front of the house, with their clear and generous windows, allow Richard to check on the family's progress from the cemetery as he roams the interior, deciding on where best to place the letter, where John will no doubt find it, but where it will not be intercepted by someone else in the family, namely Katy who would most likely take the letter straight to Judge Northcut as she had done the journal, rather than keep the affair within the family's walls and treat it with the kind of dignity and therefore silence it deserves. When Richard chooses the writing desk, a place where John nightly recorded his own private thoughts onto paper or wrote a number of letters and correspondence, that even if the letters were spare he continued to sit their after everyone else in the family had gone to bed, or so he thought, as Richard often watched him from the hallway through the cracked door, where Richard would write letters to himself from official government agencies, solicited the purchase of war medals from more destitute veterans and have them delivered to his door, now Richard places the letter square in the center of the desk, folds the top back to its closed position, when the idea strikes him to rummage through his bedroom for items he might need in the barricade, namely longer, heavier clothes, blankets, and his Union revolver from the war. Richard opens the door to find that instead of the room being as he left it, there are new clothes strewn along the mattress and floor, new clothes in the closets and draped over the sitting chair in the corner of the room next to the window, girl's clothes, *Penelope's clothes*, he realizes, though not angered at the thought of the young girl in his bed, taking his place in the family, but rather aroused, when now through the window, he sees John approaching down the street, the family trailing behind in a slow, sad procession. Richard hurries through the closet looking for the pistol, in the box at the back of the dark space where he keeps the gun, a box which now stands emptied, along with the papers that were in there as well, and so Richard, now breathing faster that the family is nearing the house, the weight of his blankets and new clothes, and the surprise and suspicion that his firearm has been stolen away, perhaps by his own daughter but more likely by the one who prepared the

room for her in the first place, and as such, Richard on his hands and knees scours the floor, inside his boots and any jacket pockets he can find, but he hears the family approaching on the lawn. Richard abandons the window and runs along the hallway to the staircase, hurries past the front door as John fumbles with the key, the family waiting patiently as he manipulates the lock, and through the kitchen Richard sprints, his arms filled with contraband as he bursts from the kitchen door and disappears into the woods behind the Bowers house.

Now I know where she sleeps, Richard thinks, once returned to his barricade, *should John refuse to acknowledge my demands to return the girl to her father and to quit meddling in my affairs, though raising a daughter in these conditions will be difficult, it won't be permanent, as my reputation with the coal company must surely still hold, as they are less concerned with character or small family squabbles, or the fathering of one child some fourteen years ago, than they are with profits, and a profitable man, the kind of man who brings new business to their desks, new claims undiscovered by their adversaries, that they will gladly brush aside these kinds of personal and therefore accidental mistakes in favor of doing business with such an ingenious man who finds the most obscure claims and brings them to their doorstep, the way housecats drag the fallen prey to the family threshold, be they field-mice or spiders, or the frail bodies of birds knocked from their nests, proud of our work but also expecting reward for our loyalties. It won't be long for us to live here*, he thinks, *once my knack for finding the claims returns and we can rebuild our stockpiles, build a new house, greater than the old, as we replaced that old cabin with a tall, brilliant house, filled with even more fancy designs and furniture and hardware, a place where it is fitting for a man to raise a daughter, especially one with such soft skin, beautifully dark and precious, the supple arms and thighs she will exercise on the property, or the way we will take holidays together in the mountains, swim together in streams as father and daughter, her damp hair soaked by the water, her body puckered, and I standing tall and firm as a father over her, my duty to shield her body, to keep it protected with what the Maker has given me. If John does not heed my warnings and deliver the girl to me,* Richard thinks, *does not make some attempt to contact me and give me what is mine, now I know where the child sleeps, in my own former room, in the very place where I once took my wife, now the same place where she sleeps warm and in various states of dress, where she denied me several children, through refusal or miscarriage or sickness, though only the second two fell out of my control, a room where I know every corner, even in the pitch dark of the stillest nights and so no matter which way John decides, which road he chooses to take, the higher or the low, I will retrieve Penelope and bring her to this barricade, and together we will weather the storm, then emerge one day victorious, wealthy again in spite of Lysistrata's attempts to keep us otherwise.*

For three additional days Richard plots in his fortified cabin, for three days festers and prepares to exact his revenge on the Bowers family, thinking, *first for the injustices my brother and sister-in-law have done to me, second now for the fact that for the past week they have not once sent word for me, neither to respond to my letter, which John no doubt received as I set it right in the middle of a place he visited every single night for the past ten years, if not longer, nor searched the wilderness for my body, should they anticipate or, even, hope for, the worst, though in that regard I have in every way disappointed their wishes, nor has Katy herself returned to the place she knows must be waiting for her, the precise location where I would be, having visited and rummaged through my papers to find her precious journal, but has nevertheless ignored, or perhaps mentioned to John the conditions of the living space, and as a retribution of their own have decided to relegate me here, and thus their takeover of my house and home, my land and wife and child and all my property is complete.* Richard packs a hunting

knife into a small rucksack along with several measures of rope and an old bandana, *implements for a regrettable but necessary violence*, he thinks, and when the bag is packed and Richard has turned down the small lanterns that light the interior of the house, a skeleton as it is of a frame with little to no substance anywhere on the house, all materials having been stripped away, as if flesh could be ripped from the bones themselves, muscles and tendons and all, plucked from the inside of the body and used as insulation on top of the skin, the way wood and metal now stands along the exterior of the cabin, when the lanterns cool Richard heads into the darkness of the woods, the moonlight overhead concealed in a thick disguise of stormy clouds, pregnant with rains but not yet in labor, their heavy sagging curves ripe for a downpour but as of yet restrained. Richard pushes his way through the overgrowth, keeps his head low to the ground as he ducks between branches and stumps, through the clear river bottoms and shallow streams that mark the land, or lakes and ponds nearby, the hills and gullies where he has resigned to catch his meals over the past several days, with his tin provisions scarce and no match for the flavor of fresh fish, crappies and bluegill mostly, and the occasional bass, no matter how thin or wriggling.

Perhaps he did not receive the note after all, Richard considers as he approaches the woods directly adjacent to the Bowers house, *perhaps Katy got to the desk first, taking care of the funeral and all its subsequent duties, maybe she needed to use the desk for some reason or other after the burial, to sign official papers in my stead or write a thank you letter to the Reverend for his homily, or even to work out the family's finances now that I have disappeared to them, banished from their land but with my body was also banished the ability to pay for it all, though the money he gained from printing the fliers most likely helped them somewhat, a printer's salary is no compensation for the loss of the money that's in coal, and so perhaps she saw the letter there, written in my hand and did not go to the authorities as I would have originally thought, but rather, did not go to anyone, crumpled the letter, or set it on fire in the trash bin, depending of course on her mood that close to the funeral arrangements and all.* Richard hurries through the back yard, past the old cabin where the family used to live, and pries the kitchen door, which Katy always locked, despite the custom that most houses in Lysistrata remained unlocked at night, neighbors trusting as they did in their neighbor's diligence to keep them safe, or their honesty, or the protection their own firearms could provide, a custom Katy found outdated once the war ended and so much change flooded into Lysistrata, not merely the new businesses but the people who followed, a wave of second-comers to the city, and thus Katy locked the door each night, though with little more than a knife Richard worked his way through the defenses. *Perhaps he did receive the letter*, Richard thinks, *and has chosen to ignore my warnings, and if that is the case perhaps I ought to stop by his room on my way from Penelope's and pay my respects to him, a brother in name only, in the fact of our biology that the same mother birthed us, nothing more to keep us bound, who would take away my daughter and ignore a father's expressed and written demands, clear as the light of day, so that now I must sneak through my own staircase, my own hallways, like a robber or a common criminal, to steal away my own child, kidnap what is rightfully mine by both the laws of nature and the decree of men like Judge Northcut. Or worse, that he did receive the letter and figures that I will come some night, perhaps when the moon is hidden and the family is asleep, perhaps even by the back door as I know the lock has always been weak at that point of the house, my familiarity with the staircase and the hallways, even in the darkness penetrated by no candlelight, that I could sneak into her bedroom, my own bedroom, and tie her down, carry her off into the darkness of the wild and keep her there as my own, and knowing of all these things, and mindful of them once he found the letter and knew of my intent—why did I leave such a clear piece of evidence to his*

hands? What madness lead me to give the enemy a sketch of my plans, no matter how poorly detailed, to know that I would be coming into his very place of sleep, would be coming to take the one thing of value entitled to me by Judge Northcut and the rest, give him a map and print of what my main asset and advantage had been, the element of surprise?—though perhaps he read the note and counted on his own strength to overcome me, a strength he never once had over me, prior to the war or after, but now a body which could in no way overpower my own, and so foolishly is waiting on the other side of the door to attack me, once my move has been made.

The handle to Richard's bedroom turns quietly beneath his large, steady hand, experienced as he is with sneaking into his own bedroom, after clandestine meetings out in the cabin, or slowly walking from the mattress and bed he still keeps in the old barn, Richard's old bedroom from that former life, far enough away from the new house that no one inside could hear the women as they moaned in the darkness, nor hear the raucous knock of the headboard against the old cabin walls, how after each encounter his palm and fingers mastered the levers and gears of the doorknob so that it would open without so much as a click to disturb his wife from her sleep, nor betray the utter, breathless silence with which Richard now turns the handle, readies his hands and arms and shoulders for the kidnapping. But when Richard pushes against the door, to swing into the room and take the girl in silence, the door sticks, does not open, and panicked Richard twists the knob several more times until he realizes that it is not the lock that is stuck but something on the other side of the door, *John*, he thinks immediately, *has set this trap for me*, but when Richard shoves again against the door and it does not move, and no ambush emerges form the darkness, Richard reaches around through the slight crack in the doorway, reaches around until he feels something wedged between the door handle and the floor, *a chair*, he thinks, but without John inside, *my daughter*, he thinks proudly, *smart enough to barricade herself in this room, probably in defense of John or Katy, John, most likely, who's probably spying on the girl of such an age, despite their relations, is probably something that gets him going, and men being as they are, neither subtle nor inconspicuous, she probably caught on and propped the chair accordingly*. With a quick push from Richard's hand, the chair thuds out of the doorway, and Penelope rustles in her sleep, the darkness of her room in no way disturbed by the darkness from the hallway, more like osmosis of like to like, rather than a flood of light that would have roused her from sleep, had any candles been lit in the hallway. He unwinds the rope from his rucksack and pulls the handkerchief to muffle the girl's screaming, *not that she would scream to know it was her father who was rescuing her*, Richard thinks, *but at the shock of being woken in such a manner, which, though admittedly is not the most ideal, is in any case necessary for our future well-being together*. But when Richard stuffs the old rag into the girl's mouth, ties it off behind her head, Penelope kicks from her slumber and knocks several items from her bedside table, a reading lantern Katy had left there in case the girl was frightened at night, and other knickknacks left there from Nance's collection, creating not a crash, but a series of loud thuds, which even through the darkness could be heard as atypical sounds for a night supposedly spent in sleep.

In the darkness Richard sees the white halos of Penelope's eyes as they bulge from their rest, wide, dark pupils set between thin circles of white, darkened completely when Richard ties the girl's ankles together and tosses her body across his shoulder, as if a load from the harvest, culled and now ready for storage, the long dry interruption, necessary, that drains the leaves of their fluids and renders the crop for smoking, and turns to head from the bedroom. *A war is a time when the usual rules are suspended*, he thinks, carrying Penelope's body down the hall, *a time when laws, all kinds of them, from the legal and the moral to the customary ways we act as*

families, are discarded for a more basic principles and purposes and causes, which is survival first and foremost, always survival at the base of things, like the bed of a river or stream, present always though oftentimes obscured, but more than survival, on top of survival is the consideration to ruin one's enemies, to crush them into dirt and overrun their towns, steal their possessions, humiliate their families and win the wars. Winning, he thinks, *is the only consideration during a time of war, a blind passion or desire that overrides the others, the other faculties as well, as reason is only a tool for the grabbin' of victory and the will is nothing but the body's own desire for power over another body, and so what can be said about a man's actions during such times as these? That is where the friction burns hottest, in the times following the war, the complex times, whereas war and battle are simple in their basic terms, victory or defeat, a body count performed on each side of the field and a decision as to who captured the day, which is why men perform best in times of war, as men's minds prefer the simple and straight answers, a clear path into the future that in many ways is already determined, and the soldier's actions are little more than the performance of lines in a play, whose script they've not read but are nonetheless responsible for executing. It's the times after the simple times,* Richard thinks, hears a stumble from the hallway as he slowly carries Penelope's body towards the staircase, *these complex times with morals and the virtues and complexities of livin' together, especially in a place like Lysistrata where the two sides have had to come back and learn how to live complicated lives again, old wounds that sometimes can't heal so much as they are covered with prettier gauze and wrappings of pleasantries and the like, as the simplicity of blue versus gray, evil versus good, the simplicity of Preachers and the religions they promote, of a good God on the side of righteous battle, which both sides lay claim to own and possess all on their own, a simplicity that is everywhere shattered when the veil of war is lifted and the true natures of women and men are revealed in the ways they have to bend and twist, both their bodies and the ways they live out their days on this earth. It's the times after these simple times*, he thinks, Penelope kicking and wriggling in Richard's grasp, though unable to loosen his grip on her body, *when the worst aspects of the race emerge from their hiding places, things like judgment and condemnation, things like values being placed on the scales and one side havin' to outweigh the other, when neighbors watch each other from their windows and evaluate what they see through the glass and judge utterly on the value of what they see and hear, oftentimes what they do not themselves witness but in fact learn second-hand, or worse, through more distant and less reliable rumors, though reliability and the checkin' of facts is hardly what they're after, simply to place their set of values and customs and such higher than the other sets, which turns their eyes not just on the present day situations, not just actions as they happen in the span of a day's or month's time, but set their eyes backwards into history, and feel themselves qualified, those who've never lived through the simple times, never serviced the simple times, feel themselves qualified to render judgment and punishment on those of us whose decisions fell outside of their jurisdiction, and yet they encroach on men at times of war and judge us to be moral or otherwise, when in fact, at times of war, morality only exists as a casualty for, and of, victory.*

The sound of a man stumbling, now the second time, interrupts Richard from his slow movement towards the staircase and sets him to turn, swinging Penelope's still struggling body to see what lurks behind him, only to have her long legs knock over a table with several picture frames and a potted plant on top, sending the items to the floor with a loud crash, then the figure form the hallway rushing to light a lantern and running towards the clamor in the darkness, which sends Richard in a full sprint down the staircase, not looking back to see what is behind

him, though he imagines a man's footsteps, and thus imagines his own brother struggling with the lantern, *roused as he was from a probable deep sleep, his fingers not yet accustomed to being awake, let alone the delicate turnings of the lantern, though it could easily*, he considers, *may have been Katy who jumped from her bed to see what was the racket in the hallway, though as a husband John ought to have made it his own business, the defense of the homestead and all, but perhaps this too was part of the overturning of things, or the utter complexities of life in Lysistrata, household life, the kind between husbands and wives that also could not escape the change in landscape and the flipping of roles, where a husband would cower in his sheets while the wife armed herself with a stick or hammer or pistol and herself investigated the hallways, while the intruder himself sneaks quickly through the house, struggling, admittedly, under the weight of his captured prize, through the kitchen and out the back door*. In fact the dark figure follows down the staircase as Richard lumbers down, follows into the kitchen and arrives just when the back doors slams shut and the robber escapes into the shadows and protection of the woods, no glimpse at all at the intruder, nor any idea at what the thief had wanted or taken, until a scream from the upstairs bedroom rouses the family awake, and the lamps in the house are lit and every corner of the house is checked for inventory, what is missing, but the scream is not for valuables of the kind that are owned or traded or purchased, but a scream for the kicked in door, the empty bed, the girl now missing from the house.

CHAPTER TWELVE

At daybreak, John and Penelope stand over a litter of puppies still wet from birth just the night before, brown hair matted and stained red against their bodies, the mother sleeping in some corner of the barn, exhausted from the exercise of labor, as all mothers are, but also satisfied at the work and eager to press the pups to her teats and provide the first taste of motherhood to their mouths. In the shadows of the Bowers barn, the morning after the commotion at Judge Northcut's office, Penelope cradles one of the tiny animals in her hands and presses him close to her chest, where livestock and the other animals also crowd her, having been neglected food and the usual care of their stables on account of both the planning for funeral and the recent dealings with the judge. The stem of goldenrod has fallen from her lapel, though she does not know where.

Penelope runs into the barn to see what food or water she can give the newborn, laughing at the blind way the animal bats his paws against her forearms, or the way his clouded eyes struggle against the gathering light of day. She does not notice the activity outside the barn, however, as one by one John Bowers gathers the other infants in his hands, holding their hind feet together in a single fist and letting the bodies dangle, raises the animals over his head and slaps their heads against a large stone half-buried in the yard. She cannot see the puddle of red spilling from the stone into the soil, working its way to the roots of tree sand grass and weeds, deeper into the water table that feeds all the wells in Lysistrata. Any time dogs have litters, the man explains to himself, perhaps in a voice not his own, as every good owner of livestock knows, John must go through these rituals, as a dog with puppies is less likely to guard the farm, less likely to stay loyal to the flock under her protection.

Penelope screams when she emerges from the barn—a high-pitched scream that causes the other animals to look up from their feed—to see the pile of dead dogs at John's feet, her mouth agape and features frozen in horror, the workings of plump tears already in the corners of her eyes, as if waiting to speak before releasing down her cheek and face, disgust at the blood and lifeless stack of bodies in the dirt. The smell of wet hay lingers in her nostrils. She runs towards John still cradling the living puppy in her arms, face streaked already with saline, and jumps against his body, grabs his elbows and wrists, kicks at his blood-soaked shins to make him stop. John fights the urge to laugh, surprised at how weak the child feels against his body, despite her size and mature appearance, the utter weightlessness she throws against him. The two struggle for a moment, each dropping the animals in their care, Penelope sobbing as she hangs from John's arm, his muscles stiff with the rigor of learned action, motions instilled in his body and mind from a young age, the tension that fills his neck and jaws when it fails to be completed, as one without control of his own actions. When Penelope sees that the remaining dogs have been freed, she loosens her grip and scampers into the shadowy barn, where she huddles over the shaking puppies, eyes still shut to the world, to protect them against harm.

"This is the way it has to be," he says.

Penelope clutches the animals closer to her chest.

"Did you raise animals in Alabama?" he asks.

"Yes sir."

"What kinds."

"I had a rabbit," she answers. "And two cats. Momma had a dog."

"Those aren't farm animals."

"No sir."

"You know that animals on a farm live by different rules than those that don't."

"Yes sir."

"Hand me the animals," he says.

John takes the two surviving dogs by the neck and waits until Penelope has run off into the barn, covering her ears as if to block the image from entering her head, shifts his grip to their hind legs and adds their bodies to the pile. The slap of the animals against the ground lingers in John's ear as he moves to dispose of the bodies, a dull pop like a memory that refuses to yield—a noise they say his father used to imitate by clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth—relishes the two thuds before heaping the bodies behind the barn and stacking the kindling to consume them, carefully stacking the wood in the shape of a log cabin, to support the weight of the bodies. From an old steel can John pours fuel onto the pile to set the blaze.

From inside the barn John can hear the girl weep silently, her throat choked for breath, sharp heaves of the shoulders and chest that work to calm her body, exhale the emotions and bite her tongue all in the same set of motions. John begins to walk towards the barn door, the fire already catching, crisp smoke in the morning air, to calm the girl, when several men approach from the street. Each arrive in their suits for work, the mayor and a few members of his staff, a handful of others who work behind desks in the city proper and who rarely stop by the *Gazette* office to say hello, let alone walk the path to the Bowers house in the early morning, before they have even set foot in their own offices. Penelope emerges from the barn when she hears the noises of men approaching, perhaps out of an old habit, and wipes her tears with the cuff of her sleeve. John places an arm over Penelope's shoulder and grips a shovel in his right fist, should the need arise.

"Can we help you gentlemen?" John asks.

In a straight line the men approach the barn, shoulder to shoulder as if in some military formation they have learned in a former life, and practiced just prior to setting foot on the Bowers property, a phalanx of suits muted by the morning light, browns, grays and blues, and other work attire more accustomed to the business of farms, than of top hats and clean leather shoes now dirtied in the soil. Doctors Wells and Rayburn form one flank, while to the left stand Mayor Cady with his assistants Allan Grace and David Cordell. Men from the Tombs, Gutter, Hanna, and Hahn families stand along side the more prominent members of town, when John realizes what they represent, perhaps even what they have come for, and loosens his grip on the shovel, but only slightly. The visitors strain to look John in the eye, each in his own manner, some more successfully than others, though when they falter, none move towards Penelope with their stares or grimaces, but rather to the scent of smoke rising from behind the barn, to the blood on John's hands and clothes, or to the sweat staining his underarms at such an early hour. Penelope fidgets beneath the weight of John's arm, the damp of blood now soaking through her clothes and leaving a cold, sodden tingle against her skin. John greets each man with a nod of the head, one of the few such habits he learned from his mother, though would never admit.

"We know you have a funeral to plan," they begin. "So we won't take long."

"Obliged."

"We are in need of your services," they say. "The services of your press. To advertise the centennial celebration. We'd like posters around town, handbills, really, with the information, and perhaps a flag or an eagle or something patriotic. Can your press handle such work?"

"I can start right away," John says.

"We don't want to interfere with the funeral planning."

"My wife will be handling those matters," John says, awkwardly.

The men sigh together as if that were also planned beforehand, a collective release of tension and perhaps even guilt from their chests. When they turn and leave, John pulls away from Penelope's shoulder and jams the shovel into a soft patch of earth, aware that the request the men brought does not require the attendance of so many officials from town, so many families, the Mayor and his deputies, not for a matter as simple as advertisements for the centennial. Penelope eyes the shovel in the dirt and moves to watch the fire slowly consume the animals, wondering what a centennial celebration might be. The event is less than a week away, John knows, and is in little need of any more advertisement, as word of mouth has already spread of the fireworks to be displayed, of the public games and free meals, of the speeches to be given in honor of the country's foundation. More even than word of mouth, these days in June and July are always met by some festival or another, as such that families plan their summers on them, the church alters its schedule to accommodate, and the government begins its planning months in advance.

Posters, he decides, are not the reason for this visit, but for the sigh they released as they turned from the grass and headed back to the road, the escape of noisy breaths without once looking back, as they had not once looked in Penelope's direction, but a pilgrimage precisely for the sigh and the feeling of absolution they now feel as they head back to town, or their own work in the fields. In its own way, the town of Lysistrata offers a rare olive branch to the Bowers family, over nearly four generations, perhaps not the life-sustaining kind, as plates of food once nourished hungry mouths, but an offering of peace nonetheless, on account of Nance's passing to be sure, but also for their witness at Judge Northcut's office, for their misplaced trust and allegiance, for the careless way they followed Richard and his stories, believed what he had said, including the bias against his own brother concerning the war.

"Have you forgiven me about the puppies," John asks Penelope when the townsmen disappear along the road.

"No," she answers. "But I understand why you did it."

"That's good enough."

"What I don't understand," she continues. "Is who could teach you to do something like that?"

John laughs to himself as he considers the answer. *My mother*, he thinks.

At the office, John prepares the printing press while Penelope finds a chair in the corner of the room and watches the people in the window. He gives her the task of cutting large sheets of poster-paper into rectangles, each large enough to print four posters on a leaf, but small enough to fit between the frame of the printing press. Of all the skills learned in the war that did not translate well into his civilian life—how to take another man's life and how, by every means, to save one's own—John is thankful for the meticulous way his generals made him clean and maintain his firearm, with particular attention to the smallest details, hours of idle time which accumulated to months of practice with the tiny parts and brushes that gave John the dexterity and concentration to work a printing press, namely, the meticulous setting of type on the machine.

While John had intended to use an old wooden-block press left abandoned in the building to start his newspaper, Richard used his money to insist on the latest gadgetry, and thus John now sets the press using cast iron letters, raised out of thick black, metallic squares, each rinsed and wiped clean for the previous printing and set neatly in order on a wooden chest along the

wall. With the type set and the sheets of paper ready, John the sets his arms for the steady motion of turning the press and churning the wet, finished pages through the other end of the loom, where Penelope waits to take each sheet and hang it dry on a clothesline, before they cut up each leaf into the four individual posters.

It reads:

CENTENNIAL
A CELEBRATION OF THE NATION'S
BIRTH
FANTASTIC SPECTACLE FOR
ALL AGES
WITH FOOD, DRINK, AND MERRIMENT
TOPPED
BY THE MOST SPECTACULAR DISPLAY OF
FIREWORKS
THIS COMING
FOURTH DAY OF JULY 1876
BY VIRTUE OF THE MAYOR AND
COUNCIL
OF LYSISTRATA

Sheet by sheet John cranks the machine and admires the posters as the girl hangs them on the line, each identical to the last but for the random marks the letter-plates themselves leave along the edges of the paper, sometimes imperceptible, other times more pronounced, depending on the heaviness of John's hand as he applies the ink or cranks the handle. A slow monotony fills his muscles and head, an ache of the familiar, an erasing from the mind which all physical labor brings about, until John imagines himself as an extension of the machine, yet another set of gears and levers which spill and release to bring about the desired results. Without thought of the actions themselves, nor even sensation of the conditions of the world surrounding him, oblivious for a moment to the girl and the city, Katy, his brother and mother, or the citizens of Lysistrata who poke their noses against the window to see the commotion, John sweats as the machine drips oil and ink, together in their labor and united in its results. And yet no machine takes pride in its work, he knows, as John now stands to admire the posters. The words are crisp and large, eminently readable in every way and sure to please the Mayor and his committee, though for John the greatest virtue of the poster is the small flag he manages to wedge into the bottom-most corner of the design, a miniature American flag with its three stripes and room for only one star, black and white, but powerful as it stands, along side the proudest line of them all, that the poster was printed by John Bowers in the city of Lysistrata. Penelope rests from her duties for a moment, dizzy, finding the window and struggling to open the latch and give some fresh air to the room.

"I never imagined the smell of ink to be so strong," she says.

John opens the window without struggle or word. When the rustle of hanging papers halts and the machine calms without John's arm turning its gears, the room falls silent but for the noises from the street, giving John an awkward moment of reflection. The ink between his fingers is sticky and viscous, like blood—John imagines Nance against the wall again, the gold lettering of her Bible, rest her soul, rest its soul, the last time he stepped foot in the office, sat calmly behind his desk pondering some trivial question or concern, watched as her finger

struggled against the tense trigger, finally succeeded. The way the desk shakes and the chair tumbles beneath her body, the rattle of windows and walls, even the heavy press moves when the shot is fired, as John scrambles to stop the deed, or perhaps, scrambles to save himself from the firing weapon.

Now he rubs the fluid between his thumb and palm until it forms a thick, black paste against his skin, wondering who it was who cleaned the mess. Someone mopped the blood from the floor and walls, took the care to clean every inch of the printing press's machinery, each gear and lever until nothing of the crimson act remained, wiped the windows and gathered what shreds of Nance the coroner had not gathered when he arrived to collect the body, nothing lingering of the chair or the desk's movement, as each had been returned to its original place by some invisible hand, perhaps a neighbor, perhaps concerned citizens, perhaps an order from the Mayor himself, as if nothing that morning had ever happened, erased by towels and mops and sweaty labor, perhaps only a nightmare that fooled them to thinking what had occurred had actually occurred, and rather than that dream, John had merely been away from the office for a day when his duties on the farm prevented him from coming to work. But just as quick—Penelope moves from the window and returns to the clothesline—John shakes off the memory and watches the girl carefully pulling each sheet from the wire, setting it on the table, and slicing each poster with the edge of a razor, careful to give each poster its own distinct border. John stacks the dried posters on the table nearest the door and grabs a hammer and box of nails.

"You are an awfully patient young woman," he says.

"Yes sir."

"Would you like to get out of this office?"

"Yes sir."

At dusk John and Penelope move through the town from hitching post to building wall nailing their fliers everywhere a flat surface or visible area will allow, a single nail driven through the center of the poster to give the advertisement as much a chance as possible against the wind. Soon enough shadows overtake the city, when the men have returned home from work and the women likewise from their shopping or workings around town, the happy reunions of families in their homes, over meals and conversations, recountings of what transpired during the previous ten hours. All that lingers in the streets as John and Penelope hammer nails is the smell of these men and women, faint traces of their perfumes mixed with the dust shaken from boots, of horses and their droppings, of children and the messes they make of themselves, all grass-stains and pungent mud, or the commotion of sweat, tension, and relief that fills every day with the honest scent of hard labor and decent commerce.

When John and Penelope finish hanging their posters, they pause to see the town now littered with their industry and return to his office only to return the hammer and remaining box of nails. They begin to speak as well, perhaps on account of the subtle night that now surrounds them, or some camaraderie developed from Judge Northcut's office and afterwards, a kinship in the dealings of the press and the work to advertise with hammer and nails. Penelope speaks with a soft voice, appropriate for the time of day, hushed against the brilliant darkness as John takes her hand, aims towards the house in the distance.

Momma taught me to read and write, the same way she learned it herself, reading from the Bible, mostly, but also with a stash of books she swiped the night she left the plantation. Looking back on things, it would've been better if she could've just held off for a while longer, her running away from the plantation, that is.

But I suppose at the time she'd have no idea how the war would turn, or how much harder some of the others had it than her, nor even what her options would be if the war ended and the Union won.

As a light-skinned slave, my momma would tell me, she had more freedoms in the house than the folks who worked in the fields, and she knew it, like learning to read and write from Mrs. Williams, the owner's wife, from the library of books the family held on tall bookshelves.

But still, a cage was no option for my momma, likewise for me, and I imagine how Mister and Misses Williams couldn't have been too surprised when momma turned up missing, along with their copies of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. When other slaves busied themselves with picking the lock to the sugar and tea chest, my momma went for more valuable goods.

That's where I got my name, in fact, as my mother always loved the image of the hero's wife, emptying her loom night after night. Still, the network worked pretty well for her, the one they now call the Underground Railroad. Momma hated that name, *Underground*, as she herself never once went under the ground, but for a couple of basements along the Ohio River, where the bounty hunters eventually found her.

So it seems, as I mentioned, that the wandering, as my mother used to call it, is somewhere in my blood, right down to my name as if married to it. When mom died I was thirteen years old and that was all the permission I required, I suppose, determined as I was to make a journey for my own and to do as she'd once told me and try to track down my father in Kentucky, a town with a funny name and deliver to him an envelope she kept under her bed, a message intended for his eyes alone.

Mr. and Mrs. Thatcher, who watched after me for a few months after the funeral, didn't try too hard to talk me out of the trip either, perhaps on account of their own seven children, as Mr. Thatcher was a man who believed a girl became a woman at her first bleeding and had to be out of the house, by marriage or otherwise, at any cost. He even gave me money for the train ride north, called it my birthday present.

Mrs. Thatcher, though, looked after me closer like my own mother and gave me another handful of coins from her egg money, maybe because she'd heard what had happened to my momma in Kentucky or because she was worried about a girl my age heading off alone.

"You sure they got trains in Kentucky?" Mrs. Thatcher asked. She didn't know about the letter, I imagine, or didn't let on like she did.

"Trainmaster seems to think so," I answered and that ended it.

I took stock of what possessions I had to call my own, the date of my mother's capture, money for the train ride, and the whole Commonwealth of Kentucky to scour for cities with the funniest names. The walls in our bedroom were cramped as I packed for the journey, the other kids wide-eyed and mouths opened at the prospect of a train ride alone. I propped a chair against the door to keep them out of my hair, a trick I learned from Mr. Thatcher too. Anything I didn't want to take with me, I'd give to one of the Thatcher kids and made a big deal of it.

A window peered over the dark street, with shutters that only blocked a portion of the outside air from entering. The floor creaked, I remember, the walls unpainted too. The room sat perpetually bare, except for the clothes we left scattered and the remains of broken toys or worn-out shoes. There was an abandoned chest of cedar drawers too, a nicked headboard leftover from a barn fire, worn and brown; the same for their lone bedside table, with its blackened face.

Then Mrs. Thatcher turned down the lights and I waited for the morning, for the train north to Montgomery, then onwards to Tennessee, then the Kentucky border. Of course at the time I was too young to be worried that I had no idea what to do once I arrived, other than to ask

the right questions of those people I found. Morning came, finally, and I left the house. A sign over the house hung loose on its screws, *The Thatchers*, and that was the last I thought of them for a while.

I boarded the morning train to Tennessee, where I would transfer to my Kentucky-bound train. My luggage consisted of a bag holding an extra dress, underclothes, and a brown blanket my mother brought along with her up to Connecticut, and back south again.

The other passengers crowded near the ticket windows, so I found an easy way to the platform. The A&T River Railroad brought me all the way to Blue Mountain, where I caught a coach to Decatur and the Chattanooga-Nashville line. With the money from the Thatchers I had more than enough to make my way, with extras for places to stay. From Nashville, I had to take the Edgefield-Kentucky route and from there I was on my own two feet.

"You're a bit young to be travelin' alone," the passengers would say to me.

"I'm heading to Kentucky," I answered, in my most grown-up voice. "To find my father who lives there."

"I've never been to Kentucky," they would say, or, "Beautiful country, I've been there many times myself."

"Do you know a man named Bowers?" I asked the ones who had been there. "In a town with a funny name?"

"No," they would say and their eyes would quickly dart away from me and forward to the cabins or out the window at landscapes rushing past. If I persisted, the passengers would politely excuse themselves form their seat and find a vacancy somewhere else in the cabin, or in a different car altogether.

"Do you know a Mister Bowers?" I would ask. "In a town with a funny name?"

They didn't know, but wished me good luck. I received plenty of good luck in the beginning, which, as I have found, is something that comes in a limited quantity. We each get a helping of it at birth, with the hope that it lasts long enough for when it's really needed. Like the way I started in at the Kentucky border, of course, long, dusty roads, where I found a kindly old couple willing to help me find the town. They gave me a napkin of chicken and a tray of flour biscuits and sent me on my way.

But like the food, good luck was a daily expense, a purse emptying slow, each coach that stopped for me along the way, the people on the roads who aimed me in the towns' directions, or the fact that as a thirteen year old girl nothing violent happened to me along the road, a debt waiting to be rendered in Lysistrata. But I couldn't have known that at the time, and a measure of good luck brought me all the way to Adolphus, then Alvaton, and Corinth, but with no answers. Gravel roads kicked puffs of dirt in the heat, when my fortune was put to the test in Epleys.

Sheriff Haynes found me almost as soon as I crossed between the Epleys county lines, very near dusk, as if he'd been waiting for me at the borders, or sent his dogs sniffing out lost girls on the hunt in Kentucky. We rode in silence through the town, no more than a stopover for coaches on their way to somewhere else, somewhere better.

The Sheriff sat upright on the bench, his posture perfect, with two hands tight on the reigns. A hat and mop of floppy hair covered his eyes, along with heavy sideburns that looked like they'd be wrestled from a bear, complete with a mustache that curled up at the corners, all the darkest brown hair I'd ever seen on a white man.

When we wagoned through the town, we entered woods again, and found the Sheriff's house where Mrs. Haynes would be waiting for me, in a log-framed house I suspect no one

would have been able to find, hidden away as it was in the hills, even if he'd gone looking for it. Outside the house the Sheriff tied his dogs to a post, three of them, but they barked and moved more like a single animal, but with too many heads to feed.

Then Mrs. Haynes stood at the front door of the house, a wooden box surrounded by chicken wire and livestock, about the color and quality of the Thatcher house, though smaller, complete with a gray curl of smoke blowing out its iron chimney pipe. The Sheriff spoke to his wife before helping me out of the wagon, they took turns looking me over, spoke more words to each other, and then he lifted me out of the bench and set me on the porch.

The woman was shorter than me at the time, her forehead coming up to my shoulder, but still the woman loomed over me like a schoolmaster, which had been her occupation at some point, though now she tended house and watched after the Sheriff, who himself had all but retired form enforcing the law, but still wore his badge and carried his gun, roaming the countryside for troublemakers, or young women lost in the woods.

For the first time I noticed her eyes, when Mrs. Haynes put her hand on my shoulder, and, how each was a different color, one brown and one a bluish-green color, like seawater, like one was alive and following me and took in all Mrs. Haynes's information, while the other, lazy eye rested, perhaps even dead.

"The Lord demands that we help strangers," Mrs. Haynes said. "But I determine the rules when it comes to how, at least in this house."

"Yes Ma'am," I say.

"What're you doin' wandering the woods alone?" she asked.

"Looking' for my daddy," I said.

"Have you been saved?" she asked, with no regard to the girl's answer.

"Not yet, Ma'am."

"I mean have you been baptized?"

"I reckon so," I answered. "In Dothan, Alabama."

"Then you can stay," Mrs. Haynes said to her husband. "Christ healed the Samaritan but I'll be ruined if I let a heathen into my house, Baptist or otherwise."

The Haynes's house had a single window cut into the wood beams, though the twilight did nothing for the plain and dark interior of the house. In the corner of the room there was a bed with two bedside tables, in the other corner was the kitchen and across from it was the sitting area. Between the sitting area and the eating area was the potbellied stove, with the black round pipe shooting up from its back and into the ceiling. I sat on the bed, which was uncomfortable.

"Off of there," snapped Mrs. Haynes. "You'll sleep in the floor."

I scooped my bag from the mattress and joined the Hayness at the eating table. They hunched over their food as I reached for the serving spoon. The Hayness did not move to stop me, either, other than quick shovels with their forks and spoons from plates to mouths, nor did they acknowledge me as I took my meal. Instead they looked at me like a carnival curiosity, every now and then, and neither asked how long stay would be.

"Your father, huh," Sheriff Haynes said before excusing himself from the table.

My answer reassured them, or in any case they left me alone, Mrs. Haynes most of all. Sheriff Haynes turned down the lights and climbed into bed. Mrs. Haynes piled a blanket in the corner for me.

"You'll be up bright and early," she said.

In the morning Mrs. Haynes stood over me with a black Bible in her hand, and a wooden spoon in the other.

"Time for mornin' paryers," she said.

Mrs. Haynes took me by the arm and led me outside to a small shack out behind the main house, not an outhouse, much larger, bigger than a shed even but not big enough to be called its own house. Inside, it was a tiny room, bare except for dull white paint covering the walls, blotched in places with cracks or stains or mildew, and here and there great sections had been chipped or pealed through the years.

Opposite the door sat a small desk and two chairs. On the corner of the desk a colorless wax candle stood half-melted. The room's only window, carved high in the wall, allowed a dirty light, cloudy and indecisive, giving a dull shade to everything. A thick coat of dust crusted over everything too.

Mrs Haynes pulled her chair in front of the door, sat, and read a verse from the great book. As she read her eyes squinted and I thought to suggest that he open the door for some more light, except she'd also placed the wooden spoon on the desk in front of her, and when she'd finished reading, she waved at me to sit at the desk.

"Which verse is your favorite?" she asked.

"I don't know," I answered.

Mrs. Haynes picked the spoon off the table, slow and deliberate, and slapped me across the wrist with it.

"That was for lying," she said.

"I didn't lie," I said, my voice cracked, shocked with the pain in my arm. "I don't know any."

She cracked my wrists again with the weapon.

"That's for lying again," she said, calm as ever. "You told me you were baptized."

"I was a baby when they did it," I answered. "I didn't know any verses then."

Mrs. Haynes brought the spoon against my mouth, hard and fast, cracked it against my gums and teeth and I stumbled out of the seat, but caught myself against the floor with my hand. I cried for a bit, grit my teeth and sat upright in the chair. Blood tasted sweet in mouth, as I hadn't eaten, though I just swallowed it down rather than show Mrs. Haynes that I was wounded.

"Which verse is your favorite?" she asked again, as if nothing had happened.

So I thought hard and long from when I was with my momma at church and all the ladies in their fine dresses and hats, the way the men held the door for us when we entered and left the building and the picnics we'd have afterwards and all the fun and laughter. But I couldn't hear one word of any of the readings, though the songs still rang clear in my head. Mrs. Haynes wrapped her fingers around the spoon again and readied to swing so before she did I spoke out the words to the song that was fresh on my mind.

I was careful not to repeat the parts that repeated, or else she'd know it was a song.

Daniel saw the stone
Rollin', rollin'
Daniel saw the stone
Cut out the mountain without hands
Never saw such a man before
Cut out the mountain without hands
Spite call them wicked men
Cut out the mountain without hands
Daniel pray'd in the lions' den
Cut out the mountain without hands

Drive the devil far away
Cut out the mountain without hands

"You see," Mrs. Haynes said. "You didn't have to lie. The Lord has a heavy hand for liars, as they are one step from blasphemy at all times. The *Book of Daniel* has always been one of Sheriff Haynes's favorites, though I don't care for it myself. I prefer the Gospels."

Mrs. Haynes put away the spoon and brought me in the house for breakfast, gave me a list of chores to do around the house, until Sheriff Haynes came home from wandering the hills, and we ate supper, most of which I cooked myself, after which we went to bed.

When she wasn't scolding me about the Bible or how I'd never properly learned to scrub a floor or hang a candle or iron a man's uniform, each time cracking the spoon across my wrists or arms or behind, whichever was closest, she would drag me into the tiny room where we prayed and give me the history of the town where she grew up in. Day after day I sat in the desk under Mrs. Haynes's watch, letting me out of her sight for so long as to go over to the outhouse and relieve myself, but not a moment more.

How the first testimony of her city came from pirates, who purchased their slaves here at the same time the Underground Railroad was helping fugitives escapes.

"Tell me about that," I said.

"That's not proper for young girls to know," she said, and put a stack of papers and some books on a shelf.

That night, when Sheriff Haynes climbed into the bed for sleep and Mrs. Haynes followed with her own routine, I pretended to sleep, as I planned to take the lantern from the eating table and sneak outside into the tiny building, to learn what I could of the Underground Railroad. After a few minutes they thought I was asleep.

"What did they tell you at the home?" the woman's voice asked, breaking the silence.

"They won't have an opening for several weeks, maybe a month," the man's voice answered in the darkness.

"We'll have to make due," the woman's voice said. "Girl of this kind belongs in a home."

In a few minutes the snoring began, and so I knew it was clear to move. With little time to waste, I hurried to the shed and reached into the desk where Mrs. Haynes had stored away the papers from earlier in the day, and read whatever I could in the pale light of the lantern.

Back in the Haynes's house, the pair was still asleep when I reentered, loud as ever and still asleep when I found my corner of the room in the darkness and fell asleep myself. I smiled for the first time that night, not that I'd found anything of my mother, but that maybe I was closer to her struggles than she had led me on to know. That maybe by knowing what she did, or something like it, I was part of that history too.

For the next two and a half weeks, morning, afternoon, and evening proceeded the same way with Mrs. Haynes, with prayer, then chores, some lessons, supper, and bed. I switched the song lyrics every morning, and spent much of the nights thinking over what the next day's song would be. *This World Almost Done* and *Ride in Kind Savior* were Mrs. Haynes's favorites, though she disapproved of my singing the *Hail Mary* song, as she suspected me of Papacy. Either way, she never did catch on.

But I also spent the nights thinking more about what I'd read that night than what I'd heard, though with a bit more common sense I'd have paid better attention. At the time I had no

idea what the Haynes's planned to do with me. Then one morning Mrs. Haynes brought me out to the yard, my bag in her right hand.

"I knew there was something about you," she said as her fist tightened over my wrists.

"What?" I tried to ask, but instead felt the tug from this woman out to the shed again for what seemed like more books or more about Beaufort.

"I should've seen it from the start," Mrs. Bran muttered to herself over and over again.

She slammed the door behind me and threw me into the desk and chair.

"What did you say you we're lookin' for in Epleys?" she asked me.

"My daddy, and he's not in Epleys, he's in Lysistrata."

"I should've been able to tell it form the start, what with your color and all, or that you'd be lookin' not for your own daddy but for the father of that baby you're carryin'. What with Mr. Haynes, saying he's heard you sneakin' outside in the early mornin', that kind of sickness the first sign. Be damned if you birth a bastard in my house."

"I'm not with child," I said.

Mrs. Haynes swung the spoon she had been hiding, not at my wrists but at my mouth again, but I ducked and that made her angrier than before.

"Don't you move away from me," she yelled. "To think I fed you and taught you the Good News, though no tellin' what good it'll do a girl of your kind."

She swung the spoon again, again for my head, and again I ducked, this time retreated form my chair and desk to the corner of the room. When I was as far away as I could get, I backed into a wall, and Mrs. Haynes came for me. She swore up and down that she'd been tricked by a mulatto, that God was punishing her but for what she didn't know.

By now Mrs. Haynes had my arms pinned to the wall, and she struggled to keep me there while she reached for her spoon again. Most of her trouble was on account of my being taller and bigger than her, though her age gave her some advantage. She cursed at my hair and my skin, the usual names and name-calling, but when she hit on bastard she really got going. That I was a bastard and was carrying a bastard, just like all my people, she said.

I stopped paying attention at that point and decided to wait it out, take what blows she was determined to strike and survive another day.

"I'll reckon your momma was a bastard too, white or colored," she said.

Before I knew what happened, my fist broke free and landed across Mrs. Haynes's mouth and a second time when she was on the floor, and I was standing over her and punching down into the old woman. A groan slipped from her throat, followed by blood from the corner of her mouth now. At this point I was back in the darkness of the bedroom, listening to the Haynes's, hearing their words again, and it came to me, how they intended to put me in the orphanage.

With strange emotion—between satisfaction and failure—I hurried past the woman on the floor out the door, across the fields, a full sprint, across the land, past the dogs snapping in their iron chains, along the horizon. Perhaps I knew something was waiting north for me, or perhaps the movement north was natural, or even my Momma's hand pushing me gently in that direction. It was at Epleys where I first recall Momma's visiting me, the way I heard her voice at night.

Either way, the world blurred, upside down and I was stuck the middle, where nothing felt the same, like could never be again, but things changed somehow and I did not look back until I found that doorstep in Lysistrata.

When they arrive at the Bowers house, no lights shine from the interior, as if Katy has put the residence to rest for shear exhaustion at having kept it open, for spite, or the confusion of planning a funeral all of her own resources, with still no word from Richard, husband of the deceased. John and Penelope laugh in the darkness as they move to the backdoor, where a single lantern hangs from a large hook-and-stand planted in the soil. John begins to undress, peeling away his clothing and its layers of filth, not merely the dust and muck from the road, nor the ink smeared and splattered on his pants, shirt, and face, but the crusted blood still soaked into his trousers and arms from the morning, now a brownish mark on his skin that most in Lysistrata would call a stain, were they to see the man in his current state.

For her part Penelope undresses as well, her body unstained by the blood, until the two stand in their undergarments, each staring out into the darkness of the woods beyond the yard, wondering if some set of eyes peers back at them, watches them in the state of their undress, or plots against them in some way, either physical harm or the knowledge that a man and young girl might find themselves in such a state, at such a time. Like a father John reaches for the door and opens it, holds the door open as Penelope passes, ducking beneath his arm until the two disappear from the moonlight.

"Tell me something about her," Penelope asks John.

"About who?" he answers.

"Tell me about the woman you plan to put into the ground."

"She's better off where she's gone." John turns for his bedroom and watches Penelope down the hallway.

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"You're too young to understand."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Katy stands over the gravesite as the workers lower Nance's casket into the ground, the feeling of eyes against her back like an itch between her shoulder blades, an irritation she cannot reach to satisfy, nor think away, knowing that oftentimes the body only responds to what a mind imagines for it, as the notion of someone watching her, them, from a long distance. The preacher reads from his dog-eared Bible. Despite the difficulties in planning the funeral, Katy knows, Nance's final circumstances could have been much more complicated, as the Bowers offered no wake on behalf of the deceased, on the one hand because there was no husband to stand over such proceedings, customary as it would have been for Richard to attend and thank the mourners as they passed, on the other hand because when they finished scooping Nance from the office floor, there was hardly enough to recognize her original form, merely a body without the usual distinguishing features of a face, of eyes, a clump of recognizable hair, let alone enough to offer a viewing of any such kind.

The minister sings *Amazing Grace* as the workers begin to shovel dirt into the hole, crisp, light soil kept dry under tarps to make the burials go faster, light dirt easier to unload than moist, fertile soil. *The rain will come soon enough*, she thinks, dampen the earth to a moist, sodden mud. Though what is worse about the soil after rain is not so much the sloppiness of the grounds, but the weight of such mud when dirt mixes with water, a weight pressing down on the lid of Nance's coffin, that, while childish and in every way unreasonable, lighter dirt might be pushed away, somehow, the lid lifted and the grand mistake revealed, two delicate hands to carve the dry, arid soil and emerge again into the light of the living world, rather than the solemn, certain, absolute motion of the box disappearing into the ground, slowly covered, weighed down by the mass of stone and dirt, no matter how wet or dry, that would seal the lid for eternity. Katy mouths the words to the minister's hymn, while John and Penelope stand tight-lipped.

Perhaps the eyes belong to Nance, Katy thinks, watching her own funeral from on high, perhaps disappointed, perhaps not, drawn in either case by the chorus of her favorite hymn, as Katy knew when she selected it, or to see her family off one final time, but for her faithless husband. The words of the hymn themselves, while attached to a melody both powerful and affecting, causing her soul to stir at each note as if prompted to some future action, stored away and reserved for some future necessity, the words themselves strike her mind as bothersome, irritable, inappropriate in the way they seem to mourn the living and their lot rather than honor the dead, if *honor* be the correct word for the living, how wretched human beings must be indeed to require such salvation, from such a lord, as if wretchedness were not the condition we find ourselves born into, the basic condition of our creation, wretchedness the primal state of life, while un-wretchedness, whatever a condition that may invoke, is the result of hard work and discipline alone, of biting our lips at pain and pushing forward against what fate we encounter, as far as one could hope to be from the rapture of heavenly salvation. Still, the itch upon her shoulders.

> The Lord has promised good to me,
> His Word my hope secures;
> He will my Shield and Portion be,
> As long as life endures.

And yet only Katy joins her voice with that of the minister, to sing the remainder of Nance's song as if the woman could hear the tune and melody, be softened or comforted by its

refrain, not for the glory of some lord who chooses to sprinkle the earth with seed, render the harvest according to what, by chance, should have fallen to good soil, damning what the winds have scattered or tossed aside, winds he created and controls, those seeds unlucky enough to fall against hard, cold stone also of His making, or the barren lands wasted by over-farming, God-fearing planters themselves negligent in the care of their own fields, not for him nor even for Nance herself, certain to be deaf now in her state of unending sleep, sounds as useless to her now as grace or salvation, but for her own gratification, a song to glorify the women and their sisterhood, if not blood by birth, blood by relation to the Bowers and their house, the prick of a needle against their fingers, now carried like hymnals up to the sky, where birds poke their beaks through an empty vault of heaven.

The Bowers family stands motionless over the gravesite, three specks of flesh and bone standing on the balance of an earth in orbit, a world in disarray, perhaps, a woman, man, and girl in the face of trees, mountains, and ageless stone, powerless, their mourning, weeping, silence, confusion, self-pity, and remorse but rapid energies spent in a listless cycle of fire and its eventual cooling over the ages, vapid to all accounts of tragedy, family, or humor. A brisk wind blows against the family's chests and faces, billowing Katy's new skirt, black and crisp from the catalog, alone as she stands, as if apart from the other two, a family unto her own, rigid in the back, legs, and shoulders, draped in fresh black garments from the ankle-high hem of her skirt to the collar that creeps half-way up her throat, nothing discernable in the draping of cloth between but a hint of breasts somewhere below the collar, the hint of a crotch when the wind intensifies. John and Penelope wear hand-me-down clothes to the funeral, John a suit from his brother's closet, who in turn received the outfit from his own father's belongings, kept and worn more from tradition and inertia than lack of money for something new, Penelope in a black dress that had once belonged to Suppina, at such a time she was thin and tall, though the bent old woman had never seemed as such in all the time Katy knew of her, the clothes ill-fitting on the girl, loose where they ought to be fitted, tight where they ought to be slack, with only Katy standing among them in fresh clothes, out of respect for the deceased. *Thankful*, she thinks, *the women are not here to see this*, a poor reflection on Katy and her sewing skills, on display in the form of the girl's attire, if the women of Lysistrata had been there to see it all, understanding, to a point, of the circumstances involved, her solitude in planning the event and all the rest, but nevertheless a tick against her on some grand, unseen tally-sheet they kept in the sleeves of their long town-coats.

They were all standing there, right outside the judge's office. If they weren't aware of the girl's condition beforehand, she thinks, *they certainly learned about it there. Doesn't take a genius of any sort, nor any kind of schooling to know that when a woman's name appears on that sort of list, there can be no doubt as to her color, a fact to which even the dimmest mind in the crowd would have grasped, even if another of them had to explain it, no matter how many of them fought for the Union. A freed slave is one thing when she or he's living so far to the south, something tolerable, but another entirely when you learn that one expects to live in your city, drink from your wells and mingle with your children, expects to be treated as a member of your town. Then, emancipation means something entirely different. And now their eyes find us here, burying our own, alongside the other women and men unfortunate enough to carry this name, a look of pity that all decent church-going people can muster, not some brand of fellow-feeling that naturally arises in our hearts, compassion for the plight of another or a recognition that all human beings in essence share the same fate, and thus a sisterhood or brotherhood must exist between us, but the look of delight, of having correctly guessed the future, certain as they are*

that all Bowers families in all possible Lysistratas, past, present, and future, are cursed to live such lives, to endure such embarrassments—their eyes relish more pity than even their tongues will confess—taking pleasure in the actuality of what they believed to be inevitable, the aspect of the girl's race a mere flourish to an otherwise predictable plot.

Now they're entirely aware of the girl's condition, she thinks, *as they're aware of their own eyesight. How they must be plotting against us already, how even though she is not my child, not of my husband, on account of my husband's brother this girl will be added to our number, become one of our people, so that whatever she is to endure, we must also bear, lest they say the Bowers are a family that does not stand by its own. Which is why she must be sent away, as far away from us as we can, not that we won't pay for the service, send her what she needs, as blood is blood and one can't deny that much for the girl, but away from Lysistrata as far as possible, away from the slanders they'll whisper behind her back, tell their children about her, to stay away from that Bowers girl and her mixed blood, the abuse later in life, no doubt, fueled by the stories they will have invented from her youth, come to light as adults with all the rancor and spite and meanness stored up for years until God knows what could happen, but safer to be far away, better to be away and lonely than part of our family and enduring misery as we women seemed destined to endure. Not that I have anything against the girl,* Katy thinks, as if to convince herself, *she seems as pleasant and likeable as any other girl her age that is reared in Lysistrata or any other decent city, though her table manners could be improved, that is precisely the kind of training she'd receive in the orphanage, sweet girl as she is, but with the habit of making silent, which breeds mostly suspicion from those around her, accustomed as people are to having the silences filled, even with idle prattle or chatter of the lowest kind, rather than face the emptiness of lulls in their conversations, which this girl seems to relish, if not entirely bring about on her own account, relishing the tension when words fall short and the long spaces between them linger, grow loud themselves, nearly shout to beg some new voice to cover over the vacancy with anything, substance or otherwise. But a girl despite her natural charms, for her own good must be sent away form this place, these people, or suffer the worst kinds of humiliations and anxieties at their hands.*

Katy measures the girl next to her husband, begins to calculate the ways she can help Penelope blend into life in Lysistrata, at least for the time being, until she can speak with John about her plan in a calm fashion, and patiently suggest the orphanage for such a child, motherless for certain, and all but fatherless, as no man would step forth to claim her lineage, though it be proven in the courts of the open air, still the best option for a child whose father refuses to own up to her existence and a mother beyond the grave. The itch between the blades of Katy's shoulders intensifies, more like a thumb pressed nail-first into her flesh, now, rather than the touch of curious lovers but the sting of a gadfly, sharp and enduring in her flesh. *The first to change will be the hair,* she thinks, as Penelope now stands with a nest of matted tangles over her head, combed until her scalp began to bleed, though still untamed, with every sort of clip, ribbon, and bow tied and re-tied until Katy herself gave up on the enterprise and the girl managed to calm the hair slightly with a damp towel, though a temporary remedy, for as soon as she stepped into the open air of the cemetery, nature works against their efforts and unsettles what had been tamed, puffs the girl's hair to it highest, most unmanageable condition.

More than the hair, the eyes notice Penelope's manners and decides they must be changed as well, those of the daughter of a slave, no matter how educated, rough and foreign, unfamiliar to the finer points of town life, the cleanliness and politeness demanded from and for the neighbors, a gentleness of voice and action, deference to those above you in class or position,

pity for those beneath, manners not of the farm but of what follows, men and women who trade their dirt-clothes for suits and dresses, trade hard labor and toil for city work, labors of the mind in place of the hands, who purchase their needs and wants from stores and catalogs, rather than depend on their own parcel of land for sustenance. Not the least of which will be her use of powders and other beauty aids, as her complexion, while clear and passing in the light of day, in the sunshine, falters when in shadows, as under trees, or when the sun ducks behind the clouds, or when, at night, the house is lit and in the orange glow her face appears dark and shadowy, betraying what in the daytime might go unrecognized.

It will be a valuable lesson, Katy thinks, *learning to pass among the men and women, learning to manage her hair and clothing and manners, certainly there are products and salves for such ends, as passing is not a recent phenomenon, all sorts of light-skinned Negroes, some of mixed blood as Penelope is, others the product of two light-skinned parents, skin blanched enough that with the proper techniques and precautions they go about their lives entirely unknown to white folks, entirely unknown to their bosses and neighbors, perhaps even to their husbands and wives, rather than have their secret known*. A secret which stands now in the light of day, head bowed, her fingers spread flat along the flank of her thighs and ill-fitting dress, occasionally trading glances with John as the minister finishes his hymns and shuts his Bible, the words interrupted by the singing of birds overhead and the gravediggers who do not stop in their labor, slowly filling the empty space with soil.

Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.

The minister is nowhere to be seen when the final shovel of dirt finishes the task, his own duties fulfilled at the sprinkling of baptismal water over the site, while the Bowers family does not move from their observation, as if unsure where next to go, knowing full well the house awaits them just down the way, with the same embarrassments as before the funeral, the same sad looks form the neighbors, somewhere between pity and enjoyment. The gravediggers too carry their shovels down the path until they disappear, with grim, nearly faceless expressions frozen in their pressed lips and unclenching jaws, eyes that do not shift from side to side, nor seem to blink in the dirt kicked from their instruments. Katy looks up from the slight mound of dirt poking above the otherwise flat gravesite and wipes her eyes, the crying having stopped rather unexpectedly at the moment the final shovel of dirt hit the ground, as if the burial itself were not official, was in some way reversible until that last handful of soil, and once it hit, practicality and sensibleness eliminated the need or usefulness of tears.

There, she thinks to herself, *it's finally over. Nance can finally rest.* But when Katy gathers herself, turns away from the grave and forward to the rest of her life as the sole Bowers woman, turns to lead the family homeward, John collapses onto the ground, triggered by the same crunch of dirt, a cry from his throat unearthly in its depth, pain and anguish and the unjust absurdity of it all, each trapped in the raspy yell John shouts into the earth, as if to wake the dead herself, his body curled low in the grass, fingers scratching the lawn and plucking fresh blades, his face now covered in dirt from the site. Katy thinks to laugh but holds the reaction on her tongue, not a laugh of humor but of ridicule, as if to ask, *What have you to mourn over this woman*, she thinks, *it was man who put her in this condition*. For a moment, neither Penelope nor Katy know what to do, but stand rather awkwardly and try to calm John as he writhes on the

ground, when Penelope places her hands along the arch of his back, puffed and thick in his funeral jacket, and traces the bumps of his spine from his shoulders to his neck, while Katy tries to calm the man with words that she finds false and helpless before she speaks them, but speaks them nevertheless.

"This is just the way things are," she says.

Men, she thinks, *make sisters out of women like Nance and me, force us to come together and defend each other, console each other in the morning after our ordeals, or during the stillest, deepest hours of night, when the wounds remain fresh and unspeakable, make widows out of women like Nance and me, and every day before the final blow, delivered by fate or time, or husbands' hands or our own, trap us into conditions beyond our making or abilities, beyond anything we may have dreamed for our lives, but nevertheless find ourselves intertwined, sewn into place, able, able like Nance was, to turn our heads slightly and look over at the other world, the world of men, with utter freedom in their control, under their grasp, precious in their tight fists refusing to dole any amount to me, us, knowing all the while how we watch and envy and stand powerless to change our lots, powerless to grab what is ours by nature, rather than what has been yielded to us by the random and artificial laws of men.*

Katy holds her hands over face, the tremble of tears, of a breakdown, noticeable only on her lips as the family approaches the Bowers home, hoping the others will think it is merely dust in her eyes that Katy's hands are shielding, rather than the oncoming of something deeper, rooted in Nance's funeral, beneath a surface for the most part controlled, emotions contained and unnoticeable to the outside, but bubbling, constantly, beneath the skin, irritation, sharp words unintended for those who receive them, a quick temper at disappointments, palms, fingers, and thumbs cold against her lips and nose and forehead, *you cannot breakdown, not here, not again, nothing ever again to drive that knot into your fist,* Katy holds her arms flat on her sides, refuses to move her wrists or even turn a thought in their direction, as easy as it would be to climb down from a rope and scaffolding, *not as easy in the comfort of a tub,* she thinks, *where the wrists could be opened long before any sense of remorse or better-judgment might take hold, too late as it would be as the dizziness falls like a curtain on the final act of a play, or the slow haze of morning descending from the mountaintops. Do not think of your wrists,* she again holds her arms deadly still, *do not think to touch them, or even look at them, perhaps even imagine how you might make the first—what the feeling would be like, how quickly a desire to undo the action might take, then a consideration of family, perhaps, or the subtle darkness of palms and fingers.*

Nance did not receive that which would have saved her, she thinks, *a grace which failed to find her, deliver itself like an angel with an announcement, nor even the whim of her husband, owner, to acquiesce and grant such lowly favors, and so her body gave up, unable to fulfill its promise, its ripening, and so it failed her, as no doubt a child is what she wanted, what we spoke of in the early mornings and late nights, the healing affects these small bundles would bring, if not to force these men into different roles, to bend their wills and ambitions and secrets for more productive things, then to provide at the very least some object for affection, something to care for and nurse to health, some glimpse of what a future might hold in store, a meager prize to ask for, such a humble request a wife must make to her husband, to suffer the weight of his body, the smell of work and toil on his breath, embedded in the skin and hair like oil, to beg his permission to have our bodies filled with hope.*

This is the meaning of our oath, Katy thinks, pulling her hands away from her face, the flow of ideas and thoughts in her mind enough to calm her nerves, if only for the relief that thinking over such matters can provide, temporarily, *our blood mixed together like sisters,*

holding each other, supporting ourselves like the walls of a house, bending and at the mercy of weather and wind, holding each other through the ordeal, a safe haven to run when husbands, or bodies, fail, an oath unlike the other words he had, or would have ever spoken, a commitment more solemn, and more solemnly kept than our own vows, our own marriages, quicker to betray them than each other, than to betray our blood, consecrated as it was at that fireside, warm and damp, the prickle of our fingertips as they pressed, our prints branded on the others' as if with ink or dye or something permanent, rather than the warm fluid that rushes through us, only someday to cool. *What else is there for us to do,* she thinks at the doorstep to the Bowers house, *other than to play the brave woman when we step beneath our thresholds and return to apron and broom, unless we should change, somehow, from our restlessness and in turn become unrecognizable to our mothers and sisters, who each bore the same burden and did not so much as utter a complaint, at least to the men, but rather laid our burdens down with the other women, in the ways we can, relying on those older for advice, who all during our youth taught us the rules of the situation, as if a game, at seven years to no longer play the rough games of boys, at ten to stand by our mothers' sides and learn the workings of a stove and oven, next, at the first spot of red, clad in a dress of silk, or the best material our mothers could scrounge, to be presented to the congregation as a woman, and now presently, all grown, we tall, handsome women, led down aisles and given away by our families, traded in some cases for land or money or livestock, handed over to men who will keep the game and its rules alive, new roles in the darkness and faint light, mature roles of body and self-sacrifice, of duty and submission to power, brute and unnatural as it may be, bound to each other by the advice of our mothers, alone—What matters that I was born a woman, if I cannot cure the misfortune?—and the obligation to pay our share of the penalty, by giving sons to these fathers, daughters to these husbands. But oh you miserable counterparts, who contribute so little to these births and sacrifices, barely even an evening's worth of pleasure, if any at all, who give away or harm so easily what you did not bear, did not harbor or bring to light, but rather waste the treasure of our mothers and foremothers, as they are a called, a treasure built in the generations, you pay nothing in return and into the agreement you threaten our lives by your foolishness.* Katy moves through the bedroom, sometime later, when the sun has set and John prepares for bed, thinking, *Have you a word to say for yourself? Only silence and the silent taking, the needy taking from us, from what our hands or bodies can offer, the washing of clothes, folded neatly in drawers, and the piles of sewing, mending, patching to keep him looking respectable, and housework, yard work, keeping the social calendars, dusting the family's ornaments, stored away on shelves and in cabinets, everything we have, offer to you with all our hearts, taking our children, our girls, in case they are chosen to be brides. Come and choose whatever you will, pluck it from our bodies if you must, relieve the burden, there is nothing so well fastened, it is merely a chord of flesh, nothing so secure you cannot wrestle it away, and carry off the darkened valuables.*

—Nance sits at my bedside and strokes my hair while I sleep, strokes my back and neck and legs, after a full day's worth of labor, after the first, immediate shock in my belly, so violent and precise I am certain it has killed the child inside with the tremor and tension of its aftermath, shocks that come in varying intervals, not at all what the women had promised me, not at all the regular, predictable pattern the women expect to see as they jot down the time and length of my contractions, as if disappointed already in my labor, my worth as a woman and mother, or worse, anger that my body is not behaving according to their patterns, a knowledge they gained by the experiences of their own bodies, experiences now rejected as false by the trembles wrapping around my belly, like barrel staves tightening over my spine and belly. In her hands I

wake to see the silver device the women have used to listen to the baby's heartbeat, as they do with the livestock, knowing full well Nance has not slept all the while, instead sits in vigil over my body, perhaps even presses the instrument to my belly to listen, a cold metal device, shaped like an egg cup or a small goblet, holding the flat end against my skin and listening through the cone on the other side, each time smiling when she hears the beating heart, but how long ago was this, surrounded by the same whoosh people claim to hear when they press seashells to their ears and detect the ocean. But the number of women gives me pause, a reason for concern more immediate than the brownish blood I discovered over a month prior to the first contraction, each hurrying this way and that, rushing to make me comfortable, as if intending to ease my pain before it has come, if women are capable of such insight.

I rock and cringe at the pains, now more intense and faster, coming more rapidly and in greater intensity, then walk around the room, having undressed completely in the sight of these women, who seem not shocked or scandalized in any way, as if they have been expecting it, perhaps even wondering why it has taken me so long, but then I have the sudden urge to use the bathroom, and start to panic at the thought of traveling down towards the bathroom, when Nance pulls the chamber pot from beneath the bed and the women lower me over it to relieve myself, supported on both arms, my back, even my neck held up by one of the women, then the final shocks from by body, the women speaking to me as if a child, how to breathe, when to bite my teeth and when to release, when to push low inside my belly and when to hold the urge to push, and then the utter silence. Perhaps I sleep for a while, or stare blankly from the window, unable to recapture the thoughts exiting my head, mouth, unable to control what my tongue by its nature and of its own accord deems fit to gossip. But then Nance asks if I want to see, that it is alright if I do not, but I push her arms and body aside, not knowing what she is saying, and we look at my son, lying on a towel in the chamber bowl, arms and legs curled as if asleep. Nance wraps the body and leaves the room, where the women no longer speak, but quietly wrap their instruments and wash where blood and fluid have spilled, when it begins, the feeling of being cold, his body so utterly cold, now removed from the warmth of my body, even if it were all I could give him, the only thing keeping his tiny body warm.

I can't find a heartbeat, she says, though I picture only birds huddled in the nest outside our window, only the round, childish clouds drifting in the sky, blue the color of baby eyes or the socks and caps the women have brought to the room, knowing as they do that a baby carried this far forward, this low, as they say, must be a boy, though I refuse to hear Nance's voice, the baby's movements in my body still fresh and alive, still vital and strong and concrete, measurable and certain, as real as every other experience of nerve and flesh, having listened with her just before I sleep the heartbeat through the cold metal listening device, though immediately concerned as to how this might upset John, or worse, might ease his mind, lift the awkward grimace of acceptance from his face, as if fate had delivered a burden he must bear, rather than a blessing. Listen again, I say, listen again, you aren't aiming that thing in the right place, listen again, at which point I am screaming and Nance shifts the flat end of the egg cup until she has covered every inch of my abdomen, even where no baby would tuck itself, finding only the clumsy, loud, overpowering rush of my own heartbeat, with nothing faint or weak or childish between its thumps, only the growing revelation, epiphany of sorts, bypassing despair or grief or worse, rushing straight to disbelief, surprised as I find myself, never once thinking I would stillbirth our first child.

Perhaps I listen to my baby's final heartbeat, not in the way it's supposed to happen, when the last heartbeat heard through the instrument is immediately followed by the first heard

outside the womb, in the company of friends and family and celebration, but rather a distortion, pain, Nance tenderly pressing my fingers, her two hands folded over my own until all but disappeared from light, one of the younger mothers in the room crying, there but for the grace of God*, she probably is thinking, the thought of John's face, or worse, his smile of teeth, the cold baby now removed, though I feel his feet against my body from the inside as if he had never passed, a phantom kicking and punching from an unseen, dark, murky world, not frightened, as if I were seeing a ghost or feeling a sprit take control of me, but relief perhaps that it is over, that the boy emerged all but perfect, correct in fingers and toes, correct in shape and size and position, all but breath, life, which melted somewhere in my body and does not return, the grief that arrives, like light from the sun, a grief which allows me to see everything else, enables my vision, permits me to see what only moments before sat veiled in a kind of darkness, an innocence like darkness, now hurtful to the eyes, groping as I do in the image of the window, of Nance smiling over me, telling me to hold tight and shooing away the other women, again the younger mothers, when they ask me how I feel, unaware as they are both of how I would feel to have to answer such questions, and of what to do in such situations, though with their sad glances and their meager words of solace, I squeeze Nance's hand even tighter, to the point that it is most likely hurting her, but she does not once flinch, does not move to loosen my grip, or her own, but rather sits again at my side and strokes my hair in her lap, as a mother might straighten a son's or daughter's hair on a rainy afternoon.*

Of course in time I see John's face for the first time, not as I imagine it will look, pleased in some way, or with a measure of I-told-you-so I might detect in his words of comfort or the way he drapes his arms over my shoulders, presses his body against me for comfort, to absorb some of my pain, as he might intend, unaware that this is a pain I will bear to myself forever, unable as it is to be shared or communicated, though my rough treatment is held in check and I am thankful for his touch, that he has not spoken what he must, or perhaps, thinks, that he ought to have followed his mother's advice, ought to have married a woman whose body can carry out the work of a woman's body, right away, then, though not more than a few hours after the ordeal itself, without sleep or rest or moments of reflection, perhaps to start again and try for another, already aware of John's reaction, that perhaps he will find me worthy again, complete again to bear another child and see him to life and light. Perhaps I know how he will respond, that the child is not planned in the first place, that he is not a father nor ready to be one, perhaps seeing ahead into the future of our bed, the dark nights, the monotony of our arguments, the way he turns his body from my advances, as if disgusted by the act which can produce such sadness out of such joy, or the urges I will have equally at night as during the day, to hang my head and cry for what has been lost, the look on his face of disappointment, as if thinking that the pain should already have washed, though I merely look to him for holding, a warm comfort, a touch that never comes. That he will only realize the first of my pains, at the loss of our son, and never think to ask about another, deeper anxiety, of the emptiness that now stands in the place of my duty, the role of mother I was to assume, only to be denied such a title, how alone I will feel as I sleep so close to this man, close enough to touch, a man who never once sees the painless, tranquil look on his son's sleeping face.

In this way I am no different from Suppina, she thinks*, our connection in grief, though I was too young at the time to know what effects it could have on a woman's life, too inexperienced to know what she suffered through, though now it seems quite clear, perfect in a way, the energy she felt after each of the miscarriages, some further along than others, how she would tell us stories of each time and we thought it was to scare us away from her sons or worse*

to keep us from trying to bring more children into the world, of the full-developed children who arrived black and cold, to the clumps of blood she would find in her bed, the mattresses ruined and her husband disgusted, violent if she did not wake him to tell him the news, more violent when she woke him in a state of panic and abhorrence, each time cleaning the mess and scrubbing away the event, hauling the rough bedding to the yard and setting it on fire, until the shreds of hay and cloth danced in the air, whitish and light, pure smoke drifting upwards unto the heavens, these particles of ash dancing upon the wind and disappearing into the sky, a few shreds settling again to her clothing when cool. Only then did Suppina return to the house, care for herself, perhaps fetch water from the well and bathe, pouring the pitchers of cold water over her body until the stain felt washed away, far after the blood had been cleansed, but something other, perhaps to show her husband that a Bowers woman knows to fend for herself, or understands the value of a clean body, a vessel returned to some prior state of purity. And yet they kept trying, tempted fate over and over again, each time fate delivering the same verdict, the same outcome, so much so that for Suppina it must have seemed that death was in fact a part of birth, some fine paid for the privilege of giving life, or perhaps a toll she paid seven times in punishment for attempting to bring more children to the world, to imagine the shock she must have felt that eighth time, when Richard emerged from the womb intact, perhaps as much of a surprise that her body yielded a boy as the astonishment of having yielded anything alive, only to have the balance returned with John's birth only a few years later, though modified, as Suppina's husband passed immediately after John's birth, and Suppina was left to raise these boys without a father, something she took pride in, as if it linked her with her own mother and grandmother and ancestry in a way her blood, or her thaler necklace had not.

Only after I lost Harrison, the name John and I chose to give the boy from that morning, though John saw no use in naming him, but rather wanted to bury the child alongside John's seven sisters in the Lysistrata cemetery, where Nance now rests along side Suppina and her nameless daughters, all on the right of the family plot, her husband and the men of her family buried to the left, only after my own experience did I understand why she did the things she did, though perhaps not forgiving her the spite and meanness, her tongue as sharp as knives and equally as cutting, worse than an actual cut in the way her words stayed with Nance and me, sometimes years after they were uttered against us, not forgiving that woman and her sins, but in any case finding a reason for them, as if reasons given for our actions, no matter how compelling, in any way excuse or excise them, so that when I saw the crosses on the wall again after my ordeal, at first no different than any other decorations, I could suddenly feel what she must have felt as she carved them, as my own fingers imitated her years later, each time wrapping the pain and humiliation, the utter despair into her heart, then letting that pain rush like blood through her arms and hands, into her fingers as they chipped away at the wood, finally resting each time they had completed their work. Oh Suppina, what curses we leveled against your soul! Neither Richard or John spoke of the crosses on the wall, though we all knew, far less of why their mother would carve them, so that when the men returned from war for good, or whatever activities Richard called the war, as the new house was being built, their first point of agreement was to cover the walls with blankets and quilts, for insulating the house, they claimed, though Nance and I each noticed the way they rushed to cover the wall of crosses first and foremost, only when those reminders were concealed did they move to the rest of the house, and once the new house was built, spoke nothing of them, if only slightly more of their mother. Nance was the one who rushed to the old house as the men converted it into a barn, and at night tugged at the blankets and quilts until the crosses again emerged from hiding, as they had once

emerged from blank, solid wood, and brought me to the spot, as if to identify with Suppina, as Nance had already, surely, miscarried her first, at least once, by the time we entered the new house, and must have also felt the pain Suppina felt, that I felt thereafter, though, as was her way, the only indication I received from her was the squeeze of her hands at my own tribulation.

Sometime before dawn, the stillest hour settles on the Bowers house. In her bed, Katy sits propped against the headboard, unmoved as when she first climbed in, her body covered in blankets, staring blankly into the darkness settled over her legs and feet, beyond the shadows of the room to the bedroom door. At her side John sleeps, restless, turning and tossing beneath the blankets, mouthing words without sound, but asleep all the while, or with his eyes pressed shut against the cemetery, against the past. For Katy the look of anxiety on John's sleeping face, perhaps not anxiety so much as confusion, the look of young boys when puzzled, annoyed at their puzzlement, reminds her of the look, identical, from their wedding night, when she propped herself awake after the festivities and watched him sleep, thinking, *Even after all the trouble she caused while we were courting, Suppina still saved some of her choicest venom for the wedding day, not enough that she brought me to the house and straightaway told me no woman would ever be enough to replace her in her own son's eyes, or when that failed, showed me the crosses and told me the men in the Bowers family were incapable of providing children. The morning of my wedding I went to Suppina to make peace, to try for some friendliness between us, on account for her son, and when I noticed the necklace, she repeated all the stories she had told me in the previous months, whether true or not, and when she saw that even these stories would not deter me, when in fact they gave me even more sympathy for John than I'd already developed, wanting to rescue this man from such a woman, she then pulls the necklace from behind her blouse and tells me its story, the history of great women who owned the piece and handed it down through the generations, then boasted that the necklace would die with her, be buried with her to rot for eternity, that it would pass neither to her sons nor their wives, however many they should be, as no generation that followed could ever equal those that had passed, that she was the transition, and thus it was her duty to bury the necklace with her.*

Even now I harbor this guilt to know what was eating at her all those years, unable as I was back then to know the effects such tragedies have rendered.

"Morning."

"Morning."

"What've you got there?"

"A note," he pauses. "A message."

"Who from?"

"Richard, I think."

"Richard? Let me see." Katy turns the stiff sheet of paper in her hands, examines the handwriting scratched onto the grain.

FROM THE DESK
OF
THE HONORABLE
JUDGE ADAM R. NORTHCUT

Im comin her father

"A little sloppy," she says. "Even for Richard. Though it looks like his hand."

Katy returns the letter to the desk in front of John. "Do you think Judge Northcut is involved?"

"No. I'd bet he stole it."

"But if it's the judge—"

"—it ain't the judge."

"Then what do you think it means?"

"He's coming for her."

"The girl?"

"How did he—" Katy begins, as if now thinking the thought for the first. "How did he get in here without us knowing?"

"Could have came while we slept. Could have came during the funeral. Could have been any time, really. To sneak into the room and slip this paper onto the desk. That's no time at all for a man used to sneaking in and out of his own house."

"Is he still, here?"

"I checked every room and the yard. No one here but us."

"Well," Katy says as she moves to the kitchen for breakfast. "He can come by again any time and take her."

John clenches his jaw, his neck stiffens, but he does not speak.

"Any time he chooses," she continues. "Can come by and claim his prize. I'll have her washed and dressed like it was Christmas morning. Come and take our burdens away, right off our shoulders and hoist her up onto his own. Perhaps I'll set her on the stoop to make things easier on him."

"Shut your mouth. You'll do nothing of the sort."

"Why wouldn't I? He'd be the first Bowers to stake his claim on fatherhood in a long while."

"If you're such the mothering type—" he says, holds his tongue, knowing that there are some words that will kill whatever accommodations and civility two people might make when they agree to such meager arrangements as a marriage.

"Go on. Finish your thought."

"I've finished."

"Say it."

"Richard cannot take this child, will not."

"Then where do you suggest she live?" she says, knowing the answer.

"You'll make due."

"Make do? With what am I to make due? The looks from our neighbors? They pretend they don't know, haven't heard, but they all know."

"If they all know, what's the secret? Nothing to hide, go through the effort of hiding."

"She's not ours," she says. "Not yours and not mine. But his, they all know that now. And not his by some woman they know, not from Nance. But by a woman from that list—have you for once thought of what her life will be like here? Before children are able to walk in this town they'll know about the mixed girl over at the Bowers house. Do you think I'd even send her alone to the store? If they'd even let her step one foot in the door. What kind of treatment do you think she'd get from the others? Knowin' what they know of her? A bastard, they'd call her. And worse. Knowin' what they know. I can't, couldn't live knowin' I'd done such a thing to a girl A sweet girl, it seems, polite and quiet and helpful, which makes it all the worse."

"Then we'll keep her here, amongst our own kind."

"Jesus Christ," she says. "A child can't grow up in a house and never be expected to step outside of it. Don't you think they'd come in after her if they're so inclined? What makes you think they'll just let her be. Let her live here? Can count on one hand the number of coloreds who've ever set foot in Lysistrata, that wasn't attached to chains, and can count on one finger the number of hours they stayed here before rushin' away to the next city closer to the river."

"It will be different for her. She can pass."

"Maybe their eyes will be fooled, but not their hearts. She can't pass their hearts. Maybe if it could've been a secret, something just the three of us knew, maybe even Richard, she could have passed with a little work, preparations. But not now. It may not even take a generation, once that crowd figures out what it witnessed at the judge's office and what it means, that the city, their city, will be the one that people point to and say that's where they harbor the mixed blood, where they keep the mixed-blooded children and let them pass as white. It won't take but one time, some man or woman from Lysistrata off in another town, buying at the store or waiting for a train, conversation will arise, where are they from, the name of our city unforgettable enough as it is, the tragedy connected to it, the revelation, that they'd heard about a colored girl who still lives here, not so much one-hundred percent colored as a half-breed. How any decent person could live under such conditions."

"I don't know what to say."

"Don't you? How could any decent person live under these conditions? She's not our blood, John. Not your blood."

"She's Richard's blood."

"Not our blood. Just his blood and some slave he bedded while supposed to be fightin' slavery. This is the legacy you're lookin' to provide for?"

"I want to provide for today," he says. "To provide what it is we can offer."

"What is that? Food and clothes, sure. A dry bed and solid roof. Those we can provide. But a father and a mother? I can't provide that, not for a child not of, our, not of us. Do you think you could? What have we to offer? Heartbreak. That's what we have for her. Heartbreak every day of her life when she looks at us and sees her dead mother and worthless father, run off and left her mother for dead. Heartbreak every time the people turn away as she speaks, crowd her from doors, refuse to yield as she walks in town, refuse her money at the counter or register, refuse her smiles as she plays in the fields, Or worse. All much, far worse than these. What other than heartbreak can we offer?"

"Protection," John says. "Protection from the most immediate harm. The others will wait, slights and slanders and epithets and all can wait. For now, protection is all we can offer this girl, is all we can offer. Protection from him."

"And you mean to provide it?" she asks.

"If he's foolish enough to come back for her."

"Are you claimin' to be her father now?" she asks.

"No," he answers. "But if you had one drop of mothering blood in your body, you'd protect this girl as well. We owe her that much. Older as we are, able to protect, however damned the circumstances."

John folds the message from Richard in his fist and climbs the staircase, his footsteps heavy across the boards. Katy watches the ceiling as if to track his motion, down the hallway, turns, into their bedroom, stops, opens the closet, steps inside, walks back to the bed, sits. When the noise of the bed calms, Penelope pokes her head from the kitchen and asks for breakfast. Katy jumps. From her face, Penelope show no signs of having heard the conversation, no signs

of having stood behind the door, ear pressed to the wood, listening to their words. From her face, Katy shows that she has been talking of the girl, cannot hide the fact to her face, now smiling for breakfast. Katy follows the girl into the kitchen and prepares their meal.

In the bedroom, John sits along the edge of the bed, his feet flat against the floor, his back rigid. To his side he lays out the Remington revolver he brought home from the war. Of all his valuables, the pistol was the only item he carried on his body, tucked into the belt of his pants over his rear, and thus one of the few items to remain from the long ordeal home. The gun is a dull metallic gray, with a black handle, itself once polished and shiny, now likewise dull from disuse in the back of John's closet. The weapon weighs heavy on the mattress, nearly three pounds. It is a .44 caliber Remington with a six shot cylinder that he picked up off a fallen Union soldier during his first assignment at Barbourville. The nose of the pistol is scuffed at the very tip, pockmarked as well at the top of the grip, where the finger leaves the handle and first touches metal. These markings arrived with the gun, unable as John was for years to scour them away. As he sits on the mattress, John recalls wishing the man had owned the rarer .31 caliber, five shot variety, as already they fetched more on the market, should he have needed to pawn his firearm for supplies.

Beside the gun John sets his cleaning set, a series of long, thin wires with cleaning bristles attached to the ends, much like stems of goldenrod, though John thinks nothing of that as he raises the pistol for dismantling. The Remington has a two-piece assembly, the round cartridge which detaches completely from the gun, and everything else. John wraps one of the cleaning instruments with an old handkerchief, slides the brush into each chamber of the cartridge. Black grit wipes onto the cloth, which John changes for each plunge into the weapon, until the chambers are ready for ammunition. The larger piece is the body of the gun, carries the most of the gun's weight, with a top strap reaching over the empty cylinder, connecting the barrel of the gun to the grip, which helped the gun survive in battle, more durable than the others, and more accurate, on account of the lack of too many parts.

John finishes cleaning the barrel of the gun and the rest of its compartments, recalls the quickness by which he once reloaded the weapon. Rebel soldiers liked the Remingtons because they reloaded faster than the other weapons available, and were heavy enough that the Union soldiers would drop them at the first sound of retreat. John imagines reloading the weapon at Barbourville, dropping the loading lever, sliding the pin, replacing the cartridge, returning the pin, shutting the lever again, aiming, snapping the trigger. With the remaining white space on his handkerchief, John again tries to clean the marks on the gun's body, crevasses that do not budge when rubbed against the cloth. He returns the cleaning kit to his closet, slides fresh ammunition into the weapon and closes the closet door.

Katy waits for John at the bottom of the stairs.

"What is that for?"

"I'll be ready when he comes again."

"You don't know that for sure. You don't know what that letter means."

"Do you have a better idea?"

"We could go after him," she says. "I know where the cabin is. He must be hiding there."

"That'd be running into an ambush."

"So you'd rather sit here for days on end, waiting to shoot your brother down in his own house. For the sake of the girl."

John props the kitchen door with a doorstop, pulls a chair from the living room and sets in it the hallway, where he can see the front door to his right, and now the back door to the left.

"John," she says. "We have to talk about sending the girl away."

"Judge Northcut said the orphanage wasn't possible, not with her kin available."

"Her kin isn't available," she says.

"We're her kin," he says. "Even in the Judge's eyes."

"Then what are those places good for?"

"After hearing that girl's story," John says. "I won't bring myself to do it."

"Nothing is worth this."

"This one is."

"But what about our own family?" Katy asks. "There are other orphanages, ones with different rules. What about our having children together?"

"She's not going," John says.

For two days straight John sits posted at the house, during the day in his chair in the hallway, at night moving the chair upstairs, where he can see his own bedroom door, the staircase, and Penelope's door, formerly Richard's, each moment waiting for Richard to enter it, reclaim it. With the gun in his hand and only time to pass as he waits, the war returns to John's mind, through the touch of metal on skin, the tension in the trigger and the itch in his own hand to squeeze it, though there be nothing to shoot but a mirror and a vase of flowers from the garden, still, the weapon, unfired, feels as if it's out of place, an action of inevitability, simply waiting for its own actuality. If he could count them, John tries to imagine the number of men he'd killed with the weapon, perhaps thirty, perhaps many more. It's impossible to know, he decides at some point of his surveillance, as firing a pistol during a battle amounts to nothing more than aiming the gun in a general direction, usually a cloud of smoke and screaming men, and firing. No whites in the eyes, no watching the enemy collapse from the entry wounds, no heroics. Simply the squeezing of triggers from a distance.

When the smoke clears and the gunfire ends, the cannons cool, their wheels pressed deep into the soil along side whatever pile of cannonballs had not been loaded, John walks among the battlefield, along with his comrades. At first, the living search out the dead, poking beneath fallen cavalry horses or larger piles of uniform and shredded body, occasionally finding a companion, severely wounded, whom they allow a sip of water, or whiskey if they have it, before firing a merciful shot between their eyes, or to the back of their heads, if they are afraid. When the companions are accounted for, John scavenges among the bodies for valuables, the rule being that everything is game, gold teeth and all garments included, on friend or foe, with the only special provision that if a man delivers the mercy kill, he is entitled to the first pick of goods from the fortunate corpse. At first it is something of a game, a hunt to find treasure buried beneath coats and shirts, tucked away in boots and socks as if in the sand, but only when supplies are plenty, and the men in good spirits. All other times, John crawls as a beast among other, fallen beasts, survival in his claws and teeth, ripping through shirts and pants where once his human hands would have unbuttoned, or taken care not to further disturb the body. Now members of the same troop, the same regiment fight when they happen upon the valuables, even tent-mates, and no one bothers to wait until the end of the mercy killings, stealing what they can from the wounded, and aiming their pistols while eying the next man over.

John.

"John."

"What," he says. The front door, closed and locked, the backdoor, likewise secure.

"You fell asleep," Katy says. Her nightgown smells of the clothesline, crisp cotton and the breeze of beech trees. She holds a cup of coffee in her hand, which she gives to John. "You won't give this up and come to bed?"

"Thank you," he says to the drink.

"I'm going to bed. Are you coming with me?"

"Good night."

"Night."

John opens his eyes at the crash in the hallway, to the pitch black of night, the usual hall lantern with Penelope to ease her fears of the new, dark home. In his sleep, from which he is not yet fully roused, the crash from the hall is the third, or perhaps fourth unusual sound his ears have registered, his mind has considered, though in the visage of delusion and in-between spaces, when the mind is neither active enough for though, not rested enough for dreams. The sound is clear and distinct, though, two picture frames crashing to the floor, their glass cracked, and the dull thud of pottery breaking, its water and flowers spilled over the frames and floor, a solid, singular crack followed by the thought of where a lantern might be.

John grabs his pistol and shakes his head, his eyes not adjusted to the darkness—the first dream is of a door being shoved, of a chair sliding roughly across the floor, followed by yelling or screaming muffled by a gloved hand. John stumbles in the hall as he reaches for the lantern, his gun-hand tracing the wall for balance and direction, his left hand feeling along the floorboard for the extra lantern he has set for himself—just before the crash that woke him, the shattering of a lantern in another room, an expensive sound.

The scene is familiar, perhaps too much so, as if fragments pulled together in one place, a puzzle come to collection, really, memory to contradict what his body now feels in the summer night, the smell of a storm on his nose, what is real as opposed to the taste of winter in his mouth, sweet like blood, the hard, frozen land he remembers beneath his feet, cold air against his skin like fear, of the prey just before the hunter strikes, of being watched, again, still in shock from sleep and struggling to light the lantern.

Bodies move down the hallway, to the staircase, and downward. The lantern catches, tracing the empty hallway with a yellowish light, smoky and prone to shadows. John rushes to the staircase, as if along a ledge of stone in the woods, the confederate uniform still ragged against his back and chest, the woods, struggles, the whiteness of snow on the ground, blown like powder or dust in the cold winds, in the midnight, the hallway rug against his feet like weeds, slow and merciless as he moves towards the stairs, begins to climb down, aiming his gun into the shafts of yellow light, finger ready to flinch at the first sight of human action, though his mind sends a signal for caution, to avoid shooting the girl, though such a signal seems lost in the excitement as he descends the stairs, rushes down the hall. Perhaps the urge is diluted before it reaches his wrists.

Tufts of grass along the pathway where rugs and floorboards ought to be, shadowed by the frames of bare trees rather than furniture, everything gray and shadowy in the midnight, the lantern useless in the tight hallway, on his way through to the kitchen. Heavy winds blow into the house from the back door, now swinging open, a view to overlook the hillsides and past the full, lush trees, a warm breeze against his face and eyes—John raises the pistol again to fire into the forest, to rustle the leaves and braches with six good shots, to find his brother's body, his body. How beneath the blusters of noise and cold, beneath the crunch of his own feet against the soil, beneath even the rise and fall of his own struggling breath, he can make out the faint sound

of Richard's body, large and human, lurking somewhere behind him, somewhere in the darkness and drawing close.

John stands in the doorway, the intruder's knife still wedged in the door's lock, in an air that so much resembles the skies over battlefields, gingerly through the trees, when the ambush appears, the ghost of his assailant leaping from behind a ridge, charging towards him in what is now complete darkness, the hurried sound of his boots over the land, the snap of sticks and branches in his wake, panting breaths as Richard once gave when chasing his younger brother through the streets of town, thinking John is too weak to defend himself, too weak to withstand the force of the attack, his brother like a wildcat onto prey, hands extended like claws, body poised, when he slams John to the ground and the flurry of punches begins, more shots to the body and neck, thighs and shoulders than to the head.

Back through the house, John traces his steps, the upstairs already lit, Katy running through the house at the first sign of commotion, screaming when she finds the girl's room emptied, the broken glass and room in disarray. Katy stands already dressed, shoes and coat, her hands occupied with a lit candle in one hand, a silver candlestick in the other.

"It was Richard," he says to her, referring either to the kidnapping he'd just witnessed, or the memory of that frosty patch of land, the darkness, the familiarity of the hands and feet against his body, the familiarity of the breaths, the grunting, and the intent.

Katy follows John down to the kitchen door, stares into the woods.

"I know the way to the cabin," she says.

"Show me," he says. "Be my guide."

Katy pushes straight into the woods, taking John by the hand, which John is as thankful for, even as the excitement begins to collect in his throat, as he is for the storm clouds gathering overhead, responsible both for the cool breezes at night as for the stifling heat of day, dancing in the sky, the onset of cloud-cover that envelops the darkness, stumbling north through branches and brambles. In the frenzy of their pursuit, Katy's voice is warm and familiar, her hand tight and determined, her feet steadily aimed and relentless, passionate and perhaps forgiving, with the moonlight never once surrounding them beneath the canopy of cloud and trees.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Before you leave, dear women of the jury, she thinks, *how my mother would have stood as one amongst you, could have, if you would have had her, a colored woman but educated, one of your own, though you would not have kissed her cheek while alive! A chorus unto her own, my mother, Momma, with sturdy wrists for work and discipline, I am accustomed to a parent's hand against my body when I have done something out of line! Do not let my light skin fool you, by her will have I found Lysistrata, by her encouragement, the encouragement of skin and color, both when she was with me, her words in my ears, or the long nights on my northbound journeys, when her dreams nestled in my mind, took refuge from their wanderings in my head, showed me their support then vanished into the morning air.*

With her voice and song, she could have been among your chorus, a credit to your town and sex and race, the strength she bore in her heart to flee, the wretchedness in which she was held, returned, the dignity with which she died her body unbroken by its labors, by the punitive hands against her. So do not judge me poorly that my mother could not stand here and give witness, do not judge her to be lacking or any less a women than you, beyond the crowd, watching and awaiting its results, but keep in your hearts the image of my Momma, the craftiness in which she siphoned books for me to read, the cleverness to steal away papers of great value, or the love to set me free, to Lysistrata, and find the planter who sewed me long ago, now soon to collect his rightful harvest.

In the darkness of that bedroom, I was never sure if I was dreaming or somewhere half between being awake and asleep. What I was certain of, eyes shut or wide open, was what the woman had said in the kitchen and elsewhere, words about the orphanage, harsh words, certain, and sending me off to one when the time was right. The other troubles weighed nothing on me, between the men and adults, stuck as I was with an altogether different future in mind.

She gave me plenty of clothes, fresh towels and food, even a jacket from the back of her closet, but I knew that some night in the darkness she'd come for me, cloudy eyes and all. Perhaps she'd come even in the middle of a dream, come to take me away, set me on a carriage and the next morning I'd be there, where they send the unwanted children, abandoned in some way or another, sometimes rightfully, other times not. The man used strict words to talk about me, maybe defend me even, but it would be the woman's choice when I got shipped away.

At about this time my mother began also returning to my dreams, a tall, thick figure, strong in the shoulders, forearms, ankles, wearing the simple gray dresses she wore, faded from the unending Alabama sun, the unending hours spent outdoors, working, calluses already thick on her palms and fingertips, still rough and protective even in my dreams. Irony was the word she used, that once freed she moved from the house to the fields. Momma didn't speak when she visited, just sat at my bedside, her hand on my forehead or stroking my shoulders, humming songs I knew, but whose words I'd since forgotten.

When she didn't hum, Momma and I would sit and remember stories from her books, the way old kings would have to beg for the bodies of their sons, after the big fights, or the one-eyed monsters who ate men and tended sheep as big as trains. I'd ask Momma to tell me the ones where the women were visited by the gods like ghosts, telling them to care for their husbands, if they were hurt in the fighting. Instead she'd tell me about homecomings, the way most folks have to fight when they want things to return to normal.

Being a ghost, Momma could visit me whenever she liked, but I knew that flesh and blood would need to come by the door or window. I set traps for the woman, so at least I'd have

a fighting chance when she came for me. At the window I tied a pair of shoelaces to the latch, so that the sound of the shoes against the wall and window would warn me. At the door, I propped a chair between the doorknob and the floor, jammed it in as I'd done at the Thatcher's to keep those kids away when I wanted to be alone.

I waited for Momma that night, wanted her to come quick and let me know that I was planning the right thing, running off. After supper I went straight to that room, stuffed my clothes into a bag, the envelope from Momma still mine, though now empty. I waited for Momma to come, couldn't leave again without asking her first, so when I drifted to sleep, still clothed, still upright on the bed, I was surprised she hadn't come, figured she'd wake me when she arrived.

When the door budged I woke, and the chair I'd used for a doorstop skidded against the floor. I recall feeling surprised, that Momma hadn't ever used the door before, but that maybe she'd wanted to remember what it was like. The hallway was still dark, so I figured it couldn't be the woman, as she didn't go anywhere in the house without a light. Momma pressed against the door again and couldn't budge it. I figured I'd give her a hand, reaching as it was to find the obstruction, and helped moved the chair myself, as a ghost hasn't a set of usable hands for that sort of thing.

Right away I knew it wasn't her, Momma or the woman, by the size of the body in the darkness, by the way he pushed through the door. The hands stuffed a rag into my mouth, tasted like sweat as I tried to scream for Momma to come, but a ghost isn't much for protection, and anyway these hands weren't the kind to scare easily. They tried to pick me up, but I kicked, knocked against the table and crashed a lamp, from the sound of it, but the hands didn't stop.

The hands hoisted me onto a set of large shoulders and carried me down the hall. I was moving backwards, down the stairs, feet against the man's belly and my head against his back. Just like I imagined Helen of Troy, as Momma would have told the story, carried off by any number of men, the kind of prize men fought wars over. When we hit the stairs, I heard the noises of someone else in the hallway, someone chasing after us, or fixing to, but the hands carried me fast out of the house, fast into the woods, where they planned to see that I never saw that room again. Though I knew Momma would find me, wherever.

The branches and prickers burned the back of my legs as we ran through the woods. I had only my summer dress on, now up over my waist, which left my legs open, the man moving fast through the trees, avoiding only the trees or thickest branches, whatever would stop him cold. He ran through everything else and I started to hum, not in my head but out loud. The words were gone by I remembered her melody, and so I hummed, his shoulder pressing my stomach, but I hummed anyway.

"Shut up," the voice said.

But I didn't shut up, kept on humming the song Momma had given me, as we rushed through a final stack of bushes, into a clearing. I could feel warm blood on my skin as we climbed over something else, like a house, but scattered everywhere, like someone had emptied the house out into the lawn. But I kept humming the song, even as we entered the house and he tossed me onto a thin mattress of rugs and straw.

For a moment I sat, breathless as if I'd just run through the woods, an ache in my stomach from the shoulder. I shook in the darkness, not from fear, but from anger, all of the sudden, which scared me more than the circumstances themselves. I wanted to hear the words again, not just the music, but in that room was only the sound of a man rummaging the floor.

While the hands found rope, I closed my eyes and started to sing, not the wordless tune from the bedside, but the only words I knew for certain.

Daniel saw the stone
Rollin', rollin'
Daniel saw the stone
Cut out the mountain without hands
Never saw such a man before
Cut out the mountain without hands

When he strung the necklace on my neck, something warm and metallic, heavy, sweaty, pressure against my body, terrible awful pressure, painful pressure, I continued my song, again, louder.

Spite call them wicked men
Cut out the mountain without hands
Daniel pray'd in the lions' den
Cut out the mountain without hands
Drive the devil far away
Cut out the mountain without hands

When he came, disappeared, I didn't move for a long while, just stared into the darkness, the echo of my voice in the air, stared into the bare ceiling, and waited. I waited with the feeling that Momma would come soon enough, set beside me as she'd done. The cabin warmed, then, smelled of a fireplace, of smoke, began to light, though no sun as yet rose. I waited for Momma, struggled to loosen the ropes, waited. *Rose-fingered*, as Momma would no doubt have said.

Daniel saw the stone
Rollin', rollin'
Daniel saw the stone
Cut out the mountain without hands
Never saw such a man before
Cut out the mountain without hands
Spite call them wicked men
Cut out the mountain without hands
Daniel pray'd in the lions' den
Cut out the mountain without hands
Drive the devil far away
Cut out the mountain without hands

But nothing happened, and after a while I tried to move again, but instead eased against the cushion and sang, figuring he was gone now, far enough away, sang the words like smoke from a funeral offering, funeral games.

So this is what it comes to, he thinks, *a man of power and wealth, setting up his revenge, the best oil-and-coal snuffer this side of the Mississippi, man of property and status, man with friends in all areas of business and commerce and trade, used to eating roast meats and crisp vegetables, drink aged whiskeys from heavy glasses, not straight from the bottle, but refined, that a man of fine clothing and valuables must now tramp through the woods, carry his own property*

as if a thief in the night, come to deliver salvation or cast those away from it who are not on guard, must kidnap what is rightfully his own, standing trial for it and being convicted, carry off his own kin as if a criminal from another clan, a horse-rustler or some other brigand. Have I not owned up to this girl, done right by her, doing the things a father does, rescuing his child to raise her in the way he sees fit?

How many children of her kind, so many fathered the same way or similar ways, during the lonely spells of a war or wilderness, how many grow with their mothers and never even know their father's names, let alone meet them in the flesh? How many after meeting them meet with some other ending than this, fathers who abandon their children and don't think twice about the indiscretions of their service, the quick, dry humps that carried them through the long campaigns? Still, they looked down on me, still do, no doubt, a liar they'll call me or a thief or a criminal, scoundrel, and for what, that some dream they held onto for years wasn't everything they'd hoped? Unfit to care for the child, the look in John's eyes, right in line with the others, that men like me cannot think to fib or lie, not even for their own benefit, cannot do what I have done, no matter the necessity that forced my hand, the times as they were, the craziness, the opportunity once and for all to rescue the Bowers name and deliver us from poverty and want, provide for the name and people dwelling under it, necessity to do such things in the darkness that other men, either by weakness of will or stomach cannot bring themselves to do, the dirtiest work, but necessary, like grease to the gears, unpopular now, years later, but necessary at the time and rewarding, the rewards awaiting men who can make tough decisions and do the dirtiest work and prosper at it, a seed to thrive on the rocks and barren soil, but still to thrive nonetheless.

This is what it comes to, he thinks*, thorns and pricker-bushes in my arms, a sprint through mud and brush and darkness, an escape but from whom? A brother who already stands in my place, who did not come looking for me, though I'd done the very same for him, after the return and he found the whole town against him, other than those who fought on his side, who gave the food from his table and a room in his house, cared for him by all means, even gave the money for the printing press, though advised against it, for never but a look that somehow he was owed all this, by virtue of what I don't know, but entitlement to be sure, never thanks or gratitude but contempt from him, favors he never returned to me, did not repay because he did not feel that he was indebted, but rather that by my generosity he was somehow being repaid himself. Now rather than my own house and furniture, I am left with an old slave-jail and a rotting mattress, soggy from the hills and their mist, from the grass and its wetness, rather than company of wife and family I am left with a half-blooded girl in the middle of the night, no trace of those who might come for me, but the sounds of a man fumbling in the hallway, of a woman who couldn't rouse herself to save what was happening right under her nose, when she seemed perfectly fit to rouse herself to action to bring about my downfall in their eyes, to prove me wrong or unworthy in front of them, to prove somehow that she'd gotten the last laugh.*

But I'll be the one with the family, when all is said and the deed is done, when the people have gathered and seen it all, their mouths dropped open and their minds in disbelief, not that a man such as they knew me could have done such a thing, could have orchestrated it as such, but that any man could have, that the human heart seemed altogether comfortable in doing it, not merely allowing it to happen, but encouraging it as if it were a part of its makeup and design, part of its soul, and not some aberration or deficiency or imperfect version of man as he ought to do. When they see us, standing against them, then they'll know who is the better brother, which son was loved more by his mother and father, which was the success and which the failure,

which built and which merely used, lived off of the land and money and goods I provided. They will stand and watch and I will be left to start a family, with everything I need, he pats the bundle tossed over his shoulder, *to start my revenge not only against the town, but on my own family as well, and not only on the men of this house but the women as well, higher and holier than we, thinking that by virtue of their birthing babies and rearing children and the like they somehow have power over us, weak as they called us, helpless as she called us, good for nothing in the world but planting seeds and pissing whiskey, revenge on the women especially, of the kind that will bother them the most, revenge of the family kind, of closeness that cannot be separated, not by time or distance or death, but the closeness a man feels when he's surrounded by his family, the respect they pay and the admiration they owe, for the protection and support he provides, the hard work and sacrifice duly noted and appreciated, in small favors and in large, accommodations and deference to his needs, the worst kind of vengeance for John and Katy, who already feel as if they've beaten me.*

It won't be long before their mouths are dropped as well, living well being the best revenge, and living well with a new family being even better a payback against them, their eyes to lay sight on the deed and to know that it could have been otherwise, could have been their own family but for their own actions, could have been a different ending but now something of necessity, necessity wrought from their own hands, the fate they drew for themselves when they stood against me and forced me into these woods, forced my hand in all matters, to this cabin, little more to live on than the wits I carry in my head, or the provisions I had the foresight to store away, but to them, knowing neither of these things, figuring I'd wander off and disappear, never to bother them again, never to repay what has been rendered. But deep in their minds they must have known that I would not disappear quietly, would not slink away like an animal beaten once, never to test his master again, but that I'd fight, kick, respond against them in some way, not just to win the fight at hand but to settle all scores once and for all. But when it happens, they'll know as little as the rest, such a surprise it will seem to them all, the look on John's face, they'll have no idea of what they're seeing, that as they watch the spectacle I'll be watching them, safely and from a distance, but watching down on them as they stand in awe of my work and dedication, at the strength of my will to once again do the work that needs getting down, but for which no other man has the heart or guts or will to execute, and then a witness to his own revenge, which is the greatest reward for those who plan and execute plans.

Maybe I should have brought Nance here, at least once, all these years, maybe a place like this is what would have broken her, finally, at last tear her away from that damned holy book and open her body long enough to bear a child, one that survived, in any case, a place removed from the house and all the reminders inside, where we could come alone and start as if all over again, where I'd brought all the others through the years, but never that one intended for me, belonging to me, brought her here along side all the others and taken what was my own, planted what was my own, then pulled my family from the dark and raise it to light. Maybe she would have been grateful for being somewhere else, somewhere different, where the people of town had never been and wouldn't dare to come following, afraid as they were of the place or of me, knowing it was mine damned near by squatter's rights, somewhere her friends and their husbands would never have gone for such a thing, such a simple thing as plant a child in her belly, even if she did what she could to make sure my seed never took root, made sure it was always barren soil or rocks or trampled on the path.

Could have tied rags over her eyes, he thinks, *if she resisted, and marched her through the woods, in darkness, so she couldn't find her way back, could have stuffed more rags in her*

mouth so I wouldn't hear her voice asking me what it was for and why I was dragging her away from her precious knitting, marched her through the woods with her hands tied around her back, my fingers tight over her wrists as we made way to the cabin, and inside. But why does it have to be this way for me? Maybe since that would be the time when I'd wipe the look from her face, as if she knew why it was her womb stayed empty, as if by her own hand, rather than God's, knowing that I'd never know the difference outright, but was too smart to know that something wasn't underhanded, that I would have known when or how she did it, guessing as to why, but counting on the fact that as a man I couldn't recognize the signs, would have any reason to suspect. Or I could have done it the same way as the first time, without once looking her in the eye, though no child would come of it, but nonetheless as it was a surprise and she'd had no time to plan, no way to answer when I did it, though in the backwoods there were plenty who offered it freely, that it came and I didn't even have to ask, just knock on the door and they'd offer it up as easily as they'd offer a glass of water to a man dying of thirst. Of course, if I had to go through the trouble, Nance never would have agreed to it after such treatment, which is why I'd have to keep her, walking around the bed like a bull, casually taking off my clothes, touching it as she watched and could only watch and wait for me to climb on top, and afterwards she'd probably refuse to speak for a while, as she'd done the other times, avoided me in the hallway and slept in the guest room, or worse, wandered in the fields at night when she figured no one knew, but I watched her walk from the window on those nights and followed her as long as my eyes could see, for a few weeks, even, or maybe a month, until she came back to our room and slept in the bed. I was always sure to take her again, he thinks, suddenly proud of the fact, *that same night, so that she'd know who was in control, that it was mine for the taking.*

Richard tightens the knots and slides the knife against the fibers, tosses the excess rope to the floor, holds the knife to Penelope's lips.

"Your momma had the same look in her eyes when I showed it to her, same fear, same need."

One hell of a night, he thinks, *though I usually went for the darkest I could find in the bunch, but there was something in the look of this one, despite her light skin, something in the way she kept her head upright, forward, that looked like it needed addressing, before I had any trouble on my hands, like she could imagine a time and a place where our roles were reversed, or worse, that she could look at me and know she was better somehow, didn't have to rely on who wore the chains and who held them, who hammered them shut and who dragged them to her meals, maybe the way she bothered to tie her hair back, sometimes in one giant bun and other times in two, or the way she kept her face clean, despite the quarters and circumstance. There had been others before with similar looks, but always mixed with anger and hatred against me, which I rather enjoyed, as a little fight makes it all the more interesting, but always with a breaking-point, some moment, expressed in either a groan or a sign, or a relaxing of the body, an unclenching that revealed what they prayed would never be betrayed, by their own bodies no less, a point when their anger and hate disappeared, replaced by something approaching desire, for me, which, once they recognized it in themselves, erased every trace of disobedience from their face, body, and posture. Either way her skin was pale and buttery, in color and in the way it felt against my hands, softer than the other women in her group, like skin that was used to taking long baths with oils and soaps, skin used to the comfort of cool Southern breezes through open windows, relaxing on the couch with a book in hand, or perhaps a cold drink, while other skin, darker skin, sweated in the fields, far removed from skin that was lotion-ed and pampered rather than marked with the lash, not just the cord itself, but the tiny shards of glass set on a cat-*

of-nine-tails, the special reward chosen for the skin that ran away and got themselves caught. I knew how it would taste the moment I found her in the basement, a house of abolitionists, holy on the outside and keeping their secrets in the darkest parts of their property, waited until they left for services, all dressed in suits and fancy dresses, then pried into the cellar to see her in the corner, gleaming, almost, figuring I was her next escort, the one to lead her across the river, her Moses, but then seeing the pistol and the chains, the charge I felt in my hand when I first laid a body on her, our first time right there in the abolitionists' basement, as I liked to set the terms up front, so there'd be no mistake as to how I ran my affairs.

But outside the basement, all other times right here on this mattress, these ropes serving their purpose over and over again, to hold her still, freeze her in time and place until I was ready, though back then it didn't take long at all, my body hard and filled with energy, how hard I used to be, how powerful it felt, to be in such positions and know that through the panels and boards the others could see and hear and smell what power I held in my grasp. Not for what it brings me, he thinks, *the pleasures I receive by having it, the women and girls, the wives and daughters who offer themselves here, willingly or otherwise, even when they come willingly, as if it were a game they play with me, flirting, a game against the husbands or their fathers, perhaps even their brothers, lovers, a game for their attentions sometimes, a more brutal game at other times, a struggle for power, for property, a game in which they control who can and who cannot enter them, a game they intend to play with me when they follow me here, day or night, as circumstances allow, a game whose rules they think they control, but games which are turned, altered, different than what they intended. So in the name of it I keep these tools handy, implements as they stand, at hand and ready at hand, waiting to explore, how it is these women, girls, will respond, how they will react to new rules, far more similar to the rules they must follow with their husbands or fathers, rules set by their husbands and fathers, for the sake of husbands and fathers, though they would call what I do within these walls some kind of abomination, though the best church choir is made from the women who sing right here, who in the same breath condemn me in public, but seek out this mattress, these ropes, these rules, in private. What is my reward? It is more than women's bodies, the pleasure I extract from them, oil and coal in long, wet veins pulled from their soil, the words that slip from my mouth, which they tell me I mutter during our encounters but which I cannot recall, so wrapped in the struggle, the struggle for power at hand, the power for which, and by which, the very rules themselves are established, set with rope and a knife, set with my fists and strength over them, a power which gives me itself as reward, simply the show of strength as show of strength, power for its own sake, the wince in a woman's eye and the wink of acknowledgement, that they have come for just such recognitions.*

Isn't this, that what you wanted, Mother, when you brought our father to ruin, a man of a good line, proud and important to the country and his neighbors, though you'd have him snuffed from our minds, though he died, perhaps did the work yourself, wiped him clean from the house and farm as you shooed away any of the rodents who snuck your food without permission, blaming me, all skin and bones, my ribs prickly and showing until I grew large enough to fight back, or run away, permission? Is this how you saw things in your tea leaves and crystals, during your spells and hysteria, during the stroke you clutched until your final minutes of life, my life unfolded in ruin, you said, in pain and horror and embarrassments too horrible for a mother to describe, let alone witness, and yet you saw it then as clearly as you might be watching now, should be watching, seeing the fruits of your labor, the harvest you have reaped, having nurtured such seeds as may have been better lost along the pathway, as you once said, your failure in the

face of that line of women you held yourself among, the life you saw and punished me for living, though the years had not yet arrived, though that man had not yet matured, though the boy had already been punished for the crimes, as if you knew what would be happening, thinking that a punishment given in advance might stop the event, rather than bring it about, the penalty already having been paid, why should a criminal then not enjoy the crime? But the dead are powerless against the whims of the living, and your most precious thing I have stolen away, Richard places the thaler necklace around Penelope's bare neck, *didn't you know, that it would end this way, the survivors making what they will of the past, stealing what we must, setting it to new purposes, then abandoning the rest, forgetting what we must or choose to let slip, to cover. This is what my life has seemed to you, and your permission was what we sought, not love, not respect or the expectation of a safe haven or home, but merely permission, to live, words or otherwise we tried to give to you, to give even though you did not deserve them, respect, to give it when it perhaps hurt us or made our eyes burn with anger, respect and love you wrangled from us, held tight in your fists, hearts, necklace, and refused to give in return. Permission. But you will give it now, give it when you can no longer refuse, give it to me, give it, give-it, give-it, it don't hurt, give-it, give—*

Richard jumps from the mattress at the sound of the building coming down, a loud crash that stirs thick piles of dust and debris into the air, sends a cloud over the room, murky and brown, dark but for a single lantern barely lit in the corner. *They've finally come for me,* he thinks, *but I'm finished here*. In the murk of the room, between the smell of sweat and bodies and old, broken wood, already Richard is a shadow standing over the girl, his frantic attempts to untie her from the bed failed, to try hacking at the bonds with his knife, though the blade is far too dull to do the job efficiently. Another crash echoes from the cabin as it disintegrates, the smell of rain clouds gathering overhead penetrates the room, choked with dust and debris, with no more to hold it upright, Richard having emptied it for his fortifications. He decides that the work of untying the girl is too costly, a man's voice now screaming into the thick cloud, from the outside, John's voice as it sounds, but changing, as it seems to Richard, *changed, coming for me,* he thinks, *but this will not be the end, we will meet and I will exact my final revenge, though this would be more than enough for any other, more than enough to bear, to know that I am a man not to be fooled with, not to be fooled*. Richard dresses quickly, cool drips of liquid running now between his thighs, sticky as he pulls his trousers, ties his boots, scrambles for what he can bring for his journey. He abandons the girl without so much as another word, turns to leave by the rear of the building, where already openings to the outside have appeared in the house, breaks caused by the collapse. Richard takes the lamp as he leaves, and in the gathering dust pours the lantern's fuel onto the ancient wood, tips the flame to the liquid. The gray wood catches, spreads along the floor and up the walls, quickly, as if inviting the flames, rendering itself to suicide, eager to burn its body in a fiery holocaust.

In Lysistrata, common wisdom holds that polite men and women do not discuss the building tucked to the north of their city, though they each know what it was used for and are familiar of its story, either from first-hand knowledge or from the reports of others, like a family secret that lays dormant for years, a thin gray crust to grow over the embers, mindful that any poke or provocation, any word of its existence might return the fire, return the conflagration. Rather than acknowledge the building, its two-story height crouched amidst a tuft of high beech branches, as if ashamed, folks in Lysistrata claim to a sort of ignorance on the matter, a concealment, vague memories of a building tucked "way up to the north" as they say, or "hidden

deep in the woods" or other such embellishment for what they know, and feel for the place. In truth these buildings are scattered all throughout the county, stretch east and west as long as the Ohio River runs, but none so close to Lysistrata that it might be within their borders, part of their town, part of their responsibility.

The history is as well-known as any in the area—Andersen the name of the family that originally built the jail, another name that folks in Lysistrata designate for the kind of wordless forgetting these places and deeds so often require, along with the actual structure itself. The namesake was a man who bought slaves young and cheap, exercised their muscles as one breeds horses, shipped them down the river for three times the price. At first, when the trade was moderate, and controllable, his needs amounted to sets of chains and leg irons, should his cargo attempt to escape. But when his knowledge of the business increased, Anderson built the slave jail to satisfy two needs, the first, and obvious, was that with more captives, there would be more escape attempts and thus a need to securely house his property, and second, as towards his understanding of the trade, Anderson knew that prices could increase as well as decrease, the usual give and take of any commodities market, and so he could store his product when demand was low, and wait until the prices favored him, and quickly ship large amounts south for the largest profits.

By their silence, of course, the men and women look to bury the past behind them, forget it until the need to forget is gone, as if to note—always quickly, always with embarrassment—how they and their family fought for the North and don't actively own slaves, didn't, as if that were enough, that their farms and families were too poor to support such things, that they themselves and their kin did not participate, do not, and thus earn some distance between that structure and themselves, the mark on their land and all attachments to it. But the slave-jail belongs to them despite their wishes, groans from its dull wooden panels lurk in the corners of their minds, ears, so that when the first thunderous crash is heard, or perhaps imagined, the sudden collapse of half the building, they do not have to think in which direction to follow, nor even hear a sound other than conscience at last trampling down, but on instinct rise from their beds, in some corner of their heart rejoicing, perhaps, as they slip into robes and thin jackets, perhaps mourning, gather their children and head northbound into the woods, with no more speed or urgency than a church procession or pilgrimage.

For Katy and John Bowers, however, the sound is like a starting gun. To that point they follow Katy's lead along the pathway, duck branches as they strain to hear the girl's voice, a low song like a trail abandoned through the darkness. Thick clouds cover the evening sky, rendering the woods and earth below dark and impenetrable. John clutches a firearm to his chest as they run. When the couple reaches a clearing, Katy points into the darkness at the slave jail, though right away she sees everything about it has changed, fallen, ruinous. For John the image fits precisely the picture in his mind, down to the shadowed corners of the building, the smell of rotten wood and musty, lingering air. John rushes through the debris set out in the field around the cabin, towards the rafters and beams now leaning against the fallen house, pressing the wreckage further to the ground, hurries over the nails and broken glass set at his feet, already working their way into the thick soles of his boots. In the distance the sound of the girl's voice weakens, disappears. Out from the darkness, lanterns materialize through the woods as the people of Lysistrata casually make their way to the clearing.

John gags at the smell of oil and dust coming from the building, scours the perimeter until he finds an opening, a crack in the rubble at what was once the front door. Inside he watches for the motion of bodies, perhaps already ghosts, perhaps the girl, as they might hurry

here and there, when the snap of a catching flame bursts through the wreckage, and the blaze begins to climb up the arid beams, replaces dust with thick gray smoke. John shields his eyes from the heat, the light, as one who stares into the sun, still watching for shadows to emerge from the house and present themselves, still waiting for Richard to surface and come clean one last time, to repent and ask forgiveness. But from ruins nothing of redemption can emerge. With his pistol in hand, ready to fire each round into Richard as payment for it all, in defense of the girl, John rushes further into the building, knocking debris from the outside as he enters, quickly over the landscape left for him by his brother. He does not hear Katy shouting from beyond the chaos, but pushes forward into the heat and smoke.

Richard is nowhere to be found. Through the flames and confusion, John crawls, finds Penelope struggling on the mattress, her arms already freed, bleeding at the wrists, but her bare ankles still tied to the long, thick beam, perpetually solid, as a spine or backbone standing along the center of the house, as if impervious to the fire or commotion surrounding it. John turns his head and vomits at the sight of the girl, her nakedness, the blood, bruises already purple and black on her skin, her legs kicking against the ropes and her hands and arms hugging around her neck, her violation. He stands in the smoke, awestruck, though in her panic the girl does not yet see him. Around the mattress and the girl, hundreds upon hundreds of slave posters lay scattered, each yellowed slightly and bearing Richard's name, some crumpled, others pristine, the kind of documents which betrayed Richard in front of Judge Northcut's chamber, now spread like flower petals on a honeymoon, a conjugal bed and offering.

The posters curl, blackened at the edges before snapping into flame, with letters that stand bold against the flashes of light, then disintegrate:

> FRESH ARRIVAL!
> 125 NEGROES FOR SALE
> I HAVE just received a large addition to my former lot of NEGROES, consisting of every description of servants; amongst them are three fine seamstresses and other house servants. I have now on hand 125 likely Virginia Negroes, to which I invite the attention of those who wish to purchase. JOHN D. JAMES. Forks Road, Natchez, April 26, 1850

And then:

> FRESH ARRIVAL OF FIFTY NEGROES.
> I HAVE just received a lot of Fifty Negroes, direct from Richmond, Virginia. I have now on hand about One Hundred and twenty Negroes, as likely a lot as I ever saw together, consisting of field hands, house servants, carriage drivers, one first rate weaver, three blacksmiths. I have made arrangements to receive regular shipments during the season and in the lot that is to arrive in January, there will be a No. 1 carpenter. Those wishing to purchase will do well to call before doing so elsewhere, as I am determined to sell under the New Orleans prices and no mistake. JOHN D. JAMES. I will also sell on liberal terms, the House and Lot in which I now reside; I have also several Waggons and Harness and several Horses for sale. Natchez. December 22 &wtf.

And a third:

> NEGROES.
> The undersigned would respectfully state to the public, that he has leased the stand in the Forks of the Road, near Natchez for a term of years, and that he intends to keep a large lot of NEGROES on hand during the year, he will sell as low, or lower than any other trader at this place or in New Orleans. He has a lot of about forty-five now on hand, having this day received a lot of twenty-five direct from Virginia; two or three good Cooks, a Carriage Driver, a good House Boy, a fine Seamstress, a Fiddler, and a likely lot of field men and women. All of whom he will sell at a small profit for cash, or acceptances on approved commission houses in New Orleans, he wishes to close out and go on to Virginia after a large lot for the fall trade. Call and see. Natchez, june 1, 1852-tf. THOS. G. JAMES.

John steps from the shadows into the light of the blaze, holds his pistol with a tight fist, wrist firm, arms straight and unyielding. Mercy killing is what they will call it. Ending a life that has no chance for happiness or worth, or redemption, only misery in its future, only troubles, both for itself and for those around it, unlucky to encounter her. Mercy killing that steadies the hand and hardens the heart, the soul, knowing that what must be done is as unpleasant as it is necessary, duty some would call it, one's duty performed not for self interest but in the interest of the one being saved. The pistol warms in John's hand, though his finger remains motionless. The gathering fire builds in its intensity, grows until it wraps around the girl and her sad face as a garrison, as an outpost in the wilderness, framed by fire and smoke, misery, like a dream recurrent through time, of a daughter, eternally, a face trapped in circumstance, out of place, perhaps having wandered into the war by accident, only to be trapped, her fate as a feather resting in the fingers of a man, heavy-handed. Not one member of the gathering crowd would think ill of the mercy killing, nor ever know its full details, not one moment of condemnation would pass through the streets or homes or minds of Lysistrata, as keenly aware they each would be of the circumstance, the benefits they all might share from the sacrifice.

In a blanket John covers the girl's nakedness, cuts away the ropes from her feet and carries her body in his arms. Around John's boots the surviving posters lose their battle with the righteous flames. Penelope trembles, but curls her body into the warmth of John's chest and shoulders, her knees huddled against her chest. From the bundle the thaler necklace pokes its head to light, silver and glorious in the flames. John sees the token immediately, tries to calm the girl with the strength and comfort of his arms. More of the house falls to pieces, and John looks towards the rear of the house for his brother. He swallows hard as he tucks the pistol into his belt, though, where he might still reach it.

"He kept saying," the girl stammers. "This is where I had your mother, this is the very same place."

"You won't be hurt again," John says. The urge to kill Richard bubbles in his throat like the taste of vomit, an urge whose only release is the firing of weapons and the burying of enemies.

"He's gone," the girl says. "My father is gone."

John kicks through the pile of debris, the planks of wood now afire, the piles of empty cans and other evidence of Richard's whereabouts, his hideaway, kicking planks of wood in a frenzy, searching for his brother to kill, all the while clutching Penelope to his heart, the girl's cold body gradually warming in the coverings, in the protection.

"I'm your father now," John says. "I'll raise you like a father."

All of Lysistrata stands around the slave jail, a ring of men, women, and children silent as they watch the fire consume the aged wood and reach its flame high into the sky, as fingers stretched from a single arm, scorching even the highest branches of beech, surrounding and overhead, until a clearing renders the cabin from its hiding, makes plain its presence to land and cloudy sky and heaven. Penelope feels the drizzle of rain on her cheek as they emerge from the wreckage, perhaps the tears of her rescuer, salty and earnest, perhaps the rain now plummeting from the heavens. The men and women and children do not cheer when John stumbles from the fire, his face blackened with soot, his arms quivering at the bundle her carries, though they each know who has been saved and who demolished, their mouths agape. Instead, the men of Lysistrata hold to the women, the children, as anchors, huddled in tight families in awe of the fire and its power, of the fierce howl echoing from the crackling wood and popping glass, of John Bowers.

When Katy pulls forward from the multitudes, she at once notices the look in John's eyes, the fog lifted, perhaps, or some old malady finally cleared from his blood, a change, his look refreshed as he stands against the burning rubble behind him and the girl huddled low against his chest, a change, she believes, she has seen only in her dreams, some kind of victory, but against what and for what reasons she does not know, a man who nevertheless now looks out to her from John's eyes, a stranger, once, now familiar again. She stumbles into her husband's arms, clutches the pair as the last remnants of the cabin collapse. They do not hear the men and women and children now talking about what they have witnessed, the fire beginning to be smoked out by the rain, do not hear when someone of the crowd approaches them, Reverend Barber, though they do not acknowledge him, those gingerly taken steps, and assures them they will find Richard and make him pay, his, their offering of justice, then invites them to come to church services in the morning.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When the Confederate soldiers first returned from war, they found Lysistrata far less welcoming than they would have imagined, both in the hands of their relatives, if there was a family disagreement, and of childhood friends, from those who had fought for the Union, doors slammed shut to their visits, invitations no longer returned, and changing their seats come Sunday, where the pews of the congregation carried the names of their patrons on thin copper placards. Many soldiers returned to find their wives and children missing, perhaps driven off when the war turned and the outcome seemed clear, driven off by the loyal wives and children of the Union families, unaccustomed to living together as enemies, where once there were only rivals in Lysistrata, only people on this or that side of the wrong side of town, perhaps driven off of their own accord, wives choosing the ignominy of raising their children alone and out west, rough and deadly as the prospects were rather than the humiliation of watching their husbands return home, defeated by war and the conditions of war, thus abandoning their houses and farms to weeds, squatters, the elements. For the Confederates, the veterans, without the excuse of victory to justify their war efforts, without the salve of victory against their wounds, these things seemed insurmountable, the loss of family along with bodily strength, the loss of home along with peaceful dreams, the hopelessness, so much so that the efforts of farm and house, the efforts of rebuilding, rejuvenation fell well beyond what powers and strengths their bodies would muster, nor what their feeble minds could allow. Many homes were confiscated during the war, their contents looted and sold to raise money for the Union, their rooms occupied by families of more deserving citizens, as they felt, since the government officials, the mayor and the rest, did not so much encourage the practice as they did nothing to stop it, nor rectify any complaints made by Confederate wives, nor by the men who caught wind of the practice while away, and wrote home to address the situation, the theft, letters written to men whom they had previously held as friends, but who found those bonds lacking as the war progressed.

Most men turned to alcohol to calm their nerves, to rid their minds both of the images they caused during the war and the effects they returned to find upon surviving one, thick yellowed drinks to assist in the assimilation back to life in Lysistrata, a life without regiment, without the perverted sense of order wars must provide, or the prospects of horror, already integral to their days like breathing and food and using the latrine, so much a part of their thoughts, fears, body that to live without war was a second tour of duty, as it seemed, a prospect with its own terrors, navigations, an enterprise for which they had not been prepared by their generals or hardened against in battle, if such things can ever be taught, but a life utterly new, fresh, brilliant like the sun, blinding and painful to observe. When confronted with these, other men ran away, the kind of running that men tell each other they will do, in search of their children who have disappeared or following a trail of notes left by their wives, westward, mostly, towards which these men gathered their belongings, scavenged the yards and closets they once filled as husbands and fathers, with the promises of reunions and relief on their lips, the promise of a dreamless sleep, like dust in their eyes, painful and provoking of tears, clouding their sight as they too disappeared in the darkness, voiceless, as if without a sound to disrupt their exits, two feet dragging silently from the hills and trees. Some men, moreover, chose an exit of an altogether different sort, that of a length of rope, or of one final use for their issued pistols or swords.

Of the Confederates who remained, of those who returned to Lysistrata and did not choose any of these undesirable pathways, a number of men lived quiet lives, stoic, spoke little

or none of their experience, and went about their routines of farm and house and reconstruction as if it were in some way a comment on their service in the war or the status and situation of their souls. These were precisely the souls Reverend Barber targeted for salvation. In the barn of the Lysistrata Presbyterian church, nearly a quarter mile behind the church itself, the Reverend invited these stragglers back into the fold, as it were, offering shelter for those whose homes had been abandoned or lost, a place to rest for men too tired or complacent to fight for their meager walls, but looking only for shelter, sometimes alone, other times with families in tow. Reverend Barber provided refuge for these men, though the barn was limited in size and in the comforts it could provide, little more than a shield against the wind and a blockade against the animals who would bother them outdoors, with cots and blankets to sleep upon, with two meals a day brought to them in privacy, with morning prayers and evening vigils loaded with sermons of "the appointed ones" and "the elected," that some men were to be saved and others not, and that no matter what we had done or seen or admitted in our hearts, that each man could be sure only of his own salvation and that no man could stand to judge whether or not another would be saved. But Reverend Barber was a showman of the highest order and knew how to keep an audience, and thus delivered his sermons with humor and compassion, as the men who limped home to Lysistrata, or rode prone on flat carts driven by oxen or horses or mules, had little patience for high-handedness, and were quick to turn when they felt the grip of condemnation or judgment across their throats.

In the beginning, John Bowers lived in the house with his wife and sister-in-law, when he returned home for the war, recuperated and thrived, some days by virtue of the bottle, other days without, until the day his brother burst through the door, Richard victorious, filled with contempt for all things Confederate, including his younger brother. There was no second fistfight, but rather a cold silence in the cabin, which lasted only an hour, with which the women did not meddle, followed by an acknowledgement on both sides as to what the new, tacit arrangement must be. John and Katy found themselves without a home, though for the first few weeks Nance continued cooking for the couple, quoting Naomi, *he has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead*, leaving plates of warm food on the back porch, retrieving the plates before dawn, until Richard caught wind and ended the generosity. Meanwhile, John pitched a tent in the woods just behind the Bowers house, the thin walls and tattered roof of the old cabin still visible from their site, gathered food and game as he had learned in the military, the skills necessary for survival, and tried to make the change as bearable for Katy as he could, though a man will suffer far more on his own account than he will allow for his wife or loved ones. During the nights John dreamed of battle, of bodies, washed in the colorless images of night, and woke when Katy shook his shoulders and kissed his forehead, until she herself tried to fall back to sleep, and amid the sounds of crickets and birds and animals scurrying, John could discern the whimperings of his wife, both for the war-sickness and the homelessness. In the mornings, John walked to town, looked for work until the afternoons faded. It was here he learned of his brother's plan to demolish the cabin and build a grand new house, from a neighbor who hired John to work the fields. In the evenings John returned to the campsite, with neither prospects nor the ability to provide, and promised better times ahead to his wife.

After weeks of steady, loyal visitation, the dinner plates left behind the Bowers house suddenly remained uneaten. After two such nights, and battles with the raccoons who claimed the abandoned meals with fierce teeth and drawn claws, Nance stopped cooking extra portions and leaving them for her family, stopped drawing the ire of her husband, both assuming that John and Katy had wandered west as the others had, or disappeared into rumors, with no more body or

soul or need for cornbread than a whisper, as the ones shared between ladies in town over tea. Lysistrata being the size it was, the rumors had already begun that someone had been caring for Confederates in a secret place—hundreds of rebels gathered together, perhaps plotting against the town, though the war was over and its soldiers wrecked, and the total number of Confederates from Lysistrata never reaching over fifty, nevertheless—someone acting no doubt from a Christian sense of duty, but misguided, as they rumored, as the Lord's great lesson was to teach the righteous whom they ought to shun, rightfully, under which circumstances it was necessary and allowable to hate, as in the case of every evil, which hardens the hearts of men and women, which all righteous women and men abhor, a justified hatred, sanctioned and legitimate. Women claimed to hear the crying at night, punishment for their crimes, they said, a low wailing when the world calmed, of wives and children for their fathers and husbands, or the groans of wounded men echoed from the trees, a sound to which every ear was by then all too familiar, begging remedies for their ailments, some from a bottle, others from the merciless blade of hacksaws, their wounds already beyond redemption from infection. Enough women complained about the screams, muffled into shirtsleeves or rags, or sometimes not muffled at all, that the men gathered together in a small band to search for these hidden rebels amongst the trees, their protectors, drive them off the land along with the gentle, traitorous soul who harbored them. The mob even approached Richard Bowers to lead the expedition, on account of his intimate knowledge of the land, but he declined, not in disagreement with their methods or principles, but because he had business matters to attend.

Nothing came of their intentions. Over the course of several months the rumors flared from time to time, weaker some days, stronger the next, and men tromped through the wilderness, found nothing, returned home, and the rumors calmed, women no longer ached their necks at night to hear the rustlings coming from the woods, until even the children in their play no longer mentioned the mysterious soldiers gathering to attack their town, no longer held long branches as muskets to defend their city from attack. In fact, when these same children stumbled across the Reverend's hiding place, chasing squirrels to practice their hunting skills, and peeked inside the door to see half a dozen men prone on thin cots, they rushed home straightaway to sound the alarm, to muster forces, to begin their defenses, only to find that their mothers and fathers either did not understand what the children were reporting to them, or no longer cared about the report, more concerned with the ruckus they made in their haste, the mud they trampled into the house. Thus time passed. One by one the Confederates returned to Lysistrata, casually, blending themselves into the city as if they had merely been away on business, the unfortunate business of war or otherwise, as if their presence in the city was as natural as that of the building themselves, something steady and persistent and unmoving, but also unnoticed, taken for granted. Reverend Barber encouraged his refugees, when ready, to make their first appearance among the congregation on Sundays, in the midst of good Christians, filled in their hearts with forgiveness, as he said, and often quoted the line about sinners and casting the first stone. He even developed a ceremony for each returned penitent, much like a baptism, where the soldiers stood before the congregation dressed only in a long white robe, asked forgiveness from the city, then from God, and only then stepped down into the baptismal pool, completely submerged, then re-emerged up the steps and into the sight of the celebrants, who held their breath as if it were their own heads suspended beneath the waters.

One such Sunday Reverend Barber held John Bowers by the shoulder and led him down the center aisle of the Lysistrata Presbyterian church, no words between them, a man every person in the congregation knew, whose story they all knew from Nance and Katy, whose

mother and grandmother they knew through rumors, whose great-grandmother they knew as legend, whose house they had seen, perhaps even thrown rocks at as children, whose brother they now lionized as a hero of the Union, and at the same time, perhaps even pitied, as only fifty or so men from Lysistrata had joined that side, and it was seen as a piece of bad luck for a family to have drawn such a lot. Katy Bowers stood at the head of the aisle, as if a groom awaiting the delivery of his bride, hair neatly trimmed and done, dress newly purchased from the store, even hints of makeup on her eyelids, lips, and cheeks, subtle, as the other women in Lysistrata would have disapproved of such presentations, no matter what celebrations were to be had. At first, Richard did not recognize his brother from the distance between the pews and the altar, did not recognize the haggard look or thin-as-rails body as John passed on his way to the baptismal tub, the listless expression on his mouth and eyes, as heads turned quickly to gauge Richard's response, though once he recognized his brother at the center of the church, Richard refused to reveal anything of the humiliation he felt burning under his skin. Reverend Barber smiled proudly, as a father introducing a successful son, and turned John to face the congregation. He read several passages from the Bible, now open in his hands.

"Do you seek forgiveness from these, your brothers and sisters?" he asked.

"I ask forgiveness," John replied.

"Do you seek forgiveness from Jesus Christ?" Reverend Barber asked.

"I ask forgiveness," John replied.

The baptismal pool was no more than a bathtub, whitewashed once a year by the Reverend himself, a tub set into the ground, with six-foot walls on all sides, and a pair of steep stairs that led one down into the water, back up again, on the other side. The white robe clung to John's body as he descended into the waters, a tepid combination of water straight from the pump and several pots added to it, which the Reverend had boiled before the ceremony. John waded through the tub up to his shoulders, when the robe loosened around his body, began to separate until he felt the waters lap against his naked flesh, reached their way into places untouched by the light of the sun, soon covered over his head and eyes with silence, with the blur of white walls beneath the water's surface. He was surprised at what he felt, relief, not at the burden of sins eased from his shoulders or the approval of the congregation, not thanksgiving for the Reverend's care nor for the good graces of the Lord who had chosen to save him, but relief that life for him and Katy might return to something of what it was, that when he emerged from these waters they'd allow him to rent a room, perhaps above one of the stores in the city, that they'd allow him to work, to feed his wife, find something for his hands to do to pass the daylight hours, something for his mind, if he were lucky, to grapple and solve, something of interest, or at the very least, a job with animals and livestock, as he had raised such creatures on the Bowers property, was used to their routines, though such work was already disappearing from Lysistrata, replaced by offices and coal companies, nevertheless confident in the set of skills he owned and which no man could banish from him.

When John emerged from the waters, the congregation as a whole turned to Reverend Barber for what to do next. In other such ceremonies, the men and women lightly clapped their approval, their forgiveness, sometimes led by the families of those who had been forgiven, other times led by those among them who were relieved to be able to welcome old friends back into their good graces. Some ceremonies broke into hymns, somber songs of celebration to welcome the soldiers back into the fold, while giving their throats some release to the strain and tension of holding out against their fellow citizens. But with John Bowers, they did not know what to do, how to respond, and when they turned to Richard, they only watched the embarrassment creep

into his face, waited for him to act, permission from their hero on how to behave, how to treat his newly-forgiven brother. Before Richard could rise and speak, as the look on his face intended, Reverend Barber waved John to a seat on the altar, walked to the pulpit and faced the congregation.

"We have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory," Reverend Barber said. "Every time we sin, we rebel against Him, we hide from Him. When we rebel against God's commandments, we abuse God's image and likeness in others and ourselves. When we rebel we accept lies as truth, exploit our neighbors, and threaten all good things entrusted to us by Him. When we rebel, we deserve God's condemnation. Yet, does not our God act with justice and mercy to redeem us? Has not God made us heirs with the sufferings of Christ? Like a mother who does not forsake her child, like a father who would not hand his son a scorpion if he asks for a dove, God does not abandon the rebellious. His Spirit justifies all of us by grace, through faith, and sets us free, binds us together with all believers in the body of Christ."

Richard Bowers stood in the middle of the congregation and applauded, his tall, thick body towering over the others as they sat, higher, as it seemed, than even the Reverend or John Bowers, who both had the advantage of the altar's stage, clapping his hands together with grand motion, showy motion, to draw attention to the applause he gave. At once the other church-goers applauded as well, though they asked among themselves if he were agreeing with the forgiveness of his brother or with the Reverend's words, and if the sermon, which aspect, that a sinner deserves God's punishment, or that John Bowers might be saved through grace. In any case the people clapped and stood, smiles creeping along their lips and faces, gradual smiles which thawed from chiseled, stern looks, disapproval melted into tolerance, though acceptance remained out of reach, not only for John but for all Confederates, no matter how repented. With a loud voice Richard called out to his brother, began to push his way through the pews, words of forgiveness, mercy, and pity out into the aisle, forward to the altar with open arms, a theatrical look on his face, proud, noticed, recognized, admired as he drew his brother into his arms, hugged the sodden man standing somewhat surprised, somewhat alarmed, and declared that the Bowers family ought to live under a single roof, as they had always done, to the approval of all in the congregation and beyond, who would hear the news shortly after, delivering a sermon of his own, on the prodigal son, and the feast Richard would throw, the ring and the robe and fatted calf and all the rest, to welcome this lost sheep back into the family fold. When he saw how the attention had shifted to him, Richard then and there took the opportunity to announce his grand plans for a new house, large and expensive, most of all expensive, on the property where the family currently lived, which brought another round of applause, a family to be blessed as they were, with a reunion and such a grand home.

"Amen I say to you, my brothers and sisters," Reverend Barber said. "In a true Christian's heart, there is no place for war."

Before dawn John pushes against the door of the Presbyterian church, a familiar door, plain, painted white, but otherwise undecorated but for the beams of the woods, formed to look like an empty cross standing over two blank tablets where the commandments ought to have been. *Years have passed*, he thinks. The room is dark, vacuous, with only a line of candles burning up near the altar and podium, votives for some special cause or benefit, while behind the slow flicker of their wicks the baptismal bath ripples from a leak in the pipes, the drip echoing up against the empty ceiling, reverberating against the empty walls, against the empty floor where John Bowers kneels in the very first pew and bows his head. The scene rings fresh in his mind, the itch of the white cotton robe against his otherwise bare skin, the smell of the people as they

waited to see which of their lost sheep had returned, the anxiousness in his own stomach, perhaps for seeing Richard again after being exiled from the house, perhaps at the ordeal of forgiveness and what that might entail. As John bows his head, he begins to pray, not daring the upward look, not even folding his hands, flat and sweaty as they press against the wooden railing, but a simple prayer, unlearned, free-form, a prayer not of forgiveness or grace or mercy, not for strength or power, neither faith nor hope nor charity, but vengeance, swift and mighty, an Old Testament's vengeance, sweet against his lips.

John remembers the prickle of cold baptismal waters, the strength in his brother's arms, the look of relief on Katy's face as he crouches low against a tuft of Kentucky's thickest underbrush, and knows that with a good head start, Richard is almost untraceable in the wilderness, a talent he held since childhood, when he could hide for days in the woods and bushes, silent as if no longer breathing, frustrate John's every attempt to hunt him down for their games or draw him out with a trap, only to have Richard suddenly spring from nowhere, some hidden and perfectly logical place, and get the better of his younger brother yet again. After two days in the woods, plains, hills surrounding Lysistrata, John has almost forgotten the scene at the cabin, the burning of the ruins, the grip of Penelope against his chest and shoulders, and now scours the earth, every cave and hiding place, looking for his brother to exact revenge, a father's revenge, eager to leverage his pistol into justice, to right the wrongs committed against the young girl under his care, perhaps now as a daughter. For two days he tempers the hatred he feels against his brother, a hatred fueled by the gentle brush of Penelope's hair as he carried her, the tremble of her voice amidst the fire and wreckage, the natural disgust at such acts and the men who commit them, not from passion or necessity, but calculated, precise, planned, and for that reason alone, unjust, tempers this feeling of disgust with the images from the church, of the baptism, the Richard who opened his arms and retrieved his brother from the trash, for whatever reasons or motivations, and in any case the conflict between the two allow John to remain awake for nearly three days on his search for justice.

The first clue takes nearly a full day to find, the embers of a campfire, a small ring of blackened wood that smells of urine, Richard's probable way of extinguishing such fires, but little else, not footprints on a trail, nor hacked branches, nothing so much disturbed or broken or upset in the world, simply Richard like wind, rustles the trees, breathes down John's neck, slips away from sight just as dawn rises, and slides back into obscurity once dusk falls, having followed the campfire westward, making a straight line from the cabin to the campfire, heading westward again as if Richard were the kind of man who could be so easily followed. Here and there along the way he finds the bodies of small game, perhaps torn apart by predators, birds of prey or nasty raccoons or skunks, perhaps torn to pieces by a more rational hand, though when he finds these bodies there is never enough meat on the bones to nourish himself—no matter who is the hunter, they rip all that is edible from the body. John captures a rabbit on the first day of the hunt, cooks it over a flame, but eats in darkness, as the weather in Lysistrata, or wherever in Kentucky he now is, is warm enough not to need a fire, and the prospect of Richard's watching him from a distance is never fully absent from John's immediate thoughts. But slowly the images of Penelope and Katy from the night and fire strengthen, particularly at night, without the distractions from his eyes, his nose accustomed to the night air, his ears readied for the crickets and animals he will hear, his body as if a trigger, ready to punch, should Richard attack from the unknown, appear as if out of mist, materialize and attack, images of Penelope and Katy, the women of his life, now, the women for whom he now hunts, though the hunt carries a large amount of John's desire along with the others.

On the morning of the third day, John turns east and heads back towards Lysistrata. Along the way he shouts for Richard to appear, to come out and face him in the light of day, far from the eyes of Lysistrata and not related to any of the past, anything of their history but restitution for the night and its events, for the girl, his own daughter, for the burning of the house and the cowardly way he runs, shouts that ring against the stones and trees, into the caves where Richard has slept, echo against the ground and the heavens, but do not find an answer. John approaches Lysistrata, avoids the city proper and sneaks through the fields of goldenrod on his way to the house, where he has left Katy to care for Penelope, aware as they all were, and are, of his intentions when he loaded the pistol again and disappeared into the wilderness. When he sees the house nestled in the hills, John imagines Penelope inside, grown, perhaps, some time into the future, how John will have to knock on her bedroom door to wake her, already late in the morning, Katy having tried but unable to rouse the girl, woman, from her rest, how the three will eat their breakfast and discuss the day, perhaps the work that awaits John and Penelope at the printing press, when she will read books while John churns away at the machine, asking her to read aloud, stories from books she knew since childhood but which sounded foreign and exotic to his ears, poets and warriors, travelers and nymphs, the rule of justice like a thundering god, watching over the stories and the girl now reciting them, the way she will take interest in his work and assist with the typesetting, eventually surpass him in her abilities to manage the machine, or perhaps she will grow adept with new machines that make the process easier, faster, new inventions he will have neither the patience nor the energy to pursue, all the while surrounded by books, in the office, at their home, with Katy at nights reading in the kitchen or during the afternoons on the porch, each buried in a separate book, but afterwards recounting what happened in perfect, undying detail. He plucks at the flowers with his hands, but does not disturb a stem.

"Did you really keep to it?" Nance asked.

"Every word," Katy said.

"We were young and foolish," Nance said. "More foolish than young."

"Don't say such things," Katy replied. "It was a good strategy."

"Richard wants children," Nance said. "But I think my body is still clinging to the oath."

Nance began to cry, which was a strange reaction, in Katy's eyes. For nearly a year or more following the war Richard had already brought home the kinds of money that other families in town tried to dream of, but could not, huge sums, of which he gave each person in the house a generous allowance, with the whole family settled under one roof, enough that Katy and John could have bought whatever they desired, enough that Nance wore fresh clothes to services on Sunday, with new hats and sometimes new shoes. The house was still one of the largest in Lysistrata, at the time, though already a few years old, but with Richard's new wealth, Nance could fill it with beautiful furniture and wallpaper, with knickknacks and cabinets, their kitchen with food and the proper tools to cook it. Katy watched as her sister-in-law cried, her words still lingering on the air, but decided that something of Nance's behavior had changed. Some weeks she'd bounce around the house, singing and laughing, as if delighted with herself, some secret accomplishment, only to be followed weeks later, sometimes a full month, with an outburst of tears, a pale sickness that blanched her skin and rendered her to the bed, for rest, which the doctors always prescribed, bed rest and fluids and no visitors, hearty meals after a few days, to bring back her color, though Nance would each time ask that Katy be allowed to sit at her side, and each time the doctor would refuse. Katy figured it was one of those episodes again, relieved

that if the doctor did come again, his remedy and orders would again keep her from entering the room, whose sadness she did not yet understand.

Katy thinks herself a fool as she combs through Penelope's hair, the injured girl prone and sleeping in the bed, Katy hunched over her, one arm to support her body against the mattress, the other stroking the child's head and shoulders in warm, motherly strokes. She does not attend services as the Reverend had offered, instead choosing to sit by the girl's side and await her recovery. A fool that she did not know what Nance had suffered, though the signs were there, telling herself it was forgivable, that she was too young, too inexperienced to know what was happening, what had happened, that sucked the blood from Nance's body. The doctor again prescribes that Katy leave Penelope alone, as if a single remedy can cure all inflictions, but Katy refuses the order as soon as the doctor disappears from her front door, brings food and drink to the bedside, sits in vigil over the girl, allows her eyes to slip out the window when Penelope is asleep, wondering where John might be in the thick forest, wondering if Richard has already gotten the better of him. She is not ashamed to think such ways about her husband—the history of the brothers is the story of the ways in which Richard overpowered John—and thus there can be no shame in expecting an outcome you believe to be part of a greater trend, an unchangeable destiny, actions set in stone before time, like grace, with only the short span of a lifetime to live by its decree. She wishes that the outcome might be different this time.

For two days Katy sits and strokes the girl's hair, shoulders, pouring water on her lips and encouraging the girl to drink, whatever amounts she can stomach, some time on the second day tearing morsels of bland foods and tucking them into Penelope's mouth, sometimes with her fingers, sometimes with a spoon, as feeding an infant mashed vegetables or weak porridge stirred with warm milk, meals she recalls serving to Suppina, from a time that feels as if it already belongs to a former life. Each hour she feels her arms more and more as Nance's arms, her fingers as Nance's fingers had once stroked her own hair, after the miscarriage, when Nance stood vigil over her body and would not be moved, at which point Katy realized what it was that afflicted Nance all those times, those rests in the bed and the women who came by the house offering to prepare the house's food and wash the laundry, as if they knew without being told why she remained locked away, as if giving her comfort in the ways they were allowed, intruding upon one's private life never directly allowed, but such tacit, implied condolences nevertheless offered. When she is not thinking of John and his hunt, of the satisfaction of knowing that she helped to bring Richard's past to light, Katy begins to hum songs that she recognizes as Nance's songs, hymnals and the rest, songs she hummed in pleasure as well as pain, when washing the dishes or after fighting or arguing with her husband, songs that rose through the house and filled it either with peacefulness or an eerie, calm disgust, and knew from the sounds now coming from her throat, she has become as close to Nance as she can ever come.

Hush little darlin', don't say a word
I'm a-gonna buy you a mockin' bird
And if that mockin' bird don't sing
I'm a-gonna buy you a diamond ring
And if that diamond ring turns brass
I'm a-gonna buy you a lookin' glass

Katy looks again into the child asleep in her arms, into the future, watches the girl's features again for any sign of John, as if it will be a habit she forms and cannot shake, for the remainder of her days, to eye the girl for these features, though soon the intent will not be the

same, will look at some point simply out of the habit of looking, or when she notices such similarities between the father and daughter that they must be connected, knowing full well it may be the features of some distant relative, distant to them both, but relative to them as well, that she will notice. She will think that this, despite every effort to the contrary, is a Bowers woman, heiress to the stories of Suppina and all the rest, to their peculiarities but also to their prides, that as the owner of the thaler necklace—a trinket neither John nor Katy would dare remove from her neck, suffering as she had when it was given to her—that as its heir she will be entitled to know everything about the previous bearers, a responsibility Katy will take upon herself to fulfill. First of the lessons will be how to know the ropes of Lysistrata, as every good Bowers woman must navigate, to know which families will be the gossips and which the ones gossiped about, which are spendthrifts and which extravagant, which families will always have status and stature, despite their poverty, and which families, despite their wealth, will never achieve respect or decency so long as they will make their homes in Lysistrata. Next will be the skills of the home, though already she knows that John will attempt to rescue her from even these tasks, the washing and cleaning and cooking that Bowers women know and hate and nevertheless perform, the tidying of the rooms and the cleaning of windows, the gardening out front of the house, which flowers return annually and which require planting each spring, the proper way to order new clothes from the catalogs and how long to wait before they arrive in their tied brown boxes. Penelope does not stir in her sleep, but rests gently, pacified, as Katy imagines her enduring lessons, those of managing, not the trials and tribulations of the city in which they live, its peculiar quirks and strangeness, she will say, no different than what you'd find in any city of similar size and circumstance, nor the managing of the household, which once the proper techniques were acquired, was almost thoughtless work, as if giving the mind a chance for freedom, but management in terms of precisely this freedom, that with what perks and pleasures her life as a Bowers woman might include, in the end with that thaler necklace she will become part of a family and inextricably intertwined in its history, that no matter what may happen to her, no matter how hard she will wish to leave the family, or worse, wish never to have boarded the train from Alabama and set foot in Lysistrata, no matter how she will cry or suffer, that those tears and sufferings are something to be managed, as they were managed by the Bowers women who passed before her.

It is Tuesday when John returns. Katy and Penelope sit upright in the bedroom, each bent over to see the man approach through the window, though from the look of disappointment on his face, they know he has not caught Richard, that justice in its fullest measure has not yet been served. In her heart, Katy is glad he has returned home in one piece, that in some way an outcome might differ from the history out of which it arises. When he enters the front door, Katy stands at the bottom of the stairs, takes her husband into her arms as he tries to put in plain words what happened in the woods. She waits for his explanation, but is not at all interested in the report. But rather than words, however, John heaves, as if crying, but without tears or sound, like history itself bubbling up and with no escape other than through convulsing his body a few final times, a last romp in John's skin and blood before finally leaping from his throat, returning only occasionally as harmless thoughts, harmless in their lack of grip, in the way he can think them, now, and not suffer reliving them, a history that is truly past and no longer a weight or burden on the present. Katy presses her husband to her chest until the heaving calms, and kisses John on the forehead.

"What did you see," she asks.

"I couldn't find him," John says. "A few clues, but no Richard."

"Not about Richard," Katy says.

"During the war?" John pauses.

Katy's voice is new somehow, as is her posture, body, as is the look in her eyes, calm, knowing, settled, the sound or quality in her throat having changed.

"A girl," he begins. "At Barbourville. My job was to torch the buildings as we fled. No more than Penelope's age, with a flower still in her lapel, her face. It's the one image that wouldn't leave. I torched the building with the girl inside. She was there by mistake, must have been, maybe bringing food to her father or brothers, maybe delivering a message. I locked the door and touched the flame to the building. Her face was framed by a square cut into the wood, with three bars dividing her face. She had green eyes."

Katy cries at the story, at the thought of the girl's death, partly because John has carried such an image in his mind all these years, without relief, though aware that this image, like a gateway, is simply the first step, an opening to a long road. The two embrace in the doorway, husband and wife, Katy's arms wrapped tightly around his neck and shoulders, his hands grasping the soft material on her dress where the shoulder blades touch the back. Without a word Katy loosens her grip and disappears up the stairs. Hunched over in the closet, Katy recalls the first bath she gave to John when he had returned from the war…

John hears rummaging from above, closes the door behind him, wipes tears from his face. When she returns, Katy hands the silver shaving kit to her husband.

"I'm going to bed," she says, waiting for John to recognize what it is.

"How, where—did you get this?"

"Langdon's store."

"How did they get it?" he asks.

"Do I need to say?" Katy says, disappears upstairs into their bedroom.

In her room, Penelope holds quiet, fondles the thaler necklace around her neck, perhaps feels forward into the future, what life in this family will represent, the flutter she now feels in her belly, standing along side Katy at the stove or counter learning how to bake breads and cookies and the like, as she would have stood along side her own mother, in a different world, and learned from her these duties ascribed to women, as the Penelope of the myths no doubt learned to work the loom from her own mother and perfected the craft until such time to teach other, mythical daughters. Penelope will take in all she can learn, perhaps convince John to give her books to read, perhaps read them to her if he is that sort of man, which she supposes he is, though it will take some time for her to measure out what kind of man it was who burst into the cabin to grab her, what kind of man would hunt down his brother on her behalf, what kind sees something deeper than skin. She wonders what it will be like in this new city, if she will have to run away, if the man from the cabin will return, or if all of it will wash, disappear as already her memories of Alabama have faded, replaced by this house and its ghosts, by this man and woman who now stand to protect her, care for her, teach her how to live in this strange new life. She folds the thaler necklace in her hands, warm, soft metal, and wonders who it was who wore such a thing, who would think to puncture a coin and wear it as jewelry.

On most nights Katy does not bother hiding herself behind the changing panels to ready for bed, the familiarities of marriage having settled the matter years ago and the thrill of common

sleeping arrangements all but disappeared, choosing rather to undress in the open of the room where the candlelight is strongest, rather than struggle in the cramped spaces of the room's corner, already facing the bed, each string and stubborn button from her daily clothing undone, standing naked for a while in the flickering darkness, shadows to dance between the room and the wide mirror which sits propped on her chest of drawers. Katy shivers, admires the curves of her belly and hips in the reflection. Tonight a nervous modesty overcomes her, the blush of a newly vowed bride on her wedding night—the scent of sweat and bare cedar from hope chests at the foot of wedding beds—uncertainty both of her own body and that of her bridegroom, a smile on her lips quickly flattened at the serious business perhaps at hand, an excitement she remembers from many years back, renewed in the purchasing of an exotic nightgown or the thought of showing John on their wedding night what he to that point had only groped in the darkness.

Thus in the cramped space behind the changing screen Katy hears her husband move about the bedroom, his own ritual unique and unaltered through the years, though he furls his brow with surprise to see Katy's silhouette behind the curtain, thinks to call her name and ask the occasion, but instead looms in his familiar position, slouching at the foot of their bed, facing the headboard, methodically peeling away his clothing, from the neck down, until entirely naked. From the behind the changing screen, Katy pokes her head to see the man's body in the candlelight, wets her lips. John rummages through his dresser drawer for sleeping clothes, tongue and voice aching to let loose, held in check by lips and mouth, as his naked shoulders seem broad in the darkness, back and legs covered in a dark woolly hair only emphasized by the night, when he finally pulls the night clothes to his body and finds a book from the shelves along the wall to read in the candlelight until Katy is ready.

Just two pages into his book, Katy emerges from behind the curtain.

"Katy—"

"You don't have to—" she stops him.

Katy snuffs the candle and climbs into the bed, facing John, their cold bodies aimed straight into the other, as if two ships on the water steering towards catastrophe, or perhaps narrowly avoiding it. Trace moonlight swells from the window across the bedside table, covers their faces in as much pale light as shadows and darkness will allow. Outside, the rattling of trees and crickets halt. Wife eyes husband and husband wife, from the span of midnight to the stillest hours, trading between them the notion to start a family then and there on the mattress, blunt and primitive, each looking to the act for some taste of success to balance against the weight and disappointment of their histories, when totaled together, rather than the unvoiced fear they each harbor, protect themselves against, but cannot ignore at the moment such decisions are made, that perhaps future children, future Bowers children are the answer, will be as cursed as the rest have been, fall victim to authorities beyond their control, with what meager power parents hold, fears that shiver in the darkness and refuse to loose their grip, two bodies trembling in the cold, hour upon hour until the resurrection of daybreak, a goddess with rose-colored sandals now steps on the horizon, a lantern dangling in her hand, though the earth remains shadowy in her wake, unfathomable, still the lantern aims ahead, thawing, when Katy takes her husband's hand and their bodies touch in the gathering dawn.