

Mercy Brown, Exeter in Rhode Island, 1892

The worm which turns the soil gives her the pale skin. In the summer humidity, in the fog, the air somehow both hot and cold, her dress billows. The simple shift she wears with the crumbling earth above the river up the hill. The worm under the fog brushes her stomach which beats with a healthy pulse. She can see the people below on the road by the water. Cemetery Street or Church depending on the north or the south of the square. Cobbled square, cobbled people, they are building a big wooden platform. The ones who don't build, watch. When the platform is finished they bring a man with tied hands and feet shuffling through the crowd. They put him on the platform. He stands alone until a different man with a big broad hat steps up to brush his hair. The people watching embrace one another.

The worm is in the earth and the worm is in the fog. The fog moves like her dress. It swishes this way and that and the worm is in her dress sucking at her pulse. The sun moans on a sick-bed, very soft but very loud. The tied man below in the square is like a fairy tale. He looks like any other person, but the sense of him is upset. He swings one way and then jerks to sway back, like a metronome someone has reset. At the top of the hill she paces back and forth and then stops and realizes that she's been pacing back and forth. She picks up a branch and pretends to trace shapes on the trunk of one of the trees. The tree is creaking in the wind and she cocks her head at one side to listen.

When they want new wool the people will take a sheep. Against the sheep's skin they take the shears so that its skin rolls in their hands. The wool they take and furiously spin. The people bring out a blanket and wrap the tied man in it. When they want wood the people will take a tree. They put the man in a box. They take out his heart and pass the roundness of it between them. They walk up to the hill-top where she swings her legs in the air. The people embrace themselves and bless themselves and she is very cold. She goes down to where they've buried

the man and the earth there is warm and soft and the colors of it are all mixed up. She looks up at the people standing around like crows and she watches as they go everywhere.

She turns around at a thick, watery noise. Someone is coming out of the river and she doesn't like how he looks, like a towns person who's been leftover. If he comes closer she's going to tell him off. The water bubbling out of his mouth. The soggi ness of his clothes and his cold fat. So unlike the warmth of the townsfolk now, like the baker and the brewer's wife with their wonderful bellies. The man from the river sees her and tries to speak. He vomits a stomachful of water. She wrinkles her nose and slaps him across his cheek. Some of his teeth come away in her hand. His eyes get big and he crumples into himself. She pushes him over and down and kneads him into the dirt. He flakes all away like curd. She stirs him into the dirt.

On her way back to the town there are five old horses. They are very ill-fed, she can see their ribs, and as she's looking at them they turn to each other and talk about her. She stares at them as she walks by and they stop talking about her when she gets close enough to hear. She keeps walking and they start talking again when she's out of earshot. Their whining voices rising and falling. She walks around a bend and the horses disappear behind a grassy hill. There have never been any horses. There is a young boy in the road ahead of her. He is out for his first walk after a brief illness. She bends down and puts him in her hand. He struggles so she squeezes. His blood bursts out of him. She holds him to her mouth and slurps.

She leaves him in the grass, propped up against the fence. There are little thickets everywhere. She hears a noise in one and sees a tangle of bluebirds. She squints until only their color smudges through her lashes. Flashes of blue against the grey green. The air has gotten colder without her noticing. She stares away in a field at the moon, wondering how long the sun has been down, when there is a little clutch of fires on the road. The fires bob along like determined bugs. They stop where the boy sits. She moves close enough to see the people touching their fingers to their hearts and their foreheads. Fingers, hearts, and heads, and a movement in between like turning pages. The man with the big broad hat is there, too. He fidgets a lot, pinching

and pulling at his shirt and pants. She likes the hat so she touches its brim; now there are two hats. An orange-skin and an orange. She peels one hat from him and puts it on her head and leaves the other on him so he doesn't get cold. The people pick up the boy and carry him down the road and after a while she decides to follow.

She remembers that there is a town and that she had wanted to go there. The people must be walking to the town. She's having trouble keeping up with them. The road twists through the hills and their fires get smaller, sometimes disappearing for a bit before showing again. She keeps at it, walking slowly when she needs to, and comes across the boy, standing in the road before her. He is looking at her. She takes off the man's hat and puts it on the boy's head. His brow scrunches up while his lips stay slack. She continues along and after a while looks back. The boy is gone. She hears voices and turns to their source. There are five horses standing on a white dinner plate by a fence post. She asks them if they're the same horses from before, but she can't understand their response. Their mouths are full of bugs. There is a spot in the dirt that might be a shadow, but once she kneels down closer, she sees it is really a shallow smear of blood. She pokes it and sniffs her finger. It smells like the boy.

There are lots of stars but only one moon. She takes that moon and turns it over and puts it on the other side of the sky. Then, she takes each moon in each hand and turns them again and divides the sky into four quadrants, with each quadrant centered around its own moon, and each moon showing a different phase. The worm under the night comes to her and gives her a book. She sits in the grass to read. The story is about a woman, nineteen years. The woman was named after a kind of knife, cold and silver like a fish, that one gave away as a gift. A formal, but sweet thing like a wedding present. The story is about a family dying of a white fever that lets blood escape in coughs. She shuts the book, nonplussed. Why did the father blame the woman for the fever? The knife and fish of the woman's name would never touch him. The worm rests next to her, breathing heavily. She pats the mass of the side of the worm and sends it away.

She notices that she's pacing again. The book has her really wound up, maybe. Is the father in the town? She will go and find him and ask him.

She stands in the center of town. A lot of time must have passed, because it's still night, but she hasn't gotten tired, and so it must be a new night. The town is covered in ice and snow. She wraps her dress around her and looks around. Every house has put in every window a small candle. The glow of each candle comes outside the windows and reflects against the snow. It's not very much light, overall, but it's enough to be pretty and cheerful. She wanders from house to house, looking in each, watching the people for a bit if they're up, before moving along again. She smiles and hums a melody she's inventing as she goes. In one window she sees an older man sitting in a chair, he's coughing into a napkin. She opens the door and walks inside.

First of all, she must be very cold. She takes his jacket, his socks and his shoes, and his pants, too, belting them up under her dress. She takes almost all his clothes and leaves him with them as well so he doesn't get cold. She gets up on his chair and straddles him, digs her hands into his sides above his hips, pulls out what she can grab of his lungs and eats them, tossing her head back as she does. With her forearms flat against his chest, she rubs back and forth while pressing down with her weight, until his ribs crack and break, the sternum caves and she elbows her way in, biting at his liver, his heart, the meat of him, she noses upward to get at the base of his tongue, like a wolf, pulling her head back to swallow and biting forward again, she follows his tongue up inside of his neck, the skin breaking apart on the bridge of her nose, until the muscles of his shoulders constrict, tilting his head back and his jaw open, his eyes on the ceiling, her burrowing into the wet husk of him.

In him there is the worm and the horses. In the dark cave under the earth they all sit around a table. The cave is both the cave and the house where the woman from the book and her family lived. She turns to the horses and asks, Brother and sister and mother, Would you please introduce me to the other two you're with? They grow large and spindly. In growing so their skin and meat stretch on their frames. Like birds they peer at her. She Well-I-Never's them and she

How-Rude's them until they shrink back down again. One of the ones she doesn't know gets up and goes to the kitchen to fetch the kettle and cakes. When that one comes back she says, Thank you very much.

The chair is cushy and comfortable and the fire has died down into warm coals. She has curled the older man upon her lap and stretched out beneath him, wrapping her arms around him, a good place to prop her hands. Now, a small group of people stands in the room staring at the older man in her lap. With their fingers they are turning the pages across their chests. She can see them thinking that it is the sickness and also not the sickness. It is both there and not there. The man with the hat is among them. He's taken it off and balanced it on top of the coat rack. He takes a book from his pocket and flips through it. His lips are moving with the book but she can't quite hear the exact words. But he sounds polite and properly formal. He doesn't cajole or order or plead. She gets up and walks over to stand in front of him. She looks at him and she's confused about who's taller, the room seems to pivot. Blue spots appear in her vision. Her stomach turns over and she buckles. She bends over and retches the blood and the meat on the floor. She stands up and brushes herself off and looks around. The stink in the room is of fear and shock. She turns on her heel and walks away. She goes out the back door.

The sun is very hot and close and there is no ice or snow. A lot of time has passed, again. From the back stoop of the house she goes through the town. All the people are dressed lightly, in bright colored clothes. She looks up the hill and sees all the wildflowers blooming. They are all dressed alike, flowers and people. Across from her a young man and a young woman bounce down the road. But there is a strong smell in the air. She looks around and in the eaves of every house hangs a tiny head. The heads are from the plant that grows a long green stalk with a small purple flower on top. She approaches one and smiles, she likes the papery skin of it, likes the pale waxy clove inside. She touches it and it burns her fingers a bit.

With her hands clutched to her breast she goes in every direction at once. She fills up her eyes with the world. Everything is beautiful! She opens her eyes and she is walking down the road.

There is the river. There is the worm warning her away from it. An old woman sits alone on a bench, mending some knitting. The old woman smiles at her, Do I know you? I don't think I recognize you. She says, Oh! Yes, I was born here. I come and go.