The woman is burning alive. As the fire eats her skin and muscles and nerves, her screams shake the rocks. She is chained by the neck to an iron stake, amid a pile of stones. Heavy ropes about her waist hold her fast. Her arms are tied, the wrists lashed together. Her skin flakes to ash, peels away from her body, and rises in pieces around her. Beside her, the river boils and churns from recent rains. It’s already flooding. Families who live by the river will gather their things and move to higher ground, to the woods.

The woman, Rose, is a slave. She murdered her master, Peter Ryburn, by serving him poisoned milk. She has had a trial in the Court of Oyer and Terminer, where she was found guilty and ordered drawn upon a hurdle to the place of execution and there to be burnt.

While preparations were made, she was held six days in the gaol. Last night, Ryburn’s son William and nephew Robert paid the keeper to go away while they raped and scourged her. She meets her death bruised and lacerated, with a broken arm.

Had the men who bound her and lit the fire—William’s cousin Robert among them—anticipated the volume of her screams, they would have gagged her. They did grant her the kindness of a blindfold. Her shrieks rise and swell. The heads of the men and women gathered at the river are bells, and Rose’s cries are the clapper. Children cover their ears with their hands. No men went
to work this morning at the gold mine or the coal mine, though some of the
planters stayed home to slog through sodden fields and tend animals, and
they too hear the cries. In time, settlers thirty miles distant, all the way to the
Blue Ridge Mountains, will claim they heard the woman die.

The fire takes her fast. William stands with Robert as close as they dare,
the fire too loud for them to talk. The woman is a live crouching thing, her
skin blackening, blood and hair exuding their own particular stench as she
roasts, her limbs changing position as the smoke lifts and blows. Within the
fire, tethered to the stake, she moves in a slow crawl as if stalking or hunting.
She works an arm free, claws at the blindfold, and casts it from her face so it
sails beyond the circle of fire. It catches William full on the cheek. He staggers,
cursing, flinging the blazing cloth away, searing his fingers and palm. Through
the smoke and his own pain, he sees Robert scoop a rock from the ground and
hurl it toward the woman.

William is the one who will go and report to Dame Ryburn—Eileen—his
father’s young bride and now widow, only recently arrived from Ireland and
eight months gone in pregnancy, that the execution has been accomplished.
He dreads this chore. Eileen will ask for details. Beautiful, she nonetheless pos-
sesses the most expressionless face he has ever seen, and the most insatiable
curiosity. You should have been there yourself, he will tell her if she presses
him too much. He is surprised by how deeply the execution has troubled him.
Eileen will remember forever whatever he tells her, with the same satisfac-
tion with which she examines the jewels William’s father gave her, treasures
to be scrutinized and set back in their nests of velvet, inside a teakwood box,
rings and bracelets that belonged to the first Mrs. Ryburn, William’s mother, a
woman so much older than Eileen and dead so long that Eileen has admitted
confusing her with her own mother, has pictured her own mother wearing
these adornments, though her mother, dead too, was poor and owned no jew-
elry at all.

When the burned woman is reduced to an immobile form, like melted
statuary, the rain begins again. It falls on her smoking body, quelling the last
flames, sizzling on the stones. The rain drives the people off, farmers and
women, miners, blacks who came for their own reasons, and an Indian or two
or three, for they have not entirely vanished as they are said to have done,
only retreated to the darkest places of the forest, which they share with deer
and bear and elk.

Rose is a knot on the boulders. A piece of bone shows through her charred
leg. In death, she has twisted, woven herself into a mat of her own leather and
marrow and hair.

William’s face burns with a wretched heat and so does his hand, the fin-
gers and palm that touched the blindfold she threw at him. How she writhed beneath him last night, while his cousin held her down. Now the running of the farm is up to William, in this time of damnable flood, and he is not the farmer his father was.

He turns away from the river and unties his tethered horse. Robert has already ridden away. William will go home to the splendid brick house his father built and enter the room where Eileen pours tea from a porcelain pot, hiding her condition beneath rugs and robes, the room airless from the fire she insists on day and night, believing it will drive off the fevers she fears in the strange new country. William will tell her the slave woman is dead, and she will sip her tea and look out the window at the rain falling on the bare branches of trees and the flooded pastures, the forests of tulip poplar and the gouged red clay embankments where the rain has washed away chunks of soil, carrying with it horses, cows, sheep, and an unfortunate dwelling or two, and there will begin a long war between William and Eileen over the management of the farm. Slaves predict in whispers that Eileen’s baby will be born dead or deformed, a devil, but the infant that will come cannonballing out from between her legs the morning after Rose’s death will be in fact superbly healthy, just small and premature, a posthumous son.

William and his wife Martha have not been blessed. Martha has not been able to bear a child. She is older than William, and now it’s too late.

As he mounts his horse and turns away from the river toward the road, he spies children playing with the wooden hurdle upon which Rose was dragged. They climb on it, crashing and shrieking, and take turns pulling each other, for the object is after all a sledge, and it will be saved for use again. William wonders if the King will be notified of the poisoning and the execution. It’s the sort of thing his wife might take upon herself, regarding the King as she does with a sense of duty so profound that she writes letters to him on all kinds of Orange County matters, crops and livestock, weather and politics, though William has tried to discourage her. She pours into the letters the attention she would have given their children, had they produced any. He should know of this, she will say, meaning the King, and she’ll disappear into her chamber. Hours later, William will find her with a thick stack of cream vellum stationery, filled with her beautiful hand, letters ready to go to England. She’s a loyal subject, ever proving her obeisance, whereas William for his part has begun to question whether the colonies might be better off with self-government.

His horse stops in the road and whickers. William slaps his legs against its sides. Rain smack his face. His burned hand is too sore to hold the reins. The horse behaves strangely. She circles slowly, turning as if performing a maneu-
ver that circus animals are said to do, preparing for some elaborate equine flight or trick. William cries a sharp command, flaps the reins, and kicks her side, but the animal turns back to the river, faces the execution place, pauses, and gallops toward it.

William has owned horses all his life, but he didn’t know one could spring from stillness to such speed in an instant. He loses his balance, slips from the saddle, and falls to the road so hard he wonders if he has cracked his spine. Luckily, he fell clear of the horse; he wonders even as his head spins if the creature meant to throw and drag him.

For a moment he lies stunned. With difficulty he sits up, feeling every moment of his forty-seven years: the burned face and hand, the bruised spine, and the sharp dental flares that signal the onset of one of the toothaches that have beleaguered him in recent years. By nightfall, he’ll be tying his jaws up in a huge handkerchief and searching his wife’s cupboards for laudanum.

The crowd takes its time dispersing, people talking among themselves. Does no one see him dazed here in the mud? He jerks himself to his knees and stands, dizzy. The shouting children, the bucking sledge on its rope, blur before him. Here comes his horse, docile yet with lightning in her eyes: nothing to do but catch the bridle and climb again upon her back. He thinks the children are laughing at him; the women bending their heads toward each other and the groups of men unknotting as they leave the river front are finding fault with him and his family.

“Damn you,” he says, unsteady on his horse’s back. “Damn you.”

A child mocks him, miming his fall—or at least that is how William interprets the youngster’s swaying gait—and he leans from the saddle and cuffs the impudent face, sending the boy sprawling in the muck. The child’s mother screeches, and William takes off, the horse’s long, familiar strides bearing him home.

Even through the rain, he can still smell Rose and the fire. He needs a bath to wash her from his skin.

She took her secret with her: what she used in the milk. Trial and torture did not pry it out of her, nor the Ryburn men taking turns in what for William was a surprisingly pleasurable assault; his cousin Robert kept his head enough to spit some questions at her, but she did not speak, just fought with demonic strength even after Robert broke her arm above the elbow so it flapped and dangled. That was the only time she cried out.

Arsenic, people say, for arsenic can be found on every farm and in any apothecary’s shop, and there are druggists in Orange and Stevensburg. Hemlock perhaps, or some roots and herbs known only to Africans, mixed in darkness and cursed in a savage tongue.
It was powdered dried foxglove that stopped Peter Ryburn's heart. That was what Rose used, and some of the other slaves know it, having discovered the concoction in a corner of the cabin where she lived alone, an arrangement created by Peter Ryburn the better to spend time with her; her two young daughters live with an old, blind slave who makes corn shuck baskets. Foxglove: a little brown flower, a little dust, and a man's heart slows and halts. The milk was tart, but that might have been because of something the cow ate, or an effect of the flood, changing the taste of the water the cattle drank from river and streams. Peter Ryburn, aged seventy-three, was hale and strong. He reeled from the table clutching his chest, his starched white napkin falling from his lap. William leaped from the table to steady him, but Peter was dead before he fell to the floor. They had been arguing, father and son, over which crops to plant in which fields, while Eileen looked from one to the other with the only real expression of pleasure William has ever observed on her lovely face.

Everyone knew Peter Ryburn's death was not natural.

All day, the day of the burning, Rose's remains lie on the stone. From high places in hills and trees, the buzzards come, dropping down to the riverside as the body cools from its fierce heat. Despite the char and ash, there is still nutrition in the deeper parts, savory to the creatures that can make a meal from carcass and offal, and these morsels they reach with their tearing beaks, flapping their wings as they jostle and balance on the boulders. Tonight, white men will come with burlap and wrap what's left. They'll bury her in the woods unmarked, for they are keeping charge of her and they don't want her grave to become a witching place for other slaves who would do as she has done.

When the birds have eaten their fill and raised their huge wings to the sky, what remains among the tossed bones is a small white stone, the size of a grape, translucent and containing a frozen human form, as if fire can freeze and preserve: Peter Ryburn's last child, a loop of flesh with discernible head, its legs a fishtail, curved within the sac. The iron stake, Rose's stake, will be pried out of the stone by slaves in the night, and for years, it will inspire plans of revenge.

Eileen will hear of the treachery of William's horse from others, as if she has an ear in the wind. That will please her, William knows, that he was thrown, humbled, that he was hurled into mud. She doesn't care about Rose, just the burning. The horse and its small mystery, the puzzle of its circling with William helpless and furious on its back, its headlong rush to the river, leaving him behind, its diffident return to its injured rider: Eileen will love that, turning it over and over in her mind as she warms herself at the fire and
suckles her baby, the weight of new motherhood melting away despite the
toddlies and buttered shortbreads she enjoys. The servants cosset her, silently
turning the blankets back, swinging the bed warmer between the cold sheets.
She has no fear of them, pays them hardly any mind. They hated her husband,
but so did she. She’ll have the new baby and the image of William in the red
mud, and such information about the execution as she decides to cherish.

William knows she heard Rose’s screams, even in her rooms with the thick
walls. His hand and face throb where the blindfold hit him.

Peter Ryburn was buried two Sundays ago, after church services. William
and Robert sat through the night with his remains, the cousins side by side on
a bench beside the coffin. It made a sound, the body did. Deep in the night,
a sound, not the crude farting and moaning and sighing that the dead are
known to make and which William has heard before, but a spoken phrase, a
few syllables that William in his drunkenness could not make out and which
the corpse would not repeat despite his entreaties. Peter Ryburn was dead
when they laid him out and dead when they put him in the ground, but for
a moment during those hours in between, he spoke. Robert heard it too and
wept, seizing the old man’s shoulders, while William slumped back on the
bench. It was so like his father to have the last word. Then: sealed lips. Coins
on the eyes. Gold coins from the mine Peter Ryburn owns, the mine that
William’s wife has described shyly in letters to the King. Words in a language
the dead know, spoken as the soul crossed over. Robert, devoted nephew,
sobbed out his sorrow into the whiskey and tilted the bottle to the old man’s
mouth. The liquor went down. Robert poured till the bottle was empty, and
still the liquor never came up from the corpse’s throat, and Robert cried out
with hope, but William knew all along he was dead as a stone.

Eileen says make use of Rose’s cabin. There is no reason it cannot be occupied
by others. William directs slaves to clean it out. The blacks balk. William and
Eileen stand before the cabin while the slaves study the ground, drawing their
feet through the dirt. A fine mist falls.

“It built on a rattlesnake nest,” a woman says at last. “We keep away.”

“That’s ridiculous,” William cries. It hurts to speak, the bad tooth radiat-
ing needles of pain through his jaw.

“She built it her own self,” the woman says, an old granny with eyes gone
icy from cataracts. “You can hear them snakes, sometime. Hundreds of ’em.”

Eileen stands straight and slim, as if she has not borne a child only days
He hates for the slaves to see her making the decisions about the running of the place, this young woman, while he stands with his face swathed and swollen, his body hurting all over from his fall from the horse. But demolish the cabin they do, once he gives the order. It’s a sturdy little house, though small. Three black men knock it down, and William asks later if they saw snakes.

“Yessir,” they say, but they weren’t bit. A whole nest of snakes is still deep in the ground, they say, boilin’ there; only a conjure woman would build there.

“All right. Burn the wood. Burn the ground, so if any snakes are there, they’ll die,” William says.

That order goes unheeded. The wood remains unburnt in a messy heap, grim and wintry. Is it then that the unraveling begins, with the slaves’ disobedience while William slouches miserably in his chair in the warm house, waiting for an abscess to burst in his mouth? Eileen hearkens to the slaves’ stories, their excuses: fire will bring the snakes out to multiply and swarm. Their fears have got to her.

The cabin remains a wreck of timbers. If snakes weren’t there already, it’s an invitation now. William holds his jaws with his hands until he can’t bear it any longer and calls a doctor to pull the tooth. The long bloody root, ivory and red in the doctor’s extractor, is his reward, that and the thick bitter gush of pus into his mouth.

And my husband and his cousin had congress with the condemned woman, Your Majesty, in her cell in the gaol, the night prior to her execution. I saw, for I followed them. I have learned to walk quietly, and I do not need a lantern.

Did you not call us your loyal old dominion? As you would deem an old friend. My loyal Old Dominion.

By the time the flood recedes and snow falls, William is sick. He blames Rose for the sores that fester on his genitals and thighs. Fever plagues him, only to subside and assail him again, so that he climbs out of bed to go outside in the snow and stretch out full length, clad only in his nightshirt, the heat of his body melting through the crust so that in the morning, when he creeps indoors again, his human form shows his household where he lay.

Beneath the heavy snow, the earth is packed with water. The river runs high, ice gathering at its shores in sheets and slush. It runs too fast to freeze. Those who would cut blocks of ice for summertime will have to wait.

Summer has never seemed so far off.
William asks his cousin if he too is afflicted, but Robert says no.

Why would one man contract the disease and the other be spared? William remembers the gaol cell, its cold dirt floor, the smell of mice and damp, and the strenuous climbing and conquering of her limbs. He had been with slaves before, young women whose bodies attracted him, but that was long ago, and he had not forced them. It was a game then, and they were willing. He wonders if the sickness has been in his body for a while. No, it was Rose. He’s certain. The woman, the sores: she wished the illness upon him. Is it possible his father gave her the disease, and she poisoned him out of anger?

Lying in the snow, fever flaming through his body, William turns face down until at last he cools. He has never known a season of so much rain and snow, and there are still months of winter ahead. The sound of the surging river is always with him, even when he’s in his chamber with draperies drawn and a pillow over his head.

He consults with his doctor and swallows bitter blue pills recommended for the malady. The medicine makes his gorge rise. One night he takes the vial of pills and buries it in the ground, digging deep beneath the snow, and afterward, sweating and thirsty, he wonders why he bothered. The sores multiply on his body. His mouth isn’t healing, either. The empty socket runs with serum and stays tender, tasting foul, the edges ragged. He mixes warm water with salt, honey, and alum and gulps it, swishing it around his mouth, and that helps a little bit. Skin flakes from his burnt face and hand.

Sunshine and fresh eggs, the keys to health. His father swore by sunshine and eggs. William directs the cook to serve him eggs at every meal. The sky remains heavy, the air colder day by day. Yet he has never seen such magnificent shades of gray as the clouds during these weeks, pewter and silver, dawn and afternoon and dusk, nor does he recall the last time he thought the sky was beautiful.

He lies outside in the snow, melting it with his heat and sweat, packing snow into his mouth and around his scrotum, beneath his nightshirt and robe. Eileen loves the snow. She makes the cook prepare a dish with sugar and cream. William can’t eat enough of this dessert. Snow cream and eggs are making him fat. All day he looks forward to his bed of snow at night. Even that doesn’t cool him enough. Fresh snow falling at night brings him a relief that borders on joy. It covers him, but it doesn’t last.

During the day, his dogs sniff the hollows where he lay, spaces where he melted through to the grass. All his life, he has had a horror of illness and weakness. He has scorned those who are frail, the lame and the infirm.

“You’re getting old,” Robert says.
“You’re nearly as old,” William answers.

To look at the two of them, William has to admit, you would no longer know they were separated by only four years. Yet these are modern times. Men live longer than they once did. William’s thoughts are too disordered for him to determine how to regain his health.

He was a young man once, courting Martha who became his wife, playing hide and seek in the garden that is now mounded with snow. William’s fever burns hotter than any heat of summer. Even in summer, down in the garden, there were cool spaces, shadows and dew under the boxwoods even in afternoon, and a trellis covered with blue ivy where Martha would meet him long ago, stifling her laughter, jumping out to surprise him, even frighten him.

Martha: a scurrying sound in her room, at her papers and letters all day. He is married to a sound. The ivy in the garden smelled like an old, lost world, she used to say, the sweet smell of memory. She plucked an ivy leaf and twirled it beneath his nose.

One night he awakes in panic, convinced all of his stock are dead. He bolts from his bed of snow and rushes into his house, calling for his wife, but it’s Eileen who appears on the steps with a candle in her hands, a velvet dressing gown belted at her waist.

“The animals,” he gasps. “Are they dead?” He can’t remember when he last saw a sheep or a hog, a horse or a cow. The snow must have killed them weeks ago.

“They’re fine,” she says.

“You or my wife have seen to them, then,” he says stupidly, “or the negroes.”

Eileen goes to the heavy front door and pushes it closed.

William remembers something else, the stake, Rose’s stake. “It was iron,” he says, “so it didn’t burn.”

“What are you talking about?” Eileen asks.

“We should get it,” William says. “Somebody should go get it. It must not become a talisman, a thing of witchcraft and,” he flounders, sweat beading on his face, “a thing of evil. I’ll dress and go get it.”

“William,” Eileen says. “You must go to bed. The stake was pulled up. It doesn’t matter.”

“But it does,” he says, near tears.

“After a while, it’ll be just an old piece of metal,” she says, “and nobody will remember what it was. It’ll be used for something else, or melted down, or lost.”

He feels so old. He will not live as long as his father did.
“I want my wife,” he says. “Tell me where she is.”

“In her chamber, I suppose,” Eileen says.

She stands aside, this woman Eileen, this stranger his father married, so he can climb the stairs. Sweat courses down his cheeks, and the steps are steep and hard to mount, as if he’s pushing his way through a snowfall on a hill. He has not thought about his wife in days. Is that her room, the closed doorway at the end of the hall?

He turns the knob, but the door is locked. He kicks it so the hinges crack from the frame, and he shoves it open. There sits an old woman in lace cap and nightdress, frozen with horror in her chair at a writing table. She is surrounded by stacks of paper. In her hand is a dripping stick of red wax. Her gaze travels from his face to the broken door and back again.

“What are you doing?” he demands.

“Sealing my letter,” Martha answers. The wax is blood-red and sweet-smelling. She blows out the flame on the taper and presses a brass implement into the daub.

“Who are you writing to?”

“The King,” Martha lifts the letter to her lips and blows on the seal. “I’m writing to the King. You knew that. There’s so much to tell him. Tonight I’ve written him about the horses in this country, how they’re descended from those on shipwrecks or brought by early explorers. I explained how they grow so strong here and are well suited to the work of farms and mines.”

William reaches out and takes the letter from her hands. He touches the wax, which is soft enough to show the print of his fingertip. “Where did you get this?”

“I order the paper from a shop in Philadelphia. The wax and ink I’ve had since we were married. My mother gave them to me in great supply. Don’t you remember? Oh, William.”

“Do you think the King cares about your letters?”

“I do,” Martha says. “He’s concerned about the colony. The people. He should know what’s happening here.”

William turns the letter over and reads the King’s name in his wife’s elegant script. “Who will deliver it for you?”

“I’ll find someone traveling to a port city,” she says, “who will take it to a ship’s captain. I’ve done this many times.”

“But he doesn’t answer. The King.”

“William, you’re very ill,” Martha says. “No matter what I say, you won’t believe me.”
Martha makes him lie down on her couch, and she fans the sweat from his face with a sheet of paper. Her heart, startled to triple its normal beat by his kicking in her door, has only just begun to return to normal. She takes a deep breath as William settles himself on her couch, his thick shoes leaving marks on the gray silk upholstery.

“That woman,” he says, “is killing me.”

“Eileen?” Martha hates the smug young woman who is the mistress of the house, mother of the heir. Martha has expected her husband to fall in love with Eileen, to divorce her, to pack her out of the house to live a pauper’s life. Ever since Eileen’s arrival and with greater urgency since Old Ryburn’s death, Martha has been saving money in a leather bag.

“Not Eileen. Rose,” he says.

“No,” she says. “Rose is dead.”

Martha fans his cheeks, the pores open and perspiring still. After a while, he falls asleep.

Yes, William wronged the woman Rose, but Martha must try to save him. She has watched him all these weeks since the execution, and she has hardened her heart against him, but she was with him in the days of the twirling ivy, when they were young.

He rouses in his fever and says, “Wife,” then sleeps again. All night, Martha sits up on her couch with his head on her lap. This person is a ruined stranger.

Toward daybreak she dozes, then wakes to find his arms wrapped around her waist. Laboriously, she moves him aside and stands up stiffly, as if her legs are uneven. She takes a clean sheet of paper and writes, Upriver, there is a rock in the water. Only when the rock is visible is it safe to ford the river. The place is called Raccoon Ford because of the abundance of those animals. Their meat is poor but their pelts are warm. Hunters prize the tails as decorations for their caps. Raccoons may be readily tamed and kept as pets.

She puts the letter aside. Long ago, there was an expedition to explore the wild land to the west, across the mountains and beyond. Should not there be another? She will write and suggest it.

But first she must tend to her husband. She orders soap and hot water brought to her, and then dismisses the servant. For the first time since the early days of their marriage, and the only time without William’s assistance, she removes his clothing. It’s hard to do. As she peels the shirt and trousers
from his body, she is saddened that his flesh is slack, muscles wasted, abdomen heavy.

Snow is falling again. The basin of hot water steams up the windows of her chamber. She'll have to concentrate and work very hard to save William. She must bring everything together in her mind, all she knows of the poison and the business in the gaol and the burning. She herself had argued, albeit only in her head, for bullets or hanging, or even exile to the West. Why burning? Barbaric. She wrote about all of it to the King, who answered with his familiar silence.

William’s skin is thick and yellow. While Martha bathes him, he sleeps on, his head sometimes jerking. The sores on his groin and privates exude heat. She has guessed they were there, but these are worse than she’d expected, a rampant, livid consequence of his visit to the gaol. For a moment, her heart fails her. She dries his skin with a cloth, covers him with soft blankets, and curls herself around him, stroking his head.

Her father-in-law, Old Ryburn, drank the milk in a single swallow, smacking his lips as he set down the glass. He stood up from the table and took two strides toward the door. Wasn’t a tradesman there, wanting a word with him? Or was he leaving the table in anger because he and William had been arguing? In any case, he gave a guttural cry. With one hand he gripped his throat, with the other reached high, as if grasping for something. Rose turned her head from her place at the sideboard where she was stacking plates. Turned her head so that out of the corner of her eye, she saw him fall. Martha recalls what a pretty shape Rose’s cheek made, with her chin tucked into her shoulder, her face all eyelashes and stillness.

“The milk,” Old Ryburn gasped. “Rose?”

It was William who caught Rose even as she tried to run, and Martha who sprang toward Old Ryburn, catching him as he fell. Eileen remained in her chair with a buttered scone in her hand. Didn’t she finish it, nibbling amid the commotion? Gooseberry jam was on the table that day, and clotted cream.

Old Ryburn used to find hangings and beheadings such merry affairs. Martha has heard of his courtship of Eileen. On a visit to Ireland, his homeland, he had learned of an execution to be held some distance away, and he took the young beauty to it, with her father and brothers for company. The convict was a man who had killed his neighbor in a dispute over a hog. The scaffolding was so high, Eileen reported to her new family, that she had to shade her eyes against the sun. There was the drop of the trap and a brief wriggling of legs, a motion that disturbed her less than if a gnat had flown into her eye.
In moments the man hung limp. Eileen declared herself disappointed. They had come so far for that. Why was she not moved by the spectacle, when all around her, the crowd displayed fury and satisfaction?

Martha has guessed that for Eileen, there was no turning back from Old Ryburn then. She had agreed to marry him and was already carrying his child. Together they would make the crossing to Virginia. When she arrived, her pregnancy was evident to everyone. The day of the hanging, Old Ryburn had bought his wife-to-be a length of lace from a peddler and a tray of plum tarts, yet even then, Martha is certain, Eileen was bored, going home in the bumpy wagon, smoothing the lace out on her lap, scolding her brothers for dripping plum juice on their shirts.

Old Ryburn had drunk the entire glass of milk Rose brought to him, but in Martha’s memory, the glass tips from his hand and milk spills over the table, a thick puddle spreading to the edges and dripping onto the floor. Old Ryburn was some kin by marriage to Eileen’s mother. Now William must take care of Eileen and her brat forever.

And Eileen is the one who killed William’s father. Martha knows this as surely as if she heard Eileen order the slave woman: Give me some foxglove. Eileen must have mixed it with crushed vanilla beans and sugar, then returned the compound to Rose saying, Put this in my husband’s milk when next he orders it; it is to strengthen him.

Yet during her trial and even at the stake, Rose did not betray Eileen. Martha, with her husband sleeping heavily in her lap, considers the fact as Eileen’s infant wails down the hall in its nursery. The child’s attendant is one of Rose’s daughters. Eileen might have murmured a promise, or what Rose took for a promise, when she accepted the compound from her mistress’s hands: I’ll take an interest in the welfare of your children. If Rose had accused her mistress in the courtroom or from the stake, who would have believed her? Rose must have known that.

Martha rolls her husband from her lap so he slumps on the bed, snoring. Her relief that he’s here tonight, instead of sleeping outside in the snow, is inexpressible. She goes to her window, parts the curtains, and looks out at the night. The landscape presents an odd reversal. The snow glows like sky. The world is upside down. These weeks since Rose’s execution, Martha has turned the particulars of the woman’s final moments over and over in her mind. William told her very little. He arrived home from the execution in a frenzy, face scorched, clothes muddied and torn. She had to work to get the story of Rose’s death from this source and that one. No, Rose said at her trial, when asked if she had murdered her master. No, I didn’t kill him. Martha has heard that
much. Yet surely Rose knew what substance was in the compound Eileen gave her. Rose, not Eileen, was the one who put the powder, brown and innocent as cinnamon, in Old Ryburn’s milk. Rose knew. Yet she didn’t tell.

A wolf howls, and Martha lets the curtain drop from her hands. She loves to hear the wolves at night, to know they are near, and herself safe in the thick walls of this house. She has seen the bloody heads brought in for bounties at the courthouse, knows the values: forty pounds of tobacco for the head of a young wolf, seventy for an old. Orange County stretches to the gigantic lakes of the north, all the way to Canada, and westward farther than she can imagine.

*How many millions of wolves live within that land?* Martha writes to the King. *The balance here is delicate, between the land and those who would tame it. We plow, we farm, we herd and build.*

She pauses. The King doesn’t know what it’s like, living here, when the balance might tip at any moment. In fifty years, this place could return entirely to savages and woods and darkness. She writes, *Do not wait. Come now. Come and visit your Old Dominion in its struggling youth, its early days from which it may rise to glory.*

The King will never come. He’ll read her letter with impatience, holding it away from his weak eyes, wondering why this one subject, some old woman out in the wilderness, writes to him so eagerly, as if he would concern himself with wolves, as if he would know how it is to be alone, your only consolation a few pieces of gold in a leather sack, saved against widowhood or eviction. He cannot know, does not care, that she and her husband and their family and slaves and neighbors keep a fragile foothold. *Indians and floods,* she writes, *and crop failures and our own hatreds and greed, Your Majesty, these threaten us, yet this is the finest country.*

Beside her, William moans in his dreams. Martha writes, *My husband’s cheek has healed badly from the burning blindfold the woman threw at him. It hurts him even when he sleeps.*