For Rudolph P. Byrd
and Gerard Fergerson
and in tribute and thanks
to Samuel R. Delany
The status of the ancient Faith differed on the eastern shores of the Mississippi and its southerly tributaries. A convent and school, established at the turn of the nineteenth century, are referred to indirectly in the records of His Holiness Bishop John Carroll of the Diocese of Baltimore, whose curacy extended at that time to the far western frontiers of the virgin Republic's lands. A specific reference may be found, however, in the personal papers of Fr. Auguste-Marie Malesvaux, a native of Saint-Domingue, whose evangelistic labors encompassed the Spanish and later French territories from Louisiana as far north as the Great Lakes. Malesvaux offers brief notations on the convent and school, which he asserts were the first in this region. Flemish Nuns of the Order of the Most Precious Charity of Our Lady of the Sorrows established both near the village of New Huntstown, in this frontier region of western Kentucky, in 1800. Because the convent and school suddenly vanished without a trace, and within several years the order itself disappeared.
as well, and as the nearby non-Catholic settlement suffered through a series of calamities before dwindling to near-extinction until its reestablishment in 1812, no other definitive records of this foundation remain. * It was not until the Reverend Father Charles Nerinckx, the native of Herfe-

* Carmel was the lone child among the handful of bondspeople remaining at Valdoré, the coffee plantation to which Olivier de L'Écart returned in late July 1803. The estate, over which his elder brother Nicolas had presided for more than two decades, clung like a forget-me-not to the cliffs high above the coastal city of Jérémie, west of the Rivière Grand'Anse, in the southern district of the colony of Saint-Domingue. Nearly all of Valdoré's able-bodied bondswomen and men, who at the height of the estate's prosperity numbered more than one hundred and twenty-five souls, had fled or been slain during the successive waves of liberation, revolt and retribution that had convulsed the colony since the first flash of rebellion in France. By edict of the Revolution, they had already been freed, first across the sea and on these shores again by Sonthonax's pen, against Nicolas de L'Écart's and the other plantation owners' wishes. Then under the threat of Napoleon's guns they had been captured or forced to return to Valdoré, and just as soon, many had swiftly escaped—parents, children, all—into the surrounding green maze of forests, hills and mountains, eventually joining or merging into the various rebel fronts, including those led by the leaders Plymouth and Macaya, that coursed throughout the long dagger of peninsula upwards into the Artibonite Valley. Others nevertheless had pledged their futures and future freedom to the Tricolor's military in its repeated campaigns to reclaim what had for years been France's Caribbean mint.

Carmel's father, Frédéric-Kabinda, a quiet, meditative man, had been stolen across the Atlantic in his ninth year. He had lived his entire life since then at Valdoré, first working in the groves until Nico-
las de L'Écart happened upon a makeshift safebox he had cobbled together from scrap mahogany, after which he was apprenticed to a polymathic Mandinkean artisan on the neighboring estate of the Comte de Barcolet. Frédéric-Kabinda, known by other names to the enslaved from his region, eventually learned to craft metal grills and finials, carve and fashion furniture from any type of wood, blow small glassware, and above all paint; eventually he was commissioned to repaint the entire exterior and interior of the nearby de Barcolet estate's main dwellings. Over the period of a decade, he decorated the walls of the manor house's dining and visiting rooms, upper parlor, ballroom, and sunroom with a series of murals of the Burgundy countryside that merited praise as far away as the capital, Cap Français, and the Spanish administrative center at Santo Domingo.

So refined did visitors to Valdoré find Kabinda's sense of composition and line that Nicolas de L'Écart eventually agreed to hire him out to the local gentry. In early 1801, while returning from working on a ceiling portrait of colonial nobles at a neighboring plantation, he was seized and pressed into service by one of Valdoré's former residents, a mixed-raced commander affiliated with the French; to this man it was inconceivable that someone of such aesthetic gifts could ally himself with the black hordes. Because of his metalworking skills, Kabinda was set to crafting knives, small armor and shot. He was also forced to sketch maps, battle scenes and caricatures for his fellow soldiers' amusement. His repeated attempts to escape to Valdoré were unsuccessful. During a counterattack against the rebels at Les Cayes, one of the Cuban attack dogs imported by the French turned on him, opening his throat, with the precision of a masterly brushstroke, in one bite.

Carmel's mother, Jeanne, was also known as la Guinée (Ginen). From early girlhood she had been in the personal staff of de L'Écart's mother until the elder woman's death from poisoning a decade before, after which she joined the estate's general domestic staff. In
her spare time she was said to practice divination, and later, as the systems of social control disintegrated, she increasingly served as a translator and courier for several groups of insurgents headquartered near the south coast. She had learned her divination skills from her mother, Gwan Ginèn, as she had from hers, and had performed it when necessary and without de L'Écart's knowledge, as a secondary mode of manor religion and justice. Most of her fellow slaves therefore gave her a wide berth, though it was widely recognized that she seldom put her gifts to malevolent uses. Just days after her husband's death, she too fell, in factional fighting near the Spanish border. Her final utterance, according to the account of a fellow rebel from Valdoré, was a curse on all who had even dreamt of betraying her.

When Olivier de L'Écart returned to Valdoré, Carmel was twelve years old. She stood just over five feet tall, and like her father, possessed milky brown eyes that always appeared to be half-shut, as if she were on the verge of falling asleep or weeping. A shy and reticent child, she wore the same raggedy calico shift over her gossamer frame every day, her waist like her head wrapped in faded crimson Indian cloth, her lone thin snakelike braid concealed beneath her turban's sweaty folds. None of the bondspeople still present—nor her master Nicolas de L'Écart, for that matter—could recall having ever heard her utter a single word. Many whispered that her mother had either cut out her tongue or cast a spell on her so that she would not reveal what she had witnessed either in the womb or at any second in her presence thereafter.

Since her seventh birthday Carmel had assisted in the cultivation of the coffee plants and the vegetable gardens during the growing months, and then during the harvest and market period in picking, drying and sorting the beans for the mill. Each day when she had completed her chief tasks, she joined the crew that gathered what remained of the withered coffee fruit for use in salves and tonics after the baggers collected the beans; the de L'Écarts had acquired a royal pat-

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ent to sell some of these concoctions, properly packaged, to the poor whites and the free mulattoes across the island. Like many of younger females, Carmel had intermittently been reassigned to the housekeeping and serving staffs during the period running from Advent to Pentecost so that her master could entertain visitors, especially from the neighboring islands and the home country, in the grand style.

By the turn of the new century, however, L'Ouverture had sunk those once halcyon days far into the sea's black depths. The plantation again began bleeding workers, which soon left its fields fallow and the entire property susceptible to attack. Nicolas de L'Écart, who'd lived his entire life among Blacks and had little confidence that they could completely overthrow French rule, refused to emigrate. Instead, he pressed all his remaining able-bodied males into patrols, meanwhile dedicating the healthy adult females into what remained of coffee cultivation. Carmel and another female under 15, Albine, were assigned full-time domestic duty. They patched sheets, tablecloths and draperies, washed clothes and windows, walls and floors, husbanded tallow candles, oils and spices, and kept strict count of the table services, silverware, china and crystal—there was little hope, except by shipping them to vaults in France itself, of securing jewels or precious metals, which vanished on a daily basis.

After even more slaves, including Albine, stole away or were killed by marauders, Nicolas de L'Écart, who was highly reputed for keeping his charges in line, sold off to American brokers a particularly troublesome quartet who'd hatched an assassination plot against him and neighboring planters. As a result, Carmel's responsibilities expanded to include maintaining full casks of rainwater in the event the insurrectionists or vandals set fires to or near the manor house, and verifying the other remaining slaves' reports on all departures and arrivals. She also had to feed the dwindling supply of chickens (their eggs were pilfered before she could reach the coops), and milk whatever cows and goats had not been carted off or carved up.
Up until this point de L'Écart had not really noted her presence, considering her no more extensively than one might remember an extra utensil in a large hand-me-down table service. He remembered having lashed her once—or thought he remembered he had—along with all of the other slaves under forty, upon finding ten gold pieces missing from his library safe, but the fact that she was female, along with her customary silence, ensured that she did not otherwise command his attention. After he survived his third attempted poisoning, however—and personally shot the chief conspirators, an elderly cook named Mé-Edaïse whom he had misbelieved to be too old to be caught up in the Negro frenzy, and her son, Prince (called by his fellow servants Bel-Aire, for the enchanting aura he left in his wake), his driver—he assigned the cooking responsibilities to Carmel and required her to taste his food before it touched his lips. Her skills were rudimentary at best, but at this point in the maelstrom of political and social disintegration, cuisine was the last thing on de L'Écart's mind.

THE ROLE OF DUTY

Under the circumstances, are there any benefits to dedication, devotion, honor—responsibility? What, in this context, is the responsible action? Is it even possible to invoke a rhetoric of ethics? Only repetition produces tangible benefits, which include the stability of a routine (however precarious) and the forestalling of longer term considerations that might provoke the following emotions: fear, indecision, paralyzing despair. In the absence of a stable context, the question of ethics intrudes. What kinds of responsibility? The maintenance of the established order, that is: labor. What is the non-material or spiritual component? In the private sphere: to the ancestors, their memory, to the elusive community of the self and its desires—constancy or consistency. What if these are in conflict?
During her rare moments of respite, when she was not identifying new hiding places in the event French troops or their black deputies or enemies commandeered the estate, or scavenging meals for herself from the waning crops and provisions, Carmel would spend her free moments drawing. She had access neither to blank paper nor ink, nor any of the other usual artistic implements. Instead, she would sketch elaborately detailed figures or images in the dusty banks of the Grand'Anse, etching them with sharp tipped branches or scraps of tin on tree boles, tracing chits of charcoal across swatches of old gazettes or in the end pages of the gilt-edged, uncut, and long unopened leatherbound books that lined the shelves of Nicolas de L’Écart’s library. Her imagery ranged from the plantation itself to the seascapes and hill-ringed plains around Jérémie, to imaginary realms she conjured from book illustrations, dreams, nightmares, and her rare night visitations with her late mother. She often drew detailed pictures of her parents, the other plantation slaves, and the hierarchy of angels and saints, for she had been baptized into the Roman Church, and her father had sculpted half a dozen wooden sacred reliefs that encircled the sanctuary of de L’Écart’s limestone chapel. She sometimes transposed these with figures, such as loas and spirits, from the folkloric accounts she had heard from her mother and other elders, often depicting them in colloquy in the images’ foregrounds. Although she had never been taught to read or write, she would add to the bottoms of her pictures verbal fragments, names and words she came across or invented.

After her master began to spend long periods of time away from Valdoré coordinating the efforts of the local militias with the French troops to patrol the western end of the peninsula on which Jérémie sat, she took mahogany charcoal sticks to the mouldering wallpaper and paled, cracked walls of the manor house’s numerous unvisited rooms. She was careful not to be caught drawing by any of the other remaining slaves, a risk that diminished as their numbers steadily fell.
Often in the middle of her creative process she would remind herself that she needed to break away to make tributes and create protective or curative powders and oils, as she had seen her mother do, in case the plantation was attacked or her master discovered her handiwork, but she would then fall back into her reveries, ending only at the point of exhaustion.

When at Valdoré, Nicolas de L'Écart was too preoccupied to notice the slavegirl's peculiar gifts. More urgent concerns beset him: in addition to holding onto his plantation, even in its advanced state of neglect, and serving as one of the leaders of the area's civil defense, he was engaged in a pitched battle with what remained of the municipal bureaucracy to clear several incorrect tax judgments and collect monies that were owed to him. He could usually be found in the main salle, where he met with the ever-waning cadre of his fellow planters or Army representatives, or in his library, poring through his financial records, or in the cool cellar chapel his father had built, his favorite manservant and groom, a tall, slender, muscular homme de couleur man named Alexis, praying beside him, sometimes under the tuition of one of the few priests still circulating in the district, the young, intrepid Fr. Malesvaux. Frequently the trio slept together there, loaded muskets at de L'Écart's and Alexis's sides.

De L'Écart, in short, was holding out for the restoration of the prevailing order. As soon as the governor—General Rochambeau—or another French leader suppressed the hordes and reclaimed the colony—whether or not France and Britain signed a peace—de L'Écart aimed to acquire a slew of new, well-broken slaves to rebuild his patrimony. Both Leclerc and Napoleon had promised not only the rounding up and return of all fugitives, but the complete resumption of bondage. There is order, and there is the order. For more than three decades Nicolas de L'Écart had been one of the prominent grand blancs in the South District, administering the estate that his grandfather, Lézard L'Écart, an indefatigable naval mechanic in the employ
of the French crown, had established at the end of the long reign of Louis XIV, the Sun King. While de L'Écart found it inconceivable that Napoleon's forces would fall to unlettered gangs and maroons, in the event that the blacks did triumph, he had nevertheless drawn up plans to depart for Santiago de Cuba, where he had purchased a large plot of land for coffee cultivation. Were things to reach that nadir, he planned to take only Alexis and several of his able-bodied adult male slaves, and as many of his possessions as he could fit into several large carriages. He was determined not to leave the world under conditions substantially reduced from those in which he entered it.

One morning in mid-summer 1803, after the British bombardment had abated, Nicolas de L'Écart rode west with Alexis to attend the funeral and auction of his cousin, Ludovic Court-Bourgeois-L'Écart, a fellow coffee planter, whose estate, Haut-les-Pins, perched high above the coastal town of Cap Dame-Marie. Court-Bourgeois-L'Écart had perished after a bout with the creeping fever, and the news of this turn of events, along with the murder of several neighboring planters—and in spite of the French Negro ally Dessalines' campaign to return escaped slaves to their plantations, which was succeeding on estates near Mirogoâne and Jacmel—which had finally convinced de L'Écart that he should depart for Cuba. As he and Alexis headed east, cannonade shredded the hills in the far distance.

The night before, de L'Écart had abruptly ordered Carmel to prepare his emergency trunks. As per his orders, she filled them with freshly scrubbed and sun-bleached ticking; sheets and pillowcases; towels; several cotton nightshirts; a month's change of gentleman's wear, including scarves, cravats, city shoes with brass buckles, as the gold and silver ones had already been stolen; an oilcloth cape; an overcoat of boiled wool; two horsehair wigs with sanitary powder; several boxes of French lavender soap; a writing set (without embossed stationery); a cube of wax with the de L'Écart seal; several shell combs; two straight razors, a strop and a whetstone; fragrant honey soap;
a square of lye; a mother-of-pearl-edged mirror; a deck of playing cards; several bags of gunpowder; the engraved, amber-handled pistol and leather holster; a box of lead roundballs; a briar pipe with a tin of Santiago tobacco; a tinderbox and wrapped wicks; Alexis's favorite toy, a palm-sized Mexican rubber ball; another large carved and polished rosewood implement, like an arm-length squash, that smelled vaguely of the outhouse; and the Latin Bible de L'Écart had purchased during his year in the Roman seminary.

About her own fate, he said nothing.

While taking a break to begin supper for her master, Carmel felt a strange and powerful force, unlike anything she had experienced before, seize her. As if she were in a trance, she rose and staggered down to the cellar where she found a small stub of coal, and then as if pulled back up by an invisible cord, rushed to de L'Écart's second-floor bedroom. She had the sensation of wanting to cry out, as if someone were twisting the sounds out of her throat, though she knew no sound would issue. On the buttercream-and-buttercup covered wall facing his bed, whose chief additional adornment beyond a crucifix was waterstains, her hand took over.

WHAT CARMEL DRAWS

A road winding along the Grand'Anse through the hills above Jérémie, which she covers with such dense and darkened foliage that she gouges the surface of her father's mural. A white horse, astride which sits a tall, gaunt black man, wearing a field cap, a workshirt, and breeches. He carries a musketoon slung over his back. Alongside this rider and horse, another horse, black, its teeth bared and its reins swooping upwards but unheld, forming an arch. It bears no rider. Instead, high above it, a saint—no, a Frenchman, short and lean in the hips hangs upside down, a cocked hat still on his head and his hands
extended as if he were diving. A pair of pince-nez hover before him. She adds clouds, a moon, and beneath the respective white and black steeds the block-lettered names LXI and MONS, before crossing out the second one: MONS.

When she finally drops the black nub, Carmel is too drained to wash the wall or hide. She returns downstairs and falls dead asleep beneath the kitchen table.

Nicolas de L'Écart did not have an opportunity, however, to view her creation. As he and Alexis returned via a road that descended through a hilly pass above the Rivière Chaineau, a band of rebels shot up out of the ground before him. He reached for his flintlock, which he always kept loaded, and cocked it to fire, but before he could, his horse reared, hurling him into a deep and jagged crevasse. An insistent bachelor with no issue, his estate by will and law passed into the hands of his younger brother, Olivier.

From 1780, Olivier de L'Écart had practiced law in the kingdom's colonial centers. In his private hours, he conducted studies on boundary and treaty disputes, producing a monograph entitled On the Legal Matters Pertaining to the Royal Survey of the Antillean Islands in 1785, as well as various pamphlets on related topics. In the autumn of 1789, as the revolutionary clouds massed in Paris, he went to New York to advise the French delegation on its negotiations with the new American republic. By the coup d'état of 1792, he was in Philadelphia, where he successfully sat for the bar. By the 11th Germinal, he was again assisting French diplomats, this time in Santo Domingo, with the civil ramifications of the Consulate's proclamations; when he learned of his brother's death, he had lived there for exactly two years. His American wife, Grace, came from an old Anglo-Catholic
family that owned extensive tobacco plantations in the Maryland Tidewater. Their only child, a daughter, Eugénie, was nearly fourteen. Olivier de L'Écart, like his brother, had been raised in the provincial milieu of southwestern Saint-Domingue, and educated in Paris. He had supported the King's laws and penal codes across the new world colonies through his advocacy, and now his late brother's slaves were his own. He nevertheless was a man of feeling; he had always maintained a strong inner revulsion towards absolutism and the dominance of the aristocratic estate over the others. In the tome-lined safety of his library in Philadelphia he had even cheered those who had forced the royal hand on the tennis courts of Versailles, and later seized the state outright. He aimed at some future stage in his life to resolve this contradiction, though he had grasped at an early age that law presented the best compromise. That the cause of equality, or liberty, seen in another way, had culminated in brutality and the militarism of Napoleon, however, just as Sainte-Domingue also had degenerated into its own terror, did not surprise him. The rhetoric of the Enlightenment was a more powerful stimulant than that which had enriched his family, because equality, he had more than once penned in his journal, was the proper guiding principle, though in practice it required severe restraint: "As distant as heaven is from the earth, so is the true spirit of equality from that of extreme equality..." (Montesquieu).

Upon learning of his brother's death, de L'Écart planned to dispose of the estate as quickly as possible. He was not unamenable to selling it to one of the local propertied mulattoes, since he had known several of them since childhood and foresaw that ultimately much of the island would end up as scraps in dark palms. His wife, however, pushed him to identify a buyer first from his own station, or at least from any Frenchman who could post a bond. It would, in any event, be sold. The capture just months before and the subsequent death of L'Ouverture, who had cooperated repeatedly with French aims
only to see his loyalty betrayed convinced de L'Écart that quite soon, the blacks, now awakened to their fate, would hereafter consent to be betrayed only by blacks. As his parting act and as a gesture of his magnanimity, a virtue in which he took considerable pride, he also planned to emancipate whatever slaves were still at Valdoré.

Before departing for Jérémie, Olivier de L'Écart shipped most of his personal effects forward to the home he had purchased in Georgetown, as he intended to resume his law practice in the new capital of the United States. He had also thought of sending his daughter on to the United States, but his wife insisted, despite the perilous situation in major portions of the colony, that the family not be separated, as the sapling flourishes best in the forest. He did not bring the few servants who also belonged to his ménage, despite his wife's request that he do so. From what he recalled during his last visit several years before, there was still a small but loyal cohort on the plantation, which would suffice for the purposes of his scheme.

Grace de L'Écart was not so eager to dispose of Valdoré. She imagined the possibilities of society in Washington to be promising, especially given her familial connections, but she had also dreamt of becoming a plantation mistress, a role for which her upbringing had most thoroughly prepared her. As it was, she had had to endure the snobbishness of the créole planters and their spouses, and the vulgarity of the government functionaries and the rich traders, as a barrister's wife; though her husband possessed both wealth and prestige, and was of the landed colonial classes, even adopting the de, as became his father's right by the King's quill-strokes, he had spent his adult life among this sphere essentially landless and in the service of a government in Paris whose aims had long been held in mistrust.

Given this new change of fate, she was thus quite willing to endure Valdoré's oppressive tropical heat and the summers of fever-bearing mosquitoes, which, her husband had once joked to her, were the colony's true masters. She was also ready to take reins over her own
retinue of slaves, even if the blacks of Saint-Domingue had tasted freedom and would only return to their prior condition at penalty of death. If it meant a life among French-speaking whites with airs and mulattoes grown so presumptuous as to declare themselves on equal footing with their former masters, she would weather it.

As soon as he had planted his trunks in the main salle and inspected the house and near grounds, de L’Écart deputized three of the male slaves that remained to serve as personal guards. A ricketed hunch-back of about 16, named Beauné or Boni, whom he found sleeping in the stables, was to guard his wife and daughter; the second, Alexis, his brother’s former groom, who moved through the house as if it were his, was to accompany him at all times; and the third, the middle-aged Ti-Louis, whose right hand had been lopped off at some point in the past, was charged with guarding the grounds. De L’Écart then rode off to the town hall in Jérémie.

In the meantime, Madame de L’Écart had Ti-Louis gather the remaining female slaves. There were four—Amalie, who tended the few remaining animals and the garden—she was Alexis’s sister, and younger than him, in her late 20s; Joséphine, an elderly woman who was deaf and partially blind; Jacinthe, another elderly woman of regal bearing who could barely cross the room; and the long-legged, mute creature named Carmel. The Madame immediately set Amalie and Josephine to cleaning the ground floor, while directing Carmel to the upper storeys. The ungainly, very black woman-child who could not talk particularly unnerved her.

When the tasks were underway, Mme. de L’Écart scoured the pantry. The shelves contained half a dozen pulpy mangoes and sabrikos, three furred malangas, a stalk of blackened bananas, covered bowls of horse chestnuts, wormy meal, jerky, numerous tins of that had been emptied of their spices and nearly empty jars of English preserves,
and a circle of hard, heavily molded cheese. Roaches wove a sepia tapestry on one shelf, ants another on the floor. Jacinthe, who had never labored in the de L'Écart kitchen, was told to prepare a proper supper for the family. Mme. de L'Écart did not trust that the slaves would not attempt to poison her, but she was certain, based on her quick review of them, that the elderly Jacinthe had the most to lose by destroying the source of her sustenance. Still, she stood watch in the kitchen until the meal was complete.

Carmel brought her tureen of lukewarm water, frothened by lye shavings, several large palms and a handmade broom, up to the front guest bedchamber. She had tied several washrags around her wrists. The room like many on the upper floors lay shrouded in old sheets, smelling of woodrot and disuse, so it must be cleaned in order for the daughter of the new Monsieur de L'Écart to sleep here. One of Carmel's charcoal tableaux, though not as fantastical as the one in the master bedroom, covered the largest wall. She looked right past it. She raised the window and opened the shutters, then hauled the Tunisian carpets onto the sash overlooking the balcony. As she began to pummel the ends of the rug with the broom handle, a nasally voice snapped from the closet: "Girl."

Carmel instantly stopped cleaning the carpets and turned around. Before her stood the white girl she had seen earlier, her shoulder-length, greasy, hay-colored hair falling in green grosgrain-ribboned braids behind her ears; her eyes, beads of cooled nickel, floated above her hawkish nose. She wore a pale green short-waisted dress of lawn, with a matching green girdle cinched by a darker green silk bow that set off her growing bosom. It had been years since Carmel had seen a young white woman on the grounds of Valdoré, let alone in such a brilliantly colored dress. She clenched her fist around the broom handle, and took a step to the side.

"What is your name?" the white girl asked, in melodic French.

Carmel mouthed her name, though no sound emerged. She
wanted to resume her work, but the white girl circled, observing her closely. She paused, leaning close enough to Carmel that her nose momentarily touched the enslaved girl’s cheek. Carmel froze.

“I know your name. This is my father’s plantation now. But he’s going to sell it.” She smiled conspiratorily. “We’ll be leaving for Georgetown, where I was born. Father has a house there too. I’ll have to have a handmaid, Mother says. Tu restes avec moi.” She perched on edge of the high canopy bed, wheeling her legs about. “I had one in Santo Domingo named Carolina.” Carmel nodded. “She would sass Mother all the time, the black witch, but Father doesn’t believe in whipping Negroes. But that’s not a problem, because you can’t sass me.” She then said several things in a language Carmel did not understand, and laughed.

“You don’t seem lazy, though,” she continued. Carmel returned to battering the carpets. The white girl grabbed her shoulder and wrenched Carmel towards her. “Can you keep secrets?”

Carmel, unsure how to respond, nodded a second time. The white girl looked her over once more, and said, “Of course you can, how could you tell? My name is Mademoiselle Eugénie. But that’s not a secret. I’ll have to figure out a way to teach you to understand English soon. Then I’ll share a few with you.” She bounded out of the room just as Boni poked his head in. Carmel splashed lye soap water onto the pine floorboards, and untied one of her wrist-rags to start scrubbing. Through the window wafted the faint scent of burning cane.

Within several fortnights, Olivier de L’Écart had identified a potential buyer for the property, a creole speculator who lived in town. The price was a robbery. The rebellion had yet to fully turn to the blacks’ favor, but they now controlled large stretches of the colony from the border with Santo Domingo all the way to Jacmel, and where they held sway their administration was as vengeful as that of the French.
In fact, reports of the slaughter of whites were as common as the fires from distant plantations painting each night’s sky. De L’Écart set about settling his brother’s chief debts, hired an agent to handle the remaining fiscal and land matters, sent trunks on to Washington, and purchased passage for his family. Although his original plan was to free the slaves—because he was finally ready to take a radical step not just in mind but in action—his wife suggested that because there were so few still at Valdoré, they be included as part of the estate to bolster the price. She also wanted him to retain several for their personal use. They would be keeping Carmel because Eugénie must not be left without an attendant of her own.

In fact, Eugénie so dominated Carmel’s waking hours that she was unable, at least for the first few days, to do anything but serve the white girl. Eugénie followed her everywhere, continually demanding her assistance in everything, ordering her around and insisting that Carmel play games with her, often in the midst of the slave girl’s required tasks. She taught Carmel to deal cards and comprehend the Spanish cursewords she had picked up in Santo Domingo. Or she practiced her amours with her servant, cuddling and caressing the younger woman, commanding her to brush and braid and unplait her pale hair, showering her with a level of attention Carmel had never experienced. In this way, to Eugénie’s way of thinking, an understanding took root between them.

Within a few weeks, Carmel and Eugénie had developed a means of communication consisting of hand and facial gestures that only they could comprehend. When Carmel couldn’t make herself clear in this rudimentary pantomime, she mouthed the words in her version of French. As she brushed Eugénie’s hair, Carmel would intermittently pause to stand before her mistress to pantomime brief tales about Nicolas de L’Écart, her late parents, the other slaves and their escapes, the various battles in the mountains, the rebel outposts in the nearby hills and mountains, the British sailors who had seized
the port, and the waterlogged, mutilated bodies she’d discovered up on the banks of the Grand’Anse—none of which interested Eugénie.

The white girl only wanted to know who had done the drawings that covered many of the walls. Their crudeness of execution, substandard media and haphazard placement all about the house were proof, as Fr. Malesvaux had stated in the library one evening as Eugénie played a pleasant minuet in a corner of the room, that, contrary to Monsieur de L’Écart’s appraisal that the images had been created by one of the penniless graduates of the École des Beaux Arts circulating in the colony’s formerly flush days, that the artist had received no formal training and was evidently a Negro mimic of the usual sort, but the exacting and strange details, marked by jarring juxtapositions of nefarious symbols, such as snakes, rainbows, hatchets, fish, coffins, swords, and unidentifiable abstractions, showed that their creator possessed an inestimable capacity for evil. Her father was less convinced of the drawings’ maleficence, though the large, wildly sketched figure on the cellar wall depicting an image of a man he took to be his late brother did unnerve him, and so he followed his wife’s counsel.

“If the fox be unseen
though his scent fills the air,
the glen is dangerous
for more than the hare.”

Monsieur de L’Écart and his wife slept armed in the small guest bedroom across from Eugénie’s, at whose door stood Ti-Louis, his machete at his side. Alexis was now the house sentry. It was only a matter of time, Eugénie had overheard them saying and told Carmel, before the ex-slaves, led by some houngan, fulfilled the end of some prophesy with the last of these de L’Écarts.

Carmel had often thought about flight and knew the hilly terrain near Jérémie, as well as the coastal route towards Cap Dame-Marie.
But what would her prospects be? What if she encountered French soldiers, or one of the fighters who had slain her mother, or insurrectionists who believed she ought to die solely because she already had not fled, or pledged to one faction or the other? She had no way to argue her position in the face of a bayonet or barrel, let alone some soldier’s unbuttoned ... Amalie, who had spoken with refugees from neighboring plantations, told of horrific murders: by Rochambeau’s troops, by the rebels, by enraged petits blancs who now saw no place for themselves in the new system. Carmel did not distrust her fellow slaves, but she also perceived that because of her mother’s particular history, they’d kept their distance from her such that there was almost no possibility of deeper ties.

Olivier de L’Écart scheduled the first Friday in August 1803 to ride down to Jérémie to notarize the contract of sale and transfer the deed. The next day the family, with Alexis, Jacinthe and Carmel in tow, would board la Pétite Bayadère, a frigate bound first for Cuba and then for the United States. Carmel thus spent all of Thursday draping what furniture still sat in the house and packing away all of Eugénie’s personal effects. She had stowed her own possessions in a flax sow’s ear.

The de L’Écarts sat down in the dining room to eat their supper. Olivier de L’Écart had never avoided discussing the grave state of affairs across Saint-Domingue in front of his daughter, so now he broached the topic of the uneven French campaign and the rumors of Dessalines’ planned treachery against his former masters. Several plantations to the southwest had already been razed, their owners tossed into the Bourdon, while the French forces were again massacring rebels in the north. The goal of the masses was to tear the white out of the Tricolor. His wife chattered peevishly about the lack of correspondence from Santo Domingo. Reason, unlike the olean-der, cannot take root where the soil is poor. Eugénie ignored both of them, slipping away from the table when neither was watching.

As soon as Carmel finished assisting Amalie in the dinner service,
she descended to the cellar to wash down its floor and recount the casks of wine and rum, which she had swaddled in straw for their journey. Suddenly, she felt dizzy, and then a loud voice overwhelmed her ears, as if filling them with a command. She fished a lozenge of coal from the bin. Down the center of the limed wall in front of her she drew a series of wavy double lines. Atop them she etched a formless mass, into which she set what quickly materialized as Valdoré. Her hand was moving so quickly she could barely control it. All around the estate’s grounds, she drew what she initially took to be mountains, though they looked more like arrowheads. After a few minutes she had covered both sides of the road with a hundred of the serrated peaks. At the base of the wall, she drew two horses, atop one of which sat Alexis, then another horse, with no mount. Beside him lay a thin, whiskered white man. Her hand traversed the wall so rapidly that her entire body was shaking. Over the horses’ feet she drew a boat, a coach, two white female figures; around them still more triangles such that whole sections of the wall appeared to move outwards as if in three dimensions. At the very bottom she scrawled TOUT, then crossed out both Ts. OU. Her fingers cramped, loosing the nugget. She felt so spent she fell to her knees, but as soon as she recovered she doused her lantern and fled upstairs.

Eugénie found her lying by the side of her bed, and slapped her. Carmel instantly sat up. “What were you doing?” Eugénie demanded. She glanced at her unbound trunks. “Don’t think because Uncle Nicolas is gone you can get away with anything.”

Carmel rose and picked up a length of hemp. She saw that her palms were black and wiped them on her apron. She was trembling but began to wind the rope around a trunk. Eugénie reclined on her bed.

“Mother says the French are dying like horseflies,” she said. “Did you know they also get the fever in Georgetown too?” Carmel finished one knot and began the next, without glancing up at Eugénie, who had crawled under the covers. “Father is going to write a book
about this plantation. Are you listening? Here's a secret: in Santo Do-
mingo I had an admirer. He was a creole boy in the seminary there.”
She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Actually I had two. The sec-
ond was the uncle of my tutor, Madamoiselle Rossignol. That’s why
Mother dismissed her.”

Carmel kept tying. Although she had considered telling Eugénie
about the drawings, she thought better of it. She wound rope around
a long, knee-high case that had once held hat presses for Monsieur
Nicolas. She couldn’t remember what she had packed in it just hours
earlier.

“Oh, stop that,” Eugénie said with annoyance. She climbed out
of bed and snatched the rope from Carmel’s hand. “Busy, busy. My
last handmaid could sing, did you know that? Don’t you have any
talents?” Carmel remained frozen, quivering. Eugénie pushed her
toward the door. “Draw my bathwater, girl,” she groaned. “Can’t you
see I’m tired?”

THE ROLE OF DUTY

“It is true that it has been said of blacks through the ages that ‘they
don’t work, they don’t know what work is.’ It is true that they were
forced to work, and to work more than anyone else, in terms of ab-
stract quantity.” —Deleuze

Within the context shaped by a musket barrel, is there any ethical
responsibility besides silence, resistance and cunning?

The next morning de L’Écart rode down to Jérémie with Alexis at
his side. He wore his holstered pistol and carried one of his broth-
er’s rifles, while Alexis carried only a well-honed machete and a pike.
Meanwhile at the dining table Mrs. de L’Écart wrote missives to her
mother and dearest cousin, who was married to a planter living outside Savannah, and with whom she often commiserated by letter. Eugénie pretended to browse through an illustrated copy of Aesop's Fables while her mother was occupied, but eventually she invented solitary card games till she grew bored. She then tracked Carmel, who had continued to clean the house and pack up goods.

By late afternoon, neither Monsieur Olivier nor Alexis had returned, though Mme. de L'Écart affected not to show concern in front of her daughter. She ordered Carmel to find Boni or Ti-Louis and have either venture into town for news. Or Amalie, who had grown increasingly inattentive. This task provided Carmel with an opportunity to shake loose of Eugénie. But her search of the house, the near grounds, the gardens, the sorting house, the stables and barns produced neither man. Nor could she find Amalie, whom she had seen that morning preparing the day's supper, a spiced squash soup, nor Jacinthe. Their absences filled her with unease. She went out to the mostly deserted slave quarters, which sat on an undulating ridge to the west of the house, away from the river; she had not visited them since the de L'Écarts moved in. There she encountered Joséphine, sitting on an overturned milk bucket in front of her shack, gumming a charoot. Carmel mimed a query to Joséphine, asking if she had seen any of the other servants or knew where they where or what was going on. The old woman offered only a smirk in reply, a grayish-blue question mark of smoke unfurling above her head.

Carmel ran back to the house. She mimed to her Mistress that she could not find any of the other servants, except Joséphine. Mme. de L'Écart, who was disposed to ignore slaves' histrionics, ordered the girl to set places for herself and Eugénie, then complete her tasks. She planned to have a glass of rum with her bowl of soup, read, and wait for her husband to return.

Carmel returned to the cellar. She paused in front of her drawing. The mountains—or whatever they were—appeared to leap from the
limestone wall towards her. The image as a whole churned her stomach, yet she could not pull away. Suddenly, she felt fingers clasping her wrist.

CONCERNING THE IMAGE

What does it mean, Eugénie calmly asks Carmel, I watched you cover this wall last night. She pulls Carmel close to the wall. Why did you do this? Carmel sluggishly shakes her head. Who told you to do this? Carmel shakes her head again. I don’t believe you—

Eugénie approaches the image and studies it, touches it. She swipes her finger through one particularly dark, iridescent region, stopping on the male figure laid out just above the O U. She wrenches Carmel’s wrist. Carmel is silent, she doesn’t know.

Answer me! Carmel, though still unsure, considers her earlier experience of the drawing with M. Nicolas, and tries to mime what she lacks the gestures for: they are going to TEAR THE WHITE OUT.

Still holding Carmel’s wrist, Eugénie ran upstairs to alert her mother that a terrible plan was afoot. Madame de L’Écart sat at the dining room table, her dinner bell, her untouched bowl of soup and several of her late brother-in-law’s meticulously detailed catalogues of purchases stacked in front of her. She had regularly strived to break her daughter’s tendency toward theatrics, so she ordered Eugénie to choose between her supper or her room. The daughter repeated herself, a murderous plan was underway. She had no appetite. Mme. Lézard de L’Écart dismissed both girls and, despite the indelicacy of reading during dinner, returned to her book.

As Eugénie, still tugging Carmel, made her way upstairs, she glimpsed through the kitchen window the surrounding hills, which
were glowing like an amphitheater at a night carnival. Without a second thought, she ordered Carmel, who also saw the lights rising just to the east of the plantation, to get them safely to the quay.

A DIALOGUE

[...]

Where am I supposed to go?

[...]

According to Amalie they've seized control of both banks of the Chaineau and are advancing up the Grande Anse.

[...]

But I've never been over the water—

[...]

Where am I supposed to go, and what I am to do when I get there?

[...]

What am I supposed to do when I get there?

[...]

With Eugénie holding the rifle that both girls knew first Nicolas and then Olivier de L'Écart always kept loaded, Carmel entered the library and stuffed the family's important papers in a leather satchel. In the dining room, they found Mme. de L'Écart lying on the carpet, retching. Carmel kneaded her stomach to speed the vomiting, then fetched a pitcher of vinegar water, which she poured down the agonizing woman's throat.
With Eugénie pressing the gun to her back, she raced upstairs and packed a large sheet with two changes of clothes and toiletries for both of her mistresses, to be loaded in the small, flatbed wagon that sat unused in the meadow near the stables. Carrying the knotted sack under one arm, she returned to the library and guided Madame, white as chalk and barely able to stand, to the wagon. There was only one horse in the stables, a swaybacked nag, which Carmel bridled and hitched as she often had witnessed Alexis do. With the mistresses hidden under a tarp that M. Nicolas had kept in the wagon for a similar purpose, she cocked the rifle, which Eugénie had only grudgingly handed to her, lifted the reins, and galloped off towards the byroad that tracked the Grand’Anse.

What Carmel remembers: nothing of the ride beyond the stench of burning coffee and bush. Not the dizzying descent down the path beside the treacherously churning Grand’Anse. Not the call of the lamb reverberating through the foliage. Not firing once into the darkness, nor the blunderbuss’s powerful report. Not Eugénie’s intermittent shrieks from beneath the rug under which she and her ill mother lay. Not the manor house erupting behind them like a immense gladiolus. Not even Monsieur Olivier de L’Écart staring up at them from the grave of the underbrush, his gaze as it met hers as impassable as a collapsed bridge, when the wagon swerved onto the main road into Jérémie.

Of the drawing, only what she now realized had covered the wall’s expanse: flames.

A year and a half after the establishment of the Haitian state, the orphan heiress Eugénie Mary Isabelle Margaret Francis de L’Écart had yet to settle in at the tobacco plantation of her maternal uncle, Colonel
Charles McDermott Francis, outside Washington. Neither Colonel Francis, who had readily taken in his late sister’s child, nor his wife had so far proved capable of dealing with Eugénie, who, they both believed, had yet to recover from the depredations she had endured in the slave colony. Under a different scenario, they might have recognized that she was entering the full bloom of an innate rebelliousness not unlinked to the one she had just lived through. Like a weed, Eugénie’s libertine attitude was beginning to take hold among the Francis’ own two adolescent daughters. In addition to her repeated disappearances and her inappropriate behavior at social gatherings, there was a near-scandal involving an immigrant day laborer on the Francis estate. As it stood, there was no possibility of marrying her off, without adequate finishing, to a respectable young man among the local Catholic families. Colonel Francis therefore decided to send Eugénie to a convent school out west, where he and his wife hoped the nuns might instill in her not only discipline but also encourage her domestic talents and cultivate her reacquaintance with the basic social graces.

In the late summer of 1806 Eugénie de L’Écart entered the Academy of the Sisters of the Most Precious Charity of our Lady of the Sorrows, near the village of Hurtts-town, Kentucky. The small and elite order had originated in southern Wallonia in the waning years of the Counter-Reformation. It was known for its industry and thrift, as well as for its effectiveness at spiritually molding young women of means. When the Directoire’s gendarmes targeted the order in 1797, the nuns dissolved the convent, fleeing first to the Netherlands and then on to Spain, where they established a new foundation. A handful of members, however, envisioned great potential in the young American republic, with its guarantees of religious liberty against the ravages of reason, and after a brief sojourn in the city of New Orleans, established a convent and school in the far western corner of Kentucky in 1800.

The convent consisted of six nuns and novices, with eleven girls
living as boarders at the school, and a trio of enslaved people, a young woman, Rochelle who attended to the nun’s needs, and two older men, Hubert and Moor, who served as groundsmen, guards, grooms, and general factotums. The convent’s estate comprised what had once been a large whitewashed mansion, in a rough version of the new Federal style, with a similarly designed carriage house and outlying buildings, as well as the extensive grounds—all partly constructed on the site of an Indian burial mound—of one of the region’s first white settlers, the farmer, soldier and land speculator Joseph Hurtt, a native of Maryland who had fought against the Shawnees in the final battles of the Revolutionary War. When he succumbed to pleurisy at the turn of the century, his childless widow, whose mother had studied with the nuns on the continent, promptly donated what remained of the estate south of the creek to them before repairing to the federal capital.

The Tennessee River separated the convent’s spur of one hundred and twenty-two acres from Chickasaw territory to the south and west; a steep hill and valley, interlaced with woodlands and traversed by a rocky road which abutted a wide, bridged creek, the grounds enclosed the entire length of their perimeter by a high, stiled fence, separated them from the miniscule, hardscrabble town of Gethsemane, which was also known as Hurttstown, to the north and east. There were no Roman Catholics among the townspeople. They consisted primarily of migrating Virginians from the Piedmont region who had intermarried with a small band of pioneers from the lower Ohio River and Big Sandy River valleys. Less than a handful held slaves; there were no free Negroes in the town. Most of the Gethsemane residents, touched by the religious revivals racing like wildfire from the Atlantic, were quite suspicious of the brown-habited, French-speaking nuns, who now not only occupied the largest share of what remained of the one great estate in the area—the rest having become Hurttstown itself—but also ran a school that did not admit the locals, though none of the
elders of Hurttstown believed, in any case, in the education of girls. The Reverend Job White, pastor of the United Church in the town and variously mayor, vice mayor, councilor, and sheriff, was known to inveigh regularly against the advances of the Popish virus, which had given Indians airs and the false promise of equality. The nuns lived and functioned, then, in a low-grade state of siege.

The first Catholic evangelization attempts in the area near Gethsemane, to the indigenous people and the whites, around 1797, by a French-speaking missionary priest from St. Genevieve, Missouri, had been rebuffed with violence. An effort two years later by two Dominicans friars from New York to raise a chapel along the creek had ended in their flight from the town at dawn. The nuns, aware of this history, proceeded with great care, taking every opportunity to maintain a provisional truce they had established with the townspeople, and refraining from any direct outreach to the Chickasaw. The sisters in fact did not themselves visit the town without the accompaniment of at least one local who periodically worked on the convent’s grounds, and one of their black manservants.

The convent’s Mother Superior, Sr. Louis Marie, a formidably tall woman whose habit always smelled of lye, was of the mind that the greater threat lay not in the gospels of finance, freemasonry and Protestantism, which were preponderant in America, but in that other dangerous product of the post-Reformation age, excessive liberty, poisoned by rationality: what, after all, had provoked the savagery that had clotted the streets of Paris with royal blood? What had brought nearly all of the great European kings and queens, divined by God, so low, and elevated the sons of merchants, with their abstract doctrines of progress, and the new, utterly alien secular order? All of the girls were required to develop the Christian aspects of their character by living austerely and working in rotation in the convent’s workrooms, kitchens, and on its small farm and printing press, which produced pamphlets to spread the Word, and the world it might help to maintain, far and wide.
They were instructed in deportment: modesty, charity, gentility. The nuns usually accomplished this through positive reinforcement and penance, though they turned to more forceful methods when needed, for not only sunlight gilds the marigold. The curriculum consisted of the practical arts, as well as courses in basic theology, introductory mathematics, and French and Latin grammar. Only amongst themselves did the girls speak English. They were taught to sew, weave and darn; appraise the quality of materials and goods and be judicious; to bake, cook simple meals and supervise more elaborate ones; to conserve household resources for times of need; clean and oversee workers to ensure a proper home; preserve produce and meats; and propagate a sustaining and decorative garden. Like Eugénie, several of the girls were from border or Southern states and had brought a slave girl or woman. The nuns permitted these bondswomen to receive a minimal instruction, in French, in order to follow along in the recitation of the Bible and prayers, during the thirty minutes of repose after the Sunday Mass.

SELECTED RULES (printed and bound at the Convent of Our Lady of the Sorrows)

7. Girls shall not take the Lord's name in vain or utter any blasphemy, nor repeat any calumny against or concerning the Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church.

8. Girls shall not dishonor or disrespect the Blessed Sisters or their fellow students.

9. Girls shall not gossip or engage in idle or slanderous discourse.

10. Girls shall not promenade around the Convent or its grounds as if on display, nor journey about the Convent or its grounds unsupervised except in groups of three (servants shall not count toward the total).
11. Girls shall not under any circumstances venture into the village of Hurttstown without the escort of a nun and a townsperson.
12. Girls shall not send notes or communicate with or enter into any written intercourse with residents of the town.
13. Girls shall avoid all license and provocation, in thought and deed.
14. Girls shall treat all of God's creatures, even those of the lowest station or caste, or of the smallest size, with love and respect, for whatsoever they do to the least of His brothers, that they render undo Him.

After only sever'al weeks Eugénie found the routine intolerable. She bridled at the endless carousel of classes, courses in domestic arts and etiquette, prayers in the chapel, and labor. As in all convents, the greatest practical evil, after apostasy, was idleness. She had been neither pious nor obedient under more favorable circumstances, and she lacked any foundation for managing the conditions at the convent, which offered her no means for fostering personal happiness. She was inattentive in class, insolent to her superiors, indifferent in chapel, and at all times indolent, in the manner she'd witnessed since childhood among women of her class and which would have been suitable under the dictates of a different and vanished social order, which is to say, normal circumstances. Under her requisite mud-brown frock, which covered her wrists and boots, she sometimes secretly wore a lace shift pilfered from her late mother. Although the nuns forbade any forms of physical adornment, she would sometimes apply carmine blush, which she hid in a tin box below a loose paving stone in the dormitory floor, to her white cheeks after sundown.

Eugénie had always mistaken Carmel's dutifulness for devotion. Now she saw her slave as her primary means of emotional support, so
she was initially kind and solicitous, assisting Carmel in making her bed and plaiting her hair, though she quickly tired of extending herself in this manner, and reimposed their longstanding hierarchy. She subjected Carmel to tirades about the food, the heat, the difficulty of the coursework, the chilliness and poor French and comparatively low stations of the other girls, and about her aunt’s and uncle’s unremitting cruelty in having sentenced her to this fate. Carmel stood at the side of Eugénie’s bed, staring at her mistress and awaiting an order, thereby giving the impression of agreement.

Carmel’s true enthusiasm lay in Eugénie’s books, from which she devised her own curriculum. She enjoyed the ecclesiastical Latin, which she learned to read and write; she had already begun assimilating the rudiments of English, as well as French grammar, during her Maryland sojourn, and spent part of her free time perfecting them. During the convent meals on Saturdays, which the schoolgirls themselves were required to serve, and the periods before evening prayers and lights-out, Carmel worked her way through the Bible, the Catechism and the Martyrology; she used her readings to wordlessly tutor Eugénie, who could not be bothered to open a book unless she was in class. She usually wrote out Eugénie’s lessons, while the white girl lay on her bed under the flickering lantern light and whispered rambling monologues, half truth and half apostatic fantasy, on her exploits earlier in the day, in Maryland, in the capital. Eugénie claimed to have been courted by a banker; proposed to by a prosperous trader, as well as a sitting Senator; and to have slept overnight in a rooming house of dubious repute not far from the White House. She claimed to have slipped away and combed the streets of Hurttstown, which she pronounced nothing more than an overgrown sty, and to have explored the woods and valleys near the Indian encampments. Carmel accepted these tales without astonishment, committing them to memory, and when she could find pen and paper, sketched some
of them out, concealing the papers in a gash in her mistress's straw mattress so that the nuns could not easily find them.

In general, Carmel found her routine bearable, since it gave her numerous breaks from Eugénie and opportunities to experience the world, even if that world was the severely restricted space of the convent and of her required duties. She enjoyed her own weekly, half-hour Catechism sessions with the nuns, which allowed her to expand her grasp of grammar and rhetoric, and the periods of common-work during which the other slave girls and women, under the supervision of one of the sisters, sometimes convened to undertake joint projects. [Carmel had grown accustomed to isolation and solitude at Valdoré and valued every moment away from Eugénie as an opportunity to learn and cultivate herself.] No matter; the other slave girls took offense at the fact that she did not sleep in the cramped and spartan quarters out back with them, not realizing that her mistress had demanded special dispensation on her behalf. They took offense at her height, which stamped her with in an Amazonian air; at her self-possession, which they read as arrogance; they took offense at her bookishness, which struck them as pretentious; they took greatest offense at her unbreachable silence. Almost to a person, they read this as a white contempt; her unassimilable refusal to communicate in a sensible way defied their sense of shared suffering and solidarity. All of them maintained their distance, gossiping about her constantly, spreading stories, when possible, to the few slaves in town: she only spoke when casting spells; she was actually a zombie; she might not really be a female at all. She responded by focusing more intently on whatever task was at hand, to the point that some of the nuns thought her the very model of industry and dedication.

After the first month, Eugénie spent her free time developing affections for classmates. She was devoted to a skinny, raven-headed girl from Bardstown, Kentucky, but dropped her for the polished admiral’s daughter from Delaware, before heedlessly pursuing another
recently arrived young white woman from Vincennes. Eugénie had Carmel write out long, passionate notes to each, slapping her hands when she miswrote, before ordering her to burn them. After lights out, Eugénie would practice her affections upon Carmel, who usually concentrated as completely as possible upon a text she had memorized that morning or a drawing that she’d been working on, until her mistress tired and fell asleep, at which point she would get up and draw for an hour by candlelight on scraps of paper she had salvaged furtively from the printing shop earlier in the day.

CARMEL’S DRAWINGS

Her mother serving as a lookout in the banana trees along the road to Valdoré—Christ on the mountain top—Christ among a crowd of rebels, giving a sermon on the banks of the Grand’Anse—Ruth—her father at the Francis homestead on the Potomac—General Napoleon and president Jefferson chatting on a Washington street—M. Nicolas reclining between the thighs of Alexis on a divan in the library at Valdoré—Jacinthe standing above the Christ child’s manger—an exterior of the convent after a heavy snowfall—St. Benedict the Moor—INRI in the outline of a fish (repeated until it covers the tiny square of vellum) —Africans genuflecting in the chapel at Valdoré—Saint Monica—Kiskeya—General Dessalines on his black-throated horse in the main street in Jérémie—the Mermaid-Divinity La Sirène—tous les loas—Mam’zabelle standing over a shallow pit behind the slave quarters as her mother solemnly drums on the maman—her father in the whale’s throat—in the Cuban dog’s—a circle of Chickasaws building a fire—micha ai illi aiokhlileka okfah kia ak ayah mak osh—her young mistress recumbent as an odalisque on a filthy pallet in an Alexandria rooming house—a map of the surrounding area—the county—a map of Kentucky and Illinois territory—a map of
Eugénie's second assigned rotation required her to assist one of the novices in arranging, labeling and packing up pamphlets, printed on the convent's press, as well as sundry dry goods in the storehouse. These included fruit and vegetable preserves, votives and other religious artifacts, such as rosaries, which Rochelle in her free time created, which were then sold through peddlers to Catholics living further south and west beyond the Northwest and Louisiana territories. The nuns also brewed their own spirits from harvested apples and berries, though they kept these for personal use, as they dared not provoke the temperate among the townspeople. A young carpenter from Gethsemane named Jacob Greaves, nephew of Reverend White, who had helped the nuns construct their still and oak casks, was again on the grounds to build a new annex to the storehouse. It did not take long, Carmel quickly noted, for something indistinct to begin spinning between Eugénie and Greaves, like a thread of freshly blown glass: brittle chatter, sly and expressive glances, a note catching in the throat for a second too long. No one else around them noticed a thing. Carmel detected periodic upswings in her mistress's mood, and Greaves's name surfacing more than once in Eugénie's monologues to her.

The late fall began its collapse into winter. Each night the hearthless bedchambers chilled like tombs, and the nuns, to maintain a proper atmosphere of asceticism, permitted only one heavy wool blanket and quilted eiderdown per girl. The conditions only magnified the hardship for Carmel, who half-slept on a low cot, bundled in her clothes and her mistress's cape. Eugénie had become increasingly distant, moving about as if in a dream, to the extent that she often appeared to forget that her slave girl was even in attendance. On certain nights after lights out, Carmel would hear her slip away, as she had done in Washington, though she always returned before dawn. Once she reappeared with the fragrance of apple wine on her
breath; another with her woollen shift's back blackened with peat. One thing she rarely forgot was to have Carmel artfully pack her bed with a sack of rags and place her bonnet at its head, in case the nuns conducted a room check. She swore the slave girl to silence—she was not to reveal anything, not even in confession, though this was unlikely since Carmel bore on her conscience none of her actions on behalf of Eugénie's schemes; she was only carrying out her duties as commanded. In any event as far as she knew none of the priests who visited periodically accorded slaves that rite.

Carmel usually spent the immediate half-hour or so after her mistress's departures at her favorite pursuit. She had completely filled one of the spare handbound diaries that Mrs. Francis had sent her niece, and was now beginning another. The mattress could no longer hold all of her work including the books, so she began concealing them beneath the false floor in her mistress's trunk. She hid her tin thimble, which served as an inkwell, and the old quills she'd collected from the convent's scriptorium in the corner behind her pallet. None of the regular, official inspections of Eugénie's room had uncovered either.

On the last night of October, a severe chill settled in, then a light rain began falling. Eugénie vanished not long after evening prayers. Carmel, who for a week had been feeling alternately restless and easily peeved, had wanted to show her that earlier that day she had finally passed into womanhood. Since Eugenie was gone, however, she readied her mistress's bed, but noticed that the sack of rags, along with several pieces of Eugénie's clothing, were missing. She'd put the clean laundry away and balled up two petticoats to fashion a sleeping body. Once she'd tucked it in, she fished out her book, her quill and her drawing book, and returned to a drawing she had been working on, depicting the meadow, spread out like a sheet of loden cloth, behind the convent. Though she had only black ink, she found herself wanting to work in color and envisioning other methods for realizing her fertile imagination, such as embroidery and painting. The nuns
would forbid either option unless she were depicting religious scenes. The white rain, rhythmically painting the windowpanes, began to lure her. The room assumed a strange and heavy dampness. As she started to crosshatch a poplar tree, her eyes rolled into the ceiling. On a blank page was drawn a rough map of the region, labeling the convent, the nearby town, the brown scythe of the Tennessee. Halfway through Gethsamane-Hurttstown, a line, but abruptly it broke off. Instead the quill punched in wavy lines, some of which gouged the paper; these stretched from the center of the river all the way across the town itself. Her fingers began moving more and more rapidly, drawing the waves automatically, until she bowed the quill completely backwards nearly snapping it. Spent, her forehead veiled with sweat and her eyes still cycling, she trembled, unsure where she was, but out of habit tamped the wick so as not to arouse the nun conducting that night's inspections. She slid the book, under the bed, and—

Some time later, she felt something tugging at her hand and foot: Carmel momentarily fought back until she realized it was Eugénie, in the darkness, pulling her from under her bed’s wooden slats. Carmel could feel that the white girl’s hair and clothes, what few she wore, were completely soaked. Still partially asleep, she groped around the room for a spare blanket and patted her mistress dry. In utter darkness, she rolled her mistress’s wet garments up, pressing them into a corner and slid the white girl into her nightgown. She stuffed the cape against the door and lighted a tiny tallow candle, which took a few minutes, since she had to orient herself to find her mistress’s trunk, in which they kept the tinderbox and a few votives. Once the flame spoke, Eugénie told Carmel of her adventure getting back to the convent: out of nowhere the heavens tore open and torrential rains fell. The sky thundered repeatedly, and then lightning struck as she was ascending the half-mile long road between the town and the convent. The path and the little bridge across the creek were swiftly and almost completely washed out behind her. Tree limbs, uprooted bushes and boles lay strewn like chicken bones down the surrounding hillsides. She had
had to run as fast as she could to avoid being swept backwards by the
downrushing water, which was falling as if a celestial dam had split.
After hurdling the gate and crawling through the basement window
she always used, she had peeled off her muddy boots, stockings, cloak,
and dress in an alcove next to the coal room, bundled and hid them
in a secret compartment in order not to leave footprints on the stone
floor. She’d made her way to her bedroom in only her petticoat and
undergarments. Exhausted, Carmel wanted to pacify her mistress and
put her to sleep, so she embraced her and rubbed her back.

At that moment, the ringing of the alarm bell in the front hall broke
the girls’ brief, silent spell. Outside the room, bare feet scurried along
the stone floors. Then the two girls heard the Mother Superior’s
voice shuttling towards them: “Mesdames, emergency assem­
ibly in the front hall!”

Carmel took her book and, as Eugénie searched for her robe, quickly
hid it in the trunk. Both girls opened the door just as the Mother Supe­
rior’s hand pressed from the other side: “To the front hall, mesdamoi­
selles, immediately!” Eugénie and Carmel arrived to find all the other
girls, the nuns and novices, a few of the workers, and the enslaved
young women, in various states of night-dress, milling about.

The Mother Superior clapped her hands, and the girls formed their
well-known rows. The head nun took a quick headcount, everyone
was accounted for. She ordered the slave Hubert to check the cellar.
Because the convent and its acres sat on high ground that drained
into the creek and river, flooding in its buildings was unlikely, but she
wanted to be sure. Before Hubert could report on the status of the cel­
lar Moor was ordered to prepare cots in the upstairs library just in case.
When they had gone, the Mother Superior described what Moor,
who had served as sentry that night, had witnessed at the front gate:
Clouds as huge as Hispaniola had anchored over the hill and town
below, then burst forth with rains the likes of which he’d never seen
in his entire life. As the river leapt its banks on the Gethsemane side,
he’d rushed in to alert the nuns and the other slaves, so that they could
bring the few field animals into the barn and secure the horses in their stables. Turning back in amazement at the ferocity of the unexpected tempest, he'd noticed a ghostly specter hurrying toward the gate, but by the time he'd been able to go back outside, it was gone. You must, the Mother Superior continued, now return to your rooms and stay there until morning prayers, but we shall each appeal to the Heavenly Father and Our Most Blessed Virgin to ensure that little harm is done to our neighbors. Ave Maria, gratiae plena, Dominus tecum...

Carmel and her mistress returned in silence to Eugénie's room. Carmel closed the door, and promptly dropped to her knees. She didn't have a rosary, but she knew the sequence of devotions well. Eyes closed tightly, her body trembling, she launched into the Lord's prayer in her head, in French. Behind her, she could hear her mistress pulling her blankets over her head as the rain unleashed its curses upon the glass.

At a morning assembly several days later, after the storm had dissipated, the Mother Superior delivered a short verbal report on the state of the convent and grounds. She pointed out that according to the male servants, nearly two dozen people in the town, whole portions of which still lay under an icy blanket, had drowned. In fact, while conducting a walking inspection Hubert had come upon the body of the convent's factotum Jacob Greaves, grounded like a barge in the creek's new banks at the base of the hill. A waterlogged sack of his clothes and a few personal effects moored at his side. Though the convent had received no notice, Carmel overheard one white girl telling another, it appeared as though he was quitting not only their employ at the convent but his hometown as well. The nuns, Carmel later learned, had wanted to attend his funeral in town, but they had been warned not to set foot on the other side of the river; nevertheless, when the next priest came through they would ask him to say a special Mass for Greaves and the other deceased, which included one of the old milk cows. The students and most of the nuns, who were
quite fond of Greaves, erupted in tears. Eugénie bawled insconsolably. Carmel, standing at the rear of the room with the other bondswomen, many of whom were weeping too, stared at her mistress, who briefly turned around; her face had contorted into a wet, stone grimace. Turning away, the slave girl noticed that her fellow slaves, through their tears, were observing her, their expressions a mix of emotions shifting so rapidly she couldn’t fully grasp them. She trained her eyes on her bare feet until the Mother Superior had finished her remarks. After a recitation of the rosary, the girls were dismissed to prepare for supper. Carmel waited until the nuns, the girls and the other slaves had departed, then she returned to the room.

She immediately thought of her work. Were anyone to find it, they would suspect the worst, and she might be punished and then sold off. She wasn’t even sure how Eugénie might respond. As far as she could recall she hadn’t experienced such an episode for the entire time that they’d been at the Academy of the Sisters of the Most Precious Charity of our Lady of the Sorrows. She entered the room cautiously. Eugénie did not acknowledge her. Silent, the white girl continued balling up her dirty clothes to be taken down to the washroom. Carmel perched on her cot and watched. When Eugénie was done with the clothes, she sat at her desk and began to brush her hair, which had come loose from its knot. Carmel did not move. When Eugénie had finished, she tied a brown ribbon around the ponytail, smoothed her frock, and sat back down. She still said nothing. Carmel crossed the room and started to re-sort the laundry when she felt something rap the back of her head. She looked up to see Eugénie stepping back, her forehead and cheeks dark as port, her eyes swollen.

“We never even got as far as the river,” she spat out, preparing to strike Carmel again. From the folds in her skirt Carmel withdrew her rosary. Instead of administering a beating, however, Eugénie pushed closer to the door, whispering only: “Parce que le diable ne s’arrête jamais.” Because, it is true, the devil, tireless, rests only for the devil. With that, Eugénie snatched the rosary and fled the room.

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A DIALOGUE

Are you going to waste yet another opportunity to save yourself?

[...]

If you use your time wisely you’ll be ready to take action.

[...]

You can take the wisdom you have at hand, scant as that is, or my counsel, which is to consider the consequences of repeatedly following the path you already know.

[...]

:::

the worst winter ever horrible cold mlle E still not speaking to me except orders fais ceci fais cela as always do this do that a pere malevo MALESVAUX here since after the flood say mass every morning in the chapel all of the S allowd to stand in the back i can say it by heart mlle E alw talkg to him she tell the other girls he ws a good frend of mon oncle she workg in the kichen i on garden detail we had to shovell snow off roof so v v cold then knitting stockings for the winter first for mlle E then nuns she made me promise PROMISE no drawings no promesse PROMISE no drawings no none wrote out english sentences & sd 1 rosary befor slp

:::

so v v cold the creek a knife of ice sky same color today we shovelled off the roadway down to the fence and the town mlle E sd to me but not to me bc she is not speakg to me parts of the town of Geth siminy is froze over the nuns send some breads & soup down but the revd mayor refusd I polishd mlle E new boots from her tante Mme François FRANCIS & sweaters sewd her collars & tear in her cape she
haves anothr handmade book fr her tante on my cot but when I sd merci she ignore me after a while she gone out quo puella fugit rido latin sentences & 1 rosary bef slp

Frigidissima haec hiems est I overhrd one Sr say that the govnr wd sending some help becouse the town sufferg so bad still they refuses bread and soup today we scrubd the cellar floors & the attic of the convent not to disturb the girls we clean the 1st and 2nd storeys on Saturday the other S did not speak to me but sd to each othr pointing to me why dont it save us the trouble and clean them with a spell they laughd mlle E still not speakg to me say I shd keep my nose out of all those books a ngr with a head full of figrs is as useful as a broom that know arithmetic I rolld my eyes mind yrself girl english sentences & 1 rosary bef slp

still so cold woke early almost dr but decide to read insted mlle E punishd bc she did not finish her french assignment had to sit the penance rm w SRS & pray ros which she nevr do save in chapel & mass even then she only mouth the wds I can say it in my lang french english latin & greek she did not speak when she return to rm but pulld my hair when my back was turnd etiam hieme cor gelatur today we washd down 2nd flr and 1st flr all the classrooms & workrooms & the ballroom where the Srs and the girls eat later after evening prayers fr MALESVAUX went down the hall & a little while later mlle E gone too latin & english sentences & 1 rosary bef slp

V cold today Sunday mass I stood in the back w the other S I sd the whole mass to myself they fell aslp or touch their dresses or gossip aftwrds we had our theology class w the nuns of course Sr did not
call on me but all my writ answers was correct later she sd to hrse but I heard her what a loss if only she were wht she might be worthy of taking vows later in the room mlle E order me to clean up I dust everything swepd the floor refold all her clothes she did not speak later after lights out she gone english sentences & 1 ros bef slp

Finalement cold breakg at morng prayers Sr askd us to pray for townsp who died fr the cold she sd ten but i hear one S sd many more & they blame the convent if the Srs dont stop their wickedness there will be under siege again there is something or someone terribly evill up there sd the revd mayor then the S all look at me rolld my eyes washd cloths all day then hung to dry in cellar later mlle E & her friends JOSEPHINE & MARY MARGARET sitting on her bd J sd do you think your S ever get lonely & MM sd of course they seem human too but mlle E sd no bc they have us she refusd to nod off finally then english & latin sentences & 1 ros bef slp

Still cold mlle E lookd strange this morn sd i know it was you i combed her hair straitened her bureau made her bed she just repeatd i know it was in the garden det today a new S FEDRA PHEDRA the nuns call her PHÈBE-MARIE aft the Bib belong to mlle JOSEPHINE O'G fr savannah her old S was NISI who the nuns called NICOLE-MARIE sent back to georgia she never speak i am hope PHEDRA/ PHÈBE more friendly her eyes a secret waiting to be solved mlle E not speaking tired went to be early so & 1 ros

Monday so cold mlle E not speaking 4 days often w father malesvaux he still do not appear to reconize me am teaching PHEDRA PH my signs swept washd down room floor washd out mlle E
clothes w other ones so v dirty alws hung to dry in cellar only saw
PHedra|PHèbe brief tday she used 1 sign while knitting stocks heard
1 S say to another S in Eng CARMEL-MARIE is putting poison in
the food im not i signed they ran away caelestia mihi vires read mlle
E Bib & wrote latin & englis sentences & ros

cold cold wheres spring mlle E still not speaking disaprd last night
like past came in early morning cloaths v wet cold struck me several
times said if y scream or bang the walls I SHALL KILL YOU on
garden det ground hard as stone then patched tablecl serviettes cur-
tains today all day fingers tired swept PH at first no speak then we sat
for few minutes she knows twenty signs now we talkd for as long as
we cld mlle E held my face down in the washbas you had better watch
out she sd then i cd breathe english sentences we declare these truths
to be self evident & 1 ros

Monday still v cold tho PRINTEMPS – SPRING mlle E sick again
had to lie down did not want to go to infirm did not want to see pere
malesvaux he is still here she sd stop staring at me you witch her face
full and red after attend mlle J PH met me in the hall we sat for a few
minutes and spoke she knows almost 35 or 40 signs now I give her
a drawg do not let anyone see it she kissd me on my cheek english
sentences & drawg & ros

Early wake mlle E sick again I will take you to the infirmary no she
said I cleaned up her mess all of a sudden very hot today like home
wkd in garden on det after through w mlle E who will spend summer
here say mme/mrs FRANCIS aunt of E she dont want her back
there fewer girls now PH beside me we digging put in seeds 2 S told
PH dont you know she disappears at night we seen her above the conv from the attic windows on her broom I signed they ran to the other end of the garden PH got very quiet I give her a drwg later mlle E could not keep her food down sd if you are poisoning me girl you will be sorry as if rido latin sents & 2 ros

No entries for 2 wks mlle E refused ink dei gratia she relented v hot they say there is a drouth in the town one of the male S HUBERT was in town spk with the 1 or 2 S there sd they tell them mayor towns people say: is those nuns wherever the POPISH cult take root there also grows evil had an entire baskt of woolens to darn PH had another detail until aft supper we seen each other outside the dining hall missd you she sd in signs she tells me abt georgia mlle J family how she born on island down the coast her fathr sold off to louisiana I give her small 2 drwgs careful fold 1 of her later cleand the room swept washd down w soap back to the knittg finished six prs so far mlle E's ankles swollen I caressd them till she fell aslp was v tired & 1 ros

Wk early not sure wh mlle E returnd sick as always cleand it up she will not go to infirm cannot fit one pinaf blamd me for shrinkd it she got ready to strike me and I lookd at her she laid down the drouth in the town continues made candles with Sr FRANÇOIS-AGNÈS kepd 2 fr myself Deo volente saw PH when I went to draw water fr the well she touchd my face I tell her about Ayiti mlle E family valdore how we escapd gave her 1 dr hid in hem of my frock mlle E followd me around till she fell aslp v late aft lights out 8a rosary

No entries for 2 wks mlle E hidden my book threatd to give it to MO-THR SUP she still sick face red cannot fit her bodice angry at me

~ 128 ~
today v hot at mass like in Ayiti sat in balc as always PH held my hand afterw group of S told her you will be just like the witch if you dont stay away do you know she can really talk but only speak the devils tongue PH laughed and then 1 S named MARILENE-MARIE slap her they nearly fight but I stoppd it they ran off we got a piece of chicken in tonights soup gave her 1 drwg of MY self mlle E went to bed early night visit did not work & 2 ros

::

Woke early mlle E crying what have you done to me I didnt do anything I sd she tried to strike me with a brush stop it you sorciere you bruja diablesse but I didnt do anything I fight her back take off the spell SR CHARLES ISABELLE came in mlle E sd CARMEL is being insolent SR did not believe her but she orderd me to say penance and the ros, I saw PH brief she hugd bef she went back to her mistr mlle Josephine mlle E fell asleep beflights out in the corner tryd night visit did not work no & 1 ros

::

Woke v early my back sore fr cleaning the inner halls my det this wk the other S kepd turng over my bucket one took the rags sd make the water run back into the pail I will I threatd they grew quiet mlle E upset you wk for me she sd I sd I know but she did not listen PH askd me do you know any spells from Ayiti I sd no spells but my mother knew how to call upon the other worlds but I do not have those powrs she sd oh I think you do we laughd she gave me a hand of violet PHlox as we heading indrs 1 S girl sd to her looks SHADOW like you finally found your BLACK they laughd PH did not answer mlle E v tired made me lie beside her stroke her hair deum misereatur as I fall slp she sd somethg is wrong are you doing somethg to me CARMEL I answered I havent done a thing God have mercy on me fin she slp english sent red & 1 ros
V hot by early morn like in Jérémie several nuns were sick the few wh girls left not feeling well mlle E cd not get out of bed pls CARMEL she sd use your powers I shake my head what powers we prepared pamphlets to be sent to other Caths in the west several wh men arrivd w horses wagons mlle E wantd me to describe them I sd I cdnt remem- ber she was v angry but fell aslp then I saw pere malesvaux w them he to stay aft they leave PH & I stand behd wagon she kissed me we hrd something & stayd for a little while then we left I give 1 dr of us in eveng when I checkd on mlle E she still sick had a fevr I bathd her head tryd a night visit no luck & 1 ros

V hot today men loadd up wagons we put in preserves sev trunks of cloaths also got much merchdse from east mlle E up and abt she doesnt eat look ill but face flush I combd her hair some fall out she big as a calabash v quiet stared at me but say noth when wagons & men leave PH and I hid und the stairs so we cd talk I gave her dr hid it in my hair & she sd your power is in here & touches my brow later mlle E sd where was you dont lie to me then she wd not talk again tryd a night visit no luck latin sentences & 2 rosaries

Fri woke v early v hot day like mid sum mlle E awake alr made me take out her slip and pinafore do not let the Srs see I did not see PH all day mlle E said well you think anyone here cares about you but me even some other S she laughd I startd crying but she pulled my hair your only concern is me I fight her back she stopd I overhrd 2 S whisp pere malesvaux leaving heading west to St Louis after mass Sun like it was a secret where is PH did not see mlle J tryd night visit but did not work da meliora & 3 ros

~ 130 ~
Sat woke v early v hot day alr mlle E awake v quiet she was read the BIBLE she never do that did not speak to me I went downst to beg wkg on the new cloths w Sr FRANCOIS-AGNES no PH I sewd till dinner 1 S sd to another now you see she made her shadow disappear I lookd at them oh where is yr shadow PH now they laughed anothr S sd I think her mistr sent her home she was turning into a witch hrself or was it the witches mistr who got her send her home they laughg I turnd away cd not finish my din made sev errors w the stitchg later mlle E silent not sayg anything when she aslp I did not cry tryd night visit saw my mothers face but thats all & no ros

Sun v hot wk early mlle E already awake staring at me at mass pere malesvaux sd it v fast sat alone aft we assembled on the back lawn to say goodbye to pere malesvaux he wldnt return until the late fall or early winter MOTHER SUP sd the wagon to carry him off wd arrive that aft sev nuns prayd I went downst to sew cloaths did not see mlle E at dinner we got soup w sweet onions some jerky & sweet bisc I sewed until nightfSr FRANÇOIS-AGNÈS said go back to your rm when I got there did not see mlle E her bed empty a circle of ashes ? on the floor near my cot I waitd until v late no mlle E quiet outsd checkd my books and papers all there sd rosary tryd night visit but no luck then on a swatch of paper no larger than my palm & began —

DRAWING

River—or creek—a hill—
a clearing—two figures—no faces—
girl—male—older male

~ 131 ~
Krik krak, a week later at midday, as I sat in the cellar workroom in the rear of the nunnery, making new blouses out of old linens under the nominal supervision of Sr. François Agnès, who had slipped away to make a toilette, I heard a hubbub emanating from the first floor. The summer brazier that been pressed to the sky above the convent and town had yielded to several days of light, intermittent rain, but the basement remained humid as a cave, and I found myself intermittently reciting lines of Scripture, switching from English to French to Spanish to Kreyòl to Latin to Greek to myself in order not to fall asleep. Sr. François Agnès’s Bible sat on the table beside me, open to the Gospel of John. As I brought the needle to the sleeve, the warm, dense air, which filled the air as if I had conjured it from my childhood, enfolded me like a lullaby. . . .

When I awoke, having not missed a stitch, I could still hear a din above, though now it was feet scurrying rather than voices. Sr. François Agnès had not returned, nor had any other nuns or enslaved
girls. I set aside my needle and fabric and hurried out of the room to find out the source of the commotion. Down the hallway, I saw Sr. François Agnès huddled with Sr. Ambrose Jeanne in the doorway to the storeroom, their whispers caroming off the walls. I wiped the sleep from my eyes and lips and slowly, step by step as if to render myself invisible, approached them.

Sr. Ambrose Jeanne was telling Sr. François Agnès that given the circumstances, the Mother Superior had no choice but to conduct an inspection, it was a disgrace that such events should come to pass in a house dedicated to the Lord, but under the circumstances there was no choice. Sr. Ambrose Jeanne shook her head violently; it was simply impossible that any of the nuns, let alone the girls, had been involved in such abominations. Sr. François Agnès agreed, pausing to look in my direction, her gaze arrowing past me towards the far wall, but added that the Mother Superior had no other option—the sheriff, Reverend White, had given her an ultimatum, and if she was unwilling to examine the girls, he would bring a party similar to the one that had just accompanied him, firearms in hand and deputized by the Commonwealth of Kentucky, to the convent’s front steps, either do his work on the premises or take the nuns and girls by force to the town.

At these words both sisters embraced each other tightly, and Sr. François Agnès held Sr. Ambrose Jeanne as the latter sobbed her astonishment away. The examinations were to occur early that evening instead of supper, and as it was to be, so be it. Then they knelt on the warm stones and prayed, and after two rosaries, both nuns headed quickly down the catacomb-like hallway to the stairwell. After a pause of my own and still unsure of what was going on, I followed. When I was almost at the stairwell, I could hear other voices rounding the corner. It was two of the schoolgirls: Josephine O’Grady from Georgia, and another girl who was not Eugénie. I leaned back against the limed wall and crouched to listen.
The girls' voices trembled with shock as well. Josephine, her English thick as a magnolia petal, asked the other girl who on God's earth could have possibly done such a thing? She ticked off the list of nuns, not a single one had been with child, of that both were sure. They saw them daily at breakfast, at supper, at dinner, in class, in chapel, not one was with child. How could anyone have assumed such a thing? And then there were the schoolgirls themselves, only five now in summer residence, Josephine and Mary Margaret, both speaking to each other now, who were each sure that the other was as virginal as their other classmates, Catherine, Dorothy Angelica, and even the sickly, greedy Eugénie—none of them could possibly have been with child either, it was as clear as the reflection on the chapel patin. Sr. Germain Ruth, who ran the infirmary, would attest to that. And it had not come from any of the slaves, Josephine assured Mary Margaret, because, as they'd seen with their own eyes when the sheriff had thrust the tiny corpse into the Mother Superior's hands, Mary Margaret gasping at the very memory, its tiny fists seizing at the air, its mud-caked face petrified in a shriek, its icy blue eyes staring out fishlike as if glimpsing the netherworld for the first time, its azure placenta eeling out of its swaddling, and most horribly, the calligraphy of marks and hatches, as if a demonic stylus had been drawn across its forehead and chest, it had been as clear to everyone assembled, all the nuns, all the schoolgirls, all the slaves, and the sheriff and his party of a dozen, that although the withered infant body had been found bundled in what appeared to be a slave girl's shift, it was not a product, as he had clearly noted, Josephine's voice breaking, "of that infernal race."

The stench, Josephine continued, she could not ever forget, even less than that horrific image. And its unheard cry was still ringing in her ears. But, she told Mary Margaret, shortly after the sheriff and his party had descended the hill, aggrieved and barely satisfied, and everybody had been sent to their rooms or stations until another or-
der was to be given about what would occur next, she had spied the
Mother Superior and several of the other nuns, including Sr. Ger­
main Ruth and the disciplinarian, Sr. Charles Thérèse, in the parlor
looking at the small, bloated body, which they had placed on a table,
and she had heard them saying that it did not appear to have been
mutilated or used for some diabolic ritual, as the sheriff and most
in his party had alleged, but rather as if it had simply been expelled
from its birthing place too early, and been buried in that shallow grave
just on the other side of the creek, at the rim of one of the many tiny
sloughs the flood had created—a tiny blue waxen doll, not murdered
by some mortal hand, despite its pose and cry and open eyes, because
it was already deceased, though in the sheriff’s conclusion, the two
amounted to the same thing.

Given that there was no priest in residence, Josephine added, as
Fr. Malesvaux had departed by coach for Saint Louis only a week
before and no other priests were scheduled for several more weeks,
she thought it only proper that the nuns bury the child themselves,
praying for its soul and returning it back to the earth, on the convent’s
grounds. The entire incident was even more terrible, she added, than
the flood and its aftermath, and the unspeakably bitter winter, and
then the heat which now seemed to emanate from the gates of Hell
itself, and the problems with her second slave girl, Phèdre—atwhose
name I moved away from the wall, nearer the speakers, neither of
whom appeared to notice me—once so gentle and passive, who had
gotten airs and become defiant and begun behaving as if she were in
a bilious humor, even engaging in strange rituals, such as drawing
crosses on the floor and talking in riddles and murmuring almost as
though in a trance, so much so that she and the nuns had had, as Mary
Margaret already knew, to remand the girl back to Savannah and re­
quest that her parents send her another in her stead. As Mary Mar­
garet also knew, the new girl had not arrived and, this was news, as
soon as Mlle. Josephine returned to her room she was going to write
her parents a letter entreat ing them to remove her from the school as quickly as possible, she was not sure she could last another term.

Mary Margaret assented: she did not want to stay any longer either, though both would have to endure the inspection that evening and then wait till as long as the post would take to travel to their respective homes before they could return, since the nuns would not send them on their way otherwise. I then heard both girls scramble up the stairs, and when there was nothing but the general sound of movement, I ascended the stairs myself on my way to the bedroom.

At the landing, I saw two of the bondswomen who, during my entire stay at the convent, had mostly kept their distances from me, though today, as in recent weeks, they did not bolt but unexpectedly lingered, as if they were gliding into my orbit. Though they still pretended not to want to sit beside me during our brief meals, today, as when we were in the same room undertaking our various tasks, they were drawing closer, closer still, until we sat or stood only fingers apart. We did not exchange a single word, but these two, who had been given the ridiculous names Daisy and Avondale, I had chosen to rename respectively Diejuste, because of her usual genial manner, and Ayidda, because twice while working in the gardens in her presence I had seen garter snakes. Each gave me the hint of a smile, as if I had shared with them some secret that offered a clue to the brouhaha now unfolding, and though I had not, I returned the slightest smile to each of them.

In the bedroom I found Eugénie slowly taking inventory of her personal effects, strewn across her blanket like a market stall. She moved as if performing a masque. I tried to get her attention and pinched her gently on the arm, but Eugénie pushed me away. She went to the door and, using a loose corner floorstone, wedged it shut. As soon as she'd done this, she crawled down under her bed and extracted a small bundle from the corner behind the portion of headboard nearest the wall. The stinking, reddish-brown mass of fabric made me retch, but
I knew what she wanted me to do, so as soon as she handed it to me, I slid it under my own cot.

The white girl, still not uttering a word, approached me and, seizing both of my hands, plunged them in one dead swoop between her thighs. I drew them back, but the white girl grabbed a hold of them and again buried them between her thighs, clamping down so they were vised in there, a rosary bundled between the flesh scraping my knuckles. As she did so she mumbled several prayers, though I could not make out what they were. For a while we struggled as an onrushing current surged through my fingertips, my fingers, my hands, my arms, until I was finally able to break free. I settled on the end of my cot farthest away from Eugénie, and looked away.

She appeared satisfied by my actions, and resumed cataloguing the clothes before her. When she had finished, she carefully folded each of them up and stacked them into neat little piles. Then she turned to me and pointed to them, which meant that I was to pack them away in her trunk. She stepped back to watch me work. I carefully placed each of the garments in the trunk, counting as I did so. I tallied combs, wool stockings, bodices, bonnets. There was one petticoat and one pair of small clothes missing: these, I guessed, were the dried carbuncle I had stored beneath my own cot. When I was done, Eugénie gestured for me to open my own sack of garments. I did so. She ordered me to pull everything out.

On my cot lay a long, threadbare linsy-woolsy shift, spangled with patches, that I alternated with the slightly newer one I now wore. There was my other linen head scarf, a faded rose castoff gift from her aunt, Mrs. Francis. There were my mismatched pair of repeatedly darned woolen socks, which I had not worn since the winter. Finally from the bottom of my sack I extracted my several tattered petticoats, which had belonged to Mme. de L'Écart, my own small clothes, and my woman's garments, all of which, though gray from reuse and repeated washing I kept meticulously clean. Where was my other shift,
the gray wool one I, like all the other slave girls, wore during the winter? I was sure she had not removed it from the sack in months.

The white girl pointed to one of the petticoats and one of the pairs of undergarments, and indicated that they be placed in her trunk. When I hesitated, her blue eyes smacked me so hard it was as if I had been struck by an open palm. I folded a petticoat and the small clothes, and layered them atop her pile. I sat back down on my cot without permission and replaced my small menagerie in its store-place. Then we stared at each other, in silence, until Sr. Ambrose Jeanne appeared at the door to fetch Eugénie for her inspection.

As soon as the door closed I tidied up the room, then returned to my cot. I considering saying my rosary but did not.

EXCERPTS FROM A REPORT BY SR. GERMAIN RUTH ON THE INSPECTION OF THE PUPILS

On the 25th day of August, 1806, in the convent of the Holy Order of the Most Precious Charity of Our Lady of the Sorrows, in Gethsemane, Kentucky, under the supreme guidance and counsel of the Heavenly Father and our patron, Most Blessed Virgin Mother, Mediatrix of Grace, and in the presence of our Reverend Mother Superior, Sister Louis Marie K., as well as our Associate Superior, Sr. Alphonse Isabelle D., I have, in accordance with the teachings of our faith, the wishes of our reverend leader, and the rules of our order, prepared the following report on the requested examination of the pupils enrolled in the convent’s school concerning the matter that is the case. This activity, extraordinary in light of the habitual occurrences of this house, was conducted to ascertain the possibility of a particular and unspeakable tranngression by any of those entrusted to our care and formation. The particular case encompassing, in short, the tragic series of events that unfolded one week prior just across the estuary separating the convent’s grounds from those of the town.

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Each of the young gentlewomen was conducted individually into the calefactory. Verily, each was asked to be seated in a chair facing away from the window overlooking the west meadow, and was presented a series of questions concerning the evening under scrutiny. The inquiries also assessed any and all potential associations with any male person the pupils may have had, their behavior in the weeks leading up to the above-cited events, and the general and specific perceptions the reverend sisters may have had about each. With one exception, the alibis provided by the young ladies were in various states of conflict concerning their whereabouts between the evening inspection, conducted by my person, and the morning call. With one exception, that being Miss Eugénie de L'É., none was able to reply to any of the subsequent questions with persuasion. Several of the girls appeared to be in advanced states of agitation, which could have been the result of sin, ill or uncertain humor, or some other cause. Only the aforesaid Miss de L'É. was able to reply with a demonstrable measure of calm. It should be noted that the inquiries were conducted by all three of the sisters present, though the author of this report served as the primary inquisitor.

To go further, though in each case the child under inquiry was able to cite a fellow room occupant, usually a fellow pupil, who could vouch for her presence in her room throughout the entire period when the said events are alleged to have occurred on the said evening, each mentioned a detail or details that contrasted with the testimony of her schoolmates. In several instances there arose conflict over the very question of whether the girls were asleep for the entire period or even in their rooms. In the sole case of Miss de L'É. there was, the inquisitors noted, a solid story, to which another figure in the house, in this instance her bondswoman, might attest. One pupil, Miss Mary Margaret S., developed considerable disquiet during the inquiry, spe-
cifically on the question of her actions on that evening. Despite the
general concurrence of her answers by her roommate Miss Josephine
O'G., she became so discomfited at this particular question that she
expelled the contents of her stomach. The sisters present were not
completely inclined to believe them.

After this initial period of inquiry concluded, the pupils were then
individually asked to lie supine on the large serving table, which had
previously been cleared of its usual artifacts in preparation for this
portion of the inspection, against the east-facing wall. A white sheet
was draped so that it concealed both the upper and lower portion of
their torsos. Each girl was then told what this portion of the inspec-
tion would entail, which provoked several exclamations. In the case
of said Miss Mary Margaret S., Sr. Alphonse Isabelle had to spend sev-
eral minutes attempting to pacify her, and when this did not succeed,
she was held down, by force, until such time as she was sufficiently
becalmed, in order that the inspection could be properly undertaken.

The small clothes of each of the inspected were removed. In sev-
eral instances this was only achieved with great difficulty. In the case
of Miss Mary Margaret S., further force had to be applied to ensure
that she would comply with this action. The author of this report,
having served as the director of the convent's infirmary since its es-
establishment, and thus possessed of deep familiarity with the human
anatomy and physiological principles, proceeded to examine each
of the inspected. In half the cases the results were inconclusive. Al-
though it did not appear as though any of the inspected had recently
given birth, this inspector, having viewed in manuscript illustration
the essential parts at the conclusion of such an event, was unready to
make a decisive declaration. On this point the other nuns concurred
initially, although the Reverend Mother Superior, on continued ex-
amination, adjudged decisively that the inspected were still in an un-
molested state. Only in the case of Miss de L'É. did it appear that the observed anatomy appeared incontrovertibly unchanged, as it ought. Given that none of the sisters was in the least suspected in the matter, this second part of the inspection left all of the inquisitors present with great disquiet, though each duly was subjected to a similar examination, in the author's case the determinant being the Reverend Mother Superior. In none of the reverend sisters, by the Grace of the Holy Mother, did the observed anatomy appear incontrovertibly transformed.

\[\vdash\vdash\]

In every instance in the inspection concerning the matter that is the case, the effort was made to preserve the inspected's dignity…

\[Sr.\ Germain\ Ruth\ M.\ deP\ deK.\]

The nuns' official report, I heard Sr. Ambrose Jeanne telling Sr. François Agnès early one morning several weeks later as I sat undertaking piecework on the other side of the sewing room, having been delivered to Gethsemane's mayor by the white driver and mechanic who had returned from Missouri with Fr. Malesvaux, who was sojourning at the convent before returning east to Maryland, appeared, at least temporarily, to have soothed the passions of the sheriff and the townspeople, if not Reverend White. The summer heat, which had returned full blast, turning the air inside and outside the convent to glass, was, however, stoking the exact opposite effect.

Among their own population, Sr. François Agnès explained, they had identified a possible suspect: a white woman, the daughter of recent settlers in the town, was thought to have been secretly with child. Sr. François Agnès's expression, and the clipped, elliptical quality of her Latin, the language into which she and the other nuns
sometimes slipped when they hoped to avoid being overheard, suggested she thought the penalty ought be severe.

After the hubbub waned Eugénie had for several weeks remained in bed. The summer air cottoning everything had wrapped her fevers and induced fainting, from which she now appeared fully recovered. The ranks of her classmates had, however, thinned only to three white girls, two of them Josephine and Mary Margaret, neither of whom had been fetched home as she had requested, though Josephine’s replacement servant, an often surly young woman named Marvel, who quickly took up with Diejuste and Ayidda, and whom I renamed Marinette because of her temper, had shown up, a sack in hand, on a coach from the east. The only other white girl was Annie Lawrie Geddes, who may or may not have been from New Jersey. These three white girls moved about as if in a state of shock, or suspended animation; their regular classes having ended, they had only to attend a daily course, after breakfast, that involved close reading and study of the Scriptures, in English, and because of the heat to participate in the various light indoor domestic tasks in the convent, such as replacing candles in the chapel, or helping to dry herbs and blooms and the first summer fruits for preservation, or copying out passages from English-language religious books to be sent to Catholics elsewhere in the countryside and country. At all other times they were allowed to read, or knit, or embroider, or sketch. None showed enthusiasm in anything she did, Eugénie even less so than the rest.

Sr. François Agnès concluded her conversation and called me over, telling me that I should wrap up my sewing and attend to Miss Eugénie, who would be finishing her breakfast and heading to class. I ascended the stairs slowly, as I had of late ceased to move with dispatch, unless it was absolutely necessary. Since the incidents of several weeks ago, Eugénie, recognizing the changes in my behavior, had responded accordingly. She no longer expected me to wash with her waste water; she took good care not to hand her comb to me in expectation that I
would run it through her hair, or point to her chamberpot unless I was ready to touch it. In the hallway I saw Marinette; she was sweeping, but paused as I passed, and greeted me with her eyes. I replied in kind. The main floor was otherwise quiet; I imagined the sisters were either in the refectory or the chapel or downstairs, or otherwise occupied. At the stairwell to the next story, I saw Ayidda polishing the banister; we exchanged fulsome waves. The stairs themselves seemed to melt as if wax under my feet; it took me a while to reach the bedroom.

Eugénie was not there. I had already made my bed so I fiddled a bit with hers. I bundled her dirty clothes up and, exerting no real effort, lined her books up on her desk. She had forgotten to cork her ink bottle, to put her nibs away, to grab her writing book for class. I thought of taking it to her but decided not to. I set the main lamp outside our door so that it could be refilled for the evening, lazily brushed her shoes and beat out her pinafore, then closed up the room. This floor also was mostly quiet, though in the large room at the end, I knew, the class was unfolding. Behind me someone was padding quickly, and I turned to see Diejuste gathering up my lamp; we parried smiles. I proceeded down the hall until I reached the door of the class, which stood slightly ajar. All four of the white girls sat in a row at the first table, Eugénie on the end nearest me. I could hear Sr. Alphonse Isabelle’s voice rising and falling like a rattle. I stared at Eugénie until she was compelled to look in my direction, though by the time she, and the girls beside her, would have done so, I was already on my way back to the sewing room.

ON DUTY

What is duty?

His maister had not half his duetee. (Chaucer)

Wherefore duty?
We have done that which was oure duetye to do. (Luke, Luke xii, f. xcviij Tyndale's Bible)

What duty is due us?

To do one's duty thoroughly is not easy in the most peaceable times. (Pattinson)

Whither duty?

No conciliation is possible, for of the two terms, one is superfluous. (Fanon)

The summer heat grew ever more tropical, provoking fainting spells and transforming the upper floors of the convent to a kiln. By late June, the nuns canceled all activities for the white girls and themselves, save prayer, from midday to the early evening, that could not be undertaken in the basement. We thus rose just before dawn, before the sun broke, to fetch water, empty chamberpots, clean, cook, cultivate the garden, move all unused tools and implements, including a store of gunpowder, indoors, prepare whatever else was required for the white girls, and assist the sisters as they saw fit. The religious class moved into the sewing room, which had been my refuge, and I and Sr. François Agnès moved to a smaller room down the hall, a large closet really, which had been used for storage. It was far more cramped, but cool and peaceful, and as she assembled or disassembled garments, knit, embroidered, and darned, I worked on what I had at hand and tried to let my mind float free of everything around it.

Though I still read just before going to sleep and maintained my journal, my entries now tending towards a brevity so extreme that sometimes only a word or two, at most a sentence, resonant for my memory and me alone, would suffice, and I filled whatever space remained with minute line drawings of my fellow bondswomen, of the
animals, of the grounds; and with caricatures of the nuns, the white
girls, and the glimpses I had gotten of the townspeople and of the
convent's visitors, including the Reverend White's son Job Jr., whom
the nuns had contracted to repair damage caused by the rainstorm,
to the front portico and to re-wash, in white, limed paint, the entire
façade, I seldom undertook the more elaborate drawings that had
been my regular practice since arriving with Eugénie, though from
time to time I would extract the journals in which I'd drafted them,
documents I kept carefully hidden in a storage space underneath the
head of my cot, which I had dug out over a period of months and
re-covered with a large paving stone, to review them, usually with a
bit of bemusement at the queer constellation of imagery and signifi-
cation that I had developed—what on earth or in the heavens had I
been thinking?—and with admiration that, despite all the constraints
I had faced, from lack of materials to disapproval to potential pun-
ishment, I had produced so much and, I was not unashamed to say,
of such a high quality. Of course no one else beyond Eugénie knew,
and even she was unaware of the full extent of my efforts, not that
she would have been able to appreciate them anyway. Sometimes I
had the thought that I should share this work, at least with the bond-
swomen, but I decided that I would wait until I was surest the right
time had come, and undoubtedly, it had not.

My other mode of drawing had not made an appearance for some
time before nor once since the last and most egregious set of inci-
dents, and it struck me that perhaps I was outgrowing my youthful
lack of control, that I might be shedding whatever tether held me
to realms which, despite the otherwise deepening clarity of my per-
ception of the worlds around me, stayed still so concealed. In terms
of my own will and gifts, I had begun to figure out ever more about
how to initiate the night visits with my mother, summoning the door
before my eyes, though I had not yet found the right key, among the
many arrayed before me, that would open it; and as for whatever lay
on the other side of those drawings, with their arsenals of augury and admonition, I had not yet developed a theory of knowledge by which to understand them. Or rather perhaps I had, but lacked a language to characterize and describe them. It struck me that the spells and the drawings themselves might be a language, but this seemed so exploratory and fantastic, that I set aside further consideration of it, and instead reflected, when the thought struck me, on the process of my experience and practice of those episodes.

The air, though cool, was heavy; the room, lacking any windows, hunkered near to darkness. Sr. François Agnès, having begun to tell me how “Hell had come to St. Francis,” the “embrace of the tropics had forced the relaxation of the convent’s routines” and that “this was, pains seize St. Agatha, the sort of liberalization one would never see in the Low Countries,” had promptly tumbled off to sleep, her snoring gradually filling the room like water finding its level. I stood and decided to make a round, to see what was going on, and responding, if I were questioned, that I was on my way to one of my tasks, which, to be truthful, was the truth. As I often now did when I wanted to pass unnoticed from one part of the convent to another, I imagined myself the shadow I had been at Valdore, where no white person, save Eugénie, had ever seemed capable of seeing me. Had M. Nicolas de L’Écart ever noticed my presence? Had M. Olivier? Had his wife? For that matter even the bondspeople had rarely seemed to register when I stood among them. I wondered where most of them now were, the ones who had successfully escaped Valdoré’s vise, France’s visible and invisible chains.

I glided along the wooden floors without a single creak. As usual I wore no shoes; my hem floated off the ground; my pace was slow enough that I might even have gotten behind time itself. The heat seemed to form a curtain through which I had to press myself, though I did so with a minimum of effort. In the sewing room all the white girls save Eugénie had stretched out on cots, and were sound asleep, as was Sr. Charles Thérèse, who slumped over the table, the books
arrayed about her like an archipelago. Quiet preceded me down the hall; near the kitchen, I could hear the gentle snoring of Rochelle, who had, I imagined, fallen asleep with the soup on boil, its aromas of barley and sage wafting through the door's slit. I roused her, by means of a thought, and the snoring ceased. Presently I heard wood against metal, and the beginning of a soulful melody she routinely sang.

Upstairs, on the main floor, the heat was stronger still, though I could smell the outdoors blowing in through windows open on the building’s backside. My girls were seated in the refectory, on the floor against the back wall, their heads nodding in near-silent slumber. I did not want them to encounter any problems, so I woke them without entering the room, and could hear them stirring, as if to return to their duties, or at least to the semblance thereof. Across the hall I peeked in the chapel, where the Mother Superior, Sr. Alphonse Isabelle, and Sr. Charles Thérèse were curled into their chairs, the Holy Virgin Mother beaming down upon them, their books in their laps, their ivory guimpes and dun scapulars undulating rhythmically, their veils tousled over their shoulders like loose hair. For a second I drew the statue’s gaze to my own, then proceeded on toward the back porch, which led directly onto the gardens and the fields. There was a low buzz, as if people were talking but wishing hard not to be heard. Through the open door and through a large pane I could see Hubert, a kerchief on his head, toiling away with a hoe.

As I approached the doors the voices became more distinct, but I saw no one in the room. Crossing the threshold, I approached the window in which Hubert’s dark shirtless back and kerchiefed crown bobbed, like a millpiece, and I paused only when I reached the glass, which gave off heat as if it were molten. The voices were now clear, and clearly in French, behind me. I turned around to see the brown, hooded cassock of Fr. Malesvaux hunching over something fast against the wall. I hid myself beneath the table beside me, though given his lack of reaction, he evidently had not seen me. He shifted the angle of his cassock and from behind it emerged Eugénie, her
face flushed, her hair plastered to her head. Both her pinafore and Fr.
Malesvaux's gown, I could now see, were soaked through. The two
struggled, in silence, he holding her wrists tightly and saying without
saying in two weeks in two weeks while trying to extricate himself, she
responding you don't understand you don't, until finally he caressed
her face, her hair and hurried out the door.

Eugénie stood alone, against the wall, looking as if she wanted scream
or cry, but knowing better. I thought of calling attention to myself, but
I decided instead to observe her. For a while she remained in the same
spot, alternatively despondent and elated, occasionally looking toward
the window and the outdoor scene above me, intermittently at the skirt
of her pinafore, which she ruffled and smoothed. Her thoughts were
cycling so swiftly and dully through her head she would not been able
to articulate them had she tried. She bent down and raised a discarded
shingle, fanning herself for a while, until I grew tired of the episode,
whose overall meaning had grown clear to me, and drew her eyes in
my direction. She froze. She could not see me, of course, and peered
all around her, as if I had placed my gaze throughout the room. She
glanced at the table behind which I knelt, and after taking one step in
my direction, she wheeled on her heel and fled down the hallway.

I resumed watching Hubert for a while, until he broke to head to
the well, where I spotted Job White Jr. refreshing himself from the
bucket. At this point I also left the closed portico and headed back
to the basement.

A DIALOGUE

[...]

I refuse to think of them as wasted opportunities to save myself,
but rather as stages in my careful process of preparation.
I am more than ready and willing to take action.

I think I have finally come to understand your logic.

Have I ever had a vision of Hell, that place to which this faith—in whose intimate and suffocating grasp I have passed the last few years of my life—and to which Eugénie, from our very first days together in Saint-Domingue, had constantly threatened the Heavenly Father would consign me? I have not. Or rather I have, but yet never have I devoted more the bare minimum of my interest to it. I know the Hell of the Gospels and le catéchisme, the sermons of Fr. Malesvaux and other priests, the tuition and exams of Srs. Charles Thérèse and Ambrose Jeanne. I have pictured it, perhaps I have even drawn versions of it, though it has never meant anything more than the illustration of an exercise, a foreign mote of knowledge, to me. Have I however lived a form of Hell, lived in one, or perhaps several? Most certainly, and perhaps am in one now.

Of course there are Hells and there are hells, which is really a statement of banalities, for there are degrees of horror, of horrors, which we all witness and live through, sometimes directly, often indirectly, and it is the immediacy of horror, its sublimity and our incapacity even to reflect upon it, though we may indelibly remember it, that shapes our sense of what a particular hell, or Hell itself, may be.

The word itself had begun to foam, like spittle, on Eugénie's lips every time she eyed me, though she did not dare utter it, or cast a single aspersion in my direction. Instead, as the weeks crept forward through the infernal heat, she crept with utmost care around me, taking care not to offend me even in the slightest, as if she could tell,
though I would not have deigned to tell her, that the departure of Diejuste and Ayidda, whose superintendents had finally been fetched home by their parents, opened a hole in my affections. We had not grown as close as I liked, but we nevertheless passed increasing amounts of time in each others’ company, Diejuste’s bright humor and wit clarifying as we sat and packed crates of pamphlets, Ayidda’s skill at producing seemingly insignificant signs that needed only the right person to decode them providing me with an intellectual and spiritual workout of the kind I had not encountered before. I woke one morning, after a troubled sleep, with a severe headache, a novelty for me, and when I reached the refectory, I saw that there were two fewer white girls at the table and knew instantly that early that morning, Josephine and Mary Margaret, with Diejuste and Ayidda in tow, had gone. That left only Marinette, whose temper was still occasionally a challenge, as a companion, though we seldom found ourselves together for long.

As we passed in the hallways we would share thoughts, ideas, dreams: she longed first of being manumitted and going to live in Washington, where she had relatives and where she had been born, though she’d been sold off when the first estate to which she had belonged had been divided, at the death of its owner. Phedra, it turned out, was not her sister by blood, though they had been raised together as if they were. She had never heard of Ayiti. She also did not know much French beyond what she had picked up during her short stay, and no Kreyòl or Latin at all. I tried my best, in the slots of time allotted to us, to rectify that. Her temper, she realized, was like the wick of a lamp too often turned to its brightest setting, and though she had cause, as we all did, she was learning, striving, to lower it. We tried to arrange a time in which I might show her my drawings, but Annie Lawrie, who like Eugénie had been left in the nun’s care, was now demanding as much of her time, if not more so, as Eugénie had previously required of me.
One night following a day so hot that it appeared to have scorched much of the foliage to a brown fur, I woke to hear Eugénie creeping past my bed. The room was black as the moment before a nightmare. She no longer bothered to force me to pack her sheets in her absence; everyone in the convent was usually so drained by the heat that they slept as if drugged. I turned over on my side, away from her, and tried to go back to my dream, in which Phedra and I were slowly walking across the river, but I could hear the white girl fumbling through my papers, so I sat up, as quietly as possible. What was she looking for? She tossed several things into a cloth sack, replaced the floor stone and bustled out of the room. When I was sure she was halfway down the hall, I trailed her.

She advanced through the darkness more quickly than I would have imagined, but I could still make her out. She was, I knew, going to meet with Fr. Malesvaux, perhaps to show him my handiwork, though to what purpose I could not foretell. Perhaps she now bore his child, and she was planning yet again to run away, this time with him. Let her go with him, I would not try to stop her, I had plans of my own. I was curious, however, about why she had taken my art. She made her way not to the first floor’s rear portico, where I had seen them before, but continued upstairs, to the attic, moving almost soundlessly and without a single stumble, which made me realize that she probably had practiced and traced this route multiple times. At end of the hall, however, I could hear a din, almost imperceptible but enough to gain my attention, coming from the direction of the town. I pulled back one of the velvet curtains to see what was going on. There were tiny pinpricks of light flaring from Gethsamane, but intermittently. Nothing, at least from this distance, was clear.

Pulling myself from the window I went to the attic staircase and moved as swiftly as I could, catlike, my ears pricked, my eyes cutting through the murk. Voices, or at least one, issued from the main room there. The door was cracked and I slid through. To my left Eugénie
was telling her lover that she had all her garments, some coins, sturdy boots, her cape, and the maps, mine, the ones I had drawn, which she had studied assiduously and was sure would serve them as well as any others. Her lover did not speak, but I wondered, given how frequently Fr. Malesvaux had come and gone from west to east and back, why he would need to depend on one of my maps, drawn, in any case, from my inner vision and not cartographic accuracy. He persisted in not speaking and it struck me that he might be communicating with her in another way. Papers rustled in the darkness, until I could tell he was stilling her, calming her. She asked if the horses were ready, and he conveyed to her that they were. I stepped out of the way to let them head downstairs; I was not going to betray her to the nuns, since I was sure she and her popish paramour would not get far, at least based on the maps I had drawn, and they would find that out soon enough.

Right near the door, she turned, her shoulder-slung sack swinging and nearly hitting me in the face, and asked, “How long do you think it’ll be before they discover you took all the money?” I was not surprised at this bald statement of duplicity and sin, and yet I was. Fr. Malesvaux, whatever he was or was not, had never seemed to me to be an evil man, let alone a thief. Even the Haitians at and around Valdore had recognized this, French and ever liberal with Christian casuistry though he was.

The voice that responded to her, in a hard, somewhat stammering twang, in English, was not Fr. Malesvaux’s, however, but another’s. “Just like you told me to I put enough of it in their food they ought not figure I’m gone till midday.” It was Job White Jr. who spoke. I must admit that his presence jarred me, at least momentarily, and I was determined to find out what was going on. I commanded the lamps to come on, and they beamed with an unearthly light. Eugénie and White, ready with sacks at their sides for flight, both suppressed their urge to cry out, but did back away from me immediately.
"What are you doing up here, you black witch?" she said to me, her voice breaking just above a whisper. I was going to answer, but I could hear the hubbub from outside growing louder and closer; with a clarity I have never felt before or since I could see the crowns of the torches gathering in the town square, before they made their way up the hill. I could see them, as I looked at Eugénie and White, who both were so pale as to appear ill. Despite this Eugénie repeated her question, and then said, "We are leaving, and you cannot stop us. I’ve placed all your demonic writings, your hellish illustrations, that diary full of gibberish and nonsense, in a flour sack just inside Sr. Louis Marie’s door. We also left a letter for Job’s father, Rev. White, and for others in the town to let him know that the nuns were harboring you, and you won’t be able to say a word in your defense. Rather than wondering where I’ve gotten off to, where we are, they’ll—” I silenced her, and exited the room. The door I made sure I sealed shut. Almost as soon as she began pulling on the knob, as he began heaving his shoulder into the wood, their screams started. Downstairs there was a shuffling of feet, and startled wailing. I got to work.

The wall outside the room leading down a storey was an expanse of paint the hue of buttermilk, but, I now knew, I no longer needed it, nor the charcoal I kept in my pocket. Instead as I walked down the stairs I urged Marinette, Rochelle, Hubert, and Moor, all asleep in their quarters out back, to go immediately to the stables and ready horses and carts, which they did, each dressing as quickly as possible, each baffled for a minute that they had had the same aim until they realized its source. I thought about letting the nuns counter the Reverend and the townspeople on their own, but it was not, it seemed to me, the charitable thing to do, and although they had assisted in the maintenance of my bondage, that would endure as a cross for their consciences to bear. I roused each of them from their prayers, their default response in the face of an approaching threat, as if they had lost all command of reason, and set them to motion.
The only white girl other than Eugénie—whose screams, now echoing throughout the upstairs and building, had turned into something almost animal—remaining, Annie Lawrie, had also never been a source of torment, so I hoisted her as if she were a marionette from the corner of her bedroom into which she had barricade herself, and spurred her to aid Marinette, in the process muting her so that she could not give a single order. Not one of the nuns, not the Mother Superior, not even Sr. François Agnès, in whom I had had some semblance of confidence, had thought to ring a warning bell, so I had her do so.

At another window that looked out onto the town below I could see the flames, at the base of the hill, ascending, like a wave of gold, towards the convent. Lamp and candlelight from the room seared through the dark. It was as if I were painting and in the painting at the same time, as if the inside and outside were fusing into one rich, poly-sensory perspective, and I almost had to stop for a second to steady myself. The nuns, amongst whom I passed though not a single one spotted me, were grabbing crucifixes from the walls, stuffing books and papers into bags, and reciting snatches of Scripture, in French. Their rosaries they did not think to look for, thankfully, since they would not have found them; I had already collected and disassembled them over the last week, so as to have the necessary tools at my disposal. I continued forward, forcing Annie Lawrie, weeping uncontrollably, down the main stairwell, where she had stalled, and outside to the stables, where Hubert and Marinette had hitched several carts into which Rochelle had packed enough bread, water and dried food to keep everyone fed for at least a day or two.

When I reached the Mother Superior’s room, the sack containing all my handiwork was not where Eugénie had claimed, but sitting beneath a desk. Whether she had put it there or the Mother Superior had moved it was unclear, but no matter. It was heavier than I thought it would be, but once I rifled through it I was sure that save for the maps everything I had accomplished since arriving here filled
it. I hefted it over my shoulder and started to leave the room, when,
glancing back, I saw Fr. Malesvaux, sitting on the edge of the bed,
immobile as if stricken. I thought to leave him there, especially as in
the blue of his irises and the sunburnt contours of his face I could
read the pilasters and eaves of Valdoré, the crop of Nicolas de L'Écart,
the fusillade of Napoléon, and L'Ouverture rotting in a forgotten cell,
but I thought better of it, and stirred him such that he barreled past
me, wearing only his dressing gown.

There was nothing in my own room that I needed to take with me
beyond the pitcher of water and the washing bowl that sat beside
Eugénie's bed. I made my way back to the attic, stopping briefly to
peer first into the back grounds, where I could see everyone seated
on horses or piled into the carts, which began to take off toward the
river's oxbow, Moor's knowledge of the area enough to save them, and
then out front, where a contingent of the townspeople, their faces lit
white with torchlights, were belling around in a semicircle on the front
drive, chanting for the nuns to open the door and show their faces, and
to bring Job White Jr., Eugénie, and me out. I thought to turn them all
into a giant, writhing pyre, but that time, I knew, would come.

The door opened with little effort, and I closed it tight behind
me. Eugénie and White had folded themselves into a tiny ball beside
a mountain of crates. Both had hollered and wept themselves dry,
and neither moved as I entered the room. I paid them no mind and,
taking a silver flask, engraved with the initials "NDL", which I knew
she had filled with liquor from the cellar, I initiated my procedures,
pouring a generous libation accompanied by prayers, drawing a circle
around me with the wine, filling the washbasin with enough water
that I could see my reflection. I sat beside it, formed a filigreed vane
with the beads and closed my eyes. Before I could get too far into my
imprecations, I heard a voice so tiny it almost sounded as if it were
coming from another world. I opened my eyes. Eugénie had risen and
planted herself right outside the circle.

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"You spook," her voice boomed, "I command you to get up and let us out of here. And you're going to hitch up one of the horses right after you open that door. Did you forget you still belong to me? Now be a good heifer and do what I tell you!" I closed my eyes and continued my prayers, opening them only to peer into the water, onto which a variety of images, first two dimensional as in my drawings, and then, as if looking into a magical screen in which life itself could be projected, took shape, color and form.

Nisi audiam no te exaudiam. The fragrance of fire taking wing through the bower of trees fused with voices thundering just beyond the nearby pane to generate an effect not unlike a nervous system subjected to an intense and continuous shock. I trembled but pressed onward with my chant.

"Ma négresse," the girl said firmly, though no longer screaming, and still outside the circle, "ouvre la porte maintenant." White was yanking on the doorknob, but it would not budge. "Have you forgotten how close we once were? How you were ma petite poupée? Ma chère, open that door." On the screen before me I could see those days, she in her pastel lawn following me from room to room, interrupting my tasks with questions, demands, how she kept me up late and woke me before dawn, how she would extend her thin pink ankle just before I took a step, her chamberpot in tow, sending it and me spilling down the stairs, how she placed the knife to the small of my back and ordered me to prepare the wagon and stallion to carry her and her barely breathing mother to the port.

Build a castle on sand, even with lime, and it will eventually be a gift to the sea. I did not even have to raise my hand to drive the pictures from the water's surface. Battering on the main door below began to resound all the way up to the ceiling above us.

"Carmel," the child said, almost softly, though I could feel the blade in every word, "let us go. You can join us if you want to. Once we get
to the Northwest Territory I might even set you free. Don't you want to save yourself, don't you want to be free?"

I thought about her offer for a second—seeing the three of us, they on the one aged gelding still on the grounds, and I on foot chasing behind them as they galloped off into the dark, then me helping her across the Tennessee as White and the sack of coins he had emptied from his father's safes sank to its brown depths, and then me foraging on her behalf for something to sustain us as we proceeded through the land the Chickasaws still tenaciously had held onto, where she nevertheless would encounter her own people as well, as they had seeped like an underground leak from one end of this region to the other—but no longer. Instead, I rose and answered her, "Fòk mwen te manke w pou m te kap apresye w." The door swung open, sweeping her and White out. I resumed my position and continued searching in the watery mirror, until I finally found my mother's face.

A DIALOGUE

Are you going to waste yet another opportunity to save yourself?

Didn't I already tell you I refused to think of them as wasted opportunities to save myself, but rather as stages in my careful process of preparation.

So you are ready to take action?

Have you been so busy you weren't paying attention?

Don't forget who you are speaking to.

Don't forget who you are speaking to.

I think I have finally come to appreciate your logic.
Perhaps, I find myself recounting to Phedra, Marinette and others, it will be left to the patience of someone more devoted to the genre of literature than I to record the noises that filled that hot and moonless night in Kentucky, or the taste that lingered on the tongues of the few survivors after the gunpowder stored beneath the printing press caught fire, or the particular stench of burning brick and plaster and ink fused with flesh and hair, or the feeling of being thrown far, far into the black air with nothing to halt your eventual fall back to the parched, grassless soil ... I personally shall never forget how that scene—so distant from where I was then that it required all my powers to concentrate—reminded me of nothing less than a forget-me-not, white with bright scars of crimson and azure, holding fast like a last memory or reliquary of sorrows against the bluffs above a small, almost forgotten provincial island or inland colonial town.