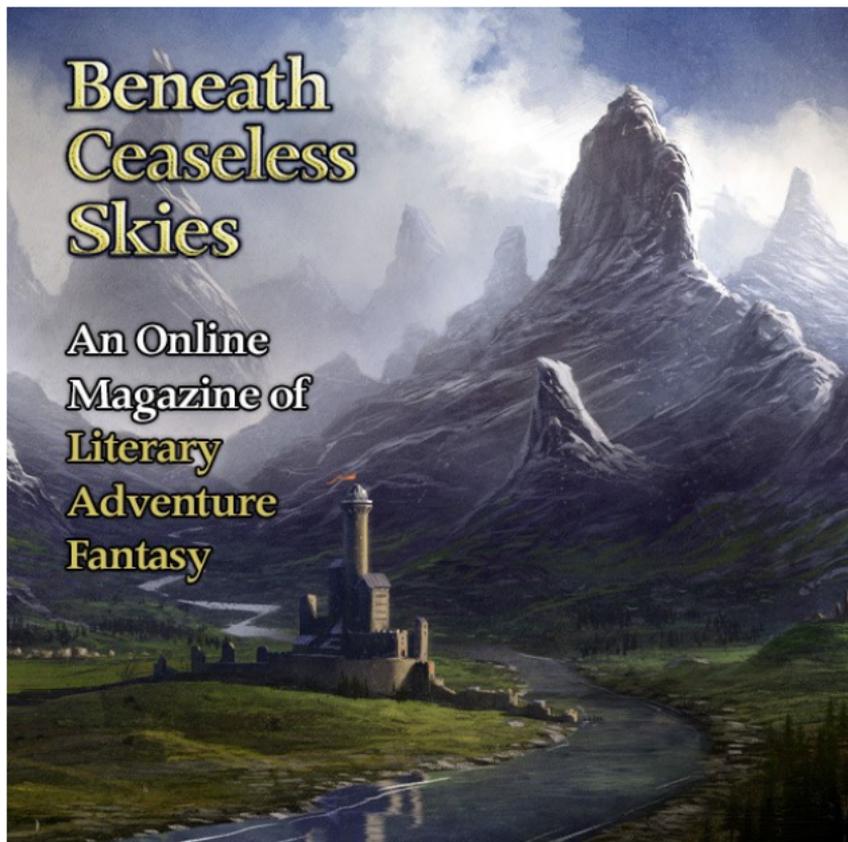


# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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Literary  
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Fantasy



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## THE FIRES OF MERCY

by Spencer Ellsworth

The assassin, the mother, and the child fled into the desert.

\* \* \*

The sandstorm had blanketed the world the night before. Sand hung still on the leaves of the palm trees; sand sat on a skim atop the water; sand pillowed against rocks. Grains swept the crevices of palm trees, shone like jewels in the sun.

The assassin emerged from the rocks and used her hand to sweep away the drifts that had piled against the cave entrance. She breathed through a light veil, as much to hide her face as keep sand out, and she prayed.

She praised the Thousand Names, the One and Many, and she praised the Prophets, and she spoke the forbidden name of the Thirteenth Prophet, a heresy. She prayed for a guiding hand and felt a fool.

She turned then, and motioned for the mother and child to emerge from the hollow in the rock.

They peered around the land. The mother's face was dark with stains; two days ago, kohl had run with her tears and

smear the pigment on her face. Sand clung to her face and bedraggled her hair. She still wore pearls around her neck, and bits of fine clothing showed through under the wool robe the assassin had given her. She cleared sleep from the child's eyes.

The child, for his part, was quiet. He had always been so, in the eight months of his life. He rarely cried, even when cold. He took only as much breast milk as he needed. He watched and he listened.

And so the child watched while the assassin told his mother there would be no fire, and his mother made sounds of protest, but not many. The assassin was not tall, nor particularly strong. She was so thin and featureless she was often mistaken for a man. Her eyes, though, stopped speech. They were deep black wells rimmed with silver, like the sun on those wild days when it was covered by the moon.

The mother groaned. She wept a little. She often had, since the night of horror.

The assassin shared out dried meat. Her cold silver eyes scanned the horizon.

In the morning, they crossed the dunes. The assassin timed their trip well. As the heat began to shimmer around them and the dunes wavered under the sun, and their tongues began to feel like lead weights, they sighted a familiar stand of rocks. The assassin topped a dune, looked back at the mother

and child slowly wading up the mountain of sand, and wished she could see through the haze of heat to tell who waited in those rocks.

“Shade,” the mother said. “Gods-blessed shade!”

“Slowly,” the assassin said.

The child watched with interest and a little trepidation. In the last few days the child had looked more and more on the assassin and less on his crying, confused mother.

“Slowly,” the assassin said, for lack of something better.

And so they walked toward the rocks.

An arrow struck the assassin’s shoulder. She spun, threw the mother and child to the hot sand, and ran, not away but into the path of the arrows.

More arrows came. One, two, three. The child watched with interest, the mother with horror. The assassin dodged the second arrow, danced around the path of third. Knives, gleaming, left the assassin’s sleeves. They caught the sunlight and shivered in the light. The mother and the child did not see the men who were found by the assassin’s blades, but they heard bodies fall.

She went on running. After a time, she came back to the mother and the child. The arrow still emerged from her shoulder.

“These were just bandits,” the assassin said. “They have not found us yet.”

The assassin took the dead bodies into the desert, left them to desiccate in sand and be eaten by jackals.

She kissed them goodbye, for every act of war has at its heart an act of mercy.

Together, they waited in the cool under the rocks, waited out the worst of the day’s heat. The assassin stripped away her blood-darkened robe and washed her shoulder with what water she could spare. She drank a bit of henbane and dark potent liquor, but carefully. One could not choose which senses were dulled.

The arrow was buried in a black, swollen mess of meat and blood. It was a familiar wound, familiar and easily treatable—when the assassin was in her element.

She had subordinates for this sort of inconvenience. Lesser assassins, kept in thrall by her strong mind, who could have treated it. Others like her, with flecks of silver in their eyes, could knit her flesh together by rearranging her soul-branches.

But now she broke the shaft high and carefully pulled the point from her shoulder, and it screamed pain at her, and her eyes swam, shuttered, like the heat.

She remembered being strapped to a post and whipped, remembered the flesh of her back hanging down in strips like

shredded cloth. She remembered the sand in her fists as she crawled. She remembered her brother in a killing pit, remembered her knife at his throat, and she remained conscious.

She was a mind-eater. She would live.

She made a poultice and stuffed it inside the open wound. Despite her best efforts, grains of sand fell into the wound. They glimmered in the sun, fell from her fingers, and vanished into the ragged skin.

\* \* \*

The mother dreamed. She dreamed of her childhood, before she came to the palace, and before the desert.

Little men came from far to the east to trade with her father. They brought fireworks. Her father called for pigs—not heretics, actual pigs! Since the Eighth Prophet had banned the eating of swineflesh hundreds of years ago, no one had seen one of the actual animals near her home.

These were the real thing; little snorting unclean monsters, spotted brown over pink skin. The little eastern men liked pigs, he said, and a wise man honors his guests before he honors his house. It seemed a foolish point of view. But he had the pigs slaughtered, and he fed them to the little men, and in return they sold him fireworks and put on a display that honored their house for a year.

Even then, she had been marked for marriage to a wealthy man. Thus her mother wouldn't let her near the pigs. Warts, goiters, leprosy, sluttishness—all came from swine flesh.

She snuck in to the pens late at night, as a child, the night before they were slaughtered, and touched a pig. She was surprised by how much fine hair there was on that skin, hair just beginning to darken.

Her son had been born with light hair that soon darkened. She sometimes thought of the pigs, and thought of her son slurping at her breast, and was amused as he gulped and snorted down the milk.

This morning, in the desert, she managed only a trickle of thin, nearly clear milk. They kept walking.

Three nights ago, a carved door of rare wood had shattered. The dark figure had swept into the harem and cut the throat of one woman, and another. More figures came. They killed the concubines. They killed the children. Old faces, kind faces, bitter faces. The strong women, beautiful and tall, who led the harem by force of will. The weak, pale girls from the north who spoke little. Every soul in the king's palace had died under those blades.

The mother had hidden, shut herself, gasping, in a shed. Until the sun peered through the door, and the assassin tore

that door open. And took her by the wrist, and raised the curved knife...

The mother saw something else in the assassin's silver-flecked eyes, that bloody morning.

\* \* \*

As night fell, the assassin's wound ached worse and worse for the walk they made to water.

She touched the pendant around her neck, ran her hands across the calligraphy. Dots and curves of vowels, grooves worn deep. The words, she thought. The old words, from the dawn of time. The language was that of air and fire, the words the keys to burning the whole world. It was a weapon, but one only a fool would dare. It was forbidden, in every text in every history, to call upon the voices of air and fire.

She had taken the pendant from its secret place, as she had embarked upon this most secret of missions. If the assassin and her men had been caught by the emperor's soldiers, if others like the mind-eaters had torn into them, if the secrets of her Order had been stripped from their minds one at a time, she would have called the voice of air and fire to burn the world. For there were secrets in her Order that could not come to light.

But their mission had failed in a far different way.

The mother asked the question that night. “Why? Why did you save us?”

The assassin didn’t answer. The mother didn’t try a second time.

While the mother slept, the assassin lay against the rock and tried to ignore the ache from her wound. She had treated such, and deeper wounds, yet. Healing was the haft of the knife that balanced the blade; her assassins killed, and they mended, and learned the two arts together.

The next morning, the mother asked, “Where are we going? How do you find water in this desert?”

The assassin looked at the horizon, a tangle of sand and rocks. She knew the trail of water here, strung out like the pearls the mother still wore. Scattered across a land better traveled than the assassin would have liked. “I know,” was all she said.

They walked that day, to a small filthy pool of water that left them belching sulfur. The baby cried when the mother washed his face with the water. In the middle of the night the baby woke screaming and flatulent; he soiled all his swaddling and the mother and assassin washed what they could and tore new ones.

“The servants wrapped him with more rags than this,” the mother said.

The assassin stroked the baby's cheek. "This is all we have."

\* \* \*

The attack came the next day.

They were feeling her out, the assassin knew. Her men were still afraid of her. So they hung back, fired arrows from a distance.

The arrows recoiled, black, thin, like serpents, off the rocks around them. The assassin turned and shouted at the mother. The mother ran to shelter.

These were her men, who had woken confused at the king's palace, finding her gone. They were still afraid of her, testing her resolve.

That was their mistake.

"We cannot run from the mind-eaters," the mother sobbed as the three did just that. "We cannot run from them!"

The assassin didn't answer. She knew. It was better to fight with arrows than to try and meet in the war of the minds. All her former compatriots had to do was head the three off, send them deeper into the desert, and the assassin, mother, and child would die.

She looked at the rocks where she knew her compatriots waited. She would go. She would go, and they would come at her, and her mind would be quicker. The branches of her soul

would reach out and wrap around one, two, three of them. Her knives would cut their throats. She would see the fear in their silver eyes, and then those eyes would fade. She would cut her way through them. She knew each movement.

Except she had no more knives. Her soul-branches were weak and quivering from lack of food and water. And if she killed the other assassins, more would come. One step wrong, and death.

The assassin stared the other way, at the eastern horizon. Somewhere beyond that thousand thousand leagues of empty sand, that waterless abyss, lay the east, the land of little men. The little men who did not speak the Thousand Names. The worries of the Thirteenth Prophet went unsaid. There the mother and child would be unknown. It would not matter if the child was an emperor here; there he would be but a boy.

Somewhere beyond death.

The mother caught the assassin staring. "I've heard there's no water," she said. "No water, and ghosts, and monsters, and death."

The assassin stared into the dunes.

"We need to get to a town."

"Mind-eaters hide in towns," the assassin whispered. "Our *sha* is quiet, still, and no man reads it, until it is too late. The darkness does not guard against our knives, nor the light." The

assassin thought of a firelit study, of old, old books bound in skin, of dark words. She thought of words in a tongue of fire, of a question that could not be asked. She thought of that knife, the balance, the haft and the blade. She touched the pendant around her neck.

“We can circle around to the south,” the assassin said. “A few days in the dunes.” She looked at their pitiful waterskins. “A few days without water; we can survive.”

The mother wept. “No, no, no. I have no milk, I have no strength, I can’t walk, I can’t...”

The assassin reached into the mother’s mind, and stroked it, calmed it. It was much like giving calm to the dying.

They filled the waterskins and went back into the desert.

They went up dunes the size of mountains, sinking in sand to their knees; slid down the other side. The mother slurped all her water the first day, tried to breastfeed the baby, but the baby slept now, slept all day and night, and breathed shallowly and whimpered.

The heat tore at the assassin’s wound, seemed to scour it. She imagined it was boiling wine, cleansing the infection. She wished so.

The dunes froze at night, cold emptiness rushing into what had been warm air, sucking life out of them. The assassin and the mother and baby huddled together. Now her wound raged

with a cold, maddening pain, tearing at the assassin's mind. She thought of her life, buried in vengeance, of her order; thought of the whole world, of the mind-eaters, the few who struck back, and it seemed such a silly thing to be a part of such a foolish world.

The assassin stared into the desert. She saw ghosts, travelers long-dead, the shadowy caravans wending across the dunes to the lands of the dead. Their jewels glittered, their clothes fine in long-gone suns, but she had eyes only for their bulging waterskins.

The ghosts wandered, forever, to wells dried for centuries, to kingdoms swallowed by the desert.

She thought she saw herself, black-clad, forever leading the mother and the child deeper into the desert, another shade doomed to wander.

Morning came, and with it, the heat.

The dunes went on forever, red waves, empty, burning. The assassin's arm was a shifting storm of pain and warmth. Her flesh had turned black at the edges of the wound, dark fingers lancing outward from the rot.

They stumbled up dunes and down again. The assassin turned toward the towns of the south, looked for them in vain. The mother could hardly walk, sinking in sand, gasping. The baby lay too still in the mother's arms.

They were three days from the towns in the south.

The assassin looked at the endless blue sky. It seemed beautiful, a great gem descending on the world, overwhelming them. She stared into it, and realized she had collapsed as well, fallen to the sand.

She closed her eyes.

She recalled that night, the knife in her hand, the close purpose. She had waited for the emperor of the whole world, behind a fine satin curtain. She had sprung from her place and slit his throat, and his words had come easy. "Die, by blood and breast milk, by sinew and shadow." His blood had run over her hands. She had laughed as it ran down her forearms, rich and dark like wine. The most precious vintage in the world.

The harem must die. They had agreed; every soul in the palace dead by midnight. Such was vengeance, for this emperor had burned their people and laughed, mocked the heretical pigs who believed in the Thirteenth Prophet. They were the shadows that took revenge, and this emperor's crimes were legion. It was time for war, in return.

The assassin had opened the door to the harem and consumed their minds, quelled their resistance, and slit the throats. She cut perfect, soft, swanlike necks. She cut the fleshy throats of babes, and children, and the knotted, scarred throats of servants.

She had been made for this, in fighting pits, in a place where she had put her own brother to the knife. She had been put in the hands of justice, a blade in the hand of the Thousand Names. A blade could not question the hand that wielded.

Such a night of blood it had been, the night she killed the ruler of the world. Dozens of women. Scores of children, all by her knife. Blood running like rivers, across tiled floors, pooling with the bodies that lay in the fountains.

Enough to give even a mind-eater pause.

She had thought the business done when the sun rose. She had gone to the river to cleanse herself. Blood had come away from her in great scabby brown flakes, scrubbed roughly from her skin by river sand. No matter how she tried, it stained her—the grooves of her fingerprints, the creases at her elbows, the soft hollow of her collarbone.

On her way back, she had heard them, gasping, shivering in hiding. She had taken out her knife again and pulled back the curtain to see the mother and child.

And stayed her hand.

She had stared at them, and she thought not of the name of the Thirteenth Prophet, not of the crimes of the Faith, but of the Thousand Names she revered, and she remembered, for the first time in years, that one of those names was Mercy.

As fire is tempered by air, and each act of war must have at its heart an act of mercy.

So it was. Her heart was full of blood, flooded and drowned with the blood of others, and her knife hand would not move. Was it the Gods' hand? The foolishness of a mind-eater who had too much fear? The end of her mission?

Questioning gave her no answers. She knew she could not kill them. This was the act of mercy at the heart of this war, and it simply was.

She had herded the mother and child from their hiding place, using her mind to quiet them, and gone to the river, found a pleasure boat, and rowed them far from the palace, then set out across the desert.

She looked at the mother and child now, lying collapsed on the sand, and she pulled the knife from her belt. It was time. They would spend the rest of their lives in danger from those blades in the dark. The boy was an heir to the entire world, and no one would see him as but a tool. The dream of escaping to the east was just that: a dream. The mercy was her flaw.

She would kill them, and she would go back, and the mission would be complete, and she would forget her mistake. This was the blade; there was no need for balance here.

Her good arm was throbbing from the wound, so she switched her knife to her lesser hand and raised it, looking down at the mother and child.

And then it fell from her fingers.

One choice yet remained.

The assassin sat upon the sand, and drew out her pendant, and spoke the words inscribed on it. They were written in a language few could speak, and none dared. The tongue of air and fire. From old books, bound in human skin, from an older time than this empire, or the empire before it.

The assassin called out the forbidden words, the summoning words, in the language of flame in the darkness, wind in the dark of night.

They came.

The spirits of air and fire rose from the ground, shining in the sun, their seven-fingered hands wavering like tongues of flame. Their sharp teeth were black as coals, their eyes the blue of the heart of flame.

They surrounded the assassin and the mother and child in a circle. Their words rippled through the flame, burned the assassin's heart.

*You have called us. You are the first in millennia.*

“I wish to make a bargain,” she whispered. “Take them across the expanse of sand, and go to the east.”

*What is the bargain?*

The assassin laughed. “What do you wish?” The words felt hot on her tongue, a language only of exchange, of dark deeds for dark words.

The spirits spoke, their words rushing like flame. *We wish for your world. We wish to burn, to burn the forests, to burn the cities, to burn the people.*

“That is no fair bargain for three lives.” She staggered to her feet.

*Give us three to burn, then.*

The assassin considered her subordinates, her enemies. She considered the palaces of kings and emperors, who had burned her people. She considered herself.

Perhaps it was the heat, or the pain, but she spoke of nothing she had considered.

“The justice in the hearts of my assassins. The hatred in the hearts of the rulers. The fear...” She wavered. “The fear of mercy.”

The head of the creatures flickered, quavered. *We do not want that!*

“Then you will burn nothing. There will be no ash.” She wavered on her feet, forced herself to stay standing. “This is no small burn. You will eat minds, eat souls, as they accuse us of doing.”

They railed and snorted. *You have summoned us for foolishness.*

“I know,” she said, and realized that those were the last words she had in her.

She fell to the sand, lay cold in it, and heard the spirits speak, the hissing, popping, deep-throated roar of flame as it ate wood. She heard them and almost she understood. Almost. *To burn at all is to burn enough, one said. And her soul will burn brightly.*

A smile touched the assassin’s lips.

\* \* \*

Shadows, shifting black whispers of fire. She thought she saw stars far above, heard strange music coming from the east. The mother and the child swept away, on the wind toward the east, saved. Seven-fingered hands closed around her body.

The assassin writhed, and thought she had died.

She saw herself, as the Gods had made her, her soul-branches intertwined and linked, as perfect as a spun tapestry of calligraphy. The creatures of air and fire gathered around her soul. Their flame touched the edges of that tapestry, caught threads, bright with licking red tongues.

They took the justice from her, the hatred, and finally the fear. Threads of her soul broke away, embers floating into the

Gods' great space, each one losing its light, its heat, and becoming cold, grains fluttering like sand through the air.

The assassin woke in the sand alone. No, not alone. All around her, glass jars of a thousand shapes: bulbs, onions, flower petals, thorns. Each one glowing with a red light.

This was the bargain. And she knew.

The mother and child were safe in the East, now. But the assassin's mission was not yet done. She would take the creatures of air and fire, bottled up in these glasses, to the cities. She would take them to lords. To assassins of other stripes. Perhaps even to her own order. And they would be a weapon, to turn blood to water, swords to coins, to eat the minds of the mind-eaters.

For each act of war has, at its heart, an act of mercy.

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Medicine Show; the latter includes slush reading and copyedits galore. He has also worked in wilderness survival, special education, and at a literary agency. He is married to fantasy artist Chrissy Ellsworth and is the proud father of Adia and Samwise Ellsworth. He lives at [spencerellsworth.blogspot.com](http://spencerellsworth.blogspot.com).

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## SINSEERLY A FRIEND & YR. OBED'T

by Thomas M. Waldroon

### I.

Mr. Stutley Northup is not a magistrate. Why, he's not even a lawyer. But if people are free to come to him with their controversies, he is just as free to offer his opinion; and if they choose to act on it, well, that's their own lookout. Little Hope, Pennsylvania, is not the sort of place to go about your business expecting not to have it talked about. If someone goes to see "Old Stuck-Up," it must be because that business is a stubborn one. And urgent, too.

Mr. James E. (for Ezeziel, although he believes that only his parents and perhaps some nameless county clerk know that) Chambers rides the Freeport Road south from the lake, on past the jog it takes at the shingle mill at the creekside, way on past Enoch Parmenter's place, past the Tarr farm, over fields and hills and wooded slopes, to just over the township line into Greenfield.

He follows the road that Judah Colt cut forty-some years ago towards the end of the previous century, said to be the first road since the French army abandoned the region. From the

cabin he built with his own hands—abandoned in 1804 but still called Colt's Station whether a church, store, tavern, or even, in the winter of 1821, a schoolhouse—it runs due north to the lake at Freeport. Winters, some folks still log the ridge, skid their haul to Little Hope, and, come the spring floods, lash together a raft and float it down French Creek past Amity and on into the Allegheny River, and past the confluences of the Clarion and Kiskaminentas, all the way to Pittsburgh, or farther, even (...Saint Louis! ...New Orleans!).

Old Northup's place, now: isolated, sure, but his own. No, he tells anyone who asks, he's not lonely, he's got his books to lend him human warmth; a few cows, a hired man or two as they might be needed; he does well enough for himself nowadays. Niece of his stops by to look after him, good girl too, not like—well, there's no call to name names.

Once he's all properly seated and settled and served with refreshment, Chambers asks: What think you of the Canadian Republic and its likely fate? I hear tell that MacKenzie has lately fled to Navy Island, in the Niagara, and the British have seized and fired an American ship conveying supplies to them there.

Northup says: Don't let's beat around the bush, Chambers, tell me what you come here for.

Not to be hurried along, as befits the inherent dignity of the new Justice of the Peace for Harbor Creek Township, just this year appointed by Governor Ritner himself, and so young, too—J. E. Chambers takes his time with a few more sips of Northup's locally famous boiled milk coffee. He suspects Northup ekes it out with roasted acorns. The old man watches him amiably enough, despite his tone.

Chambers, when he's good and ready, says: You remember the Dusseau brothers.

Course I do. Pair of fools. French, too.

And their great sea serpent...?

Northup laughs bitterly.

You know of it then, Chambers presses.

Know of it? I saw it! Mind you don't be smashing the crockery, Chambers.

James Chambers has set his cup down so abruptly that it threatens to shatter the saucer.

Northup says, Can't afford to be replacing it all the time. Come from England, you know.

Chambers says, So sorry.

He mops up the spilled coffee with his spare handkerchief.

He goes on: But how could you have seen it? They said it must have died.

They lied. French, you know.

Well, then, what did they see there?

Probably it was just like they said.

Chambers regards the old man gravely. He slips his fingers into a pocket of his tobacco-brown coat and withdraws a paper packet. This he unfolds slowly and studies carefully. He looks up at Northup again, then back at his papers. He clears his throat.

He reads out: There is great excitement among the French inhabitants along the lake shore in North East Township over the reported discovery of a marine monster by two French fishermen named Dusseau. It was between twenty and thirty feet long and shaped like a sturgeon, but it had arms which it tossed wildly in the air.

He looks up: That was the *Phoenix and Reflector*. Last May. Local paper, you know. Gossip fills a column up as well as truth does.

Northup shrugs.

Chambers places this scrap of paper on the table and studies the next one.

He says: Now this is one of the New York papers. Last June, I believe.

He reads: Special from Presque-Isle, Pennsylvania. The French settlers along the lake shore, in North East Township, Erie County, a few miles east of here, were surprised and

amazed on May Twelfth over the appearance of an unknown fish of mammoth size. Two brothers named Dusseau, both fishermen, were returning from the fishing grounds, when they discovered a phosphorescent mass upon the beach. It was late in the evening, but they succeeded in making their boat fast to the shore, and, upon examination, discovered a lake monster writhing in agony.

Northup remarks: Amazing what gets printed these days.

Chambers keeps reading: The brothers say that it was like a large sturgeon in shape, but that it had long arms, which it threw wildly in the air. While they were watching it, the great fish apparently died, and the Dusseau boys, badly frightened, hurried away for aid. When they returned with ropes the fish had disappeared. In its dying efforts it had succeeded in tumbling into the lake and had been carried away by the waves. The marks left by its wild thrashings on the muddy shore indicate that the serpent was between twenty and thirty feet in length. Several scales as large as silver dollars which were cast off were picked up.

Chambers places this on the table atop the first. I have more, he says.

Northup sighs, shakes his head. He says: Not wild thrashings in the mud. Writing. And not scales, Chambers. Eggs.

\* \* \*

## II.

His father, born Stukely Northup but renamed Stutley by a regimental clerk's error and an officious paymaster's refusal to admit it (*You want your pay? Then you're Stutley! Stutley!*), had named his son after the error to confound the new government's record-keepers. The war had done more than rename him; it had left him feeling hollowed out, uncertain of most things, and with a frail left arm. Discharged in January 1777 at Trenton, New Jersey, he'd made his way back through the bitter winter to a Rhode Island, a wife and young child, that he hardly recognized, not because they had changed but because they had not.

On May Fourteen, 1780, a fine spring Sunday in Little Rest, R.I., he was hailed in the street by a young woman strangely togged out, all in black, mannish and vaguely Quaker, and cloaked in a long black gown, like a preacher's, tied at the throat with a flowing white cravat. She was riding a white horse and sporting a preposterous hat of white beaver with a flat crown and broad brim, tied down with a purple kerchief. Friend, she called to him, dost love thy neighbor?

Thinking of all the men he had so recently shot at, not in anger but out of righteous principle, he answered: No.

Dost love God? she asked.

That was a harder question. The strange woman urged her horse closer with a nudge of her knees and a clucking of her tongue. She asked again, bending down towards him, gazing into his face, her own framed by waves of mahogany curls held in check by her kerchief, her eyes alight: Dost love God?

No, he admitted.

Come, she said, follow me, and I shall teach thee how.

She straightened up, patted her horse's flank. It ambled away, its hooves clop-clop-clopping on the hardened mud, and she did not look back.

Jemima Wilkinson had been born in Rhode Island, of Quaker parents, in 1758; had contracted typhus during the British blockade of Providence in 1776; had died there; and two days later she had risen again, from ecstasies and visions of heaven, with a new name: the Publick Universall Friend. Stutley (formerly Stukely) had never had much traffic with Quakers, but he saw in her something that he himself lacked and needed; she was possessed of a stout commonsense and a visionary charism, of compassion and a biting wit; and as for having died and risen again, well, he did not believe her, exactly, in so many words—he might say that he accepted her testimony. He abandoned his errands and duties (whatever they may have been) and turned his path towards hers.

\* \* \*

## III.

Four Mile Creek originates in Greenfield Township and enters the lake after a course of about eight miles. The most striking feature of these lakeshore streams is the deep channels they cut in their passage from the high ground inland to the level of Lake Erie, and which are often the only route down from the lake's treacherous shale bluffs to its narrow stony strand. These ravines, or gulfs as they're called there, are most profound along Four and Six Mile Creeks, where they have worn a course from 100 to 150 feet deep, providing picturesque scenery for those who enjoy such diversions, and also, for many others, freedom from spying eyes.

Someone has cut crude steps into the steepest parts of the path down the gulf's slope. Now two men—one tall and gaunt, head-to-foot in rusty black, clean-shaven, grizzled hair matted to his scalp with sweat but spiking out where he's rubbed at it; the other rounded in well-fed curves, his brown checked suit impeccable (or it was, before they started down this infernal track), his thick brown hair sleek with Macassar, his brown beard fashionably full—stumble and veer like a slapstick duo (ho there! hold on! give us a hand! *et cetera*) until, reaching bottom, they huff and puff for a minute and catch their breath.

Then Northup says: Lend a hand now, will you?

As they haul the brush and tree limbs from off a rowboat pulled up onto the stony margin, Chambers asks: Is this your boat?

Northup says, I spend a deal of time on the water, like many a dairy farmer.

Chambers coughs.

Northup says, There's a canoe nearby, too. Proposing to conduct a boat census, are you? Want to stay on the right side of the law.

As do we all, Chambers says.

And it came to pass, Northup says, in those days, that there went out a decree from John Ezeziel, that all the boats should be counted.

Chambers says: As a duly appointed officer of the law, a magistrate in fact, it is my duty, my bounden duty, and a duty that I intend to uphold, sworn as I am, in the law, to pursue any and all....

But this peroration peters out, like a mountain stream flowing out across a desert waste. He keeps his silence while Northup busies himself with oars and buckets and other paraphernalia. Eventually, he asks: Whatever became of that hired man of yours, the Negro?

Amos, you mean?

Chambers shrugs. He says, I don't recall the name, if I ever knew it.

Northup shakes his head. Called away by family duties, he says. Promised to send his cousin in the spring. Pretty soon, I expect, come to think of it. Off we go now, heft her up, watch your step.

They half carry, half drag the boat into the water. It rocks and scrapes as they clamber in, Chambers taking care to keep his glossy boots out of the mud. Now, the issue arises, which is to be the more honored in our time: age or dignity? Age wins out (also ownership), and Chambers bends his back to the oars while Northup, kneeling in the bow, fends the boat off submerged rocks with his heavy walking stick.

The watercourse is treacherous along this stretch, but the boat was hidden only a little way upstream from the lake, and soon the water is flowing deeper and faster. Chambers ships the oars and the boat runs freely along the gulf and then out from between the beetling scarps rounded like the shoulders of some giant asleep on the lakeshore. The boat slows in the lake's stiller waters and he takes up the oars again. It's hard work, and after a while of stretching and pulling, stretching and pulling, he pauses to steady his heaving breath. Northup is still kneeling in the bow, gazing off into the blank and hazy distance.

Chambers half turns and speaks over his shoulder to him:  
Rumor has it—

Northup snaps: Rumor's a fickle bitch.

Chambers turns back, waits a bit, then tries again:

Rumor has it that strange happenings are afoot around the lake. Fishermen have seen monstrous great snakes, and their boats have been attacked, and their catch often bear extraordinary teeth marks. Bathers have been harried and bitten by unseen molesters in the water. Not to mention the numberless reports of floating lights, and voices and other noises in the night, and mysterious comings and goings of invisible ships, and unexplainable prodigies of the water. Stationary waterspouts, as just one example. And worse, much worse. The Dusseau affair is the least of it. You simply cannot imagine what crosses the desk of an ordinary Justice of the Peace every day! Why, only this morning a body washed ashore.

Northup turns and sits heavily on the bench athwart the gunwales.

He says: A body? First *I* heard of it. Whose body?

Chambers says: Your hired man. Amos.

\* \* \*

IV.

Stutley (Junior, as it were)'s childhood in the New Jerusalem, between the shores of Keuka and Seneca Lakes in central New York, doted on as one of the few children in a community of separatist celibates, all of them half-drunk on godliness, was at least as happy as any other childhood and happier than many. The Universall Friend forbade violence of any kind, even so trivial a violence as striking a willful child. She believed, instead, in reason and patience. Stutley, grown a young man, left to study at Brown College, back in Rhode Island, where he could live with relatives; but when at last he had finished there, all diploma'd, he learned one more wisdom: his hometown, riven by land speculation and unable to long outlast its founder, had been liquidated in that universal solvent, suits-at-law.

Therefore he'd ventured westward, out into what was still only sparsely settled wilderness, on the promise that there was need for schoolmasters there. Not that anyone called it wilderness. It was *opportunity!*, that most American of words, and like most of America, newer than new, it was not quite what it seemed.

Not that it was a lie, exactly, either. There ought to have been a need for schools, Heaven knows they sorely needed them for the adults as for the children, but schools there were none. Not a one. Certainly in Rhode Island and Connecticut

there were more would-be schoolmasters than there were schools to house 'em. So then, young man, westward ho! and they'll beat a path to your door.

Paths there were, in plenty, trails and tracks, but hardly any roads, no schools, and certainly no students at all. Thus all his opportunity left him, as his ready cash already had, on the marshy margin of French Creek at Greenfield Post Office, better known as Little Hope, the last stop for the flat-bottom boats (or batteaux as they are called locally) that ply the western branch of that stream. Another crate landed, *crack!*, at his feet, heaved off the batteau by a boatman who was going to be angrier yet when he learned that the gratuity due him was not to be. Stutley sighed and tugged the crate out of the mud. Well then, he supposed, there he was, and there he would stay.

\* \* \*

## V.

I begged him! I begged him to stay, I did.

This outburst startles Chambers, who is head-down at the oars again. He leans back, so that the blades lift clear of the water, dripping, and with a clatter lets them fall to the bottom boards. He turns on his bench, hefting his legs over it, to face Northup on the bow bench, and plants his feet on the bottom. He pats his pockets for his tobacco pouch—but he's left it at home, knowing that smoking would be unwelcome at

Northup's place. The American shore is a blue blur low on the horizon.

Reluctant to speak after the fury his attempt at a few sympathetic words provoked earlier, Chambers leaves Northrup to his fit of weeping and takes in the cloud- and lakescape. He was one of Northup's early and few students—the little schoolroom didn't last long—and owes to his relentless drilling what smattering of Greek and Latin he still retains; he can't imagine Northup begging anyone for anything. Or weeping, for that matter. The little boat bobs and rocks now as the wind-raised chop slaps against its side, the tops of the wavelets flaked with dazzling sunlight.

Have to be an inquest, I reckon, Northup says, calmer.

Chambers nods.

When?

Tuesday instant.

Tuesdays I take my milk to the Burnham factory, in Arkwright.

It takes a little time to gather a jury together.

Northup rubs his face with both hands, lets them fall back onto his knees, open, palms up. He shakes his head again, as if in disbelief. He stares at his fingers, curled like the roots of a storm-felled tree.

Well, he says at last. Better get to what we come here for.

He bends from his seat, hefts his walking stick, and pushes it through the gap of a crude wood clamp fixed to the bow, letting it slip through his hands until most of the stick's length is underwater. He twists the clamp tight.

He turns to Chambers and says, I warned—

Chambers says: Perhaps we could just get on with it.

Northup turns back and picks up a mallet. He strikes the submerged stick; Chambers can feel the thrum of its vibration through his seat. Another blow. Another. He is making a steady rhythm like a man walking, ten strokes in all. Northup waits for a moment, then repeats the pattern. And once more. He tosses the mallet down and turns to face Chambers.

Right then, he says. Might take a while.

Chambers puts his hands in his pockets. The wind off the water is cold. The ice finally cleared up only a week ago.

Unexpectedly, Northup smiles. Never told you about the Dark Day, did I?

Chambers shakes his head.

Northup tells him:

Five days after my father met the Universall Friend. A crowd, listening, in the middle of the deserted street, in the middle of the day. Everywhere the darkness. Candles flickering in the windows of shops and houses. A preacher, voice already hoarse. He holds a book open, aloft. Shouts: *Matthew, chapter*

*twenty-four, and the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven!* He's not reading aloud, it's too dark. An eloquent sweep of his free hand calls attention to the black and heavy sky. *Revelation, chapter six, and lo, the sun became black as a sackcloth of hair and the moon became as blood and the stars of heaven fell onto the earth, for the great day of his wrath is come, and who shall be able to withstand it!* He holds up his free hand, for silence like, and his other hand shakes the book fiercely. *Not I!* calls someone in the crowd. *Nor I!* and *Amen! amen!* from all around. Then there's a woman's voice calling out: *I shall, I shall stand, we all shall stand that day.*

The crowd parts, but there're also angry murmurs: because it's Jemima Wilkinson. The preacher admonishes: *The wrath of God is upon us all, fear God, for the day of his judgment is here!* She says: *I worship God the father, not God the petulant child who breaks his playthings in a fit of rage when his will is thwarted.* He: *Look, the heavens are darkened and the sun snuffed out.* She: *It is but smoke, can thou not smell it, as from some great fire to the north?* She dips a handkerchief into a barrel of water there. *Look, it is soot afloat the water, that has settled out of the air, it appears to me that this darkness is occasioned by the smoke and ashes arising from large fires, the state of the wind being such as to prevent the quick*

*dispersion of these heavy vapors.* She's shouted down: *Unbeliever! Heathen! Blasphemer!* and worse.

Behind her, the preacher lifts his thick book over his head like to strike her. But she looks into his eyes, silently, until he lowers it. She takes it and hugs it to her breast. The crowd's silent now. She says: *The word of God, indeed, in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God, all things were made by the word of God, and this light shineth in the darkness.* She points up at the blackened heavens: *What do you think the name of this word is, do you know, can you say?* She returns the book (which isn't in fact a Bible but a volume of Coke's *Institutes*) to the preacher. She says: *I tell you now, the name of the word is love.*

Chambers says: Look!

He's pointing at the water where a  $\Delta$ -shaped wake is aimed at their boat like an arrow in flight.

\* \* \*

## VI.

And Captain DREVAR wrote to the Editor of the Graphic (144):—

“My relatives wrote saying that they would have seen a hundred sea-serpents and never reported it,

and a lady also wrote that she pitied any one that was related to any one who had seen the sea-serpent.”

I hope that within a few years, this fear of meeting with a sea-serpent will be no more heard of.

—Antoon Cornelius Oudemans

*Shh!* Hephyibee hissed. They’ll hear!

Dust motes as they drifted through the air crossed the slits of light that slanted through the vertical chinks in the siding of the empty smokehouse—it was parching summer, Fifth Month of his twelfth year—and, falling through, illuminated then winked out, shafts and sparks in the dimness. Hephyibee moved so that one bright stripe fell across her bare belly, where she’d hiked up her dress and pushed down her pantalets.

Down, slave! she commanded.

Stutley obediently bent over, his toes gripping the packed-earth floor.

She said, You have seen your mistress improper.

She whisked an old cobweb-chaser, its long bristles limp and broken, against his bare back. He flinched and whimpered, as she’d instructed at the beginning of the game.

Show me your shame, she demanded.

He stood up and dropped his trousers for her.

Ha ha ha, she said—not a real laugh, but as if reading aloud laughter as it would be spelled out in a book. She raised the broom again.

Samuel was standing next to the door, out of the slanted light, watching, blinking, silent. Samuel Turner, youngest boy in a freeman's family that had joined the settlement from Philadelphia. His dark skin made him little more than an outline against the bright stripes. He'd consented to take off only his shirt. Stutley watched him watching them, Samuel's mouth open a little, the lower lip moving as he breathed. A fugitive glisten. Stutley saw in his eyes something that must be only a version of himself.

Samuel pushed the door open—blinding glare—and ran away. The door thudded shut. A moment later, the door slammed open and shut again. Hefhyibee.

As Stutley stood there, his trousers at his ankles, the smooth dirt cool against his soles, waiting for something, he didn't know what but something huge and perilous and inexorable—like a theophany from heaven, Hail! Blessed One! — he felt nailed down, not by fear that what he was doing (what *was* he doing? he didn't know, not for sure, but he did know it would direct the course of his life) was in any way sinful, for surely it was not, but a certainty that no one, *no one*, could see its beauty as he did: pure, fervid, glittering, a beauty so

overpowering that he was trembling. It was like a long hallway, longer than any real hallway he'd ever seen, stretched out in front of him, lined its whole length with doors, and all he had to do, all he *could* do, was open one.

\* \* \*

## VII.

Northup holds his arm out over the gunwale like Moses preparing to part the waters.

Don't let the mouth alarm you, he says. Takes some getting used to, I'll readily admit.

The wake stops a few yards short of the boat, and the leading ripples splash quietly against the side. Then a gout of water bursts up right next to them and out of it thrusts a fleshy column, water runneling down its sides. Like the tail of an enormous snake. The top of it's more rounded than a snake's tail, but it's scaly all over and glistens.

The thing thrashes up and down, like a horse resisting the bridle. Splashes of water fly all over.

It rears back and bulks tall, and a good two feet of it drop over the side of the boat, where it rests, quivering.

Chambers jumps up. The boat rocks.

It all goes so quickly!

Three slits along its sides flare and lapse, flare and lapse, like the gills of a hooked fish. The three slits widen. They flap

open. The inside's bright green. And lined with teeth, rows of teeth, spiraling rows of teeth. And out of the—. It must be a mouth. Out of the mouth a dozen—tongues?—tentacles?—whips?—a dozen little lashes of flesh in as many colors and—

—quite casually—

—as if he's done it many times before—

—Northup thrusts his hand into the writhing.

He looks up at Chambers, his hand nearly engulfed in a frenzy of caressing whipleets. And he smiles! He holds up the other hand, as if to say, wait, wait, you'll see.

Two more tentacles emerge from the rings of teeth. Their tips flicker like snake tongues, forked, but fast, much faster, the motion a blur in the air. *Dost... fare... well... friend....* sings a piercing little voice like the whine of a mosquito.

Chambers seizes the oar from the bottom of the boat, wrenches it out of its lock, and brings it down with all his strength on the snake looped across the gunwale. The blade skids against solid flesh and he beats it again and again then another oar smacks black against his skull and his eyesight narrows and darkens and he drops the oar. He staggers back. Sky and water swap places and the water blooms green and someone wrenches his arm and tugs him, he's facedown in the bottom of the boat.

A deep *thud* from below the boat; the boards (Chambers could swear) strike his jaw like a blow and he sits up like a jack-in-the-box. Water wells up and sinks. Circles of waves with the boat at their center flee outward.

Somewhere deep inside his fury and panic, Chambers hears Northup shouting: Hell's teeth in a bucket of blood, man! How could you! Why could you! What's come over you?

Northup grasps Chambers's lapels and hauls him upright against the bench. He sits down on the other bench and stares at him. Chambers blinks back tears. His belly's heaving and he swallows hard. He's panting.

Northup says: For sure your heart is a furtive, terrified, and small one.

And he says: Not to worry, he won't be returning today.

And he says: I say "he," but probably it's nonsense to apply that word to him.

And he says: Always seemed impertinent to ask.

Chambers's hands are nervously rummaging about, as if they're someone else's hands, touching rope, wood, wet, a bucket handle, moss, the oar, a nailhead. Moss?

He looks down. Strewn around him: hundred of wet rounds, like seedpods or ragged coins. He picks one up and immediately flings it down, for it's warm as flesh and as yielding, its surface plush as velvet.

Ah, Northup says. The eggs, you know.

Chambers levers himself off the bottom and onto the bench.

It's not done to a purpose, Northup says. He strews his spoor as he goes. Not usually so many, though.

Chambers says: And from these small notions such monsters hatch....

Northup says: Oh, they don't hatch. Just swell up for a day or two, turn all leathery, crack open, and dry up. Seems this world lacks some vital necessity.

This world? Is there some other?

Northup spreads his open hands, then lets them fall back to his knees.

Chambers's jaw flaps open: No! You can't mean—these Hellish creatures—

No just God has any use for a Hell.

He says it with an air of quoting someone irrefutable.

Chambers says: Spare me your heresies. Not Hell, then, but certainly not Heaven. Where then?

Northup waves one hand skywards.

He says, Elsewhere, elsewise. I don't pretend to understand. I like to think—

He smiles as if at a private joke.

Venus, he says.

Chambers scoffs: Venus! You might as well say Mars. Or Jupiter.

Yes! Northup says with a peculiar enthusiasm. Or the Pole Star!

\* \* \*

### VIII.

Northup often spent time on the lake shore, because sometimes he needed to be there, and because he wished to establish that his presence was not unusual. Probably most folks assumed he was smuggling whiskey, and laughed at his pose as an abstemious hemi-demi-semi-quasi-Quaker. He often said: I am myself a burnt-over district.

He picked up a flattish stone and flung it spinning at the water. It smacked the surface and leapt up one two three four times and vanished, *plunk*, at five. Not bad. He looked around for another suitable rock.

At first he thought it was a log washed ashore—blackened, slick with wet and rot, a clutter of stones and sticks tangled around it. The water surged and retreated in the onshore wind. His boot heels crunched dimples into the shoal of pebbles. Those angles of rocks, that arrangement, the broken driftwood—it almost resembled, it seemed to be—oh it must be: it was a word. L O V E.

And then the log opened its eyes.

All six of them.

Not a log but a serpent, an enormous—

*(Everything that is in Nature, the Universall Friend once told the two boys, Stutley and Samuel (the only other boy even close to Stutley's age) she'd caught beating a little black grass snake with sticks, is of Nature and thus partakes of some measure of God's benevolence. She fixed her eyes on each boy in turn and continued: In some cases, to be sure, alas, it is a distressingly small measure. But this creature—she looked into its eyes dangling before her own and with a flick of her arm tossed it into the tall grass—is not venomous and serves God's will by eating the vermin that would otherwise eat the maize belonging to God's servants. She turned. And now, my small gentlemen, with that lesson well learned we shall proceed with our schoolwork. And with the two of them in tow she strode across the field, long black clergy-cloak flapping behind her and the two boys making faces at each other.)*

He stood frozen to the spot.

The serpent bucked back and shook itself, flung out multiple whipping arms, and flapped and flipped up and down in a frenzy of motion. Like an epileptic fit. Was it ill? It fell down and lay still.

Now the stones and driftwood read H O M E.

Northup's knees just gave out on him, his legs went limp and he sat down right there on the rocks. Terror dwindled quickly, though, swamped with astonishment and, as that too ebbed, with, what else, it must be *curiosity*—

He found a stick and scratched into the mud E V O L.

And the serpent whistled. A high keening, like a winter wind through pine trees, and somehow communicating the utmost melancholy. It reared back again and rapidly rearranged its sticks and stones to read F R E E.

A scurf of scales rose and fell on the broken water, blank to the horizon.

\* \* \*

## IX.

Back at the farmhouse, Chambers paces up and down the parlor.

How long? he asks. How long?

How long what? Northup asks.

How long has God's good earth been infested with these—these—monstrous *vermin*?

Northup sighs, shakes his head.

How long? Chambers asks.

A lifetime. Fifty years or more.

Fifty years!

Northup nods.

What hope, then, in ridding ourselves of them? What hope of surviving the onslaught? What hope for our children, our families? What hope for the future of us all?

Northup says: What in Heaven's name are you going on about?

The beasts! The creatures! Already they have killed a man

—  
Killed who? Northup asks.

Your man, they killed your hired man, I saw the body myself.

Northup says: You forgot his name already.

Chambers says: It's hardly important.

Northup stands up and stalks out of the room. Chambers hears him in the pantry, stomping around, glasses and crockery rattling and knocking. After a while it get quiet and he comes back with a bottle and two glasses.

He hoists the bottle and says: Don't usually indulge, but this is not a usual circumstance.

He sets the bottle down hard on the parlor table. The top-heavy Argand lamp there cants and steadies, and its train-oil reservoir tilts a shadow across the wall.

Armagnac hors d'âge, he announces. You might say the good stuff. Dutch merchant whose son I went to school with gave it to me—oh, years ago. Dead now, I imagine.

He pushes the cork out with his thumb and pours. He hands one glass to Chambers, who tosses it back and falls into a fit of coughing. Northup swirls his own glass thoughtfully, gazing into the amber whorl, then lifts the glass to his lips and sips noisily. He smiles, and sets the glass down.

Survival seem likely? he asks Chambers.

Winded, hand pressed to his chest, Chambers nods.

More? Northup asks.

Chambers shakes his head.

Northup takes another sip.

Pleasure is the principle pursued here, he says, not mere intemperance.

He continues: Now, as for our friend in the lake. Been there long as I've been alive. Longer, maybe. Plenty of time to wreak all the havoc a soul could fear, if havoc was wished for. If my understanding's good, we've as long again to go before any hope of rescue. Yes, rescue. Don't be a fool, Chambers. Sit down.

Chambers has leapt to his feet and is heading for the door.

Northup says: I'm no more an enemy than I've ever been. Which is to say, I hope you see, hardly at all. Sit down.

Chambers stammers: They—they've—you have—

Northup says: There is no "they," Chambers. There's only the one. Sit down.

Chambers is fumbling at the door, which Northup has had the foresight to latch.

Northup goes over to him, puts his arm over his shoulder, and brings him back to the chair. James, James, he says. Sit down, old friend, he says. Have another brandy.

He pours. Chambers sips this time.

He sets the glass down and comes out with: Tentacles! You put your hand in—

But he can't complete the thought, his mind just veers away from the recollection.

Northup says with an air of great patience: He recognizes me by taste. Can't see too well out of the water. Of course he's got good eyes, and up close he can see very well indeed, better than us probably, but at any distance.... Which is also how you managed to surprise him with that oar.

Chambers says, How long have you—?

Northup says, Many years. I spend a deal of time on the water, you know.

Yes, Chambers says. About that....

Northup lifts his eyebrows at him.

Chambers says, It might seem a little awkward, to deal with your former student as an officer of the law—

Not at all, Northup murmurs.

But duty is duty, and I know what mine is.

Chambers takes another drink. Northup refills his glass.

Chambers says, Now, I know *you* did not kill him. Yes, I know that because I know you. And you say the... the...

Visitor, Northup suggests.

The—visitor—has not have killed him, whatever I might believe about it. I accept your word on that point. And yet I have a body that's washed ashore, and even a dead Negro requires an explanation.

He half-drains his glass.

Not a mark on him, he adds. Good stuff, this.

Yes, Northup says.

Well, Northup says.

Truly, you didn't know? Northup says. And all this time, James, I thought you were looking the other way.

Looking away? From what? When?

Now it's Northup's turn to drain his glass. It was a placard, he says. That I saw in Erie City. I mentioned it to Amos, casual like, that one George Cramer was offering two hundred dollars reward for the whereabouts of a certain Nebuchadnezzar, not a name I knew. Can you believe it, I said. I thought it preposterous. But he flew into a panic, wouldn't listen to me, threw his belongings into a bundle and out the door. I—

He refills his glass.

You remember how cold it was this past winter. He determined to walk across the ice. It was foolhardy. He wouldn't heed me, and the ice proved, it seems, less sound than he believed. He must have drowned, and without any help or hindrance from our visitor. Who I can't doubt was not even aware of his presence above him.

A long pause. The firelight flickers on the ceiling, orange and gold laced with shadow.

Chambers says, You go to Arkwright on Tuesdays?

Northup nods.

Chambers says, I believe it likely that the jury will return a verdict of death by misadventure. He lowers his gaze, and adds: Even without your testimony.

Northup says, Thank you.

But he adds: There is a class of people who, accustomed to the manipulation of power on behalf of themselves and their friends, grow to believe that that power is theirs as an aspect of the natural order of things. Soon they do not care what it takes to perpetuate their power; whatever it may be, they will do it. You are not like that, Chambers. But take care that you do not become so.

There follows a passage of time punctuated with the purr of poured liquor, the clink of glasses.

Eventually, Chambers says: Rescued?

Northup says: Yes. He comes from a long-lived race but all he can do here is wait.

\* \* \*

X.

He calls himself Jonah now, a story so terrible that he's never told it to anyone because no one could believe it. Amos Walker was never his name; that's just what he called himself to strangers, a name for using on the long road northward. He chose for himself the name Jonah, from the Bible, and the surname of a man who had been kind to him. The name he was given at birth—not by his mother—nor had he ever known his father—was, he's come to understand, a cruel one, and contemptuous. And a mouthful, too; even his own mother called him Nebs, his childhood friends Nezzar. Just the one name, like an animal.

He shivers and pushes at the door again. It's firmly shut. Winter had been cold in Virginia, too, of course, but it's harsher here, more ice, more snow, especially south of the lake. His mind veers away from that thought with a practiced swerve, a neat turn, and he crosses to the hearth and plucks a twist of tallow-dipped straw from a little basket there, holds it to the guttering fire, and breathes on it gently to puff its smolder into flare. It's colder here than he's used to—but then it was cold in Pennsylvania, and colder still crossing the ice.

For a second his hand shakes again and he nearly drops the twist. This won't do, not at all. He pinches off the crumb of soot crusted to the tip of the wick and presses the little flame against it. The candle stub smokes and catches, brightness rising from its wick like a smile. A thread of smoke bends and wafts. He closes the lantern's glass door. There. That's good. Warmth and light. He hangs the lantern up on its hook, its pierced-tin back against the wall, and prods the fire higher.

He sits down at the little deal table under the lantern, pushed up against the wall, and picks up the penknife. He has a cracked cup stuck full of the right kind of feathers, and he takes one, strips the barbs off with the knife, and plunges the tip into the hot ash under the logs in the hearth.

No, Canada's no paradise. His neighbors aren't as friendly with a colored man as they might be with a white one, for sure, but Americans are worse, apart from a few, and he's had much to endure. Only for that—bad usage—and he'd still be in America, though he does not regret coming here. No, he was forced away. He pulls the quill out and sets to cleaning the end, softened now, with the dull back edge of his knife. Then he polishes it with a bit of brick he keeps for that purpose.

He's well contented here, yes, a man now as God intended that he should be—that is, born equal and free, a wholesome law unlike the southern laws that put men, made in the image

of God, on a level with brutes. O what will become of my people—for a moment all the sickness of his own thoughts bears down on him—where will they stand on that day? Let the oppressed go free, go free.

He is staring blankly at the fire, his task forgotten.

And I will come near to you in judgment, a swift witness against the false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow (his mother was a widow, she never spoke of it but he knew why), and the fatherless (a blankness).

He looks down at his hands, at the quill, the knife: a choice to be made.

But he knows that he will not meet those men again in this life; and, indeed, despite his anger, he hopes that they might still repent of their evil, and let their property go free. He does still hope for their salvation, but he does not believe they will.

He trims the lower third of the quill, twists it round in his fingers, cuts off the tip at a slope, then turns it again and slits it. He nicks the sides and trims them off, tests the tip against his thumb, and trims a little more. Placing the tip on his thumbnail, the knife somewhat aslant, he cuts the end of the nib not quite off, nimbly flips it around, and pulls the blade clean through. He inspects the new pen and, satisfied, lays it down.

He opens the bottle of ink he bought in town; an extravagance, perhaps, but in the past summer, besides having a good kitchen garden, he raised (for cash sale) 316 bushels potatoes, 120 bushels corn, forty-one bushels buckwheat, a small crop of oats (for the hogs), seventeen hogs, and seventy chickens (whose eggs he sells at the weekly market, while the occasional ailing hen goes into the pot). His rent for his cabin this year is fifty dollars, and next year he hopes to build and so avoid that expense. If he'd known how well he'd get along, he'd have left America ten years sooner.

He dips his pen.

*Deer*, he writes. Is that right? It's a word, sure, but something about it seems not exactly as it should be. Writing comes hard to him, having been learned late, and his lines frequently blot and his pen breaks and the paper tears and he brushes his sleeve against wet ink; every literate mishap there can be, there is. But he tries: that's important; he tries, and perhaps he improves day by day.

He found a route north, and he found a teacher to help him to read, and reading's easier for him now than ever before, and surely he'll find his path here too. We are all wayward pilgrims, having lost our names and our friends, and many of us our lives, with little chance, stumbling towards Zion-land;

and though we may not know the clear path, still we shall reach our home. Someday. Perhaps someday. Pray that it be soon.

He picks up his pen again and writes:

*Deer Friend Stutlee*

\* \* \*

(XI.

(July 1881. Report of the Signal Service officer at the port of Erie City:

(At 5:30 in the morning the air was calm. At 6 o'clock, a slight breeze. To the northward a dark cloud appeared like a curtain, and at the same time a rumbling sound and a strong wind. At 6:20, a single, large green wave, about nine feet above the normal level of the lake, with no crest, approached from the northwest with great rapidity. The cloud, wave, and wind seemed to travel together. Soon after the passage of the wave, the wind subsided and the cloud dispersed.)

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*Thomas M. Waldroon has lived in or near Washington (or, to be pedantic, the District of Columbia) for many years.*

*“Sinseerly &c.” is from a series of preposterous lies—to be collected someday in a book titled Certain Americans—about his ancestors, in this case one of his great-great-great-great grandfathers. Let it be noted that you too, brave reader, can plumb the depths of similar tedium at [www.tmwaldroon.com](http://www.tmwaldroon.com).*

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## COVER ART

“Twisted Mountain Valley,” by Christopher Balaskas



*Christopher Balaskas is an instructor at Infinity Visual and Performing Arts and a freelance traditional / digital conceptual artist. He was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, and is currently based in Jamestown, New York. View more of his work at [deviantArt](#) and [artstation](#).*

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