

CHRISTINA MELDRUM

A young woman with long, flowing blonde hair is the central figure. She is wearing a green, textured sweater and is holding a small, orange and black butterfly near her face. Her hair is blowing in the wind. The background is a field of autumn foliage under a dramatic, cloudy sky.

Madapple

Chapter Sampler

CHRISTINA MELDRUM

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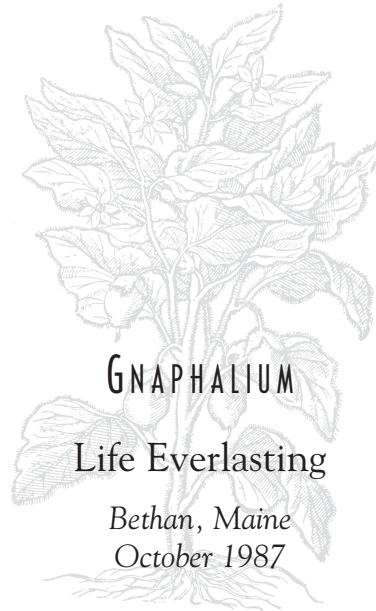
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First Edition

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The women resemble schoolgirls with gangly limbs, ruddy cheeks, plaited flaxen hair; they walk holding hands. Yet the older of the two is pregnant; her unborn baby rides high and round. And the younger woman's left foot scratches a path through the leaves. She seems comfortable with her limp, accustomed to it.

A child darts before them, chasing leaves that swirl at her feet. Her dark hair, tied back in a scant tail, whips behind her. She stumbles, catches herself. "Mor!" she calls out. "Mommy!" Then she points at a bird perched high on a leafless branch, its plump breast berry-like against the low sky.

The older woman hesitates before she recalls the bird's name. "A robin. The bird is a robin. Soon it will fly south for the winter. It is too cold here in Maine."

"*Men det er ikke koldt.* But it is not cold." The child's words are malformed; she is not yet three.

“*Ikke for Danmark*,” the woman says. “Not for Denmark. And certainly not for you, but you are not a robin.”

The robin jerks its head to the side, then back, before it takes flight.

“The robin was looking at you,” the child says to the woman with the limp, not her mother. “He wanted to know your name.”

“I’m *Moster Maren*, little *Sanne*. Aunt *Maren*. Have you already forgotten?”

“Yes!” The child laughs and sprints forward; her laugh is discordant, but the wind carries the sound away, and the woman, *Maren*, is grateful.

“*Sanne* reminds me of you when you were small,” the child’s mother says to *Maren*. “Do you recall what *Fader* called you? *Gnaphalium*, remember? That plant known at home as ‘life everlasting.’ You were so full of life.”

Maren stops walking.

“What is it, *Maren*?”

“Don’t go back to Denmark, *Sara*. Stay here with me. Please. Your marriage is ending—you know that. And with *Moder*’s death, there’s little keeping you. And I can help you. We’ll help each other.”

Sara frees her hand from *Maren*’s grip. “*Fader* is still in Denmark. And I told you before, I don’t need your help.”

“Yes, *Fader*,” *Maren* says. She reaches toward a plant and runs her index finger along a scar on the fleshy rhizome of the plant. “Solomon’s seal. This plant’s name is Solomon’s seal. See, the mark here. It resembles the seal of King Solomon, the Star of David—the symbol Solomon used to cast away demons, summon angels.”

Sara lifts Maren's hand from the stalk and turns Maren toward her. "Tell me what's wrong," Sara says. "This isn't about me. Why did you ask us to come? You said you were leaving Denmark to start a new life, but now you want to bring your life in Denmark with you here?"

"I want you here. And Sanne. And your new baby," Maren says.

"But why? What is wrong? Is it something about *Fader*?"

"Don't tell *Fader*."

"Don't tell *Fader* what, Maren?"

"I'm pregnant, too."

"*Mor!*" the little girl calls out. "*Løb efter mig, Mor!*" Sanne runs down the path; trampled leaves cling to her scarf and hair. "Chase after me, Mommy!"

"You are pregnant?" Sara says, but she looks at her daughter and the gray sky and the leaves.

"Don't be angry with me—" Maren says.

But Sara interrupts. "I didn't even know you knew about such things." She is fondling her own hands as her eyes search Sanne's hands, but Sanne's hands are a blur. "You're so young, Maren. Maybe you're mistaken."

"I'm a robin." Sanne's arms stretch wide. "I can fly!"

"I'm almost sixteen," Maren says. "I'm not that young."

"But you've been in the States for less than two months. How could this happen in such a short time?"

"I'm four months pregnant," Maren says. "Three months less than you. I was pregnant before I arrived."

"*Mor,*" Sanne says. "I'm flying away. I'm flying south."

Sara wraps her arms around herself and begins walking again, toward Sanne. She can see Sanne's hands better now:

her fingers splayed, and those two webbed fingers not splayed. And she wonders. And then she says, “Before you arrived? But how can that be? I didn’t even know you had a lover. I’ve been like a mother to you since *Moder* died. How could you have not told me?”

“I didn’t know.”

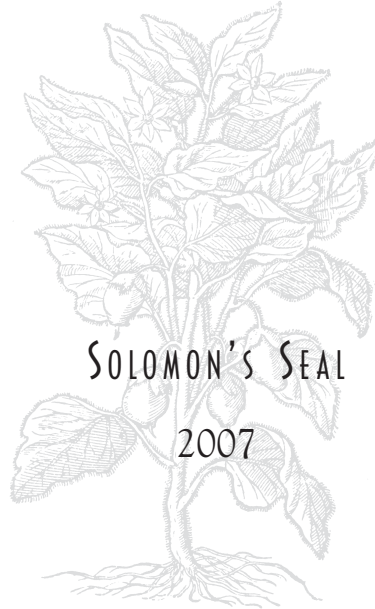
“Didn’t know?”

“I didn’t know I was pregnant. I found out the day I asked you to come.”

“But you knew you’d been with someone. You had a lover, Maren. And you didn’t tell me.”

“I’ve flown away, *Mor*.” Sanne has reached the end of the path. “I’m gone forever.”

“But I didn’t have a lover,” Maren says. “I’ve never had a lover.”



- Please state your name for the record.
- Aslaug.
- And your last name?
- I don't know.
- You don't know your last name?
- No.
- Your mother's name was Maren Hellig, was it not?
- Yes.
- You are Aslaug Hellig?
- Mother called me Aslaug Datter.
- So your last name is Datter?
- No. I mean, I don't know. *Datter* means “daughter” in Danish. I'm not sure it's my name.
- What was your father's name?
- I don't have a father.

—You don't know who your father is?

—I don't have a father, other than the one we share.

—You mean God in heaven?

—I never said God is in heaven.

—But you mean God, am I right?

—Yes.

—Well, I'm referring to your biological father. You don't know who he is?

—I don't have a biological father.

—Your Honor, the witness is being nonresponsive. She's being tried here for one count of attempted murder and two counts of murder in the first degree, and she's playing games—

—Do you have a birth certificate for the witness, Counsel? It seems that document may clarify this matter.

—She has no birth certificate, Your Honor. At least none we've found.



ANGEL'S-TRUMPET

2003

Hartswell, Maine

Mother crouches in the field, her body folded into itself as she uproots the salsify plants and lops off their purple heads. Our gathering baskets circle her like iced-over petals, their inert white handles conspicuous above the quiver of herbs and wildflowers. Her hands are gloved, should she encounter stinging nettle, she claims; its young shoots and upper leaves are worth collecting, she reminds me; we have eaten them as greens and in stew. Yet I know it is the jimsonweed, not the nettle, she is prepared to find: rank-smelling, rash-causing, poisonous jimsonweed. When I was growing up, Mother called the weed a variety of names. Madapple at times. Devil's apple at times. And green dragon and stinkwort and angel's-trumpet. No matter, her warning was always the same: deadly. Still, I know it is the jimsonweed she wants today. Her eyes pick through the flora, searching in vain for

the tall green plant with the prickly fruit and funnel flowers that look deceptively benign.

For nearly two months now, I've found the weed's leaves and kidney-shaped seeds drying in the back porch sun, mingling as if innocent with the other berries, seeds and leaves. Perhaps Mother assumed I wouldn't notice the jimsonweed, subsumed in this mosaic of plant parts. Perhaps I wouldn't have noticed if it weren't for the weed's smell: like rot. But for much of this past week, I've smelled only its absence, and, as of today, absent it remains.

Despite the dearth of jimsonweed—perhaps because of it—our baskets are mostly brimming. I carry handfuls of yellow goatsbeard leaves to cook as greens for dinner, and I toss them into the basket on top of a mound of sweet clover. The vanilla scent of the clover hovers about the basket, obfuscating the stench of waste that lingers on my shoes and skirt. We spent our morning at the town dump, collecting the wild madder we use to curdle milk when making cheese. Had we found the jimsonweed then, we might have headed home. Instead, we've worked most of the afternoon in this field collecting far more of the other flowers than we need.

The basket containing the medicinal plants is overflowing, as if the whites and yellows of the blossoms were oozing free. And the mullein is so abundant; we'll have candles for a month at least. Only the basket for the plants Mother calls her *sapientia*, her wisdom, is not yet full, the Indian tobacco there making only a thin purple-green bed along the basket's base.

"Aslaug," Mother says. I watch her untangling as her back straightens and her clenched fingers ease just enough to

release the salsify. “Those cinnamon ferns,” she says, and she motions toward a gaggle of green bordering the woods we will pass through on our way home. “They have hundreds more chromosomes than you.” I look to the ferns; even assuming her statement was meant as a slight, I can’t quell my interest.

“I’m hurting,” Mother says then, as if the ferns’ genetic abundance has some bearing on her pain. I turn back to her, and I see it, the pain; it seems different suddenly; she wears it differently. Her lips are powder-dry and pursed. Her left eyelid is twitching, twitching, twitching, like an insect’s pumping wings. I have the urge to press my fingers against it, hold it still.

“We’ve been out too long,” I say, walking toward her. “We should go home.” I say this, but I don’t mean it: I don’t want to go home. Our house sits outside the village of Hartswell, at the end of a dirt road, at what I imagine is the end of the earth. We have only one neighbor; the next closest house sits miles and miles away. Even so, Mother and I leave our house only to forage, less often to drive into Hartswell to collect the mail or to the college town, Bethan, to buy supplies. The outside world is my featherfoil plant, magnificent in its season, when it appears in abundance, but then it disappears, completely, for what seems years. Our drapes are thick as quilts, and tacked shut floor to ceiling, side to side, inch by inch by inch. We live in a cocoon, Mother and I, whether to keep the inside in or the outside out, I do not know.

“We can’t go, Aslaug,” Mother says. “I need help.”

“I can help you walk.”

“No. No. For the pain.”

Mother is sick. She's been sick almost as far back as I can remember. Not terribly sick, but sick. I don't know the name of her illness; Mother's never mentioned its name, and I know not to ask. She's said only that her body is attacking itself like a tomcat that devours its progeny, the progeny being her cartilage and bone, and her muscles and ligaments and tendons. Her joints are red and swollen, and, day by day, little by little, she is becoming deformed.

I rip off a leaf of the Indian tobacco and lift it to her mouth. She chews it but shakes her head. "We have shinleaf at home," I say. "I'll make the leaf plaster for you, rub it on your knees and back. It will help."

"No," Mother says. "No shinleaf."

There's a feeling that wells in me I can't name. An instinct, it seems—an instinct that something is very wrong. "I found some scarlet pimpernel at the dump," I say. "Not a lot, but enough to make a poultice." Mother refers to pimpernel as adder's eyes—snake eyes. But she's taken it before; it's made her happier, nicer. I want to believe it will help her, but I know it won't, even before she answers.

"Adder's eyes?" Mother says. "Adder's eyes won't help."

"You want jimsonweed," I say, not meaning to, but the words come.

Mother looks at me like she doesn't know me; she doesn't ask how I know about the jimsonweed. "I make an ointment with it, Aslaug," she says, "for the pain. Like the shinleaf. I mix it with nightshade, and it helps. More than shinleaf."

"I'll find some," I say.

What I don't say is she is allergic to the touch of jimsonweed, as am I. This is something she knows, we both know;

each of us has been careless at times, brushed against the weed and endured its wrath. Mother has no intention of rubbing her skin with jimsonweed.

Nor do I say I've seen her make cigarettes from the weed's dried leaves and seeds. Her hands protected by gloves, she rolls the weed with hemp or Indian tobacco and smokes at night when she believes I am asleep. Sometimes she mixes the leaves with something flammable—potassium nitrate, maybe—and she burns them in a saucer and inhales their smoke deeply, and holds it. I watch from the top of the stairs, the jimsonweed burning in the distance like a neutron star, and the Kabbalah or Torah or Upanishads glowing faintly in its light. Although I don't know what the weed does for Mother, she seems transported in those moments, and sometimes for days, like she's entered another time and space. A time before me. A space without me—a space where the windows were open to the world. There is a softness about the way her mouth falls loose after she inhales, and in her eyes: their twitching and relentless blinking give way. She releases her hair at some point while she sits there, and it plunges to her waist like a flash of light.

I submit to sleep before she does, always, and I wake before she does, always. And I often find the remains of Mother's foray in the morning: her cigarette butts like magnified mouse droppings or the saucer like a diminutive swamp. Sometimes I pick up a butt with tweezers, lift it to my mouth, or I breathe hard from the saucer, trying to find that space Mother finds. But the power of the jimsonweed is dead for me; it takes me nowhere.

I run through the field now, moving far faster without

Mother. How easy it would be to run away from her. How easy; how impossible.

I find the jimsonweed at the far edge of the field, and I rip it down bare-handed, knowing even as I do I will suffer for this. I carry the weed back and throw it on top of the Indian tobacco. I expect Mother to seem relieved, even pleased with me, but she doesn't look up. She is watching a butterfly as it flutters across a bed of sweet clover. The butterfly is pale brown, almost gray, and from a distance it looks drab, but as I walk nearer, its delicate markings become apparent: the wings are speckled with darker spots ringed in white; a single blue splotch near the tail is flanked by patches of orange.

"An Edward's hairstreak," Mother says.

"It's beautiful—" I begin.

But Mother stops me. "It shouldn't be here. We're too far north." She jerks her hands into her pockets, and I wonder whether they are shaking, whether she is hiding them from me. She has the same look on her face as earlier this month when she saw the purple passionflower she says resembles a crown of thorns. Mother claims the flower doesn't grow in Maine, but there it was. When Mother saw the passionflower, its showy blossom almost gaudy in the otherwise plain thicket, she crushed its fringed corona in one swoop like a bird of prey, and she tore it from the ground.

"We need to find some sneezeweed," Mother says now. The butterfly moves behind her, across the clover, and she turns away from me to follow it.

"You want sneezeweed?" We've never gathered sneezeweed before; I assumed we never would. Mother told me herself its only use is to purge the body of evil spirits, and

Mother claims she doesn't believe in spirits, evil or otherwise. On any other day, I would assume Mother is mocking me about the sneezeweed; today I'm not sure. I want to look at Mother's face again: at her eyes, to determine whether she is there with me or has escaped inside her mind; at the tilt of her mouth, to see whether her lips are tight in irony, or open in wonder. But Mother has her back to me now.

"Do you know atoms are comprised almost completely of empty space, Aslaug? Objects around us look solid, but they're not. The hairstreak is more not there than there. And yet we see it. It seems solid. The sneezeweed? You don't see the plant right now, but you know what it looks like—you have an image of it in your mind. That image has almost as much substance as the real thing."

"You want the sneezeweed for evil spirits?" I say, trying to draw Mother back. I want Mother to say yes; I want her to believe in spirits. Even evil spirits.

Mother continues as if I've said nothing. "Celtic people in the Middle Ages understood this about butterflies—they knew butterflies are ethereal, not really solid. They saw butterflies as souls. They believed women became pregnant by swallowing these butterfly souls." Mother removes a hand from her pocket and reaches toward the hairstreak; it flutters high for a moment, then descends again to the clover. "They believed each butterfly soul flew about in search of a new mother." She bends to the clover, grips a cluster and rips it from the ground. She turns and pushes the clover toward me, and I reach to take it. But she pulls it back. "Is that how you came to me, Aslaug Datter?" she says. "Did you come as a butterfly soul?"

I can feel her moist breath on my face—a fog of peppermint leaves and tobacco. “I don’t know,” I want to say. “You’ve never told me of my birth. You’ve never mentioned my father, not even his name. I don’t know where I came from.” But I don’t say this. I’ve learned not to take Mother’s bait.

“The words for *soul* and *butterfly* are the same in Greek,” I say. “*Psyche*. It means both.”

“So you’ve learned something I’ve taught you,” Mother says. And I realize the butterfly is gone.

When we’re not out foraging or doing chores, Mother teaches me Newton and Lyell and Darwin and Einstein and Dalton and Bohr and Heisenberg and Pauli. Newton’s *Principia*, Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*, Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* and Einstein’s “Cosmological Considerations on the General Theory of Relativity.”

And languages. I have no memory of learning Danish or English or Latin—as if they’ve always been mine. But I do recall Mother teaching me Greek before I could reach the kitchen sink. By the time I could hang clothes on the line, I was learning Hebrew and Arabic and Aramaic. And on the day of my first menses, Mother began with Sanskrit. Then other ancient languages: Coptic, and the runic alphabet, and a bit of the Celtic languages, Gaulish, Celtiberian and Lepontic.

Mother teaches me other subjects as well, but only because the state of Maine demands it. A man from the Department of Education came to our door two years ago—after our neighbor reported us, Mother claims—and now I learn language arts, social studies, health education,

library skills, fine arts. But of these subjects, Mother teaches me only what I need to pass the standardized test she's required to give me each year, and she blacks out passages from most every book I have to read. Although I'd never tell Mother, I'm grateful she has to teach me these subjects; otherwise, I'd have practically no understanding of the world outside our house, outside these woods, outside the microscopic, the scientific. I wouldn't know of poetry and fiction; I wouldn't know of art; I wouldn't understand democracy or taxes, or that human beings have sex for reasons other than procreation. And I wouldn't have this awareness of how much I'm missing—of how many passages Mother's blacked out.

Mother looks into the basket containing the jimsonweed and studies its contents. I notice Mother's expression, and I see what I'd wished to see before: relief, for certain; almost pleasure. She reaches behind her head and coils her pale fan of hair. "Madapple," she says, but not to me. And then, "You did well, Aslaug," as her eyes sift through the collected mound of jimsonweed. "You did very well."

She begins walking toward the woods in the direction of our home, carrying the basket of jimsonweed and tobacco, but she's struggling with the basket, still struggling with the pain. She seems to have forgotten the hairstreak butterfly.

"What about the sneezeweed?"

"You are ridiculous, Aslaug Datter," she says. "I was being facetious."

She says this, and yet I sense otherwise. She wanted the sneezeweed, I think; she *wants* the sneezeweed. I'm not sure whether to feel grateful or terrified. Mother scoffs at the

mystical, the magical, the mythological, even if at times she slips into it, as with the hairstreak. And yet, the more Mother teaches me science, the more cracks I see, and the more cracks it seems Mother must see. Science describes the world; it doesn't explain it: it can describe the universe's formation, but it can't explain why such an event would have occurred, how something can come from nothing. That's the miracle. Mother ridicules me when I talk this way, but now she wants the sneezeweed.

I fumble behind Mother now, looping one basket around my forearm, gripping the other two. Juggling the baskets, I couldn't walk much faster than Mother if I tried, but I don't try; I wouldn't try. Our shadows, stretched before us, mingle like butterflies courting. A dance of searching souls, I think. That sense of insecurity—that something is amiss—still drags at me, so unlike gravity, so much stronger. I hear Mother in my head: "The force that keeps our universe from soaring off into the oblivion is astonishingly weak." The feeling I have now is anything but.

We approach the ferns Mother made reference to earlier. They look so simple, unadorned by flowers or fruit or extraneous color. Yet, they are more complex genetically than we humans, who seem to feel such need for adornment. I think of people I've seen in Bethan—of their painted toenails, fingernails, cheeks, lips and eyes.

This memory stirs my longing for bloodroot, for the blood of the root, that orange-red sap I've used in secret to dye my belly with the likeness of a spotted touch-me-not, as if somehow that golden flower with its splotches of burnt red could protect me from my mother: from her biting words, the

stinging rod; her absence. Touch me not. And yet, I want her touch, and I want to hear her words—words that open small passages into the tunnels of her mind, and often seduce me with wonder.

I find myself looking beyond the ferns, into the moist woods. And I spot a withered bloodroot. Its leaves are collapsed and dried, but I know its rounded rootstock is still fleshy, and full, and waiting for me to release it from the ground, give it new life on me. Give me new life in its adornment.

I digress a bit from Mother as I move toward the bloodroot. There is a gully just before the woods, the water traveling almost indiscernibly, the ferns reflecting there like the trees of a submerged and miniature world. The impulse stops me: I put the baskets down and lean over the water, toward the ferns, and my face enters their world, but my reflection is obscured by my hair. I hear Mother behind me, first her voice calling my name, then her movement. I turn to see she is running toward me. Running. I didn't think she was capable of this. She grabs my hair before I think to get away; a hot splash of pain radiates across my scalp. She pulls me back from the gully, and I fall into the baskets; salsify and goatsbeard speckle the ground. Mother stands over me. "What were you doing?" Her hair has come loose, and it flails about her like wings. She is breathing erratically. I feel afraid of her, for her.

"I'm sorry, Mother," I say. "I'm so sorry." I don't ask her why she is angry, why I am sorry.

"What were you doing?" she says again.

"The cinnamon ferns," I say. "I was looking at them."

“The ferns?”

“You mentioned them earlier. Their chromosomes. You said they had more chromosomes . . .”

Mother doesn't move. She hangs over me like a willow, her hair, her arms, her clothing, suspended and caging. “You were looking at the ferns,” she says; it is not a question. But her eyes challenge me.

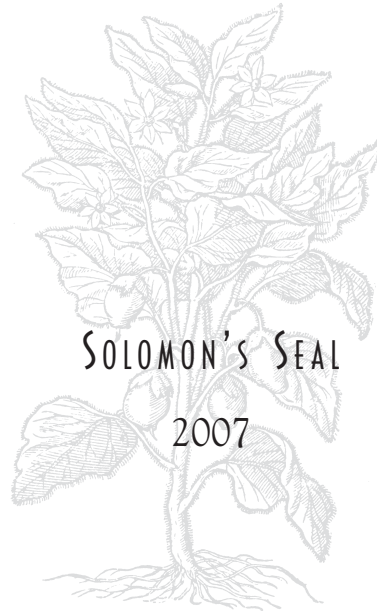
Mother reaches into her pocket then and removes something. She tosses it onto my chest before moving away. I sit up, and the hairstreak tumbles into my lap.

“Is that what you were looking for, Aslaug Datter?” Mother says. She picks up the basket of jimsonweed and walks again.

I lift the lifeless body into my palm.

“It didn't belong here,” she calls back.

I stand, still holding the butterfly; I can't bear to let it drop. I recall the story Mother told about the Celts. A butterfly soul. I lift the hairstreak, slip it inside my mouth and swallow.



—Please state your name for the record.

—Lens Grumset.

—What is your home address, Mr. Grumset?

—886 Bedrag Road, Hartswell, Maine.

—How long have you lived at this address?

—Thirty-one years.

—Do you know the defendant, the woman we are referring to as Aslaug Hellig?

—I do. She and her ma lived next to me for about thirteen years, until about four years ago.

—During the time Aslaug and her mother were living next to you, did you see them periodically?

—Well, I wouldn't say I seen them much. They kept to themselves, mostly. Kept their windows covered, for insulation I guessed at the time—but now that this is all come to light, well, who knows what the hell was going on.

—Objection, Your Honor. Move to strike. Speculation.

—I'll strike his last sentence only. Please just answer the question asked, Mr. Grumset.

—Yes, sir, Your Honor.

—Mr. Grumset, you said you didn't see Aslaug and her mother much. Did you ever see them?

—Sure I did. Mostly Aslaug. When she was a kid, I saw her now and then. She was quite a tomboy, that one. Racing round the yard like some wild animal, stomping through leaves and puddles, climbing trees. I always felt bad there weren't other youngsters round for her to play with. She was always alone. Makes kids strange spending so much time alone.

—Objection, Your Honor. Move to strike. The witness's conclusion is speculative and lacking foundation. Mr. Grumset is not an expert in child psychology.

—Sustained only as to Mr. Grumset's last sentence; otherwise, the objection is overruled.

—Did you see Aslaug during the months just prior to her mother's death, Mr. Grumset?

—No, not much. Aslaug didn't spend much time out of doors when she was a teenager. Lord knows what she was doing cooped up in that house of theirs. Although I would see her on their back porch hanging clothes and fiddling around. And she and her ma worked in the yard sometimes. And they also used to take these walks out in the woods. They'd come back with all manner of paraphernalia. Sometimes I wondered whether they was into witchcraft or the like.

—Objection. Move to strike Mr. Grumset's final sentence. Speculation.

—Sustained. Get to the point, Counsel.

—Mr. Grumset, did you observe Aslaug on the day of her mother's death?

—You bet I did.

—And what did you see?

—Well, I remember it happened on that day about four years ago when Aslaug pulled down all their curtains.

—Objection. Move to strike. Speculation. Lack of foundation. No one has testified Aslaug took down any curtains.

—Well, her ma sure as hell couldn't had done that—take down those big curtains, I mean. The woman was nearly crippled by then.

—Mr. Grumset, please. You are not permitted to speak when you haven't been asked a question. Your objection is sustained, Counsel. Strike Mr. Grumset's statements from the record.

—Sorry, Your Honor. Sorry.

—Mr. Grumset, please explain what you saw at the Helligs' house on the day of Maren Hellig's death.

—Well, like I was saying, about four years ago—the day those big curtains came down—I saw Aslaug dragging her ma's body to the backyard. She was going to bury it.

—Move to strike, Your Honor. Speculation.

—I'll strike that last statement. Please just describe what you saw, Mr. Grumset.

—Well, you see, I saw Aslaug dragging some large white thing out the back door of their house, into the yard. I couldn't see what the thing was at the time, but later, when the police got there, I saw it was her ma's body. Anyway, Aslaug was having trouble pulling it, and I wondered why on earth

her ma wasn't helping her. Then I remembered her ma was pretty much crippled. If I could've helped her, I probably would've gone over there, but I was in this damn wheelchair. When she finished pulling it out, she went and got a shovel and started digging. It was a couple hours before I appreciated the fact that the hole looked like a goddamned grave.

—What else, if anything, did you see the defendant doing while she was in the backyard?

—Well, I remember her rolling this big rock around. And I remember her doing something to that rock. Writing on it or something. I couldn't tell.

—What else, if anything, did you see the defendant doing?

—Nothing. She wasn't doing nothing else but digging, until the police got there.

—Let's back up a bit. Did you do anything when you realized the hole the defendant was digging looked like a grave?

—Well, I called the police. Not right away. I mean, the body was wrapped up in something white. A sheet, I think. I couldn't be sure what it was. But after another fifteen minutes or so, when I didn't see Aslaug's ma around, well, hell, I felt I had to call, especially 'cause I'd heard someone scream over there at their house earlier that day. In the morning.

—Objection. Move to strike. Nonresponsive.

—Overruled.

—You heard a scream coming from the Helligs' household that same morning?

—Yeah. At seven or eight that morning, I think. I'd not thought much of it when I first heard it. It could of been any-

thing, I thought. But when I realized that goddamned hole looked like a grave, well, Christ. I thought back on that scream, and I made the call to the cops. And it's a damn good thing I did. If I hadn't been watching the whole affair, Maren Hellig would probably be buried back there now. And I might be buried back there, too, if you know what I mean.

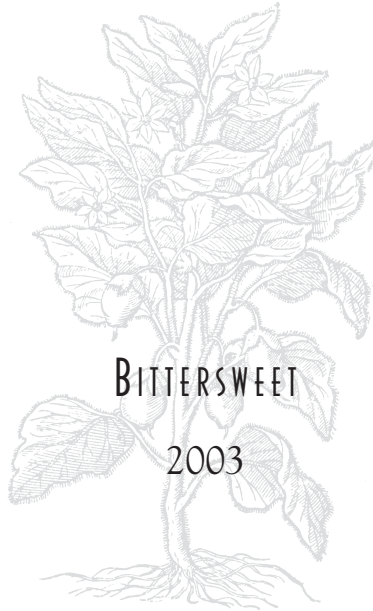
—Objection, Your Honor. Move to strike. Speculative. Narrative. Misleading. Counsel needs to get some control over his witness.

—Objection sustained. And I agree you need to rein your witness in, Counsel. Strike Mr. Grumset's last comments from the record, everything following his statement that he called the police.

—I apologize, Your Honor. I'll wrap things up here. Mr. Grumset, did the police arrive at the Helligs' house?

—They sure did. They came right away, and there was a whole bunch of them. They surrounded Aslaug, tried to take the shovel from her. But she started swinging at them with it. And she was kicking and cussing. I was shocked. I was damn well shocked. They had to handcuff her, you know, just to get her under control.

—Thank you, Mr. Grumset. I have no further questions, Your Honor.



We pass through the clearing, only minutes from our home now. The bloodroot bulges in my pocket; its blood pulses against my leg as I walk. I dug up its roots after Mother turned away, after I swallowed the hairstreak and it found its mother in me. I'll paint a butterfly on myself this time: the hairstreak will be reborn on me.

Clouds like gauze stretch low across the sky; it seems the whole world is enclosed by a rippled tarp. I can see the house: its exterior walls angle first to the left, then the right, as if behind warped glass. From the distance it seems impossible the house could be as imposing to me as it is. Lanky, its gables like antiquated hats, it stands like blue vervain gone dry: its broken shingles and peeling paint fold and crease; it seems the entire house could be uprooted and snapped.

Mother perches on a fallen log near a vine of nightshade;

her basket of *sapientia* rests on the ground. A stalk of cankerroot juts from her lips; she chews it for the sores that speckle the interior of her mouth in mounds. She turns toward me, pulls the cankerroot from her mouth, tucks the soggy stalk in the hip pocket of her dress.

“Help me, girl,” she says. She’s removed her gloves and dropped them to the ground; green pulp hangs from her hands. I realize she’s picking the nightshade berries. Trying to, her fingers no longer capable of subtlety.

“They’re not ripe,” I say. I lower the baskets, flatten the bloodroot deeper into my pocket. “We can’t eat them.”

“I know that, Aslaug,” she says. Still, she tries to pick; her hands grab the berries in fistfuls and squash most.

I pick with her. The berries are cool and waxlike, firmer than I remember. Shiny and green. I imagine the taste of their juice, first bitter, then sweet. *Solanum dulcamara*. Bittersweet. Edible when ripe and red, poisonous when green. But not so poisonous, I think. I ate the unripe berries as a child, just three or four when Mother wasn’t looking. If Mother weren’t with me, I’d eat a handful; it’s been a long time since breakfast.

“These are not the berries of *Atropa belladonna*,” Mother says. “They won’t kill you.”

“*Atropa belladonna*,” I say. “Deadly nightshade. It doesn’t grow here.”

“No,” she says. But without conviction, it seems. “The name is Latin for ‘beautiful woman’—have I told you? Women used to put drops of deadly nightshade in their eyes to dilate their pupils. They thought the enlarged pupils made them more beautiful.”

“You told me before people first used belladonna because it’s a hallucinogenic—it makes them feel like birds, like they’re flying?” I say, but I think of dilated eyes. When Mother inhales the madapple, her pupils stay dilated for days. But now her pupils are pinpricks. Yet her eyes still look wild.

“You would remember that,” Mother says. “Are you plotting to fly away?”

How is it that Mother knows my mind? When she’d first described deadly nightshade to me, I had wished the plant grew in Maine; I remember longing for that sense of flight.

“This is bittersweet nightshade,” I say, and I turn my face to the bittersweet. “Not deadly nightshade. Why are we picking it? Why do you want it?”

Mother ignores me, keeps picking.

Jimsonweed is related to nightshade; they are in the same family, Solanaceae. I wonder if Mother plans to eat some bittersweet berries to see if they can do for her what the jimsonweed does while she waits for the jimsonweed to dry. I want to tell her not to bother, that the green berries give little: some momentary pleasure, yes; some nausea if one eats too many. But I can’t tell Mother this. She’d forbidden my eating the unripe nightshade.

We strip the branches of their remaining fruit. Our swell of berries stains the *sapientia* basket, opposite the jimsonweed Mother’s pushed to one side. Many of the berries are compressed to green jelly.

“We’re done here,” Mother says, nudging me off the log.

I step down, reach back to assist her. She lifts one hand

toward me; the pulp clings to her fingers like moss. I take her hand in mine and ease her down, and when I pull back my hand, the jelly strings between us.

“Have a taste, Aslaug Datter.” Mother’s arm remains stretched outward, her hand propped near me. I’m surprised she has energy to goad me. Her skin looks petal-thin, her feral eyes hollow. Still, I have the impulse to take her fingers in my mouth, shock her. Instead, I kneel to the ground and wipe my hands along the grass in two slick swipes. Then I stand and help Mother squat; I place her hands on the grass.

“Are you afraid tasting the berries might counter all the spells you’ve been putting on me?” Mother says.

I slide her still-curved hands along the ground. “You don’t believe in witchcraft.”

“That’s never deterred you.” Mother wiggles her hands from mine and attempts to wipe off the nightshade pulp herself, but she has difficulty flattening out her fingers and much of the pulp stays put. She motions for me to help her stand. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten even this?” she says. “Bittersweet nightshade counteracts witchcraft.”

“If only I did know witchcraft,” I want to say. “Then I’d become a butterfly soul, find myself a new mother.”

By the time we reach home, the mosquitoes circle. And stars show in the sky. Like seeds, I think, each star holding the possibility of life. I know I’m looking into the past when I look at the stars—that I’m seeing the universe as it existed years and years ago. I can’t help but wish I could see into my past, into Mother’s past. Into my father’s life. I wish I could find a context for who I am.

We pass by our neighbor's house. He sits in the window that faces our yard watching us. His hands grip the wheels of his chair, his glasses sit askew and his few longish hairs dangle over his ear, having slipped free of his glossy scalp.

"Perverted old coot," Mother says when she sees him there, and she spits, at him or the ground, I can't tell. Then she smacks the deep vale of her collarbone, and the flattened mosquito sticks there, in the vale. "The old coot was waiting for us again. *En skefuld lort*. Spoonful of shit." But she says this with less ire than usual, it seems. Less contempt. Still, she glares at him.

She'll try to stare him down, I think. I take the opportunity to lower my baskets, lift a cluster of meadowsweet from the ground, drop the flowers onto the disheveled heap of plants.

Mother turns, sees me, and I see the mosquito hangs in a sketchy pool of red. "Why are you picking those?" she says. "You've got the runs?"

So like Mother to nearly rip my hair from my skull, then worry I have diarrhea. "Yes," I lie, but I speak to the abundance of meadowsweet stamens, not Mother. I lift the baskets from the ground, start walking.

"Wait," she says, and she drags herself and her *sapientia* to me. She presses her scaly palm against my cheek. "You're feverish," she says. "You feel feverish, Aslaug."

"I'm just hot from the trip back," I say. "Not feverish. I have some indigestion. It's nothing, *Moder*. Don't worry."

But she is worrying, and I feel a tinge of satisfaction in

seeing this. A tinge of relief. This is mother-love. This is my mother's love.

"Maybe I'm contagious," she says. "It's spreading from me. . . ."

"No," I say.

"Or an imprecation . . ."

"What are you talking about, *Moder*?"

"You're in pain?" she says.

"No, *Moder*. I'm not sick. Come. Come inside."

We walk again. Creep again. Our neighbor pushes his chair back just before we step from his sight; then he rolls himself to a side window of his house where he can see us trudge through our backyard, this landscape of doll-size peaks and valleys and muddy rivers, still sodden from yesterday's rain. The yard looks like the ceiling of my bedroom to me, where the cracking plaster forms similar mountains, where rain often slips through the roof and streams momentarily before dripping to the floor.

"Cursed beast," Mother says now, but not to the old man, not to me. She is looking at the oak tree that stands leafless near the house, its branches too still, too peaceful. Last season the oak's leaves fell early; this season its leaves didn't grow back. I'd loved this tree when I was a child: the tree had been wild-looking then, its emerald leaves jittery. I remember longing to climb it; I imagined sneaking outside, wrapping my small body against its grain, mounting higher and higher.

Mother spits again; this time she hits the tree, and curses, "*En skefuld lort*." But I see the tree meant something to her, too. There's a tenderness in her voice despite

her words, a fullness in her eyes. “What are you looking at?” she says to me, and her knotted hand swipes her vacant cheek, seems to vanish there. “Just get yourself inside.”

She’s weeping, I think. It feels like a caterpillar is slinking up the nape of my neck, and another layer crusts across the mystery that is my mother.

“I’m just waiting for you,” I say, and I try to help her up the stairs, but she swats at me, shoos me away.

We enter through the back door, onto the back porch, where I’ll sort and spread the jimsonweed. But first I’ll separate out the salsify and goatsbeard for dinner. I expect Mother to move inside, settle in, but she remains still, staring at the jimsonweed.

“You want me to prepare it now?” I say, setting down the roots and leaves. “The jimsonweed?”

Mother looks from the weed to me. She shifts from her stronger leg to her weaker, winces, shifts back. She slumps against the counter, props herself there. Mother’s changing before my eyes: she’s growing so deformed, she’s becoming something new.

“Lay it out to dry,” she begins, but she stops herself. She can see in my eyes I know what to do: I saw what she’d done with the jimsonweed for months.

She leaves me, then; she turns and heads inside. But she doesn’t pump water, wash in the porch sink, as she always does after we forage. And she forgets to remove her shoes. Mud from the backyard, still fresh, slips from her soles in purplish green smears. Her hands curl, but her arms hang open and limp. She walks hunching, as if her own

weight's too much. I recall years and years back, to a time when Mother didn't hunch, when she towered above me like the goddess Artemis: proud and cruel, but still my protector.

"I'll bring up your dinner," I say. "And the adder's eyes. As soon as I finish here." I want to stop her, remove her shoes, help her wash. "And shinleaf," I say. "I'll make the paste."

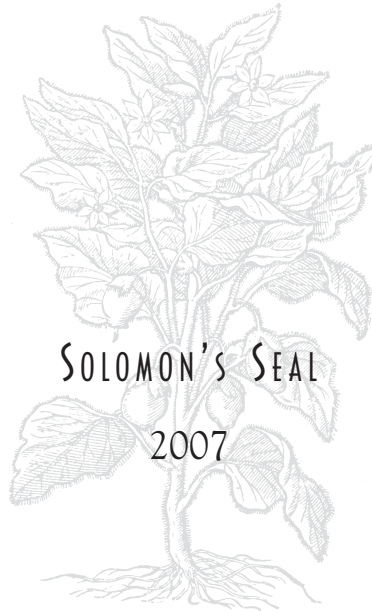
I expect Mother to call back, remind me she doesn't want the adder's eyes, she doesn't want the paste. But she is silent as she climbs the stairs. One step, she waits. Another. She waits. She doesn't know I'm watching; she wouldn't want me to see her like this, and yet I can't turn away. I want to go to her, take her bony elbow in my palm, lift her like I did the hairstreak.

"*Moder*," I call to her. "What about the nightshade? You want those berries?" I'm surprised to hear myself offer this. They are poisonous, the berries; they won't help her.

"Are you trying to poison me, Aslaug Datter?" she calls back. "I told you, I gathered those berries to ward off your witchcraft."

Although Mother studies religious texts—the Torah and the Kabbalah, the Koran and the Bible, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, and Vedic writings and Tantric writings—as if each separate one were the key to our salvation, she claims she's an atheist. No gods. No spirits. No divine anything. No evil. And no witchcraft. But why does she scour these texts, then, searching for some illumination, some epiphany, some treasure buried beneath the yellow-oil glow of our claw-foot lamp? And why does she forbid my

looking at the texts, except when she's teaching me languages? Is it because she knows I'll find answers there that will make her less divine to me, empower me to leave her? Or is it because she's protecting me from the realization that there are no answers, even there?



—Cross-examination?

—Yes. Yes, Your Honor. Mr. Grumset, you live alone, isn't that right?

—Uh-huh.

—Please answer yes or no.

—Yes.

—You've lived alone since your wife died eighteen years ago, correct?

—Yes.

—And you've been confined to a wheelchair for approximately twenty years, correct?

—Yes.

—You've rarely received visitors since your wife's death, right?

—A nurse comes to the house a couple times a week,

and I get groceries delivered, and I get those damn sales-people and Jehovah's Witnesses.

—But no one else visits you regularly, is that right?

—That's right.

—In fact, no one else has visited you for years, correct?

—I don't know about that.

—When was the last time someone other than your nurse, a delivery person or a solicitor visited you at your house?

—I don't remember.

—Mr. Grumset, you mentioned you have groceries delivered to your house. In fact, since your wife died, you've had Soren's Grocery deliver supplies to your house once per week because you can't drive, isn't that right?

—Objection, Your Honor. What is the relevance of this?

—The objection is overruled for now, but please get to the point, Counsel. You may answer the question, Mr. Grumset.

—Yes.

—Isn't it true that Soren's Grocery has delivered a fifth of gin *and* a fifth of whiskey to you every week—*every single week*—for the past eighteen years?

—Objection, Your Honor. Mr. Grumset is not on trial here.

—But his credibility as a witness is, Your Honor.

—Objection overruled. Answer the question.

—How do you know that?

—Please just answer the question.

—I don't remember eighteen years ago.

—Do you remember even one week during the past

eighteen years when Soren's didn't deliver two fifths of hard alcohol to your house?

—I don't remember.

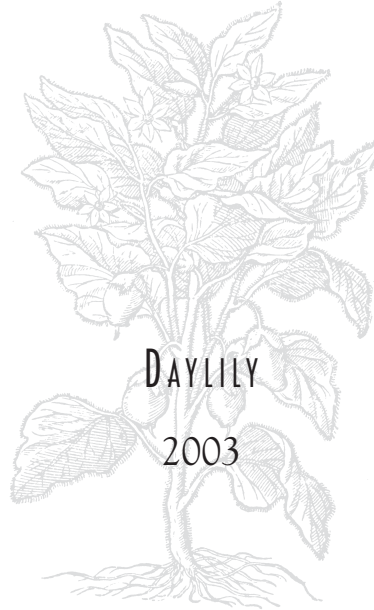
—And that would include the week when Maren Hellig died, isn't that right?

—Objection. Argumentative.

—Overruled.

—I don't remember.

—Thank you, Mr. Grumset. I have no further questions, Your Honor.



DAYLILY

2003

I untangle the crumpled roots from my pocket, stash them beneath the kitchen sink in the basket of soapwort leaves. Then I pump enough water for Mother to wash and pour it into a pot. Before I heat the water, I scoop out a jar for my meadowsweet, lower the stems into the water, then hide the jar under the sink. Next I heat the water, carry it upstairs and leave it in the bathroom, knowing Mother will see it there. And I head back down to the jimsonweed.

I separate the leaves and seeds and spread them to dry. Then I prepare the adder's eyes tincture, diluting alcohol and mixing it with the plant's fresh leaves. I make the shinleaf plaster and start dinner, before I sort and store the remaining plants. It's close to nine by the time I walk upstairs with a tray for Mother, and I wonder what to do if she's asleep, knowing this is a possibility, although it's never

happened before. Knowing she's especially unwell. Should I wake her if she's sleeping? Encourage her to eat? Or should I steal the chance to open the bloodroot, paint the hairstreak on me?

I reach the hallway; her door is open. I knock my foot against the doorframe, but barely; she doesn't answer. When I look inside, she's not there. I feel the weight of her in me, the weight of knowing I've no option of escaping her: she's awake. She must be in the bathroom, washing with the water I left for her, and rubbing her skin as she does each night with the bilelike sap of the celandine plant—the plant Mother calls her wartwort. It fades freckles, she claims; eliminates warts. But when I turn, I see her emerge from the green room, the room she refers to as our guest room—although we've never had guests. Mother stops when she sees me; she stops like she's been stopped. I know right then: there's something in that room, something she does not want me to see.

I've often stood in the green room and peered at the twin bed, the small green sofa, imagining someone visiting us, staying there in that room. Someone who might steal me away. The room's furnishings had always seemed illusory to me—as illusory as guests. Not now. Now my mind traverses each piece.

Is she hiding another book like she hid *The Scarlet Letter*? I wonder. That book was on my recommended reading list from the state, yet it never materialized. Never, that is, until I was changing the sheets on Mother's bed and, as I tucked, I struck it, mashed beneath her mattress and dog-eared.

I realized she was reading it at night, behind her closed door. And none of the passages were blacked out.

I waited then, from Thursday to Sunday, until the hour of her bath. And I read. And I read again the following Wednesday as she bathed, and again the following Sunday. And I learned of Hester Prynne and Pearl and Reverend Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. And I found Mother in Hester Prynne, and Pearl in myself. But who, I wondered, is Dimmesdale? And now I wonder, Will this secret of hers in the green room reveal our Dimmesdale?

“Dinner’s ready,” I say. I try to steel my expression, to not let her read what I know. “I boiled the goatsbeard and salsify roots.”

Mother lifts her hands and attaches her bent fingers like vines to the tray. She limps into her room but manages to turn toward me before she bumps her door shut. “Most of our universe is made up of dark matter, Aslaug.” She speaks in a near whisper; she pants out the words. “No one knows what it is.” I want to stop her, tell her I know about dark matter, she doesn’t need to teach me right now. “You are not alone in that, you see?”

“It’s okay, *Moder*,” I say. She sways, the tray rocks; I fear she might fall. “Let me help you into your room. You should eat your dinner. Rest.”

“But the old outhouse,” she says, referring to the red shed we’ve never used that sits invisible at the rear of the property, overgrown and reeking with the rotting-carcass stink of the thorny carrion vine, and encircled in summer with metallic blowflies and flesh flies and midges. “There’s a crack in the ceiling. The boards are loose.”

“It doesn’t matter, *Moder*,” I say, but it does matter, I think: something’s wrong, now, with her mind. “We don’t use the outhouse—”

“You need to go there,” she says. “Find it. It’s hard to find.”

I say, “It’s overgrown, I know, but it doesn’t matter—”

“You’ll find it, won’t you? And the ceiling, the crack in the ceiling. The boards—”

“I’ll fix the ceiling, *Moder*. Don’t worry.”

I try to take the tray from her, but she pulls it back. “Why would you do that?” she says.

“I’m just trying to help, *Moder*. Carry the tray for you.”

She shakes her head, leans into the doorway. I imagine her slipping into the narrow seams of the doorframe, disappearing there. “You are good to your mother, Aslaug Datter. My daughter. You have always been good to your mother,” she says, and the door bangs closed. I stand there, looking at the door to her room, the door to the green room. I want to go into her room, show her I can be good—that I want to be good to her, even though I hate her at times. But I want to go into the green room more.

She’s tired, I tell myself. We foraged the whole day. In the morning her mind will be fine. As fine as Mother’s mind can be.

I walk down the stairs, letting my feet fall with weight, so Mother will hear my descent. I enter the kitchen; I have to force myself, now, to eat the greens, the roots. When I finish, I pump water and pour half into the sink; half I heat on the stove. I wash the dishes, clanging them together, then I carry the warmed water up the stairs, into the bathroom. I empty

the water into the tub, holding the pot high as I pour, so the sound of the splashing water carries to Mother. And I wash myself, slowly: my hair and nails and neck and ankles, once and again. All is normal, Mother, I'm trying to say. I'm in no hurry, Mother.

I towel off and dress, then I enter my bedroom, pull hard on the door; I want Mother to know I'm in my room, the door is closed. I climb into bed and push hard on the squealing springs. Then I lie quiet. And listen. I'm not surprised Mother isn't asleep: I hear her comforter rumple, her body settle. She's waiting for me to sleep; I expected this. So I pretend. I pass a half hour in silence before I hear her blow out her candle, watch the crack of dim light disappear. Gradually her breathing transforms from barely audible to audibly crisp.

Then I slip to the floor, to my knees, hands, stomach: I try to disperse my weight, hinder the creaking boards. I crawl down the hall like an insect; grit from the floor clings to my palms like pollen. I reach the green room, but I fear lighting a candle even though I've shut the door; I fear Mother might wake, notice the stealing tint of white light, so I search first in darkness, but my hands alone unearth nothing.

I strike a match and light a candle, and another, and another, until the room is almost bright, then I search with a fastidiousness that makes little sense. What do I think I might find? What epiphany could be tucked in the crevices of the sofa, the thick folds of the quilt? I look for close to fifteen minutes before I notice the framed poster of Tivoli: it depicts the Danish amusement park at night, from a distance, the city of Copenhagen sparkling around it. The poster has always been in this room, on this wall—as far

back as I can remember. But now the poster hangs askew. I reach up and lift the frame from the wall, and I see Mother's secret just hanging there, no longer hidden by Tivoli.

I pull the cushions from the sofa, stack them. I stretch my skinny legs and torso high, and my hands lie flat against the wall; the sofa cushions beneath me cradle the balls of my feet.

The mirror I'm straining to reach is tiny—no larger than my outstretched hand—and I see from below that its glass is speckled, yellow and gray, as if diseased, like the infected skin of an animal turned hairless and crusted. But to me it is another world, hope of another world: it is beautiful.

I've never seen my face before, not in a mirror. There were no mirrors in this house as I grew up. And Mother destroyed the mirrors in the car long before I realized what those mirrors might have meant to me. I must have been little more than a toddler when I watched Mother crouch near the car's passenger door, rotate its mirror outward. I saw her grip the hammer like she did the switch used to punish me—praying hands, folded neatly, but separated, then stacked—and I was awash in the already-familiar deluge of incomprehension and dread. I closed my eyes: I saw neither the swing nor the slam. But I heard the high-pitched burst as the glass splintered, and the thump as the hammer dropped to the ground. I opened my eyes to discover Mother assessing the mirror, the absence of mirror: this mosaic of angled light. I was relieved. Confused, too, certainly, but more than anything I was relieved. She hadn't struck me. The mirror, yes. But what did that matter? I'd no appreciation then of what her conduct signified, of what it might portend.

Discreetly I stepped back from the car, from her, as she

collected the hammer from the dirt, opened the squealing door, slipped inside. She left the door ajar, and I could see her spider-like legs awkwardly curled beneath her. With effort, she repositioned the rearview mirror, angled it toward her. This time I watched as she whacked it, once and again, before she unraveled herself from the car.

I don't believe she'd intended initially to destroy the remaining mirror, the mirror on the driver's side. She'd ordered me back in the house and was following behind me, heading inside. But I paused, I glanced back at her. And it was as if someone behind had gripped the fabric of her gown. Her torso stiffened, pulled back, even as her neck stretched forward and her head plunged; her airborne foot slammed into the ground, stuttered.

I could almost feel her cold-ocean eyes scrutinizing: my young face, my wrinkled dress, my scrawny arms and legs. "*I huset,*" she said. "I told you, get in the house." Then she pivoted away, walked to the car. She struck the remaining mirror with too much force, too many times. Its base cracked, then broke, and it spilled to the ground.

I had a vague idea what I looked like before this moment in the green room. I'd seen a semblance of my face rippling in a muddy pool in the drive and in a sun-bathed window in Bethan and in a gully, as today. But the images I'd seen were fleeting and vague. I'd tried to find out; I'd tried to see myself. I'd studied my face in the curved bed of a spoon, the flat spread of a knife, the body of a pot, the base of a pan. But our utensils and cauldrons are tarnished; my image was barely decipherable. I was tempted to pull out a line of tacks, draw back

a drape, find my face reflected in one of our hidden windows. But I never did—I never dared. Yet I would have if I thought Mother wouldn't find out. I would have done so in a breath.

Now I close my eyes before my face reaches the mirror's surface. I teeter on the cushions and wait: five seconds, ten. I count my breaths; I count the time. I know I should hurry—that every second I tarry risks Mother's wrath. But I want to savor the pulsing and pumping in my body, the rushing heat, the slippery vitality of my palms. How long have I awaited this moment?

Yet it is not my own reflection I've so longed to see.

It is my father's.

I feel certain I will open my eyes and he will be born there for me, in the features of my face. I've come to believe that Mother's fear of this—of my discovering Father in myself—is her rationale for preventing my seeing my reflection.

But when I open my eyes, I see Mother.

Mother.

In reality I'm certain I look far younger than Mother, but this difference is masked in the mirror's age. What I do see is colorless, almost translucent skin; her broad, high forehead; hair that frames the face like dangling shards of bone. And eyes that swirl in gray and green and the palest blue. The only aspect of my face that seems my own is the freckles that spot my nose and cheeks.

Then I remember the wartwort.

I want to scream, to obliterate Mother from my mind, from my face.

She'd not been hiding my father from me; she'd been

hiding herself. But why, I wonder. Why? I know the features of Mother's face, know them like I know the musty smell of our house, the creaking of the floorboards. Mother's face was an ever-present in my life, long before I saw that her face is mine.

I return to my bedroom and try to sleep, but it seems I hear the passing of every second, the mundane sticking, straining, ticking of the alarm clock's second hand. Ever since I'd learned about sex—since I'd learned someone had fathered me—I'd been buoyed by the knowledge there was part of me independent of Mother, part of me she could never touch. Each time Mother had punished me since then, and when she'd scorned me, I'd thought of Father. I imagined he loved in me all she hated, that he took pride in all she found alien, that each time she rejected me, he pulled me closer. But after seeing my reflection, I'm no longer certain of my separateness from Mother: I'm no longer certain Father exists. Intellectually, I understand that to have come into existence, I had to have had a father, but this knowledge no longer seems enough.

Is Mother like the short-lived daylily? I wonder. Capable of producing without fertile seed? Did I just sprout up from some piece of her that fell away? From a strand of her hair? A scrape of her skin? A torn nail?

I think back to a year or so earlier, to the one time I garnered courage to ask Mother about Father. I sat across from her, the morning light slipping through a gap in the drapes, stretching across the dining table like a diaphanous shield.

“You have no father, Aslaug.”

She was lying. It seemed she was lying. Her ashen skin

transformed to scarlet, her limbs to tense cords. And her gray to green to blue eyes focused intently upon the white, the blank, of the wall.

At that moment I knew—I felt—that I did have a father. That I *had* had a father, for I sensed he was no longer alive. There was longing in Mother's face, and mourning. Her eyes, normally so dry she blinks almost incessantly, softened with moisture, as if waves had stirred those cold-ocean colors and warmed them. Her lips, usually tucked stingily, fell open and round, so I could almost imagine her kiss.

It had never before occurred to me Mother loved my father, lost him. I'd not known she had the capacity for this type of love.

Later that day I began to speculate how Father died. It became almost obsessive for me, this speculation: I imagined scenario after scenario. Eventually one overshadowed all others.

I could see my newborn body, tinged crimson and viscid, still throbbing with dry cold and fluorescent light, as if Mother had given birth to her own pumping heart. The doctor and nurses swarmed about me like gluttonous mosquitoes, sucking and sucking. Then wiping, for several seconds. Several seconds. More than enough time for his racing vehicle to lose control.

I envisioned Father driving a diminutive white car with burgundy interior. The traffic light before him turned yellow, then red, but he accelerated, desperate to reach the gasps and screams of the woman, his wife, my mother, as she labored. The truck that struck left little but rent steel, rent vinyl, stirred into a pinkish morass. Father's head lay like that of a dandelion, thrust from a child reciting a rhyme.

Had Father actually died this way, my life would make some sense. That Mother raised me as if I were a bastard would be unremarkable. That she locks me away like one would a psychopath might even be expected, for in a sense I'd be a no-conscience killer, my very existence bound with death. And her clothing, black and shapeless, her body buried there as if with his. What else might she wear? Her life would be one of mourning. Her brooding, tortured eyes watch me like an obsessed, obsessive lover because I'd be a reminder, a remnant, of what she had lost.

A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader:

I began writing *Madapple* while working as a litigator. I would rise at five each morning to write for an hour before work. I remember sitting at my desk in my tiny apartment in San Francisco, my computer providing the only light. I remember that part-dream state in which Aslaug, the sixteen-year-old protagonist of *Madapple*, was birthed: a state that seemed a bridge between the natural world and the supernatural, where my rational mind and my unconscious merged. And I remember the strange sensation of leaving that in-between world to go to my law office, where the world became wholly rational. And I would wonder while I wrote briefs and interviewed witnesses, prepared for depositions and reviewed copious amounts of documents: why does that part-dream state seem more real than this?

In a sense, I knew. I had majored in religion at college. And I had come to believe that the dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural—between science and religion—was a human construct. Rationality seemed limited in its ability to capture the world. It was this belief that initially spurred my writing of *Madapple*. As Aslaug says, “Science describes the world, it doesn’t explain it: it can describe the universe’s formation, but it can’t explain why such an event would have occurred, how something can come from nothing. That’s the miracle.”

Yet religion absent science—absent rationality—also seemed deficient: if God exists, would not nature be a means by which to understand God? The more I researched the natural world, the more convinced of this I became. Plants, which are central to *Madapple*’s plot, are truly amazing. The more I learned, the more I understood Einstein’s belief that genuine religiosity lies not in blind faith but in a “striving after rational knowledge.”

My hope is that I have somehow captured that in-between space where religion and science meet.

Thank you for reading.

Sincerely,

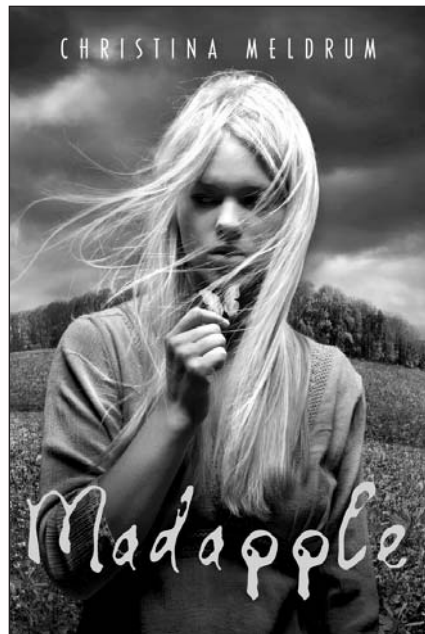
A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Christina Meldrum', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Christina Meldrum

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