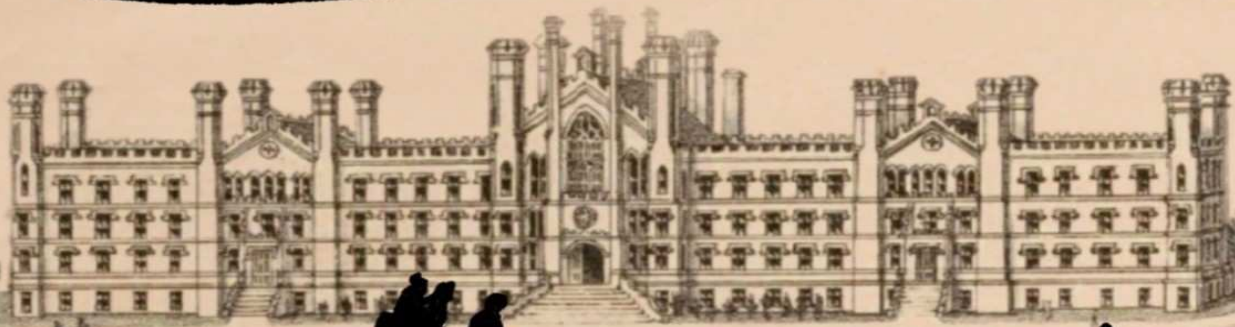


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NIGHT

WATCH



a novel

JAYNE ANNE

PHILLIPS

Author of LARK AND TERMITE

*

ALSO BY JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS

Quiet Dell

Lark and Termite

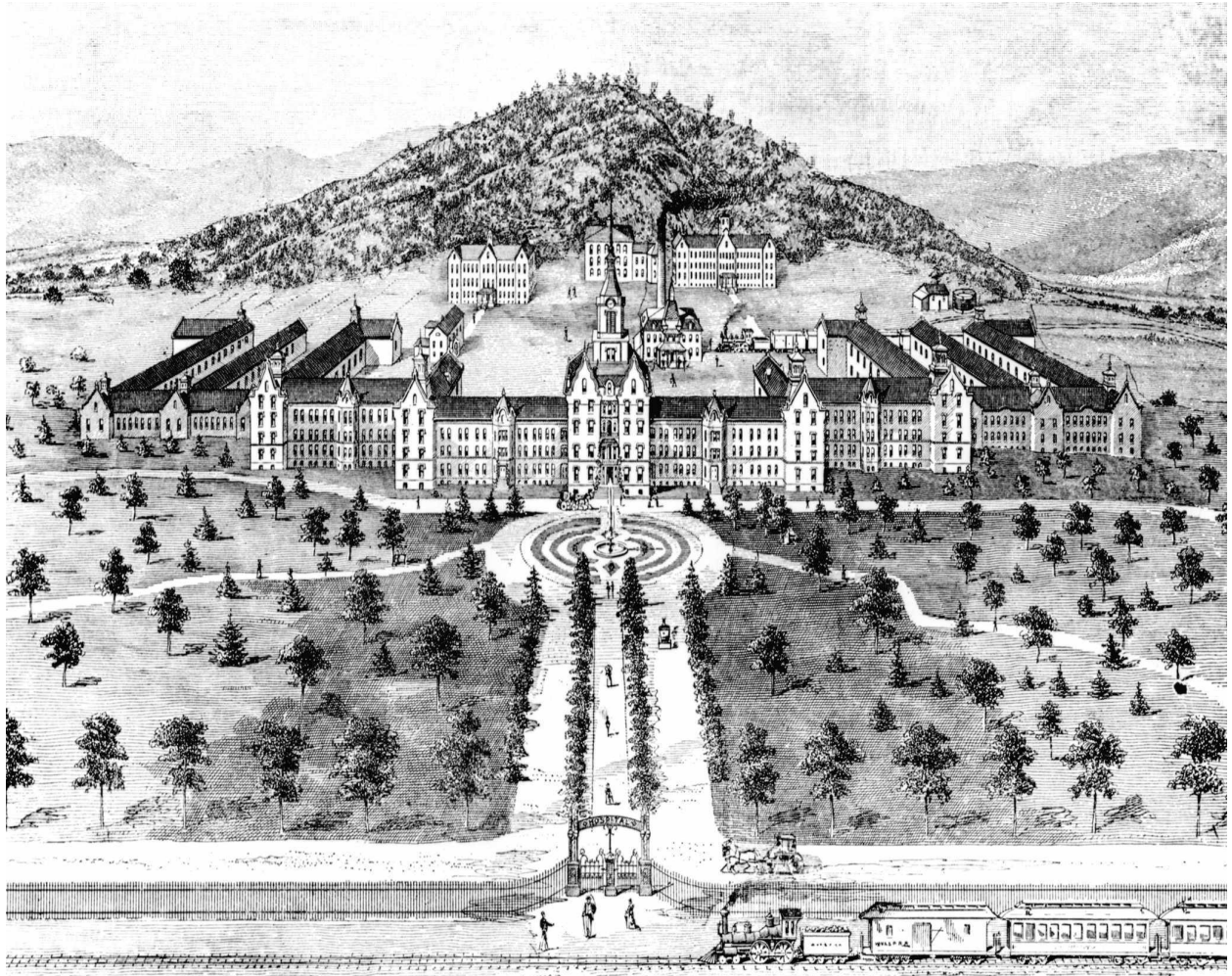
MotherKind

Shelter

Fast Lanes

Machine Dreams

Black Tickets



Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum, Weston, West Virginia

Night Watch



Jayne Anne Phillips



ALFRED A. KNOPF, NEW YORK, 2023

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For my grandfathers,

Warwick Phillips (Sept. 15, 1886—Aug. 1, 1919)
of Roaring Creek, West Virginia,

James William Thornhill (July 31, 1867—Aug. 21, 1943)
of Buckhannon, West Virginia,

and for my grandmother Grace Boyd Thornhill's "Great Aunt Jenny,"
who welcomed her husband home from incarceration in Richmond's infamous
Libby Prison in 1865

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

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I am interested in what prompts and makes possible this process of entering what one is estranged from.

—TONI MORRISON, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*

West Virginia should long since have had a separate State existence. The East has always looked upon that portion of the State west of the mountains, as a territory in a state of pupilage...Our State is the child of the rebellion; yet our peace, prosperity and happiness, and...that of the whole country, [depends] on the speedy suppression of this attempt to overthrow the Government of our fathers; and it is my duty, as soon as these ceremonies are closed, to proceed at once to aid the Federal authorities in their efforts to stay its destructive hand.

—GOVERNOR ARTHUR I. BOREMAN, *First Inaugural Address, State of West Virginia, Wheeling, West Virginia, June 20, 1863*

I cannot give you an idea of half the horrors I have witnessed and yet so common have they become that they do not excite a feeling of horror.

—LIEUTENANT CHARLES HARVEY BREWSTER, *Tenth Massachusetts Infantry, May 1864, The Civil War: The Final Year, Told by Those Who Lived It, ed. Aaron Sheehan-Dean*

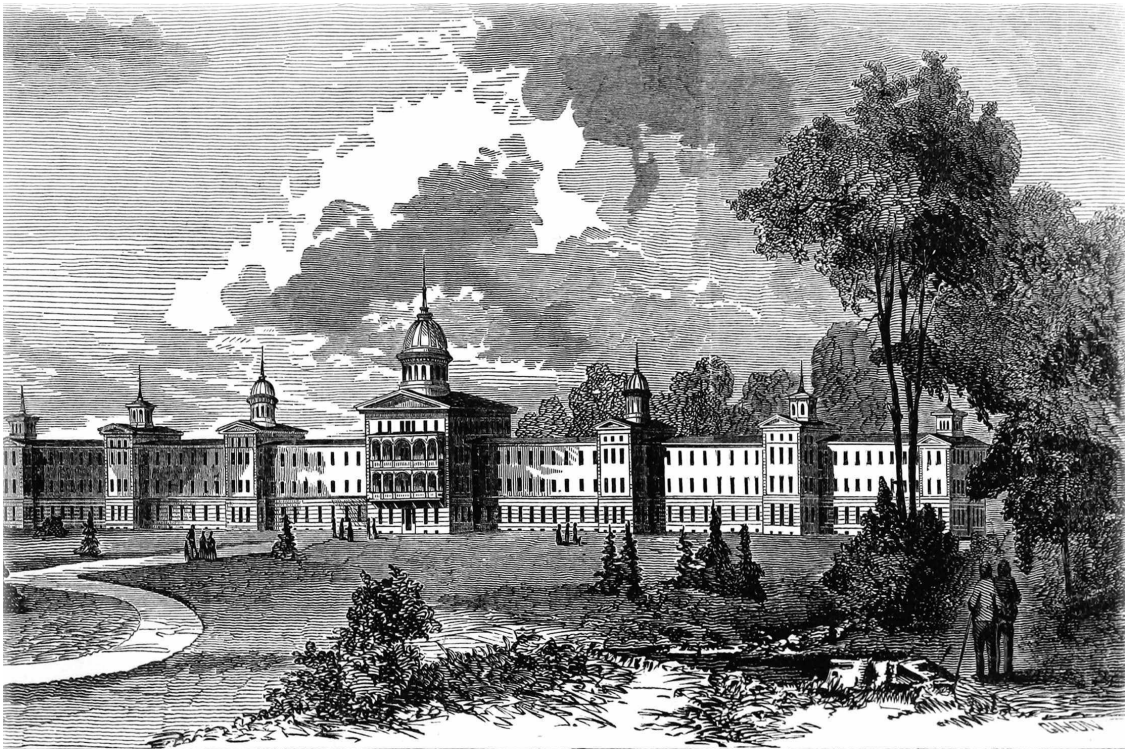
I'm saying it's all inside us, the whole war.

—DENIS JOHNSON, *Tree of Smoke*

PART I



1874



STATE HOSPITAL FOR THE INSANE FOR 250 PATIENTS.

IT IS AMONG THE MOST PAINFUL features of insanity, that in its treatment, so many are compelled to leave their families; that every comfort and luxury that wealth or the tenderest affection can give, are so frequently of little avail...The simple claims of a common humanity should induce each State to make a liberal provision for all its insane...especially as regards the poor.

—DR. THOMAS STORY KIRKBRIDE, 1854

On the Construction, Organization, and General Arrangements of Hospitals for the Insane

ConaLee

A JOURNEY

APRIL 1874

I got up in the wagon and Papa set me beside Mama, all of us on the buckboard seat.

Hold her hand there, he said to me, like she likes. Sit tight in. Keep her still.

I saw him lean down and rope her ankle to his. I was warm because he made me wear my bonnet, to keep my skin fine and my eyes from crinkling at the corners. In case someday I turned out after all.

Talk to her, he said. Tell her she'll like it where she's going. A fine great place, like a castle with a tower clock. Tell her.

You'll like it, Mama, I said. A fine place like a castle, built from stone.

Tell her about them palms.

Palm trees in pots, Mama, and velvet sofas, like in a city hotel.

And don't call her Mama, he said. Don't you see how she's dressed?

He'd got the dress from a widow man who was giving away his dead wife's carpetbag and clothes, the petticoats, silk underthings, the skirts, the satin bodice and jacket with bell sleeves, a net for her hair with a pearl comb fastener. Our neighbor had pulled Mama's dark locks up in bundle braids, like the page from *Godey's Lady's Magazine* we kept nailed on the wall.

You know what to call her, he said. Don't fail in't.

You said call her Miss Janet. Though it is not her name.

It is her name now. Her old name won't do her good. She's a quality woman alone in the world. Call her by her name.

I will, just in a minute. Catchin my breath.

But I put my hand on hers. She was clasping her knee so hard I could feel her shake. I was out of breath from carrying the babbies to the neighbor women. One of them would take the boy because he was walking and talking, and the boy twin if she got both boys. The other woman would take the girl twin, so that was a separate trip, pulling the drag with the bags of flour and salt. I guessed we were going to be gone some days, driving over to Weston. Papa had packed a grip and had him a bedroll. I had my leather bag of fancy dress buttons, folded up under my woolsey jacket. I was wearing my trousers, as like I was going to feed the chickens.

Papa, who's going to feed the chickens while we're gone, and find the eggs?

That neighbor woman, he said. That took the girl twin.

Mama never named the babbies. We only called them so—the babbies, and she nursed all three. The twins weren't but twelve weeks. I had marked the weeks, a line through every Sunday since February 1. It was that eve we brought them, Papa and me, and he cut the cords with a hot knife. No one else came to help. Not even Dearbhla, our neighbor granny a ridge above—Papa forbade her near us. Mama made noise, sounds and words. I was hopeful she would talk normal after, like she did before Papa came, way before, it seemed. But she only made those sounds and lay abed since. I would bring the new ones to her from the drawers I lined with blankets. She'd so much milk, hard as stones and pushing her clothes away, until I just

left the babbies in the bed to suckle. The older one was walking by then but he crowded in and took his turn.

The road was shade and sun, and shade and sun. Early spring, a chill edging the tallest pines.

Talk to her, Papa said, like I told you.

There's a clock tower that keeps the time for the town, I told her. And a great lawn with a fishpond. Paths and flower beds.

We had the cow then and I gave her milk with egg beaten in. Now and again she said a word, clear as anything. Bell, she said, or goose. A game like rock, scissors, paper. Or did she want a bell. I gave her a jingle bell from a harness in the shed, but she only laid it aside. There was no goose. I had all I could do to change the nappies, soak and wash and hang them, flags from a line on the porch.

Her name, he said.

Miss Janet, you will like to walk on the paths. Quality ladies are there. Everyone their own room, Papa says. Like a hotel. Resting. No more chores. Fresh breads and butter. Got their own bakery and dairy, and buy food fresh from the farmers. Corn, tomatoes, meats.

Mama had not done chores, not for the longest time. She turned her head as we rode along, tilting her face slow to one side, then to the other. The earbobs I found in her jacket pocket had little tassels that matched the bodice of the dress and she could feel the gold threads touch the line of her jaw. The way she held her shoulders squared, and stayed so still but to stand and move where you led her, made her look proud. As though naught concerned her. It was that gave him the idea, surely, and the widow man throwing out the clothes. And the cow going down. The cow was on her knees and I'd no time to walk up the ridge to Dearbhla, to fetch one of her root or marrow tonics. Papa was ever away and came back from town of an evening, with lamp oil and bread and cheese. Or he stayed in the woods, hunting. Rabbits, pheasant, turkey. He'd got the clothes in town. Just in time, he said, and all was in motion so fast, with farming out the babbies so she could have her rest.

We will come to visit you, Miss Janet, I said. Even the babbies. We will bring them to see you, dressed nice. And you resting while they grow.

No need to worry about any babbies now, Papa said. And began to whistle a tune.

I leant against Mama, my head to her shoulder, and she leant against me, her face to the top of my head. It was how we slept at night sometimes. She liked her pillows behind her, and me near beside her, to lift up the babbies. The wagon was lurching gentle and I fell asleep, my dreams twisting off, wisps of all she wanted to tell me and had no strength to say. We slept that way, sealed as shells, while the sun dropped lower and the summer gloaming came up from the fields. Today was April and I knew it, even as the wagon groaned and shifted and he was pulling off the road. You stayed off the roads if you stopped then, out of sight, if you left our mountain cover. I could feel the shade of the beech he pulled us under before I opened my eyes, a beech so big it spread a shelter wide as a circus tent, the long dappled branches grown right down to the ground. The new grass underneath was soft and green as fairy grass.

We could live here, I said.

He'd braked the wagon and staked the horse to graze. Then he was up beside me and lifting her to the back. He gave me a bag of dried apple slices. There's your supper, he said. You sit here and face front. Stay hushed.

I could feel him lay her down, his weight shifting about her, and hear him loosen her clothes. I'd packed her bodice with clean rags, last of the babbies' nappies. No milk on those quality clothes. That's what he was about. Those babbies would be crying for her. I heard her breathe a half sigh of relief, the sound she made in the hard latch of their suckle. Their pale fists would drift over her until their fingers opened, but his hands were on her now, and his mouth, taking their sustenance. My face was afire. I couldn't see naught in front of me and thought I heard the babbies howling across the fields. The branches of the beech stirred in one part, then another, shielding all from sight. Just in a while the wagon began to rock and I wanted to climb down. I tried to move but heard his strangled whisper: *Stay still*. I never knew if he said it to her or to me. I would see things shift sometimes, and go tight and clear and strange. Just now, threads of seed on floating strands glimmered, lifting the tree's canopy in a ruffling wave I knew could not happen but in my

sight. The fields turned gold then, and the grass was lit and sharp. Shining blades pulled at the twilight, pulling it down, firing red and blue and red before the bright white inside the colors pierced me through.

• • •

I was laid out flat beside her when I woke, and the sky was full dark. Her head on my chest felt warm and hard as a rock in the sun. I wondered was she fevered but I was only cool from not moving, and calm in my mind. I would have such sleeps and wake up where I'd been, only time had slipped, a little time or more. Time I'd lost and could not know. It was empty there but full and floating, and wiped out every pain. Dearbhla said I gave myself what I needed, that I never had such "rests" before Papa came. Even when I woke, I was so peaceful that I had to think of moving. All was stars above us, nothing but stars in the inky black, for we were on the open road. Just then I was falling up, into the night sky that seemed to draw away, turning like a cup. A shooting star crossed the handle of the Dipper. I could see Orion's Belt and moved her from me, to sit up and look for Betelgeuse and Bellatrix. I knew my constellations if I traced one to another, to see them whole like pictures on a plate.

He called me up to him then. Here, he said, Connolly.

I climbed up beside him. Cold, I shivered into myself and pulled on my woolsey jacket. I told him I wished I'd dressed nicer.

Yer fine as you are, Papa said.

We were moving along a bare hill, and the fields as far as I could see were flat and chopped. Someone had burned them, cleared the crop and left the chaff. Burned and not harvested. Some mite or fungus could eat a crop and leave a poison for the next. Farmers burned it all with torches. Some days ago it seemed, but there'd been no rain to take the smell. Charred popcorn it smelled like, dirt-damp, a soil smell coming up in mist and dew on the singed air. The road emptied along through it, dusty, yellow with moon glow.

Puts me in mind of the War, Papa said. Mighty lonely when it's burnt and dead, far as you can see. It's how we did it, burned them out.

And they burned us out, I said.

That they did, he said, but they never found you, back along that ridge.

I didn't say they had found us, and more times than I knew. Mama would hide me in the root cellar, once with a handful of carrots she ripped from the ground as we ran. Don't come out no matter what, until I fetch you! And she dropped me in. She told me, when she was still talking, never to tell about the War. No matter who won, it didn't do to say what had happened. The Secessionists lost, I knew, and the Abolitionists won, but they were all ragged, drifting men.

That little cabin, Papa said, deep in the cover. Not much to see, but full forested and a steep climb. Nothing level for any farm a'tall. Don't know how you managed.

Mama had a bigger garden, I said, in patches, all along. Two cows and more chickens then, and the neighbor women traded one thing for another. Dearbhla took the buckboard to town and sold her roots and tonics.

Told you not to speak of that old woman, Papa said.

Just to say, Mama wasn't like she is now.

That a fact, he said. Well. Sometimes the strain eases and what's held together falls apart. Good thing I come by when I did.

The sound of the wagon groaning along was a lull. Whenever I tried to think on it, I could not remember when he came home. I knew of a homecoming picnic at the church, with banners in the trees and fife and drum, maybe around that time. But that was not it. We never went near church after he came.

A few things to tell you, he said. A girl that hasn't got her monthlies yet cannot get with child. And a woman suckling infants cannot get with child. Miss Janet will not get with child.

But she did, I said. When the chap was small and suckling.

The chap was sitting up. Six month he was. That was too late. Now is not too late. Those little ones are a ways from sitting up.

I didn't say anything, only looked before us to where the road turned.

That chap, he said, and laughed. Like a mountain goat. Walking and yammering so young. He's mine, all right.

We're all yours, I said.

A bank of trees came up in the distance, long like a huddle of shapes. They straightened taller along both sides of the road as we came on.

He gave me the harmonica from his pocket. Play me a tune real quiet, he said.

I played "Camptown Races," slow as a hymn, so that only we could hear. Keep that mouth organ, he said. You play it better than most.

We were off the mountain some time now, into the valley. The trees were willows standing up one after another, drooping their tendril branches. We were in a glade and the burnt fields strung out behind us.

• • •

Clouds came off the ground as we got toward dawn. The stars faded all but one or two. Mama would be as alone. I wouldn't be there to hear her say my name, and other words she spoke now and again. As only I hadn't been so rushed, I could have brought her books, to remind her of home. Brought to *this place* in saddlebags she'd said. But Mama's books were mine, too—I'd writ *ConaLee* in every one, and listed them in my mind:

My set of McGuffey's primers, that were hers.

Mr. Noah Webster's dictionary. Open to a page, pick a word, eyes closed.

Our Bible.

Myths of Ancient Times, the Minotaur and Cyclops, one stumbling in dark caves, the other with his blinded eye.

Water-Babies: Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby, dragonflies and darting trout and little Tom.

My *Wordsworth*.

My *Tennyson*.

My *History of the American States*.

Oliver Twist, by Mr. Charles Dickens.

A Christmas Carol. In Prose. Being a Ghost Story of Christmas, by the same Mr. Dickens. We acted out the parts every Christmas, with Dearbhla for audience.

Aesop's Fables.

Sonnets of Shakespeare. Mama knew some by heart and taught me to read the words.

Geographies of the World.

Constellations and Their Stories.

Now the stars were gone. Dearbhla always said that she could see me through them. I played my harmonica, sounds that only breathed, and shut my eyes. In a while I could hear little trills between the sounds, and then the sounds were water. Rills of water came up under us, on a bridge. Air circled like swallows from a cave. He stopped just the other side to fill the canteens and water the horse from the feedbag. Water poured through it and the mare lowered her head to beat the dripping to the ground. He poured water over her till her mane was wet and flat and smoothed her flanks, moving the harness and the reins. He knew animals and handled them all the same, strong and sure, whether he wrung a chicken's neck or coaxed a horse from a ditch. For all his whistling or rare look of favor, his hands moved you here or there. I walked down under the bridge to the stream, to wash and drink and relieve myself where he couldn't see. I thought I would bring Mama and pull up her skirts for her to crouch as silent. The brook was loud and fresh by the rattling water, a bell of sound beneath the bridge, her bell it could be, like the word she said, and no one else near. I wished we could abide here, small and hidden as the water sprites that live in rocks and pools.

But when I went back up, he had got her out of the wagon. Her drawers were off. He had a way of leaning back against a wall or porch rail and now the wagon, holding her fast with her clothes bunched up over her head. She was a blind thing in a sack with her arms flung up and trapped. He'd arched her out before him to aim her like a vessel; he did it when she made water and he was there to know, or decide she must. She was so white and pale on

her thighs, still with a pouch of belly from the twins. He watched her while she couldn't move and spat in his hand to clean her.

I could have taken her to the stream, I said.

And muddy her clothes? Them delicates are silk.

She knew what to do when I took her to the privy, or sat her on the chamber pot by her bed. The house was one big room. Days or nights, he would tell me what was private, when not to look, but he never said this was private and did it when I was near, calling me back if I turned away.

He called me now. Come and help with her drawers.

He watched me pull them up, then he stood her on her feet. He let down every layer of skirts and her arms came down to hold her breasts. She would be aching again or nearly, and she looked around her.

We got to get on, Papa said. Help her into the wagon and keep the dust from her skirts. You sit up with me.

• • •

Dusk of the second day, I could see the glow of a town but knew he wouldn't go through it. He found dirt roads and meadow trails, and kept a pair of clippers for snapping barbed wire. He could twist it back together and leave no sign of passage. He liked to say about all he knew. Staying hid so you could see and not be seen. Which roots and leaves to eat if you stayed hid. How to fish with a bent safety pin and a length of rush, with the white grubs that lived under rocks for bait. How to see the holes where animals lived. How to set a trap from lengths of green sapling so thin even a child could bend them, and so sharp they pierced the flesh. How to find the North Star. Never to live in a town, but always on country land, deep in shelter, where few passed. Like where we lived, high on the ridge. I supposed he'd put us there, and so knew where to find us.

What could that town be? I asked him. There, between the hills.

Not Weston, he said. Not yet. We'll go around.

You always know how to go.

I know my way, he said. Been through here. Even to Weston, back in '64 with Witcher's Raiders. The Asylum was half built, already like a castle. Camp Asylum, it was then, with the Union boys just pulled out. We took all the blankets and every scrap from the larder. The South was eating bark by then, and whatever we could steal. Here, take the reins. Give me that mouth organ.

The horse went on. Papa leaned back, pushed his hat low, and played an air.

Then he was quiet. Napping. Catnapping he called it, how you kept going when you were on the move. Awake and asleep, he said. But I felt alone, driving the wagon. We were under a stand of pines, so close I could smell the needles on the boughs. A great owl looked down at me, blinking its round orange eyes. Huge they were. The lids seemed to stutter to open wide again. The owl drew up, fluffed its white chest to twice the size, and opened its sharp beak. A tongue darted out but the echoing sound seemed to come from everywhere. Then the great wings spread and gathered, rowing the air like water. The owl flew over me and was gone. I saw that its white feathers were dappled with black.

Papa startled. What was that?

An owl, I said. Flew out from the trees, straight across.

Screecher, was it?

Might have been.

He took the reins. Or maybe a barn owl. Good omen, they say. You wouldn't have seen one before cause you never had a barn.

Did you?

Did I what?

Ever have a barn?

Course I had a barn, he said, now and again. You and your mama, sure never had a barn. He clicked his mouth at the horse and snapped the reins, picking up the pace.

I was thinking we were far from any barns out here, and a name was not a given. He'd named Mama to suit himself—called her Mrs. until she was Miss Janet. And said my name wrong, Connolly instead of ConaLee. But a name

meant nothing to the owl. It lived wild, and hunted in the woods for mice and birds' eggs, and might live in these very pines. Papa didn't know. He'd not seen the owl nor felt its gaze.

Are we nearly there? I asked him.

Soon, he said. After a while he told me to go back to her and press out her milk, careful, to keep her clothes clean. I crawled over the buckboard seat into the back and lay beside her. She always knew me when we were alone, and put her hands on my shoulders now for me to pull her bodice loose. She was hard and sore. I held the rags to one breast and pushed gentle on the other. Milk fanned in blue threads across my face. I made a palmed bowl of a flour sack and kept it tight against her. It didn't take long because I knew exactly how. After, I could feel the sticky sweetness on my cheek and kept my hand on my face when she pulled me to her. I fell asleep hungry and heard the babbies, crying far off, like the sound of them would follow us forever.

• • •

Just after dawn, we stopped and I sat up. Papa had braked the buckboard on a wide dirt road. A railroad track lay to one side, then a thin run of stream, and the back of the town. To the other side was a great lawn. The broad gravel path of the entrance led far back to the castle, and the stone walls, four or five stories high, went off to both sides as far as I could see. Straight paths crisscrossed the grounds but the widest one led to the huge front doors. There was a circle halfway on, with a fountain and round pool in the middle, and benches arranged around it. Then the path led to the stone steps and arched doors of the building. It looked as though there would be many doors, for the long wings and many windows, with cupolas topping the roof, but there was just one door, bigger than any I'd seen, with oval leaded glass windows on each side, and a leaded glass pyramid for a transom window. A wide palace door for a prince or princess. All was silent. The sky was rosy. It was first light, and the stone walls looked more blue than gray. There was the clock tower, and above it a spire like a church. No cross, only a point.