

Conduction

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I departed Virginia with few effects to my name and no real farewells, on a hot summer Monday morning, four months after I had run from Lockless, the plantation of my birth, the plantation of my father. And, though I knew that I would be, somehow, called back there, it was for now behind me—along with the crimes of my father, the slave-catchers known as Ryland’s Hounds, and the spectre of my dancing mother, whom I could barely remember, a void in me that I knew was somehow tied to her sale. I walked most of that day and spent the night in the small farmhouse of an old widower sympathetic to the cause. Then, on Tuesday, I set out for the town of Clarksburg, where the first leg of my train journey would commence.

The plan was to cross through Virginia by the North West Virginia Railroad and then, once in Maryland, link up with the Baltimore & Ohio and proceed east and north up into the free lands of Pennsylvania, to Philadelphia. There was a shorter route, due north, but there had been some recent troubles with Ryland along the rail there, and it was felt that the audacity of this approach, right through the slave port of Baltimore, would not be expected. When I reached the Clarksburg station, I spotted Hawkins and Bland sitting beneath a red awning, where a flock of blackbirds perched. Hawkins was fanning himself with his hat. Bland was looking down the track, in the opposite direction from where the train would approach. We all made sure to take no note of one another.

On the platform, I saw a white woman in a bonnet and a blue hoopskirt, holding the hands of two well-dressed children. Some distance away, beyond the shade of the awning, a low white, with what I guessed to be all his possessions in a carpetbag, smoked tobacco. I stood off to the side, not wanting to inspire suspicion. The low white finished his tobacco and then greeted the woman. They were still talking when the blackbirds flew from the awning and the great iron cat roared around the bend, all black smoke and earsplitting clanking. I watched as the screeching wheels turned slower and slower and came to a stop. I presented my ticket and papers to the conductor gingerly. Fabricated for me by other agents, they indicated that I was a colored man of reputable character, that I had recently purchased my freedom and was now to take up employment as a woodworker in Philadelphia. The conductor barely looked at them. It may be hard to believe now, in these dark days, but there was no “nigger car.” Why would there be one? The Quality, the Virginia royalty, kept their slaves, their Tasked, close, the way a lady keeps her clutch—closer even, for this was a time in our history when the most valuable thing a man could own, in all of America, was another man. I headed to the back of the train, walking in the aisle between the two rows of seating. I tried not to look nervous. But when I heard the conductor yell, and the great cat roared again, I felt every inch of me draw tense and taut like a cord.

The journey took two days, so I arrived at Gray's Ferry Station, overlooking the Schuylkill River, on Thursday morning. I stepped off into a crowd of people searching for friends and family. I saw Hawkins and Bland as soon as I was off the train, but they gave me a wide berth, for it was known that even here, in the city, Ryland's Hounds prowled, searching for runaways. I had been given no description of the escort who was to meet me. I was told simply to wait. There was an omnibus across the street, hitched to a team of horses. Several of the train passengers stepped on board.

"Mr. Walker?"

I turned and saw before me a colored man in gentleman's clothes.

"Yes," I said.

"Raymond White," he said, extending his hand. He did not smile. "This way," he said, and we walked over to the omnibus and boarded. The driver cracked a carriage whip and we pulled away. We did not talk much during the ride, and this was to be expected, given the business that had brought us together. Nevertheless, I was able to take the measure of this Raymond White. His dress was impeccable. He wore a perfectly cut gray suit that angled down from his shoulders to his cinched waist. His hair was neat and parted. His face seemed a stone with features cut into it, and for the whole of that ride no expression of pain, annoyance, joy, humor, or concern moved those features. Yet I thought that I saw a sadness in his eyes, which—despite all his forbearing elegance—told a story, and I knew, if not how, that his life was somehow tied to the Task. And from that sadness I concluded that his high manner, his nobility, was no simple matter of birth but one of labor and struggle.

The omnibus cut away from the river and into the heart of the city. There were people everywhere on the streets, a Virginia race day multiplied a hundredfold, as though the whole of the world had gathered there, gathered to heave between the workshops and fur dealerships and druggists, to walk the stone-chipped streets, to inhale the acrid air. Every rank of person in every configuration—parent and child, rich and poor, black and white. And I saw that the rich were mostly white and the poor mostly black, but that there were also members of both tribes in both classes. It was a shock to see it directly, for if whites held the power here, and they did, they did not seem to hold it exclusively. The coloreds here were not merely surviving, as they did in the part of Virginia I had come from. They were out there in the churning city, some of them in hats and gloves, their ladies under parasols, moving like royalty.

We got off the omnibus after twenty minutes or so and entered a brick row house, where we found Bland and Hawkins already installed. They were in a small parlor, just past the foyer, drinking coffee with another well-dressed black man. Seeing us, the whole party smiled. The man I did not know stood, strode over, and gave me a big handshake and a bigger smile. I could tell from his features that he was kin to Raymond White. He had the same handsomely etched face, but not the stoicism.

“Otha White,” he said. “Have a seat. I’ll bring y’all some coffee.”

I sat. Raymond and Bland made small talk until Otha returned. I studied Bland and Hawkins, and saw a great difference in their bearing, how much more openly they spoke now that they had journeyed up out of the coffin. They were my handlers, senior agents in the business in which I now found myself enrolled—the Underground. I’d met Bland, who was white, almost ten years before, when I was still a boy on the plantation, sometimes called on by my father to entertain his fellow-Quality with my miracles of memory—card tricks, flawless recitations, and oral sagas conjured from nothing. Bland was posing as a tutor then—an educated white, but still lower than the Virginia gentry, travelling from manor to manor, tending to the children of each estate. Only later did he reveal the truth of his trade. And Hawkins, in Virginia, had seemed to Task as I did, on another plantation, though his secret practice, like Bland’s, was liberation.

“Take care of this man, you hear?” Hawkins said to Raymond. “He is the genuine article. This is not idle talk. He done suffered everything one could throw at him, and he still standing. Should tell you something.”

“You know my commitments,” Raymond said. “My whole life is given to this. And we gladly welcome his aid in our business.”

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“We could really use you, Hiram Walker,” Otha said, as he poured coffee into porcelain cups. “I wasn’t raised here, either. But I learned, and I think you will, too.”

Hawkins seemed more at ease with Otha, who, I later learned, had been born into slavery, than with Raymond, a creature of the North, who had not. I think now, through the lens of years, that it was a matter of how we worked. In Virginia, those with the Underground were outlaws, and that was our honor: we revelled in being beyond the morals of a world we believed to be premised in Demon law. We were not Christians. Christians practiced their arts in the North, where the Underground was so strong that it didn’t need to be underground. Whole city blocks brimmed with fugitives, and these fugitives were organized into vigilance committees, which guarded one another and watched for Ryland’s Hounds. In the North, the Underground was not made up of outlaws; indeed, it was very nearly a law unto itself. Its members stormed jails, attacked federal marshals, and shot it out with Ryland’s Hounds. Men like Hawkins, who had been born into the unremitting Task, forged by instruments of torture, were amazed at such a life. Men like Hawkins plied their trade in the shadows. Men like Raymond shouted in the town square.

But with Otha it was different. There was something about him that compelled deference from Hawkins, however deeply buried and unacknowledged, for Hawkins was a man given to saving souls, not peering into them.

“All right,” Hawkins said, now rising. “We have done our part. May the boy serve the cause here as well as he done served it down there.”

I rose early the next morning to see Philadelphia. I walked out onto Bainbridge Street, one of the city’s great thoroughfares, and watched the variety of human life teeming in the streets and it was only seven o’clock. Across the street I saw a bakery and, through the window, a colored man at work. I walked in and was greeted with a sweet smell, the perfect antidote to the fog of the city. On the counter there was a pleasing array of treats—cakes, fritters, dumplings of all kinds—laid out on parchment. Behind the counter, more still, stacked on trays suspended in slotted shelves.

“New around here, are you?”

I looked up and saw the colored man smiling at me. He was perhaps ten years my senior and regarded me with a look of pure kindness. I must have recoiled at his question, because he said, “Don’t mean to pry. In fact, not prying at all. I can see it in all the new ones. Just dazzled by the smallest things. It’s O.K., son. Nothing wrong with being new. Nothing wrong with being dazzled.”

I was silent.

“Name’s Mars,” the man said. “This is my place. Me and my Hannah. You from over near Ninth Street, right? Staying with Otha there? Raymond and Otha—they both my cousins, blood to my dear Hannah—and you with them, so that make you family to me.”

Reaching behind him, Mars tore a piece of parchment from a roll and went into the back. He returned with something wrapped in the paper, and, when he handed the package over to me, it was warm to the touch.

“Go on,” he said. “Try it.”

I opened the paper, and the scent of ginger wafted out. The smell evoked a feeling at once, sad and sweet, because it was attached to a lost memory that I felt lurking somewhere down a winding, foggy path in my mind.

“What I owe you?” I asked.

“Owe me?” Mars said. “What I tell you? We all family here.”

I nodded, managed a thanks, and then backed out of the bakery. I stood on Bainbridge for a moment watching the city, the gingerbread still warm in my hand. I wished I had smiled before I left. I wished I had said something to reward his kindness. But I was fresh out of Virginia, fresh out of the pit, my remarkable escape still alive in my mind. I walked west

across Bainbridge, across streets that counted up, pondering the absurd size of a town with so many streets they'd apparently run out of names for them. I walked on until I was at the docks, where I saw a mix of colored men and whites working on ships and unloading them.

I followed the river as it bent inward then curved back out. Its banks were crowded with workshops, small factories, and drydocks. The oppressive scent of the city eased some against the cool river breeze. Now I came upon a promenade, a large green field dissected by walkways lined with benches. I took a seat. It was about nine in the morning, Friday. The day was clear and blue. The promenade was filled with Philadelphians of all colors and kinds. Gentlemen in boaters escorted ladies. A circle of schoolchildren sat in the grass hanging on the words of their tutor. A man rode past on a bicycle, laughing. It occurred to me that this was the freest I had ever been in my life. And I knew that I could leave right then, right there, that I could abandon the Underground, and disappear into this city, float away on the poisonous air.

I unwrapped the parchment and brought the gingerbread to my mouth, and, as I ate, something inside me cracked open, unbidden. The winding, foggy path I'd seen back at Mars's bakery, the one called up by the scent of ginger, now appeared before me again, and this time there was no fog, and, really, there was no path, just a place. A kitchen, the kitchen of Lockless, where I had been Tasked as a boy. I was no longer on the bench, or even near the promenade. I was standing in that kitchen, and I saw on the counter cookies, pastries, and all manner of sweet things, on trays lined with parchment paper, just as they had been back at Mars's bakery. And there was another counter adjacent to that one, and I saw behind it a colored woman. She was singing softly to herself, kneading dough, and when she saw me she smiled and said, "Why you always so quiet, Hi?"

Then she went back to kneading and singing. Some time passed before she looked up at me again. "I see you there eying Master Howell's gingersnaps," she said. "You might be quiet, but you fixing to get me in a whole mess of trouble."

She shook her head and laughed to herself. But, a few moments later, I saw a look of caution on her face as she brought an extended index finger to her closed lips. She walked over to the door and peeked out, then walked back to the other counter and pried two gingersnaps loose from the paper.

"Family got to watch out for each other," she said, offering them to me.

I took the two cookies from her hands. I must have known what was happening. I must have realized that, wherever I was then, it was not the Lockless of now, was perhaps not even the Lockless of then. It was as though I were in a dream. And this woman before me, I could not name her, though I felt a pang of recognition, and a pang of something more—of loss. And so strong was this feeling that I ran to her, the gingersnaps still in my left hand, and hugged her, long and hard. And when I stepped away she was smiling big as day, big as the baker Mars had smiled at me only that morning.

“Don’t forget,” she said. “Family.”

And then I saw the fog return, float into the kitchen from all around, until the counter disappeared before me, and the woman disappeared, and she said to me as she faded from my sight, “Now get on.”

And then I was back, seated on a bench. I felt tired. I looked at my hands, which were empty. I looked up and out past the promenade to the river. The man on the bicycle rode past again. I looked to the benches to my left and then my right. The line of benches continued on both sides with little difference, save this—three benches down I saw a piece of half-eaten gingerbread, and in the grass the parchment in which it had been wrapped, drifting gently in the summer breeze.

That was Conduction. That was the power that had drawn me to the Underground, or drawn it to me. The little trick on the park bench was the power in miniature, for at its peak Conduction opened a blue door from one world to another, moved men from mountains to meadows, from green woods to fields caked in snow, folding the land like cloth. But of its workings all I knew was that its engine was poignant memory, and mine was just then beginning to emerge from the fog. I did not yet understand how to call it forth.

It had happened before, had happened only months earlier, when I’d found myself falling from a bridge and into the churning depths of the River Goose, which bordered Lockless. There had been no warning. One moment I was on the bridge, and the next I was crying out for breath, and what I now remember is the agony of the answer, the agony of water rushing into me, and how I answered that agony by heaving, which only invited more water. But somehow I steadied my thoughts, somehow I came to understand that all my thrashing could but hasten my demise. And, with that accomplished, on came the memories, alive and wreathed in blue light, memories of my loved ones dancing before me: Thena, the woman who had cared for me once my mother was gone, Thena, on wash day, an old woman hefting the large pots of steaming water; Sophia, the woman I loved, in her gloves and bonnet, like a woman of Quality, because that was what her Task required of her. I felt my limbs submit, and this time, when I went under, there was no burning, no straining for breath. I felt weightless, so that even as I sank into the river I was rising into something else. The water fell away from me, and I was alone in a warm blue pocket with the water outside and around me. And I knew then that I was, at last, going to my reward.

But there was no reward. At least none of the sort the old ones spoke of at Lockless. I am here, telling this story, and not from the grave, not yet, but from the here and now, peering back into another time, when we were slaves, and close to the earth, and close to a power that baffled the scholars and flummoxed the Quality, a power, like our music, like our dance, that they cannot grasp, because they cannot remember.

I was in the water, and then rising into the light, until the light overwhelmed, and when it dimmed, and faded away, I felt the land under my feet. And then there was the most incredible fatigue in my bones. So I lay on the ground, shivering, making no effort to move.

It was that same fatigue that I now felt on the promenade. But I managed to drag myself, exhausted, back to Otha's building and fell asleep as soon as I was in my room, the sun still out, and did not wake until early the next morning, when I heard a knock at my bedroom door and then Otha's voice.

"Hiram, you there?"

I opened the door and saw Otha already descending the staircase. He looked back up at me and said, "Gotta go."

I followed him down the steps and into the parlor, where we found Raymond pacing with a letter in hand. When he saw us, he walked to the door, grabbed his hat, and, without a word, dashed out. We followed him onto Ninth Street and then to Bainbridge, which was by then flush with the flow and miasma of Philadelphia. When we caught up to Raymond, he began talking as though we were already in mid-conversation.

"The law of our state is quite clear," he said. "No man or woman can be held under bondage—even if brought here under bondage. Haven, once requested, must be granted. But it must be requested. We cannot induce them to freedom. They cannot be wooed."

"The masters," Otha said, looking at me. "They keep the law hidden. They tell their people lies, frighten 'em. Threaten their families and friends."

"But when we have people who clearly state their intentions," Raymond said, "then we are empowered to make sure that those intentions are respected. And this Bronson woman has made such a request—one that her captor dishonors. Forgive my rush, but time is short. If we are to make this man honor the law, it must be done right now."

Before long, we were at the docks, and I could see the Delaware lapping gently against the ships. It was hot yet again, hotter in this city than anything I had known in Virginia. Shade had no meaning here. The heat followed you as sure as the odors, and the only relief, I was coming to find, was at the shores where the two rivers marked the city. We walked a few piers to the south until we stood before the gangplank of a riverboat. We boarded quickly. Raymond surveyed the passengers but did not see anyone matching the Bronson woman he spoke of. Then a colored man said, "They down below, Mr. White."

We walked to the back of the boat and found a set of stairs leading down, and there in the belly of the boat we saw another group of passengers. I recognized the Bronson woman before Raymond did. I needed no description. I had, in my two days here, noticed that Tasking folks were dressed as well as the free coloreds, perhaps even better, as though their captors sought to conceal the chains by which they were bound. But, if you watched closely

enough, you could see in their manner, in the particular way they attended, that some power kept them under. And this Bronson woman was well dressed, costumed even, but I saw that her arm was held tightly by a tall thin white man, and that with her other hand she held tighter still to a boy no older than six. I watched her spot Raymond, who was still searching for her, and then her eyes found mine.

By then, Raymond had caught on. He walked over and said, “Mary Bronson, I understand you have made a request. We are here to see this request fulfilled, in accordance with the law of our state, which shows neither respect”—and now Raymond fixed his eyes on the tall thin man—“nor regard for the customs of human bondage.”

Raymond’s words went off like a bomb. And the white man who held Mary Bronson felt it.

“Damn you,” the white man said, yanking at Mary Bronson’s hand so that she stumbled off balance a bit. “I mean to return to my home with my property.”

Raymond ignored him.

“You are under no order to obey,” he said to Mary. “He cannot detain you, and, should you come with me, I assure you the law of this state will reinforce my efforts.”

“Damn you, I have her!” the man said with great force. But I saw that he no longer held Mary’s arm. I did not know if she had slipped it free or if he, with his wrath focussed on Raymond, had simply let go. By now, a small, motley crowd, some colored, some white, had gathered near us, some to support, some to see the source of the commotion. They informed one another of the details of the story. They muttered and motioned toward the man, who did not seem to perceive that what little power he had was withering around him. But Mary saw it all. The crowd buoyed her. She took her child’s hand and walked toward Raymond. The man fumed, called for Mary to return, but she ignored him, positioning herself behind Raymond, with the child behind her.

“Boy,” the man said, his eyes raging at Raymond. “If I were home, I’d have you in your proper place, and break you good.” At this, the mutters grew into taunts, shouts, and threats.

There is a moment in the stormy lives of a few blessed colored people, a moment of revelation, when the sky opens up, the clouds part, and a streak of sun cuts through, conveying some infinite wisdom from above, and this wisdom comes not from the Christian religion but from the sight of a colored man addressing a white one as Raymond White now did.

“But you are not home.”

Raymond looked around at the crowd, and the thin white man, following with his eyes, began to understand his predicament. Rage and determination fled from him. Fear and panic closed in. He seemed to grow paler and thinner by the second. The people in the crowd, agitated by

his threats, now murmured to one another about what they ought to do next.

We watched the boat shove off and then returned to the Ninth Street house, where Otha and I sat with Mary Bronson and her son. Raymond had gone off to begin the business of having Mary housed and, soon, he hoped, employed.

Otha made coffee and gave Mary's son a collection of toys—cows, horses, and other farm animals rendered from wood. I watched as the boy took a wooden horse in each hand, made a threatening face, and then crashed the two into each other with a loud "Pssh-h-h!"

"What is his name?" I asked.

"Octavius," she said. "Don't ask me why—I ain't name him. My old master decided that, like he decided everything else."

It was the custom to take an account of the ordeal of all who passed through the Philadelphia station of the Underground—another notion that was utterly unimaginable in Virginia, where such accounts might implicate a fugitive. I went up to my room and retrieved paper and two pencils. Otha was to ask the questions. I would record.

"My name is Mary Bronson," she told Otha. "And I was born a slave."

"No more, though," Otha said.

"No more," Mary repeated. "And I want to thank y'all for that. You got no idea what I been through down there, what we all been through. I'd have done anything to get out from under that man. I just wasn't sure how. You know, this ain't even the first time I been to the city, and it ain't the first time I had the notion to run. I don't know why I ain't done it before."

"Where you from, Mary?" Otha asked.

"Hell," she said. "I am straight out of Hell, Mr. Otha."

"And why you say that?" Otha asked.

"I had two other boys, beside Octavius here, two other boys and a husband. He was a cook just like me. Everybody around the house loved the work I did."

"Did you love your own work?"

"Was never my work to love. But I was different, you see. Fact of it is, I had an understanding with my old master. I did the cooking, but I wasn't the only one in the kitchen. So, time to time, my old master would hire me out and split whatever I made with me. Plan was to gather up enough to buy me and mine out. I would go first, so as not to have to split nothing no longer, and then I'd get my man, Fred, that was my husband's name. I'd get him so as to have another hand to work. And then we'd together get the young'uns out."

“And what happened?”

“Old master died. Place was carved up, and one of them low whites—man you just seen—took over. Then I ain’t like my work so much. He took all the money for himself, said he had no notion for any agreement with my old master, nor any banking. So I got crafty. Started working slow and sloppy. But he caught on.”

Mary Bronson paused here and drew herself in.

“That’s when the beating start. He set a figure for every week. Said if I ain’t make that figure he’d take it out on my hide. He threatened to sell my husband, my sons—all my boys. I worked hard as I could, Mr. Otha. He sold them anyway. He spared me my youngest”—she nodded to the little boy, still on the floor playing with the wooden animals—“but that wasn’t because of no sympathy or concern. It was power. He held that boy over me so I always had something else to lose.”

“Why’d he bring you to the city?” Otha asked.

“He got family up here,” she said. “He was bragging to them about my work. Had me Tasking for his sister.”

“He had you Tasking here?”

“Yes, sir, he did, Mr. Otha. Working in his sister’s kitchen. But I done showed him, have I not?”

“Surely, you have.”

“I was thinking ’bout all the times I come north and ain’t run. And I was thinking about the grip they got on me. And I knew that boy would be off to the fields in a year or so, and I knew that then they’d have him, too.”

She sobbed softly into her hands. Otha went over and sat next to Mary Bronson. Then he held her, gently patting her back. Mary Bronson wailed, and I heard in the wailing a song for her husband, her boys, and all her lost.

I had never seen an agent do what Otha was now doing—comforting her, treating her with the dignity of a free woman, not merely cargo. He rocked her in his arms until she was calm, and then he stood and said, “We shall have a place for you and your boy in the next few days. Raymond gone to get that started. You and your son welcome to stay here until it’s all arranged.”

Mary Bronson nodded.

“It’s a good city, ma’am,” Otha said. “And we are strong here. But I understand if you don’t want to stay. Either way, we gon’ help how we can. As you will soon see, finding freedom is only the first part. Living free is a whole other.”

There was a moment of silence. I had stopped writing, thinking the interview terminated. Mary Bronson wiped her face with Otha’s handkerchief. And then she looked up and said, “Ain’t no living free, less I’m living with my boys.”

She had composed herself now. I could see that her pain and fear were shifting into something else. “I don’t wanna hear about your city. My boys—they the only city I need. Now you done found a way to get me out, and, by God, I am thankful for it. I am thankful. But my boys, *all my lost boys*, that is my highest concern.”

“Mrs. Bronson,” Otha said. “We just ain’t set up like that. That just ain’t in our power.”

“Then you ain’t got the power of freedom,” she said. “If you can’t keep them from parting a mother from her son, a husband from his natural wife, then you got nothing. That boy over there is my everything. I run for him so he might know some other world. Left on my own, I would have died as I was born—a slave. That boy freed me, you see. And I owe him so much. Mostly I owe him his pappy and his brothers. If you can’t put us back together, then your freedom is thin and your city hold nothing for me.”

The following Monday, I began my employment in the woodworking shop, just off the Schuylkill docks, at the corner of Locust and Twenty-third. The owner was an associate of Raymond White’s, and a large number of those who labored there were fugitives like me. I worked there three days a week and three for the Underground.

After work, I would usually walk alone through the city, taking in the alchemy of sounds, odors, and sensations, all of which proceeded late into the night. But, still in all, among that incredible amalgam of people, I somehow felt alone. It was Mary Bronson who’d done it, her longing, her hunger for a freedom that extended to all of her blood. For what did it mean to be free, in a city such as this, when those you hold to most are still Tasked? What was I without my mother, without those who had cared for me after she was sold and carried off, like Mary Bronson’s boys, far from any means the Underground might muster to recover her?

One Friday morning, as I was leaving for work, Otha approached me and said, “A man can’t be too long without family.”

I stared and said nothing.

He smiled. “Still, it might be nice to be with some folks who care, Hiram. Supper? Tonight? At my mama’s. What do you say? Whole family’ll be there. We good folks, I tell you, and would very much welcome you as our own.”

“All right, Otha,” I said.

“Lovely. Just lovely,” he said. Then he tendered directions and said, “See you tonight.”

The White family home was across the Delaware River. I caught the ferry that evening, then walked along a cobbled road until it turned to clay and then to dust. The heat of the city, the air damp and thick, faded behind me, and a refreshing breeze swirled up the road. It was good to be out. It was my first time in anything like the country since my arrival, and I now realized everything that I missed about my Southern home—the wind in the fields, the sun pushing through the trees, the drawn-out afternoons. Everything happened at once in Philadelphia, all of life one ridiculous crush of feeling.

Raymond and Otha’s parents lived in a large house with a porch wrapping around it. I stood for some time on that porch, staring at the front door. Inside, I could hear children and mothers, fathers and brothers, their words and laughter mixing into happiness. Even before I entered the house, their accumulated affection radiated out. I had felt something like it before. And no sooner did I recall this feeling than it all came upon me again. The summer breeze grew chill. I shivered. And everything around me went blue. The door to the White home expanded into many doors all in a row, and these doors pulled away from one another like bellows. A door opened. I looked in. I saw my mother’s hand reaching out from the smoke. She walked toward me, her hand reaching for mine, and when she grabbed it the blue faded, and the yellow heat of that summer afternoon returned. In the doorway I saw a woman who was not my mother but about the age she would have been. And just behind her I saw Otha, who waved and smiled.

“Hiram?” the woman asked. And before I could respond she said, “That must be you. You look like you seen the Devil himself.”

She gripped my hand tight and then looked into my eyes. “Uh-huh. Hunger’ll do that to a man. What Raymond and Otha got you eating down there? Why, don’t just stand there—come on in!”

I followed for a couple of steps until the woman stopped and said, “Viola White. But you just call me Aunt Viola, because that is who I am to you. Any man working with Otha and Raymond is family to me.”

I followed Viola White—calling her Aunt Viola would take some time for me—into the front parlor and found a crowd of relatives. Raymond stood at the mantel talking with an older man. Mars, the baker, rushed over and pulled me into a big scrum of people, rendering introductions and expounding on the effects of that gingerbread.

“That boy try to make like he cool, like he wasn’t caught,” Mars told his wife, Hannah. “But soon as he stick his nose in the paper I knew I had him.”

Hannah laughed and I, surprising myself, laughed, too. Something was happening here. Walls were falling down, walls I had erected at Lockless. My silence, my watching, was a wall. There had been love even at Lockless, I tell you, some of the deepest and hardest I’d ever

seen. But it was brutal and erratic. Passions had transfigured into outrages and violence, even among us. But the demeanor that had served me at Lockless seemed cruel and unnecessary among the Whites, so I found myself, awkwardly and haltingly, smiling, laughing, and, above all, talking.

After supper, we took coffee and tea in the back salon. There was a piano there, and one of the younger girls began to play. What I remember more than any virtuosity was seeing the gleaming pride in the eyes of the White family at the talents of this child. And I remembered how I had had talents, too, as a child, but had served as an amusement, rather than a source of pride, even for my father, who, if he could have, would have given all my gifts to his other son, the white one. Watching that little girl urged on in her pursuits, rewarded in whatever genius she had—and we all had some—I saw how much had been taken from me, and how much was so regularly taken from the millions of colored children bred to the Task. But, more than this, I saw, for the first time, colored people in that true freedom that Mary Bronson longed for and that I hungered for, walking through the city.

There was still a minor note in this gathering. I had noticed, throughout the conversation, the names Lydia and Lambert, and I knew from the way they were spoken that these two names belonged to family still held down by the Task. After the girl's recital, I found Otha seated on the large porch, looking out past the road and into the lush, green woods in the summer twilight. I took a seat and said, "I want to thank you for having me here, Otha. It means a lot."

Otha looked at me and smiled. "It's nothing, Hiram. I'm glad you came. The work can be such a weight."

"Your mother," I said, looking back inside. "I gather she knows what you do."

"They all do. The babies only a little, of course. But how could they not know? They the reason we in the work to begin with."

"Well, you've got a beautiful family," I said.

At that, he went quiet for a moment, and his gaze returned to those woods.

"Otha," I said. "Who are Lambert and Lydia?"

"Lambert was my brother," Otha said. "And Lydia is my wife. Lambert died while I was still down. And Lydia is still there. I have not seen her in some years."

"Children?"

"Yup. Two girls. One boy. You?"

"Nah, just me."

“Huh. Don’t know what I’d do if it weren’t for my young ones. Don’t know who I’d be. This whole thing, this Underground, starts with my babies.”

Otha stood and looked through the door inside. We could hear the gentle clanging of dishes and sombre talk, broken by the occasional giggling of children. Then he walked to the edge of the porch and seated himself there, against the wooden railing.

“I’m not like them. Wasn’t raised up here,” he said. “My daddy is old and stooped now, but he was something in his day. Born to the Task. But in his twenty-first year he walked up to his old master and told him straight—‘I’m grown now. And I shall sooner die than have the yoke.’ And the old master thought on it for a day, and when he next saw my pappy he had a rifle in one hand and Pappy’s papers in the other. And he told my pappy, just as straight as my pappy had told him, ‘Freedom is a yoke, boy. You’ll soon see.’ Then he handed Pappy the papers and said, ‘Now get off my land, for the next time you and I meet only one of us shall walk away.’”

Otha laughed at that. “But there was this woman, Viola—Mama—who was Tasking there, too. There was two of us by then—myself and Lambert. Pappy had it figured that he would get up North, get work, and then buy us our freedom. He started out at the docks, saving for the day he could get us all out. But Mama had her own notions. She ran with me and Lambert, took the Underground, as it was back then. Shocked the life out of Pappy when she showed herself down at the city docks.

“They married proper, and two more was born—Raymond and Patsy. That was Patsy’s daughter at the piano. Girl can sing like a bird. The old master let my pappy walk—don’t ask me why. Who can figure white folks? But for my mother—a woman—to take mastery of her life, as she did, well, it was too much. Maybe it was how she did it. Or maybe it was because she took us. Mama was the goose. But we was the golden eggs.

“That man sent the Hounds up to the city. They bagged me, Lambert, my mama, Raymond, and Patsy—the whole family, save my pappy. We was carried back. When we got there, Mama made it out as though the escape was all Pappy’s idea. Told the old master she never wanted no part in running. Flattered him into believing he was good white folks. And maybe he needed to believe her, needed to think that he was doing some kind of good, dividing a family and holding ’em down.

“Anyway, wasn’t long after that Mama ran again. Went different this time, though. She woke me up in the dead of night. I must have been about six, Lambert about eight, but I can still see it all, like it’s right in front of me. She told us, ‘Baby, I gotta go. I gotta go for Raymond and I gotta go for Patsy. They goin’ to die down here. I am so sorry, baby, but I gotta go.’

“I know why she done it now. I knew why she done it even back then. But it burned in me, a low, heavy hatred. Can you imagine hating your own mother, Hiram? After that, the old master sold us south—two lost boys sent down into the Deep. He did it to punish my mama,

to show her that whatever plans she had of coming back for me and Lambert was done. I had a whole other life down there. I met a girl—Lydia—and we made a family. I Tasked hard. I was a man well regarded in slavery, which is to say I was never regarded as a man at all.

“Lambert knew. Maybe ’cause he was older, he knew all that had been taken from us. And the hate in him was so strong, it just ate him. So Lambert . . . Lambert died down there, far from home, far from the mother that birthed him and the father that reared him.”

I could not see Otha’s face in the dim light, but I heard the halting in his voice, and I felt a halo of agony burning all around him.

“There are so many holes in me, so many pieces cut away. All those lost years, my mother, my father, Raymond and Patsy, my wife, and my kids. All my losses. Well, I got out. My master needed the money, more than he needed to hold on to me, and, through the kindness of others, I got out. I came up to this city searching for my family, for I was left with rumors of where they had been. And soon I heard from the coloreds that this man Raymond was a good one to know, should you be searching for family. I sought him out.”

“Y’all recognize each other?” I asked.

“Not even a little bit. And I had no surname. He sat with me, just like we sat with Mary Bronson, and I gave him my whole story. Later, Raymond told me that he trembled with every detail. But you know Raymond—he is a rock. I’m sitting there telling him all that I know. And I’m wondering how he’s taking it, because the whole time he’s just real quiet. Then he tell me come see him again tomorrow. Same time. Next day I come back and there she was, Hiram. I knew her right away. I didn’t need to search myself or think no time on it. It was my mama. And then Mama tell me that this man, this rock, was my brother. It’s the only time I seen tears in Raymond’s eyes.

“When we was young, Lambert and me had all kinds of schemes for seeing our way out. And when Lambert died, Hiram, I knew that I must somehow do it. And I knew that any anger in that venture was a waste. I think back to my mama’s words the night she left. I think about them all the time in this work, in my time with the Underground. ‘I gotta go for Raymond and I gotta go for Patsy,’ she said. ‘I am so sorry, baby, but I gotta go.’ And I, being young and loving my mama, I said, ‘Mama, why can’t we go with you?’ And my mama, she said, ‘ ’Cause I can only carry so many, and only so far.’ ”

The Conductions became frequent for me now. The world would suddenly and randomly fall away, and moments later I would return, dumped into back alleys, basements, open fields, stockrooms. Every Conduction seemed activated by a memory, some whole, some mere shards, like the vision of a woman who sneaked me gingersnaps, who I realized suddenly was my aunt Emma. I remembered the stories of her prowess in the Lockless kitchen. I began to feel that something was trying to reveal itself to me, that some part of my mind, long ago locked away, was now seeking its liberation. Perhaps I should have greeted the unravelling of

a mystery and new knowledge with relief. But Conduction felt like the breaking and resetting of a bone. Each bout left me fatigued and with a somehow deeper sense of loss than the one I'd carried into it, so that I was in a constant low thrum of agony, a melancholy so deep it would take every ounce of my strength to rise out of bed the next morning. For days after each Conduction, I would still be working my way through the most sullen of moods. This didn't feel like freedom, not anymore.

And so one day I walked out of the Ninth Street office set upon leaving Philadelphia and the Underground, leaving the triggers for these memories that threw me into depression. I did not meditate on this decision. I did not gather any effects. I simply walked out the door with no view of ever coming back. I reasoned that my initial exit would alarm no one, since it was known that I enjoyed walking through the city. But then I would just keep walking. I turned away from the office and made my way over toward the docks.

Of all the people I saw in the city, the sailors seemed the freest, tied to nothing save one another, bound by boyish jabs and indecent mockery that always elicited a host of laughter. Sometimes they fought. But whatever their quarrels these men seemed a brotherhood to me. Even in their freedom, they somehow reminded me of home. Maybe it was their hard black faces, their rough hands, bent fingers, bruised and worn-down nails. Maybe it was how they sang, because they sang as the Tasked did, but were not of the Task.

I stood at the dock, hoping one might call out to me, perhaps asking for a hand, and when no one did I left, and that whole day I just wandered. I crossed the river, passed a cemetery and some railroad tracks, and stopped before an almshouse to watch the indigent of the city gather. I walked more until I stood before Cobbs Creek and a forest at the southwesterly recesses of the city. By now it was late. I had no plan and it was getting dark. I really had no way out, no way to escape the Underground or the binds of memory. So I turned around, but these were the thoughts that clouded me on my way back to Ninth Street, back to my fate, the notions that kept me from watching out as I had been trained to do. Suddenly, I was face to face with a white man, who seemed to materialize out of the night itself. He asked me something, but I could not hear. I leaned closer, asking him to repeat himself. And then I felt a sharp blow fall across the back of my head. There was a bright flash. Another blow. And then nothing.

When I awoke, I was chained, blindfolded, and gagged. I was in the back of a drawn cart and could feel ground moving beneath me. I cleared my head and knew exactly what had befallen me, for I had heard all the stories. It was the man-catchers—Ryland's Hounds of the North—who'd got me. They were known to simply grab colored people off the street and ship them south for a price, with no regard to their status as free or in flight from the Task. I could hear them laughing, doubtless counting up their haul. I was not alone in the cart. Someone near me was weeping, quietly—a girl. But I was silent. I had wanted out of the Underground, and now I had it. There was some small part of me that felt relief, for I was, at least, returning to the Task I knew.

We rode for several hours, across the backcountry roads. Then they stopped to make camp, and I felt rough hands around my arms—I was pulled along for a moment and then tossed to the ground. “Take care, Deakins,” I heard one of them say. “Damage that boy and I’ll damage you.” This man, Deakins, propped me up against a tree. I could move my fingers but nothing else. I was listening to their voices, attempting to calculate their number, when I saw a brightness through my blindfold. A campfire. The men gathered around and traded small talk. I now counted four voices, and from their words and general commotion it became clear that they were eating. Their last meal.

I never heard him approach, and neither did Ryland’s Hounds. There was the crack of a pistol shot—twice—a scream, a struggle, and then two more cracks, and then nothing for a moment. And then I heard someone rummaging for something, and again I felt hands upon me. The click of a lock and the chains loosened. With a furor that shocked me, I pushed the hands away, as well as their possessor, and pulled off my blindfold and gag, and, in the firelight, I saw him—Bland, regarding me with a stolid and unmoved face.

I stood and leaned against the tree to settle myself. There were two others, bound and manacled as I was. Bland worked quickly moving among them. I looked away and saw four bodies on the ground. How do I explain what happened in that moment, the blinding, unconscious rage I felt? It was as if I had been lifted out of my body to watch myself there. And what I saw was me kicking one of the corpses with all the power I could muster. Bland came over to stop me, and I pushed him away again and kicked the dead man—Deakins, perhaps—even more. Bland did not try to stop me this time. It was all the rage of everything in that moment, all the lies, all the losses, all the violation, all of it came up there and vented itself on a dead man.

Finally tired, I doubled over on my knees. The fire was now burning low. But I could see Bland standing there. “Are you finished?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “Not ever.” ♦