

## Stephanie Dickinson

### Mother of the Fields

She grew up near the cornfields filling her with the sultriness of furrows. Her skin had dried like a muskrat's papery skull and her hair colored so many times was the grizzle of corn silk. Only her thonged feet with their soft nails still the girl's who had waded in soil. My Pentecostal brother and I sat at her table. The fields lay just outside and we sensed the breathing green, the wire-walk of the daddy-long-legs, manure and the lazy pungency of cattle. The TV on in her bedroom was turned to *The Young and Restless*. She'd been listening to the lovers kiss as she spooned rhubarb into glasses that came free with a decades-old gas fill-up. Her eyes, never pretty, were a fading blue that has seen from the Depression into the 21st century, an altered biosphere. Eyes where her own childhood still drifted, workhorses breaking sod and snapping roots that sounded like gunshots. While her father plowed with reins tied around his waist the earth had bled and been resurrected. In her gaze the just-beginning-girl ran to the dirt road to meet the threshers come from faraway Black Hawk County, and, in the morning's yellow haze, she raced from tree to tree setting out basins and mirrors for the threshers to wash with. This was pleasure when every day was a kerosene stove to be stuffed with cobs from the splintered lips of the wood box. When her eyes were bluer they looked out onto a world of small pox and homemade dresses, of syphilis and hard religion. The forenoon hum of summer was coming in—potato moths jittered above the black odor of marigolds, flies buzzed over the lawn's knee-high grass. Grass, that in the short run seemed important to mow, but now at the tail end of her life she saw it made no difference if it had ever been cut. And then my brother picked up a rock from a bowl in the center of the table for this woman liked stones better than bouquets. He wanted her to hear her eulogy before it was too late. She was this rock, a solitary stone, who had raised three children by herself. The rock never broken. Her head bowed and tears filled her eyes for the girl and her long life.

### Emily and the Whooping Cough

1901. Two long tables and in front of each of us sits a board to write on with charcoal. Cold in the one-room school, but where I am near the potbelly stove—is hot. I do not mind wearing long underwear that curl over the top of my brother's boots or undergarments like dresser drawers. Thick stockings, and then a grey dress like a dirty overcast sky, and finally my apron. The lessons warm me. The nearness of books. I like my apron's two pockets. Another slam of the outhouse door. Recess over. The Moses' children crowd around me. Wilma. Francesca. Fern. And the boys. Mathias, Wilbur. They smell like wet feathers. Like cornmeal. I give them my pork cracklings and rye bread. I give them my molasses. Their lunch bucket is empty. They cough. Three days later only Fern and Mathias warm themselves at the stove. Mathias, the oldest Moses' boy, blinks his white eyelashes like mulberry stems, and tells me there's kinkcough at his house. His mother asks for help, knows I've already had the cough. I follow them to the hovel where nine live in two rooms. A horse neighs at our approach, a grey shadow whose ribs show through. He nudges the brittle hazelbrush with his muzzle. The chicken coop knocked to the ground and what looks like a one-winged hen, chips her stone beak against the stonier ground. The last of the sun dies like a fiery frozen shooting star at the fenceline. Inside, I hear the sound of *tosse canina*. I know it from my brother's Latin. A cough wild and cruel like a dog. The dim of the room lit by one wick kerosene lantern. Three in one bed. The babies together, their tiny fists clenched, heads like soft blue potatoes. The mother bends over the robe-slung bed, mopping the red stems of blood running from the noses of Francesca and Wilma and Wilbur. The woman's another grey shadow like the horse, her chin juts, all jawbone bared. Her fingers are worked to the bone. My heart kicks. The unseen being has come, bearing his foul lilacs. The half-eaten apple of a nose bleed. The chalice of vomited milk. I tell myself that Providence has a plan for each of us, the stars will burn like lion heads and archers, the tails of comets will trail celestial wildflowers across the blackness. This night five Moses' children die. The whooping cough that strangles as if an unclean God has placed a hoop around your neck. A crowing cock that wracks and chokes. I hold my friends after they have set out into peaceful death. The true music of a soul is quiet filled with a hundred prayers and I close my eyes. The mother is rocking and will not take comfort, tearing the hair from her head. Do not look for miracles and signs, John Hus

told his followers before they burned him at the stake. Yet I look for signs everywhere. Is this proof that He does not exist, I think, but do not let the words pass my lips. The oldest boy Mathias will fight in the Great War, come home from the Argonne Forest and hang himself. Only Fern is left to carry the misshapen Moses name into the next generation.

## **Emily and the Norsemen**

*1903.* The walls of the country church's Sunday school sweat. I pass out fans to my students who share readers, pictures of gods worshipped before God. Dogs, hearths. I wipe their hands, the ones who came unwashed. Tell them they are lucky to be in the here and now. He admires the bent innocent heads. Who can predict fourteen years hence or the vastness of an hour? The hayloft the dark-haired Moses boy will use to hang himself in, after returning from the Argonne Forest battle. Or the Novak girl shy behind her braids one day jumping off the balcony of her husband's farmhouse. See how they pore over their books. The dank forest. Trunks of mammoth oak streaked with fire. Norsemen—antlers branching from their helmets, bellies filled with wild seeds—kneel before the tree. The boy and girl take in the thrill of thousand-year-old worship. Birds soaked in scream-smoke. Eyes of drowned animals like spongy flower bulbs. This is the pure world. After services I wander. Sluggishly flowing at the edge of the Manse, the creek calls to me with its cloud of grazing sheep, its drought-stricken hickories and honey locust. Water trickling over stones like the voice of my pastor praying, words catching in his beard. There's the poor beast of a garden thirsting to death. I taste dust when I kneel before the cucumbers. The vines rattle when I lift them, the squash and zucchini's oily green blackened as if fire has passed through them. Like the flames that burned Joan d'Arc at the stake. I raise my hands into the sharp light. Cut me, dear Lord and Savior. I yearn to suffer for You. Two of the tomatoes, the almost ripe ones, are freshly gouged as if a being has grown to like the taste of its blood. Shreds of skin hang from the stem by what appear to be teeth marks. The god of dirt has eaten.

## Emily and the Missionary

1904. Leaves overgrow them, drooping oily black from branches. The orchard's fragrance thickening, bliss. The missionary stands before her. Back from Africa to ask for Emily's hand. Too late. She is seventeen and already promised. He's put fruit in her lap—apples and peaches. Her eyes, the soft blue of trough water. Prettiest girl in the church choir. He wears short pants, rumpled jacket. His hair recedes from his forehead, his tie is dull maroon. Nigeria and Cameroon. Bellies pouched from eating locust stew. Maiduguri, Dwo, Zinder, Jos. Cities with unbelievable distance between them. Hard to pronounce, the names grunt in the mouth. He tells her of deserts, of rivers that are roads, cold heat, flies. Here towns sprout every three miles from rolling alfalfa fields. Here it is always corn weather, humidity, bark secreting sap and black ants, worms coring apples. She wants to hear more about such barrenness. Her father milks seven cows morning and night. The missionary lifts his handkerchief to his lips. She smells mosquitoes on his fingers, a dank puddle of shimmering, a skim of standing water, thick like the cooked-off froth of asparagus. Mosquitoes lift the steamy skin from their puddles to his cheek. His teeth chatter. He wonders if he has brought cholera with him from the village where he preaches the new life in Christ. Thirty dead. Women and children mostly. Cholera drinks you from the inside out. She wants to go there. Elizabethville in the Congo. Madagascar, a French colony, an island called Zululand. Wood-burning boats. Savanna, wet and dry seasons. All her imaginings take her there. Hovering over the white of the sanctuary air, the pale flesh throats, the heavy bloodless scent of altar peonies, she yearns toward something darker—ebony sweat, snake-like vines bearing showy half-eaten flowers, each fat as a starving child's face.

## Emily and the Blizzard

1909. Wind gusts yet no cloud squats over the windmill, only grey wreaths the weathervane. Without warning the falling snow begins to neigh and snort. My man has gone in the sleigh to cut wood and returns from Black Hawk County tomorrow. Big with our first child, I tell my belly about the snow—each flake, a milky sleep bubble. The sky pushes down and a muffled groan cocoons the farmhouse. The door rattles. I put on choreclothes and rubber boots. I tell my baby we must see to the cow who will soon give birth. I tie clothesline to my arm. Outside the snow pricks my face with tiny pickaxes. The wind is full of wild deer and ancestors eating bark. A stray dog burrows into a snowbank, then bursts from it, his black muzzle lightened with silver snow beads. Soon there is no more distance—the white wind has erased the chicken coop and smokehouse. I must see to the cow. Without hands she knows not how to open her muzzle if frost freezes it over. I struggle against the drifting wind trying to carry me into the black trees. The Dutch doors squeak as I heave myself inside. I am afraid of the barn now that the sun has gone out. Panting, I light the one lantern and find Matilda, the brown and white Guernsey, restless in her stall. Glad she's not stranded herself in the pasture hearing the snow's promise of green porridge, only to be fed ice. She is heavy with calf and has already expelled the sac like a fallen ripened fruit—peach mash glazed in its rhubarb jelly of blood and womb saliva. Back and forth she paces and I pace with her. Finally, she lies down in her pain, the calf coming, half in and half out of its mother. Huddled together the barn ripples and creaks with cold. We wait but the calf comes no further, and I take the length of rope and tie it around the calf's front hooves and tighten it around my waist. I pull the four-legged infant, this hoofed creature, my belly cramping yet like some holiness of the violent night, I heave and pull, until the calf shudders free. Matilda sets him to breathing. Her tongue, a spongy washrag, begins cleaning this wet tarnished being, its enormous eyes not yet seeing. The birth steam rises in the below-zero stall. I imagine frozen light from the fickle stars wondering at us. I bring blankets and make a tent for the three of us, and the fourth inside me soon to be. There is a lovely nothingness and the wind howls. I hear a low moan inside the blowing snow, then singing. One star bawls like a herd of welcoming cattle.

## Emily and Big-Headed Anna

1927. There in the dawn after milking I discover Anna, my husband's sister, bent over the hay manger. Her big head's covered by a hat the color of a song sparrow or a cloud of road dust. Mouth ajar as if a pasture gate's left open. Her apron's tied on backwards and its pockets bulge with cider apples she's scratched from the orchard's still frozen mulch to feed the calf—sold months ago to pay taxes. The barn is empty, but for the one cow let out to breathe the March air and stare into the distance. Strands of hair unravel from her braid. She is tickling her face with hay. "Anna," I say. Sometimes I sense her behind me suckling her thumb, standing in my shadow, or lowering her head between the stanchions, waiting for me to draw the milking stool under and squeeze the bucket between my knees. Her big nostrils drawn to the remnants of sour milk and the pale mash of bluegrass. Other times, I find her holding her head in her hands or resting its heaviness (like a chest of useless silverware smothered in burgundy felt) on a hay bale as if her neck could no longer shoulder its weight. "Anna," I say again and it will be dusk. The apples she's placed in the hay manger. "For him," she answers, waiting for the calf's brown eyes the size of our front room doorknobs but shinier. The barn light half-erased as if muted by burlap, its particles scattered like coarse rye flour from a grindstone. "Have you eaten?" I see the ghost of my husband's father, a huge man with white hair and weedy black mustache, soft with animals and women, yet working both hard. He trembles in death, like wick in a fading kerosene lantern. Is he sorry he pushed his wife, a fine-boned girl from Prague, to milk the cow no matter how big her belly? And the cow tired of the human thumb and forefinger, dragging the milk endlessly from her, wishing her teats tasted of bitter black marigolds not sweet, lifted her hoof, and kicked his wife in the stomach. His first-born's head so large it jammed the birth canal. Her head, the circumference of a calf's, Anna had to be roped and pulled out. The father ghost doesn't see in her eyes what the nuthatches do when they come to her. Half-singing she will talk to them. Purple finches and chickadees call her name. My children share the bed with her in cold winters. They claim she moos in her sleep. Under a full moon and in green pastures they've seen her become four-legged and graze, only her hat staying the same. I threaten to wash their mouths out with soap for telling untruths. I know Anna chases snowflakes and will open her mouth to swallow them. She likes sheds and coops, the tumbling fence, the ditch under the mulberry bush. Summers, big-headed Anna

befriends the neighbor's cows in their field of long grasses. Summers, she wanders off to herd them up the hill, the lead cow with her followers, the soft brown of her eyes like overripe fruits, drawing the spirits. "Anna," I say, "it's time to go in." Slowly without looking, she raises her head like a bucket of milk filled to the rim and hands me an apple.

