

Chattels.

We are looking at the girl through the trees, as we like to do.

Susannah, her name is. The daughter of Susannah, the woman with the face of a marsh-rotted turnip – but who knows how to work, that much must be said.

The younger Susannah has different thoughts, we can tell. Which is why we like to look at her.

Where she stands is in a glade among pines that bow heads and link arms, like schoolgirls keeping a secret close. But this is no ‘tell-my-lover’s name’ game, nor stolen treat. What they hug is a mirror’d pool, as clear as our gaze.

And, now, Susannah unfastens her hair, unfettering it from the caps all girls must wear, because hair restrained in coarse linen is better for working. Better, too, for keeping the chiggers and punkies away, to stop them from itching and biting the delicate female scalp. So, yes, the cap is a good thing, in truth. But. Still.

We watch as the cap floats to the ground, and as she pulls her fingers through her tresses, to feel the air blow through the golden strands; gold as the corn we were told would grow here in plenty – which may be the case in some part of this vast continent, but not here, where we have found ourselves. No. Not here.

The cap floats, the hair floats, white, gold, catching the sun.

Our breath catches in on itself.

And then, and then... she loosens the ties of her dress. It, like the cap, falls to the ground, around her ankles. A spool of flax. She looks down at it gathered there, surprised, as if, maybe, she did not mean to do this. Yet *we* knew she would. All the girls who come here do the same. Just as all the girls who come here wear nothing under their workaday shifts.

Susannah steps forward. She steps to the edge of the pool. And, like ourselves, like the craning trees, she looks.

We do not have mirrors, here. Yes, we brought them with us, packing them up in the old country, layer upon layer of hessian, bound with twine, to keep them safe. Only, they did not keep safe. Thrown into the hold of the vessel, crammed there with the chattels of a multitude of passengers, to be subject to the bucking of the boat on the long, long voyage. Roof-high Atlantic waves, storms, tempests. Then, those that survived, surrendered to the uncaring unloading of the care-less stevedores at the docks. And still our journey, their journey, was not over. Bundled, as we all were, into carts, to travel over miles of 'road' – which was not road, but some sort of mud river; or, if dry, pitted and crested, root-infested, all likely to shake the chassis of the most stalwart of wagons. That, and all its contents.

Then, if by one of God's miracles, a single cheval should find itself unscathed, to be lop-sided against the higgledy-piggledy log walls of our 'dwellings', God failed to further protect it from the hands of recalcitrant servants, or the weather He, in His beneficence, provided in this 'heavenly tract' – the rain and snow coming through the roof, the wind blowing through those same walls.

So... no mirrors here. Hence, the need of a calm, crystal pool, that reflects a perfect replica of all who stand at its side. And some might say that the Lord works in mysterious ways – that He has given us nature's perfection in the stead of foxed, warped images, trapped between frames of gilt or mahogany. Is that so bad?

And would those same souls say it is also God's work that so much other delicate cargo suffered the same calamitous fate? The young maidens who left the home country, fresh in face and body, for example. How many of those arrived in tact at this Virgin Territory?

Susannah is one such. She knows it, as she looks down at her reflection in the pool. She sees it in her comely features, her shapely limbs, her flawless skin, her burgeoning breasts, that hair... She knows it, and is pleased at what she sees, for a smile plays around her lips. And soon, as if she wants to see more, she stretches her arms wide, and twirls her body round, her head twisting behind, so that she can perceive all parts of herself. 'Yes, this is me,' she is thinking. 'And I am lovely.' And we think so, too.

Susannah starts to sing. A playful tune, to match the swaying of the branches, the nodding heads of the wild flowers, the winking of the sun. A tune to match what she is now doing – dancing. Her raised arms flounce and loop, while her hands brush the air. She lifts one foot, then the other. And her hips... her hips sway like those lithe boughs, as she thrusts one side forward, then the next, pirouetting all the while.

And we find ourselves humming along with Susannah, even though we cannot hear the sound she makes. For it is the same as we would sing, when we used to come here. For yes, we used to come here for just the same reason as Susannah – to see ourselves in that pool. Thinking we would be unseen by others (except for those trees), thinking of it as a private place, somewhere to revel in our beauty and our bodies. As we were then. Before. Lucky, like Susannah, to have made it thus far, unscathed, unblemished, in all ways.

And that is why we watch Susannah, reminding us, as she does, of how we used to be. But are no longer.

Seeing her dancing reflection, Susannah's smile turns into a laugh.

Ah. A laugh. A long, rippling burst of merriment. A sound we barely recognise any more. There is so little to be happy about, there is so little time for laughter, with all the work we have to do, with the weather, with... everything. It is a pleasant sound, one we wish we could hear more of. Such is life, some would say.

Susannah has stopped her dancing, now, as she steps forward, ready for what is next. Her arms are stilled and lowered, poised to clutch herself, because she knows the water will be cold, even with the sun doing its best to rise above the topmost branches to warm it. Or peeping through, to look, in its turn.

And now she is in the water, little squeaks coming from her, to begin with, from the cold, but then, these turning to more laughter, as she splashes about, splashes herself. Splashes her face, those breasts, below her arms, between her legs, as if she is washing – which she is... another useful function of the pool. Laughing all the while.

So much laughter that we laugh, too! We have not forgotten, after all! True, our breath gasps, and our mouths are unused to spreading in that way, for screaming requires different muscles. But, yes, we laugh in some fashion. Laugh, and laugh ... until Susannah disappears beneath the surface entirely.

We are not alarmed. For this is what we did, wanting the water to lave all over us, ruffling our skin, before entering each and every crevice, cleansing; then lifting our feet off the bottom of the pool, so that we felt weightless, as we moved through it... seeing another world, forgetting the world we had left behind.

What alarms us is our thought. 'Don't come back up!' Mary and I both mouth together, then look at each other in dismay. Is that what we think? Is that what we would like to tell her, if she could hear? Do we truly want her to end her life in this moment of happiness – caught in a shaft of sunlight, illuminating her in the deep, lost in a reverie of freedom and bliss?

Now. Today. Before tomorrow, when all will change.

Tomorrow is the day set for Susannah's wedding.

Susannah is to marry Mr Wilbur Fielding. Mr Fielding is older than the older Susannah, and looks much the same. Susannah is to be Mr Fielding's third wife, the other two having died of hard work in all manner of weather. Of falling pregnant again and again, and giving birth without aid, being torn asunder; of grief from losing those children who survive womb and birthing. Lack of joy.

This is what happens here. An 'old' wife must be replaced, so that her work can be continued. Work in the house, the fields, the bedroom. For no matter how many children die, more must be procured. So that they can work, too.

Susannah, having only just arrived here, having recently been 'sent for' to join her parents, thinks this marriage is not such a bad thing. Mr Fielding, after all, has a good roof over his head, and owns a sizeable tract of fertile land, which is more than most who have settled here. More than her parents, whose 'home' is no more than a shack, that has already blown away twice since her arrival. And the land they own is swamp – hence her mother's looks, she is inclined to think, charitably.

Foolish Susannah. But we cannot blame or mock her for her folly, for we were the same. Like her, we thought such a match was to be welcomed, as we were welcomed, we believed, in our vanity, when the men came calling within weeks of our joining our families – the farmers, homesteaders, outbackers; widowers, all. Coveted for our youth and beauty, a perfect catch, an adornment for their desirable abodes; not understanding that the welcome was just as they gave to a new, strong horse or cow, good breeders all, or a wagon, even, fit and ready to do service, in place of those that had failed.

True, I knew my proposed husband, Mr. Lawrence, had been married three times before. And true, his previous wives had all died. But I, of course, thought I was different, and that it would be different for me.

And Mary's 'beau' had been widowed only the once – hasty re-marriage was a common enough occurrence in the Motherland, why should it be other, here? Yes,

there was talk of his ways among the servants, but servants talk should never be heeded, should it?

‘Should we tell Susannah?’ That is what Mary and I have been thinking, ever since we heard news of this latest marriage.

Should we tell her *now*, for, of course, she rises from the pool (and yes, we must be glad of that, mustn’t we?). And she will lie down, on the velvet sward of the clearing, to dry herself in the sun, before pulling her shift back on, and her cap, before heading back home to preparation and celebration, just as we did on our wedding eve.

Should we show her what has happened to us? Our hands... hands are the books of our lives, it has been said. The story ours tell is not a pretty one. ‘Hard Work in a Cruel Clime’ would be its title. The calloused cushions of flesh, the nails gnawed as a fretful child’s, knuckles like the ends of a marrow bone, the skin, peeled bark from the oldest Oak in an English forest. Our hair – no need to capture it under a cap, any more.

Our faces.... We are glad there are no mirrors, now.

Spines bent, ankles swollen, knees... so much to show!

And... should Mary show her back, the welts and bruises hidden there? For, indeed, the servants talk was true.

‘Do you think...?’ Mary asks.

‘It would be for the best,’ I reply.

‘For her sake,’ we say together.

‘Surely...’

‘Yes?’

We are looking at the girl through the trees.

Lizzie her name is.

We are waiting for her to take off her hat and her dress, to look at her perfect self in the pool – as we know she will do.

As we have done. Before.

Mary, Susannah and me.