School of Media, Creative Arts, and Social Inquiry

Witch Reoch

and

‘She had No Power of Her Tongue’: Re-writing the Trial of Elspeth Reoch

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature: Date: 16/10/2020

Abstract

This thesis utilises creative practice as a research methodology to explore the historical figure, Elspeth Reoch, an accused witch tried in Orkney, Scotland, in the year 1616. It consists of an exegesis titled '*She had No Power of her Tongue': Re-writing the trial of Elspeth Reoch*, and a work of fiction: *Witch Reoch*.

Elspeth Reoch confessed to meeting two fairy men by a loch-side when she was twelve years old. These men gave Elspeth a ritual for the second sight. Two years later, after Elspeth had given birth to an illegitimate child at the age of fourteen, one of these fairy men visited her again. He stayed by her bedside for two nights, relentlessly trying to convince her to lie with him. On the third night, he awakened Elspeth by placing his hand upon her breast and thereafter lay with her. The next morning, Elspeth 'had no power of her tongue, nor could not speak'.

Like most of the textual traces we have concerning the seventeenth-century female peasantry, a predominantly illiterate group, the voices of the accused women that speak in witch trial documents have been obscured by the hands of the learned men recording them. Elspeth's words have been filtered, edited, and interrupted by the court officials who elicited them from her. In my exegesis, using a variety of methods drawn from contemporary scholars of witchcraft, I have conducted a close reading of Elspeth's trial that searches for and privileges Elspeth's voice, in order to ascertain what kinds of experiences may underlie her testimony. This research informed my creative piece, a work of historiographic metafiction, which considers the problems of retrieving Elspeth's past. This novel does not attempt to deliver any concrete answers to Elspeth's complex history. Rather, it aims to imbue Elspeth with voice and life, while paradoxically proposing that Elspeth, as a subject, is almost entirely unknowable.

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Map of the Orkney Islands, 1638

Fig. 1. Hondius, Hendrik. *Orcadum et Shetlandiae insularum accuratissima descriptio*, 1638. National Library of Scotland. https://maps.nls.uk/counties/rec/7146. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland, under Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) licence.

WITCH REOCH

Glossary

The following definitions have been taken from the online *Dictionary of the Scots Language*.

Anent With respect or reference to; in regard or relation to; concerning, about.

Art and part Used to denote participation in crime.

Assize A jury.

Bannock A flat round cake, usually of barley, oat, or pease meal, and baked on a girdle or 'back'.

Bere Barley.

Box-bed An enclosed bed.

Branks A form of bridle with wooden sidepieces.

Burn A brook or stream.

Coffer A box or chest.

Cordiner Shoemaker.

Dempster The officer of a court who pronounced doom or sentence definitively as directed by the clerk or judge.

Dittay A statement of the charge or charges against an accused person; an indictment.

Dome A judgement formally pronounced; a judicial decision or sentence.

Flesh The meat of an animal, as an article of food.

Flit To convey, remove, or shift (a person or thing) from one place to another.

Green sickness Denoting a specifically female sickness. i.e. period pain.

Hanting To frequent (a person's company).

Heiding Beheading.

Kindly Native, belonging by birth or origin: native-born, true-born, rightful (ruler, subject, etc.).

Kist A chest: a large box or trunk used for the safe-keeping of things.

Lockman A public executioner, a hangman.

Mare Nightmare.

Mercat Market.

Millefole Achillea millefolium, commonly known as yarrow.

Oye A call used, esp. by an officer or crier, to attract attention before making a public announcement.

Remit To refer (a matter) for consideration.

Sundry Various, diverse, (many) different.

Tackman An official responsible for collecting rent and other payment.

Wag A name applied in Caithness to the remains of iron-age houses, both circular and oblong, somewhat sunken in the ground and built of massive drystone masonry with internal stone pillars for roof-support.

Ward (A place of) custody, confinement or imprisonment.

PROLOGUE

February 15, 1616

Pale light streamed down the alley, rippling over the wet stones. Elspeth sat, with her back against the wall, halfway down the lane. She tried to take hold of the silver on the cobbles, but every time she reached for it, a shadow appeared over the place she wanted to touch. She moved her hand faster, darting her arm forward and back, trying to beat her shadow, but suddenly, the silver river she was on drained away, and she was in darkness. Five officers in arms stood at the head of the alley, casting long shadows. Elspeth knew then that they were not satisfied with one witch. She wondered if Jonet had said her name. She may have even screamed it. Then, Elspeth was thinking about hot iron and her flesh being peeled away, and her dress being peeled away, and all the things that would happen to her inside the Palace of the Yards. She scrambled up and skidded back from the officers. Their boots slapped over the ground behind her, but she was moving quickly, quick enough to outrun her shadow; her foot fell into a pool of silver as she reached the end of the lane. She slipped out from the line of houses and found herself moving towards more silver: the silver of the bay. She slid into the water, running out until she was up to her neck, not really knowing why; only that it was cold and that the officers might not go in after her, or that she might die by the time they did. She did not die. She was dragged out of the water by one of the officers, who pulled at her skirt like a fishing net. She flailed, but her hands slid off him, weak as water.

I

LOCHABER

April 1613

Elspeth trudged through the heather, from croft house to croft house. Strangers passed her every now and then, but she did not look at them. Mud cracked on her cheeks and her lips cracked around her teeth. There was blood inside her mouth from where she had bitten down on her tongue to keep herself awake; to keep herself walking.

As Elspeth neared the next house, a shadow stepped beside her and said, 'Are you alright, lass?'

Elspeth glanced up. It was a woman, carrying corn at her back.

Elspeth nodded and lowered her eyes again. She slowed, trying to lose the woman.

'Where are you headed?'

Elspeth hesitated before answering, 'Allane McKeldow's house.'

'Well, you're going the wrong way. He is back by the loch. Do you know the loch?'

Elspeth stopped. 'Back there?'

The woman nodded.

Pain pressed through Elspeth's heels. She swayed.

The woman took hold of Elspeth's arm. 'How do you know Allane?' she asked. 'What business have you with him?'

Elspeth said that she had something to deliver him.

The woman frowned and said that it looked like Elspeth had been travelling a long way with whatever it was. 'You can give it me,' she said, 'and I can have it to Allane upon the morn.'

Elspeth shook her head.

'Don't worry—I am his sister-in-law. I promise, I will have it to him safely. What is it? Is it in that sack?'

Elspeth pulled her sack behind her legs. 'Sister-in-law?' she asked. She wished she could lie down on the grass.

'Yes, his wife's sister,' said the woman. 'Katherine.'

'Katherine,' Elspeth repeated. 'Yes, my father mentioned he had another sister here, but I could not remember your name.'

'Who are you?'

‘I am Elspeth Reoch, daughter to Donald Reoch.’

‘God’s cause,’ said Katherine. ‘What are you doing here? What on earth have you for Allane?’

‘Nothing,’ Elspeth sighed. ‘I don’t have anything for him. I have come looking for a place to live. I have nowhere else to go,’ she said, her voice high and unfamiliar.

‘Come,’ said Katherine. ‘You won’t make it to Allane’s. Stay at mine. Allane will be around in the morn; he will see you then.’

Elspeth followed the woman gladly. Her aunt’s arm never left hers.

Her *aunt*, she thought. This woman had grown up with her father, had seen him small. What was he like then? She looked many years older than him. She must be able to remember him small.

Elspeth’s aunt told her to take a seat by the hearth. She fell onto one of the stools, looked across the flames, and saw the outline of a young woman inside them. She thought it was her own shadow, but then realised that the darkness was behind the fire, not in it, and that there was a young woman sitting across from her.

The young woman frowned, looked up at Katherine, and asked, ‘Who is this?’

Katherine put her basket of corn down and said, ‘It is my niece—she has come seeking Allane.’

Elspeth gripped onto the sides of the stool. She felt, suddenly, as though the stool had lifted off the ground and was teetering, side to side, every time she shifted her weight.

Katherine handed Elspeth a mug and, carefully, Elspeth lifted one hand from the stool and took it. The ale gurgled at the base of her stomach.

‘Do you have any bread?’ Elspeth asked.

She found her balance, lifted her other hand off the stool, and took a bannock out of the basket her aunt held out for her. She ate without taking a breath.

Katherine sat beside Elspeth and said, nodding over the fire, ‘This is my granddaughter, Marion. She has been living with me for a year now. She is much help around the croft. My husband died two years since, and I have needed all the help I can get. Your uncle, Allane, comes around every Thursday to help too. He is a kind man, Allane. He will take you in without a thought.’

The young woman, Marion, was looking down at her lap. The fire was very high. Elspeth could not see if she had anything in it.

‘My son, Marion’s father, could not keep her anymore,’ Katherine continued. ‘She is one of thirteen bairns. How many siblings do you have? I have not heard a thing of your father since he left at, well, he would have been around twenty. How is he, Donald? And your mother?’

‘He has been dead around three years,’ said Elspeth. ‘My mother four.’

‘Three years!’ said Katherine. ‘And your mother... Who is in charge of the house?’

‘My brother, Henry.’

‘You will be good for Allane,’ said Katherine. She spoke about how lonely Allane had been since his two sons left Lochaber. Allane missed them terribly. ‘It would be good,’ she said, ‘for him to have kin around the house.’

The heat of the fire licked Elspeth’s bones, making them soft. She wilted in her chair, her arms falling limp over her lap, as the woman continued to talk about Allane. Elspeth’s eyes closed, and she began to envision the kind of man he would be. She could not quite see an image, but she could feel a warm tightness spreading over her legs, pressing her firmly into the floor once again. That meant that her uncle would make sure she was settled in his house: that he would not let her float up with the fire smoke and disappear through the hole in the roof. He would keep her. Elspeth, soothed, fell asleep.

I

Elspeth woke to the sound of a low, humming voice. She was lying on her side, facing a damp wall. She turned. Light filtered through a thin box-bed curtain. Dark against the cloth, was the outline of the young woman, Marion. She was lying on her back, staring at the roof.

‘How long have I been asleep?’ Elspeth asked. ‘Is that my uncle talking?’

Marion nodded.

‘Are you getting up?’

‘Not yet,’ said Marion. ‘You go out, though.’ She nodded towards the curtain. ‘I am not feeling well.’ The girl sat up weakly. The two of them crawled around each other until Marion was lying in Elspeth’s place, and Elspeth was sat in hers.

Marion folded her hands over the blanket on her stomach and closed her eyes.

Elspeth opened the curtain, stepped out, and found herself looking at her uncle. The curtain brushed past her back as Marion closed it again.

Her uncle was sat by the fire, next to her aunt. He smiled. ‘Elspeth, is it?’

She nodded.

‘How old are you?’

Elspeth thought for a moment. She settled on the number twelve.

Her uncle turned to Katherine. ‘Agnes will not like it.’

‘No,’ agreed Katherine.

Her uncle sighed and said to Elspeth, ‘Think you can manage a mile walk?’

She nodded.

He looked down at Elspeth’s feet. It was impossible to tell what was dried mud and what was dried blood.

He nodded and stood.

Elspeth looked back at the box-bed curtain. She thought about opening it back up and saying goodbye to the young woman but didn’t.

Her uncle asked no more questions. Elspeth was glad, for she needed to concentrate on walking. She had the urge to grab her uncle’s hand, which swung close beside her, but she did not know why; perhaps because she felt so unsteady. She wrapped her fingers around her forearms, both to hold herself up and to stop herself from reaching for her uncle.

As they neared what Elspeth hoped was her uncle’s house, they passed a black cow. The creature stared at Elspeth. She was relieved when her uncle took hold of the rope about its neck, for that meant that it must be his, and so must be the house. With his other hand, he took hold of Elspeth’s elbow and walked both her and the cow towards the barn. He tied the cow up inside and then turned to Elspeth, who stood close to the creature, in its warmth. He crouched down, looked into Elspeth’s eyes, and told her that his wife, Agnes, would not be happy that she was there, and that, if she was to have any hope of not being turned out, she was to be still and quiet; to hold herself up straight and do anything Agnes asked of her. Elspeth nodded, and her uncle guided her back out of the barn, towards the house.

A woman was standing in the middle of the house, stirring a pot over the fire. She glanced up and narrowed her eyes at Elspeth, who stood behind her uncle in the doorway.

‘What now, Allane?’ said the woman. ‘Who is this? I’m not taking in any more beggar women.’

‘This is our niece,’ he said. ‘Donald’s daughter. Can you not see the likeness?’

The woman narrowed her eyes. ‘No, I can’t.’

‘She has come looking for somewhere to stay.’

‘All the way from Caithness?’

‘Aye.’

‘Step forward, lass,’ said her aunt. ‘What brings you here?’

Elspeth shuffled around her uncle and said that her family could no longer afford her and had sent her away.

‘Donald sent you?’

Elspeth shook her head and told the woman that Donald was dead.

‘How long?’

‘About three years since.’

Her aunt began chewing on the nail of her third finger. ‘How?’ she asked, speaking over her hand.

‘Sweating sickness.’

She pulled her fingers away. The nail she had been chewing caught on her woollen skirt. ‘You do look *a little* like him,’ she said. ‘But you can’t stay here.’ She turned back to the pot. ‘Stay with Katherine.’

‘Katherine can’t keep her, Agnes,’ said Elspeth’s uncle. ‘We already sent Marion to her.’

‘Because she was idle,’ said Agnes, turning to Elspeth. ‘Are you?’

Elspeth shook her head. ‘I am a good worker—I promise.’

‘That’s what Marion said.’

‘I promise,’ Elspeth repeated. ‘I will work for my lodging, harder than any servant.’

‘You are skinny,’ said Agnes.

‘I don’t eat very much. But I’m strong.’

Elspeth wanted nothing more than to sink down and go to sleep, but she walked over to where her aunt was stirring and took the spoon from her.

Her aunt stepped back as Elspeth took over.

‘Make sure you scrape at the sides,’ she said, wiping the sweat on her cheeks and forehead over her hair. She stepped into the draft filtering through the open door.

‘You can stay for now,’ she sighed. ‘But if I catch you being idle, you’ll have to find work elsewhere.’

Elspeth kept stirring until her aunt asked her to stop.

Agnes dished out a bowl of porridge, handed it to Elspeth, and told her to sit and eat.

Elspeth looked at the chairs surrounding the fire. Her uncle’s coat was draped over the back of the only armchair, marking it as his. The rest were low stools. Perhaps her aunt’s seat was the one beside her husband’s, or maybe her aunt did not like sitting close to him; maybe she liked the furthest stool away. As Elspeth stood there, deciding which of the four stools would be hers, her aunt brushed past with a bowl and sat in the one next to her husband’s chair. Sighing, Elspeth took the seat furthest away from her aunt, across from her uncle. Its legs had ground deep into the earth floor, as she hoped her footprints would, over many years, inside the house.

Her aunt did not look or speak to Elspeth as she ate.

Both Elspeth and her aunt were scraping the sides of their bowls by the time Allane came in and dished himself a bowl.

He fell into his chair, smiling at Elspeth. ‘Good porridge,’ he said, before he had eaten any. ‘Well stirred.’ He asked Elspeth if her siblings were well.

Elspeth replied that they were.

‘How many of you are there?’

‘Three. Me, my brother, and my sister.’

‘Seems Agnes could only have two bairns,’ said her uncle, between mouthfuls.

Agnes stood, taking Elspeth’s bowl.

‘I will wash them,’ said Elspeth.

‘No,’ said Agnes, ‘you can walk to the loch and fetch us some water.’

‘She’s done enough walking, Agnes,’ said Elspeth’s uncle. ‘Look at her—she’s not fit for it.’

‘I am,’ Elspeth lied. ‘I’ll go.’

Agnes nodded to the pail by the door. ‘Off you go, then.’

Elspeth stood.

‘Careful of the fairies,’ said her uncle.

‘What fairy?’ Elspeth paused.

‘The ones that frequent the loch,’ he said. ‘I’m surprised none approached you when you passed by the first time. They are known to carry away pretty young girls like you, wandering alone at the loch-side.’

Elspeth shivered. ‘Shouldn’t someone go with me then?’

Her uncle smiled and said that she had nothing to fear. ‘It is still early, and there will be several others at the loch at this time. You won’t be alone.’

This did not reassure Elspeth, who looked over her shoulder with every few steps she took towards the loch. The cuts on her feet were leaking over the ground. She hoped the fairies would not follow her trail. What did her blood smell like? Would they be able to tell it belonged to a young girl? Her uncle had called her ‘pretty’, but she could still feel mud cracking on her cheeks.

There were several boats on the loch, and she was glad. There was a group of women too, washing their clothes at the shore. A few of them looked over at her. She shuffled towards the edge of the water, crouched down, and washed her face. Mud dripped off her nose and chin. She looked over her shoulder. The women were still staring. She looked for her cousin Marion among them but could not see her. She wondered if Marion was friends with them.

She dried her face on her skirt and filled up her pail.

She did not want to tarry too long, frightened of being the last one left at the loch, so she washed her feet quickly, rubbing dirt from the open cuts and sores. She stayed there, with her feet in the water, just long enough for her toes to numb. Then she stepped out, picked up her pail, and, without glancing around, hurried back through the trees.

‘See any fairy?’ her uncle asked when she stepped into the house.

She shook her head.

He took the pail from her and poured it into the pot over the fire. ‘Good. That’s good,’ he said, his arms trembling with the weight of the pail. His hands were long and thin. He smiled at her again as he placed the bucket on the floor. She liked his teeth. They were small and neat, not like her brother, Henry’s. His arms weren’t like Henry’s either. She did not think he had ever struck his wife or bairns; and she had not seen a whip or bridle in the barn he could use to beat anyone with. She was sure that her aunt had stepped beside her for a reason the day before and that she was always meant to

find her uncle. No man had ever smiled at her so much or looked at her so long. She pressed her heels into the ground, squeezing some of the blood from them. She stepped back. She had made two dents in the earth floor, her blood at their centre. She was a part of the house now.

By the time Elspeth had washed the spoons and bowls from dinner, she could hardly see. Her uncle said behind her, 'Go to bed,' but she still needed to empty the washing pail. She couldn't lift it. A hand settled on her arm: her uncle's hand. He guided her towards an empty box-bed. The curtain opened, and she climbed in.

II

Elspeth sat up, the woollen blankets clinging to her arms. She couldn't see her legs before her. She sensed a wall to her right and open space to her left, but they were in the wrong places. She usually slept with the wall at her left. She reached for her niece, Chrissie, needing to feel something warm and alive, but her hand fell through the air and onto empty sheets. 'Chrissie?' she breathed, reaching further and further across the bed—her fingers met a wall. She felt all around her now—wall, wall, wall, roof, curtain—she grasped it and ripped it open.

Yellow light hugged the sides of pots and baskets, rippled over the dust on the counter, and glistened on the drying bodies of the fish over the fire—and there was her uncle, sitting in his armchair. He turned his eyes towards her and gave her a small smile. 'Not a mare, is it, Elspeth?' he asked.

She shook her head.

'Good, come out and sit with me if you can't sleep,' he said.

She couldn't open her throat enough to answer, so she shook her head again and closed the curtain, making sure there were no gaps between the material and the wall.

She lay back down, panting. It must be early still, she thought, though she felt as though she had been asleep three nights. She tucked the woollen blankets under her chin and wondered if they had been washed since her aunt and uncle's sons left the house. Elspeth envisioned the sons inside her box-bed. They looked like her brother, Henry. They were curled away from each other, leaving a small gap between them for Elspeth. But then she remembered her aunt saying that the young woman, Marion, had

been there recently. She tried to squeeze Marion's form in between her and the two brothers. Marion only just fit. The blankets smelt of old sweat and grease. Elspeth was sure it was the two sons she was smelling, and not Marion. She could not remember Marion smelling like that when she had woken beside her the previous morning. She must not have stayed there long enough to have left any of herself in the house, and Elspeth was glad of it. The two sons, though, would have spent a lot of time in the box-bed. They would have been sickly in there, perhaps even close to death. They would not have thought that, after they had left it, Elspeth would be using it after them.

III

Her aunt did not greet her as she stepped out of bed the next morning. She hardly glanced up from the dough she was stretching. With no orders, Elspeth decided to do as she normally would. She swept the ashes from the fire into an empty bucket, and, once she was finished, scattered them over the soil. Then, she stoked and built up the fire again. Her aunt continued to knead. Elspeth thought, I must keep working; if I stop for even a moment, Agnes will tell me I must leave.

Elspeth took up a pail and walked out to the barn. She stroked the cow as she told it her name, her father's name, and her siblings' names. It listened intently, never turning away or interrupting her. Once she felt that the cow was comfortable, she placed the bucket below it and started milking. The cow rewarded her with much milk. When the cow was empty, Elspeth rubbed the place where the rope had cut into its neck and kissed it. She told it that they would be good friends and would get along with each other very well.

Elspeth's uncle walked into the barn as she was readying to leave. He told Elspeth that he had been to see his sister-in-law that morning to let Katherine know how she was getting on. 'I am glad to see you,' he said. 'You have more colour in your cheeks. Did you get back to sleep alright?'

Elspeth nodded.

Her uncle leaned towards her, confidingly. 'To tell you the truth lass,' he whispered, '*I* usually sleep in that box-bed, and last night was the first night in some time that I have slept beside Agnes.'

Elspeth warmed. She wondered why he was telling her this. She realised that the sheets must really smell of her uncle, then, and not the two boys, and that the space between their ghost bodies had already been filled by him; there was no space for her, or Marion, after all. Perhaps that was why Marion had to leave. Elspeth was sorry she had forced her uncle to sleep where he did not like to. She figured that he did not like to, because of the way he said *Agnes* with a snarl. It was not hard to see why he might dislike Agnes. Elspeth thought, suddenly, that she hoped her uncle liked *her,* though. Perhaps, she could make his life in the house happier. She could be a comfort to him; she could be someone he liked to talk to; someone to distract him from his cold wife.

That night, Elspeth lay in bed, listening to her aunt walking about the house and her uncle shifting in his armchair. Eventually, Elspeth heard Agnes mumble something to her husband followed by the rustling of a hay mattress and the pull of a curtain. Elspeth's uncle stayed in his chair. She waited for him to follow his wife into bed, but he did not move. She decided to try and sleep, though she was aware of the thinness of her bed curtain: the only thing separating her from her uncle. She longed for a wall, something solid in front of her, but she did not know why.

She closed her eyes, desperate for sleep, desperate to get her strength up so she would be able to concentrate on her tasks tomorrow, but her box-bed was filled with the sound of her uncle's chair, the wood sighing, nails protesting, his fingers drumming, his lips smacking, his breath deep and hoarse. She clenched her woollen blanket. She needed to please her aunt tomorrow. She needed to *sleep, sleep, sleep*. Why wasn't her uncle going to bed? Did he dislike Agnes that much? He was pacing now, back and forth, across the house. She thought she could hear him mumbling to himself, but she could not imagine her smiling uncle doing such a thing: stalking and muttering like a mad person. It was like he had transformed into something else.

On and on went the strange sounds until, eventually, Elspeth heard the whisper of his box-bed curtain and his sigh as he lay down beside his wife.

Elspeth peeked out from the curtain, making sure he really was in bed. He was. She lay there for the most part of an hour, waiting for him to fall asleep. Then, Elspeth crept out of bed and towards the ale barrel, shivering. The smell of the ale made her stomach turn. She gulped it down. There was a sound from her aunt and uncle's bed. Her uncle's round, wet eye, shone through the gap in the curtain. Elspeth almost dropped the mug. Her uncle reached out his hand and beckoned Elspeth closer.

She edged towards him.

‘Can I have one, Elspeth?’ he asked.

Elspeth, chilled, nodded and fetched him a mug.

He took a small sip, patted her hand, and told her she was a good lass.

IV

It was her fault that her uncle was so reluctant to crawl into bed beside Agnes; she had stolen his bed away from him. She knew what it was, to sleep next to someone you loathed, to hate every stroke of their breath on your cheek. She used to be able to taste her brother’s breath as he panted into her mouth. She thought about offering one side of her bed to her uncle, but that wouldn’t be right. She had never slept in the same bed as her father.

Her uncle sat up late every night. For the most part, he was still, but every now and then some spasm would move through him, making him jolt in his chair, as though something was moving inside him; as though some spirit had found an opening through his vacant eyes and was now trembling under his skin; trying to get him to move, to kick, to what? What did they want him to do? Sometimes his fingers drummed on the arm of the chair. Sometimes he got up and paced. He looked peculiar, moving around the house in the dark with the fire catching in his eyes and hair. He sometimes stayed up until dawn. Before he went to bed, he would take off his jacket and drape it over his chair, and then he would turn reluctantly towards the box-bed he shared with Agnes. Sometimes he hesitated, his hand hovering over the curtain. Seeing him pause sent another wave of guilt through Elspeth, but at the same time, she willed him, please, please, go to sleep so I might go to sleep too. Sometimes he would think better of it and turn back to his chair. The wood protested as he collapsed back into it, and Elspeth felt the shriek of the hinges like a slice through her breast, and she too wanted to shriek. Sometimes she thought he was looking at her, and not the fire, but it was not possible. Elspeth had studied her bed throughout the day, in every light and weather, and at no time could she see through the wool. Even so, when readying for sleep, she closed the curtain securely and undressed facing the wall.

V

Elspeth had fallen asleep in kirk every Sunday since she arrived. The minister talked slow and long, never looking up from his book. Agnes pinched her awake every time her head fell and asked Elspeth what was wrong with her?

Elspeth spent the rest of the sermon chewing on her tongue, as she had done on her journey to her uncle's house. She wondered if she had made the right decision in coming there.

After the sermon, Elspeth sometimes spoke to Marion, though Elspeth's uncle did not like to spend too long outside the kirk and often dragged Elspeth away.

VI

During the day, the churn handle bent and twisted. The cow's udders felt like liquid in her hands, and she could not grip them properly. Agnes scolded her often and called her a feeble beast, and Elspeth cried most nights as she lay listening to her uncle move, wishing that the tears crawling down her cheeks and into her ears would seal her eyes and ears shut so that she might sleep.

Elspeth was afraid to eat too much of her aunt's food. At dinner, if Elspeth reached for an extra bannock, her aunt would say, 'I thought you did not eat very much.' Then, her aunt would take the bannock out of Elspeth's hand and shove it into her own mouth. Elspeth's uncle often slipped a bannock to Elspeth under the table, and Elspeth took it gratefully, putting it in her apron pocket for later.

VII

One day, Elspeth's uncle found her crying into the cow's side in the barn. He sat beside Elspeth on the bench and put his arms around her. Elspeth stiffened at first, and then melted into his side, and he wrapped both arms tightly around her. It felt so nice and warm to be held there: to feel a heart beating beside her ear, to feel her tears soaking into her uncle's shirt, to smell the dirt on him.

'What's the matter?' he asked.

'I'm sorry,' she sniffed. 'I am only tired. I have not been sleeping well.'

'I'm not keeping you awake, am I?' he asked.

She shook her head. ‘No,’ she lied. She was only missing her brother and sister.

Her uncle nodded and said, ‘It must be difficult for you. When I first married Agnes and moved away from my brothers, I felt very lonely. I thought I loved Agnes, but she was very sullen and angry after our first month together, and I realised that I did not know her at all.’

Elspeth shrunk. She thought that she should not be hearing this: that if Agnes knew that her husband was speaking this way about her with Elspeth, she really would throw her out.

‘Agnes is a cruel, cruel lady,’ he said, ‘and we should run away from her together.’

Elspeth wished they could. Then she thought, if Agnes were not there, she and her uncle would each have a box-bed to themselves. Then they would sleep peacefully, and they might actually be happy, but she pushed this thought away almost as soon as it came. She did not let herself dwell on how it might be done: how her aunt might be gotten rid of—a charm perhaps—no she could not think of it; would not. But what a peaceful house it would become, and she and her uncle would be so very happy alone.

Elspeth shivered when her uncle pulled away as cold air rushed to the places he had warmed.

She wanted him to put his arms around her again. Her uncle told her that she was a good lass, and that all would be well. Then, he stood and walked out the barn, and Elspeth wrapped her arms around the cow to stop the aching in her chest. Her father had never held her like that.

VIII

Afterwards, Elspeth’s head ached, and she felt like a fool. She did not like that her uncle had seen her like that, and that she had let him put his arms around her. She spent the next few days wound tight. She attached herself to Agnes so she could avoid being alone with her uncle, but this irritated Agnes, and Elspeth spent those nights wiping her eyes in her box-bed because she was so sure Agnes would send her away.

A couple of days later, Elspeth’s uncle came up to Elspeth and asked how she was and if she had been sleeping better? No man had ever asked her how she was before, and the question almost made her weep again.

‘I’m well,’ she said, ‘and I am.’

‘I’m glad,’ he replied, and she was sorry she had ignored him.

IX

Elspeth carried a basket of clothes to the loch. The wind pushed her hair and skirts forward, towards the rippling water. There were no boats upon it and no women washing clothes at the shore. She was alone. She paused, wondering if she should go back or hide in the trees until someone else came, but the fairies might find her even there, and Agnes would rebuke her if she came in with a dry basket.

She knelt beside the loch, took a breath, and plunged the first sheet into the water. The hair on her arms stood up, and her teeth chattered. She looked over her shoulder often, mistaking the stroke of the wind for the stroke of a hand. She scrubbed as fast as she could, determined, now, not to look up until her task was complete.

There was a nagging heaviness at her back. She moved onto the next sheet.

A twig snapped, close behind her. She glanced once again over her shoulder.

Two trees had broken away from the rest and were now walking towards her. No, they were not trees; they were men. One was dressed in black and the other in green tartan plaid. They moved like mirror images until one stepped in front of the other, and for a moment it seemed as though the two men had merged into one being, until the man behind stepped out beside his friend once more. Elspeth turned away and hunched over her washing, coiling herself tight. She was not sure if the men were real or not. She thought, if she squeezed her muscles tight enough, she might never feel the men at her back, might never hear a word from them; that she would get through all her washing and would look again behind her to find that there was no one there at all, and never had been. But it was not to be. A shadow fell over her lap, and a voice, high above her head, greeted her. Elspeth curled even further over her washing, but the man repeated his greeting and crouched beside her. She did not look at him.

‘You’re a pretty one,’ he said. ‘Your uncle must love having you around, hey lass?’

She could not move.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked.

‘Elspeth,’ she croaked, glancing at him.

It was the man dressed in green. The one in black was but a shadow behind him.

'You know my uncle?' she asked.

'Aye,' said the man, 'we know him. We came to tell you that a relative of yours is in trouble.'

'I'm not sure about this,' said the black-clad man behind his friend. 'She will not keep counsel.'

'Ah now, look at her, that's a trustworthy face. Say, you can keep counsel, can't you, lass?'

'Let's go,' repeated the man.

The man in plaid sighed and stood. 'What's gotten into you?'

'She'll talk,' the black-clad man whispered.

The plaid man waved him away. 'I will warrant her,' he said, kneeling back down beside Elspeth.

'Who's in trouble?' Elspeth asked.

'Just over that hill,' said the man in green, nodding, 'lives an aunt of your own, who is a widow.'

The men were telling her what she already knew, but she did not stop them.

'She has a granddaughter staying with her, who is with child to another wife's husband, unknown to any, not even the young woman herself. She is in much trouble.'

Marion, thought Elspeth; it was not possible. How could she be with child? She was not a loose woman. She went to kirk every Sunday, and she did not work in a bawdy house. 'How do you know that?' asked Elspeth.

'By the second sight,' he said.

Elspeth's chest tightened. This was it, then; they had found her. 'You are fairy?'

'That we are,' the man in plaid smiled.

'Which means,' said the man clad in black, 'that you mustn't tell anyone about us or about how you know about the young woman. And if you do not keep quiet, we'll make you quiet.'

Elspeth swallowed. 'Why tell *me*? What can I do? I cannot help her.'

'You *can*,' said the plaid man, gently. 'Of course, you can. You can go to her and tell her—look in her face and tell her she is with bairn to another wife's husband.'

'How can she not know?'

‘It is early. If you tell her now, she may find a way to be rid of it before it is grown.’

‘But you must keep counsel,’ repeated the man in black.

‘But what should I say, if she asks me how I know it?’

‘Tell her you have the second sight.’

The loch was lapping at Elspeth’s knees, but she hardly noticed. ‘But,’ said Elspeth, ‘what if she asks me how I *got* the second sight?’

‘Tell her you got it by a charm.’

‘Is that possible?’

‘Of course,’ said the man.

‘Can you learn it me?’ asked Elspeth.

The man frowned, and Elspeth became frightened that she had asked them too much. They had done her a favour, chosen *her* to help the young woman, but fairies always asked for something in return.

‘I don’t know now, lass. You haven’t yet proven that we can trust you.’

‘You can,’ Elspeth insisted, suddenly afraid that they would leave without giving it to her, or that they might give up on her altogether and strike her dumb. Think of what she could do with the second sight, what she would know: about her uncle, her aunt, the people at kirk. She might even have the power to drive her aunt from the house.

‘If you promise us you will go to the young woman, and never tell a soul you saw us and what we have told you, then we will give you the second sight.’

‘I promise,’ said Elspeth. ‘How can I know it?’

‘Well,’ said the man, ‘you take an egg and roast it, and take the sweat of it three Sundays, and with unwashed hands, wash your eyes, whereby you should know and see anything you would desire.’

The man clad in black told his friend that they should get going. He kept looking over his shoulder.

The man in plaid nodded and stepped back.

‘Will I see you again?’ Elspeth asked.

The man clad in black said, ‘Aye, if you talk about us to anyone, I’ll make sure of it, lass; I’ll find you, and I’ll make you sorry that you did.’

Then the man in plaid led his friend away.

As soon as they stepped into the forest, their shadows stretched out long, and Elspeth could not tell them apart from the trees.

Elspeth abandoned her washing. She scooped the dripping garments into the basket and walked home, her sodden skirt clinging to her legs. She marched straight to the front wall and began draping the sheets over it, her arms trembling. Yellow stains frowned at her. She tried to rub them out, but only pressed the sheet into the moss on the stone, turning the stains green. She pulled it off the wall and began scraping at it with her nails.

A weight fell onto her shoulder and she jumped, nearly dropping the cloth. She gathered it up in her arms and pressed it into her bodice. Damp spread across her chest. She shivered.

'What's the matter, lass?' her uncle asked.

Elspeth shook her head. 'Nothing.'

She turned back to the wall and draped the sheet over it, smoothing out the creases.

'You look guilty of some sin. What is troubling you?' Her uncle leaned against the wall beside her. 'Confess.'

Elspeth flushed.

'Come now, lass, I won't tell anyone.'

She turned away from him and grabbed another sheet out of the basket.

'I won't tell anyone about those men that were with you at the loch-side.'

She dropped the sheet.

'What men were those anyway?' asked her uncle. 'What did they say to ye?'

'I cannot tell you,' croaked Elspeth. 'They will hurt me; they will make me dumb if I do.'

'I forbid you to fear, lass, for they are friends of mine. I will make sure they do you no hurt.'

The men had told her that they knew her uncle. But how could he be friends with fairy men?

'I know what they said to you,' he said. 'They will not hurt you for telling me what I already know.'

Elspeth hesitated. She had known there was something strange about her uncle, this night-time man. Perhaps, when he paced at night, he was walking in another world;

and when he stared at the fire, he was seeing some other place: a place between heaven and earth. Maybe, when he mumbled to himself, he was really communicating with his friends, clad in plaid and black.

'Come now,' said her uncle. 'I want to hear all they said to you. If you do not, I will have to guess what you were doing with them and why you might keep it a secret from me. And I should tell Agnes, too. What might she think? What might a pretty young lass want to meet two men in secret for?'

Elspeth thought about her sister, Margaret: about her secret meetings with a man behind their house. Margaret's face had turned red when she noticed Elspeth watching them. She had pulled away quickly. It must have been bad, what they were doing.

'They told me that Marion is with bairn to another wife's husband,' said Elspeth, the words falling off her tongue.

'What else did they tell ye?' he asked.

'They said they were fairy men.'

Her uncle waited.

'They said I was pretty.'

'Did they now. Did they touch you lass?'

Elspeth shook her head, her eyes wet.

'Did you let them touch you?'

She shook her head faster.

'You think Agnes will believe that, lass? What choice would she have, but to throw you from the house? What will the people at kirk think?'

'But I didn't do anything,' she cried.

Her uncle gripped her shoulders. 'Did they say anything else to you, lass?'

She was silent.

He began praying to God to forgive her lies.

Elspeth couldn't stand his words: fast, frantic, stumbling on and on. 'They learned me how to get the second sight,' she started.

Her uncle paused, and his grip eased a little.

She was not breaking her promise to the men, she assured herself. She was only telling her uncle what he already knew.

‘They told me to take an egg and roast it, and take the sweat of it three Sundays, and with unwashed hands, wash my eyes, whereby I should know and see anything I would desire.’

‘Anything else?’ her uncle asked, his hands sliding down her arms.

She shook her head.

‘It hurts my feelings, Elspeth, that you might keep these things from me. Do you not trust me?’

She did not move.

‘I will not tell Agnes about this.’

‘Thank you,’ she breathed.

‘But never speak to those men again, do you hear me? And you must not tell anyone what they told you—it is dangerous, lass. Fit to ruin the whole family’s repute, understand?’

Elspeth nodded; she thought she did understand.

‘I will never forgive you if you do,’ he said. ‘I will no longer be your friend.’

Elspeth nodded. Yes, yes, she understood; she wished he would let her go.

‘That’s a good lass,’ he said, trailing his hand over the drying cloth. His fingers seized on a spot Elspeth had not cleaned properly. He rubbed it, gripped it in his fist, looked as though he might tear the stain from the material altogether, but suddenly released it and walked away.

X

Elspeth’s uncle did not speak to her for a week after he had scolded her, and Elspeth knew it was because she had hurt his feelings. She did not want him to think that she did not trust him. He had been kind to her, and she did not want him to stop being so.

She thought about Marion often. When she was churning, she wondered if Marion was also. When she was bent over a milking pail, she wondered if Marion were doing the same, and if so, how she could not feel her swelling stomach.

Sin was growing inside Marion’s belly and she did not know it. Elspeth felt a terrible urge to go and tell her. She wondered how Marion had gotten it, and suddenly, Elspeth was back in Caithness, walking around the side of her house. She turned the corner and saw her sister, Margaret, leaning on the back wall, with James Moodie

pressed close to her. Marion took Elspeth's sister's place in her mind, and James Moodie's face darkened until he no longer looked like James at all. He looked more like the man clad in black who Elspeth had met at the loch; but his hands were the same as James's, with their long fingers and deep lines filled with soil, smearing on the waistline of Marion's dress. Marion made low noises in her throat, and Elspeth thought the man was hurting her. Elspeth ran up to them and pulled Marion away, but Marion shoved Elspeth onto the ground. Then Marion leaned over Elspeth, but the voice that came out of her mouth was Elspeth's sister's. 'If you tell anyone, I'll kill you.'

Elspeth ran back into the house.

Her mother asked her why she was crying.

Elspeth shook her head and pressed her lips together, determined not to say a thing, lest it be the wrong thing.

Her mother frowned and walked out the door, her eyes down, following Elspeth's footsteps in the mud. Elspeth heard her trudge around the back of the house. Then she heard her mother yelling and Margaret screeching back, and Elspeth knew then that Margaret had done something wrong—very wrong—and that Margaret would think that Elspeth had told their mother about it. A man's voice mumbled low, like he was trying to soothe a spooked horse. Whether he was trying to calm Margaret or their mother—or both—Elspeth did not know, but his voice soon trailed away, and her mother's was the last voice she heard. Margaret came in crying. She skulked past Elspeth on the way to her box-bed and shoved her to the side, so hard that Elspeth fell into the pot hanging above the fire and scalded her elbow. Elspeth punished that burn. She scratched at it for weeks, never letting it heal. She took comfort in the bruise of blood that spread over her dress sleeve, for she deserved it: if she had not come in crying, her sister would still love her. The man never came back, and Margaret married a man named Robert Black three months later. Margaret was sullen the whole wedding day.

Elspeth's mother told her that if she had not come in crying that day, Margaret would have been in very big trouble. She might have gotten with bairn. She told Elspeth that she should never hesitate to speak about such things, and she must not punish herself for it; Margaret did not know it yet, but Elspeth had helped her.

XI

Agnes baked two bread loaves, one for them and one for her sister, Katherine. Elspeth offered to take it to Katherine right away, as she was ahead with her tasks, but Agnes replied that her husband would take it to them in a couple of days.

'But,' said Elspeth, 'when I spoke to Marion and Katherine at kirk, they said they were desperate for bread, having given most of theirs to a passing beggar.'

Agnes frowned and said that her sister would soon be a beggar herself. 'Fine,' she conceded. 'Take it to them, but do not tarry.'

Elspeth wrapped the bread in cloth, put it into a basket, and set off for Katherine's house. She thought about the last time she had walked up to her aunt's house—the wind forcing her skirts between her legs, the heather cutting into her ankles—and how close to death she must have been. Now she was strong, fed, and had been visited by the fairy folk, who had given her the chance to help her kinswoman.

Elspeth saw Marion in the distance. She was walking up to the house too, but from the other direction. Marion paused and placed the pails she was holding on the ground. Water spilled over the sides, turning the soil into mud. Marion bent over her legs as though she might be sick. She breathed heavily for a few moments before straightening and lifting the pails again with a grunt. Elspeth ran up to her, calling her name. When she reached Marion, she gripped onto one of the buckets, but Marion scowled and pulled away, splashing water over both their skirts.

'Let me,' said Elspeth.

Marion sighed and let her take it. 'What are you doing here?' she asked as they walked up to the house.

Elspeth nodded at the basket in her other hand and said that she was bringing them bread.

'We have plenty left,' said Marion.

'My uncle may not be able to come in a few days,' Elspeth replied, 'so we are bringing it now.'

Elspeth and Marion placed the pails beside the door inside. Marion stumbled back as she straightened and walked unsteadily to the bench by the fire. She looked frail. A sudden thought came to Elspeth: Marion did not have long in this world. Elspeth knew how women so often traded their lives for their newborn bairn's. Marion already looked like she had one foot in the in-between.

Marion asked Elspeth if she wanted any ale.

Elspeth said that she did.

Marion fetched a mug and held it out with a trembling hand.

‘Marion,’ said Elspeth, ‘you are not well.’

‘It was a long walk to the burn,’ Marion said, sitting, ‘and the water was very heavy—I’m tired is all.’

‘I don’t think you should walk it anymore,’ said Elspeth.

She said she was fine.

‘But you do not understand. I know something about you. You should not strain yourself, for you might die of it.’

‘What are you talking about?’

Elspeth hesitated. ‘I will tell you,’ she said. ‘But only if you promise not to tell anyone what I have said.’

Marion frowned. ‘I promise—tell me.’

‘Especially my uncle,’ Elspeth added.

‘What is this about?’

‘You are with child to another wife’s husband,’ said Elspeth.

‘I am not.’

‘You are,’ Elspeth insisted. ‘You just don’t know it yet.’

‘But *you* do?’

‘Yes, I have the second sight.’

Marion scoffed.

‘It is true.’

She called Elspeth a liar and told her to get out of her grandmother’s house. She looked like she wanted to stand but could not. ‘Get out,’ she yelled.

Elspeth stepped back. ‘I am trying to help—’

‘Get out—get out—you are not welcome here.’

Marion’s voice drove Elspeth out the door and followed her down the hill, ringing through the heather. ‘You will repent this,’ she cursed. ‘In a short space, you will repent this.’

XII

For the next few days, every time Elspeth looked at the door, it filled with the shape of her aunt Katherine, demanding to speak with Elspeth's uncle about what Elspeth had said to Marion. The words, *you will repent this*, echoed in Elspeth's mind. It was as though Marion was in the house: pacing, repeating it over and over, while thinking on the tortures she had in store for Elspeth. She needed Marion to take it back, this curse of hers. Now Marion had flung the words into the world, they had to go somewhere, and she was afraid of what they would become.

When her uncle came back from Katherine's house, Elspeth thought that she would hear the words again, this time from her uncle's mouth as soon as he stepped through the door, but he greeted Elspeth with a smile and went about his evening as usual: talking softly over dinner and pacing across the house at night, towards and away from Elspeth's bed.

She needed to speak to Marion at kirk. If she could just explain herself, she could make Marion see that she only meant to help; that she was someone she could confide in; someone to trust, not hate. Maybe then, Marion would take back her curse.

XIII

The folk were stirring outside the kirk. There was a beggar woman, darting through the crowd. The beggars on the church wall were usually quiet, sitting with their heads down and an empty sack before them; but this woman—her eyes wide and frantic—was flitting from person to person, pulling them close while she asked if they had any coin, any coin at all to spare.

Elspeth wondered why she was only using one arm to pinch and tug at the people, but then she saw that the woman was cradling a bundle in her other arm. The bundle cried, suddenly. It was a bairn. Some folk behind Elspeth were talking. It was a man and a woman, but Elspeth did not look to see who. The beggar's eyes were large, bulging above her sunken cheeks. She looked to be almost forty, but the people behind Elspeth said she was only twenty and unmarried.

'What a shame,' they tutted. It was so very sad. It was not the lass's fault her mother never taught her how to keep her skirts down—God rest her soul.

The crowd surged around the woman like a brown river. Suddenly, two bellowing men cut through the people, waving sticks above their heads. ‘Get away—get away,’ they yelled.

Elspeth looked for Marion in the crowd but could not see her.

‘Get away.’ The men swiped at the woman with their sticks.

She cowered, hunching over her blue child, and attempted, with her free hand, to bat back at them, but the branches cut into her forearm. She started away from the crowd. The men followed her, driving her out, as the folk began to pour into the church. The townspeople cast hard, deliberate glances at the beggars beside the door, who were only a few Sundays away, surely, from becoming as desperate as the woman was.

After kirk, Elspeth felt a small, timid nail poke the back of her shoulder. She turned. Marion’s eyes were wide. She pulled Elspeth to the edge of the crowd and asked her, low and quick, for something, *anything*, to get rid of her bairn. Elspeth’s breath caught. What did she mean? It was unthinkable.

Elspeth told her that she did not know how to get rid of bairns.

Marion said, ‘You do, you *do*; you just won’t tell me.’

‘I don’t,’ Elspeth replied.

‘But you said you had the second sight. You have the power to do it. You must give it me. I have coin,’ she said, putting her hand in her pocket, but she drew nothing out.

Elspeth caught her uncle’s eye in the crowd outside the kirk. He was looking at her and Marion closely.

‘Alright,’ said Elspeth, stepping away. ‘Alright, I will make a cure for you.’

‘When will it be ready?’

‘I shall come to you,’ said Elspeth, ‘when it is.’

‘But how long? I will start to show,’ said Marion.

Elspeth felt sick at the thought of Marion’s rounded belly, sticking out from her skirt.

‘Two Sundays from now,’ said Elspeth, stepping past Marion and back towards her uncle.

Marion gripped Elspeth’s arm. Tears beaded in her lashes. ‘I’ll be big by then. I’ll be thrown from the house.’

‘You won’t,’ said Elspeth.

Her uncle had begun walking towards them. ‘I will visit you two Sundays from now,’ Elspeth whispered.

Marion followed the direction of Elspeth’s eyes, noticed Allane, and nodded.

Elspeth scampered up to her uncle. He put a heavy hand on her shoulder and told her it was time to go.

Back at the croft, Elspeth’s uncle asked her what Marion and she had been speaking about.

Elspeth said, ‘Marion had only come to ask me how I was liking living with you.’

‘And what did you say?’ her uncle asked.

‘I said I liked it very much.’

Her uncle rubbed her back and said that he was liking it too, but he did not smile. He knew she was lying.

For the rest of the day, Elspeth walked in and out of the food cupboard much more than she needed to. The eggs winked at her in the fading light. Elspeth wondered what she would tell Marion in two Sundays. She could admit that she was lying, that she did not really have the second sight, but then Marion would hate her forever and double the curse that she had already placed on her. Or, Elspeth could reach for an egg that night and in two Sundays Elspeth would know how to help her, and she could spend the rest of her life praying for forgiveness, and God would surely forgive her, if she did it to help a kinswoman. What choice did she have?

No matter what happened, the bairn would die. It would either die inside Marion from some magic cure, blue on top of some hill overnight, or in Marion’s numb arms next to the other beggars outside kirk. And if the bairn would die anyway, the least Elspeth could do was save Marion. For, if the bairn did not still in Marion’s belly, or on top of some hill, both it and Marion would die of hunger and cold. Elspeth imagined how Marion’s face would settle into the same limp expression all the beggars wore; how she might scratch and scramble with a whimpering bairn in her arms like the beggar outside of the kirk that day. To let both of them die like that would be a double murder, as opposed to one. She had been given the opportunity to save one life; wouldn’t it be the greater sin not to take it? They were fairy men that had given her

the egg ritual, not demons; and they were friends of her uncle. That is why they had called on her: to save one of her uncle's kin.

Elspeth could erase the thing she had brought to life in Marion the moment she said *you are with bairn* out loud. Marion would be in debt to her, then, and she would take away her curse. She may even be able to help others once she had the second sight. She could even make money from it by selling cures and prophecies; enough money for her and her uncle to run away on, like he said they would.

XIV

Elspeth lay awake, trembling, counting the seconds between each screech of her uncle's chair. He retired while it was still dark, and when she emerged from her box-bed, she found that the fire was burning low, and there was a faint glow on all the surfaces of the house. The eggs in the pantry, though, shone more than anything else. They seemed to be floating in their dull basket. Elspeth drifted towards them, reaching out. The shadow of her hand curled over the eggs. She took the largest one and cradled it softly in her hands. It was warm. Its glow seemed to come from within, rather than from the dying fire.

Elspeth, balancing the egg in one hand, took the poker off the wall, and walked over to the fire. She felt exposed, standing in the middle of the house. She circled around the fire until her back was towards her aunt and uncle's bed. She heard someone cough behind her, and, startled, her hand clenched over the egg. Her fingers sunk into the shell and warm liquid oozed onto her palm. It was not clear and yellow like it usually was, no; it was red. She dropped the egg in alarm and flung the congealed blood off her fingers. Some of it landed in the fire and the flames burst up, releasing the smell of burning flesh. Elspeth leant over the cracked egg on the floor. Red veins reached over the yellow yolk, which was circled by thick blood. Elspeth thought she could see an eye, like another small egg, floating inside the yolk, its middle black, its outer translucent. She swallowed down sick. There was a small beak, like a fingernail, skimming over the bloodied yolk. Something moved behind her. Her uncle was leaning over her, also staring at the egg. She shivered when she saw his eyes. She had caught them at the moment before they flickered into life. He blinked, and once again, light seeped into them. She had to look away. Unthinkingly, she began to scratch at the earth floor, trying to bury the dead thing, but the packed flecks of earth only floated over the

yolk. Was that a claw she could see, or an eggshell? She swallowed hard. Her uncle grasped her shoulder and she jumped, cupping her hand over her mouth to stop from screaming. He didn't say anything, only crouched beside her and gathered up the egg. Blood slid down his wrists. He stood and walked outside. Elspeth darted a look at her aunt and uncle's box-bed. Her uncle had closed the curtain. She could not hear her aunt moving behind it. Her uncle walked back through the door and inched it closed.

Elspeth held her breath. He would know what she was trying to do. She waited for him to scold her. But he only asked, 'Have you ever roasted an egg?'

'Once,' croaked Elspeth.

'It's a difficult business. Come, I will help you.'

Elspeth watched in wonder as he walked into the pantry and plucked out another egg. She wanted to ask him if the one he held would also have life in it, but she couldn't; she couldn't speak. She felt if she did speak, this dream would cave into itself like the egg, and she would wake both herself and her uncle, who seemed to be in a similar trance to Elspeth. His thin fingers moved over the egg. He asked Elspeth to take it from him. She held out her palms, and he dropped it inside. The egg felt as warm as the other, and this made Elspeth even more frightened that it had life in it. Her uncle walked over to the fire and picked up the poker. Why was he helping her?

He stuck the poker into the fire, and suddenly, she wanted to fling the egg away. It had become real. Soon, her uncle would stick the poker into the egg. She could say something; she could still stop it. What would she see when she had the second sight? As she stood there thinking, her uncle kept moving, quickly and smoothly. The poker glowed orange. He pulled it out of the fire and asked Elspeth if she wanted to do it.

Elspeth shook her head.

'Here,' he said, taking the egg from her. He held it up and pressed the poker slowly through the bottom of its shell. Some yolk oozed out, hardening on the poker. Elspeth imagined a half-formed life writhing inside. She thought of her uncle, driving a hot poker into Marion's belly, cracking it open, and the unborn creature flopping out if it. Elspeth wondered if the ritual wouldn't work if there was life in the egg. She wondered if it would only work if there was.

Her uncle held the egg inside the fire. The flames stroked it, leaving black lines over the shell. He kept it there until the egg began to scream. Then he lifted the poker out.

'What was next?' he whispered.

He knew then, thought Elspeth. He remembered what she had told him and what this egg was for: he knew it was not for her to eat, and still he was helping her. He had roasted the egg so easily, she began to think that he had, perhaps, done this before.

She could not speak, but she did not need to; he already knew what to do. He walked over to the bench and grabbed a cloth. He wrapped it over his hand to protect his skin and twisted the egg from the poker.

He told her to go to bed, and she did. She sat up, waiting for him. He walked over to her and handed her the egg. Elspeth rubbed her palms over it until they glistened with grease. Then Elspeth scoured her lids, the corners of her eyes, and her lashes.

Her uncle told her not to open her eyes again; she must keep them closed until morning. Then, he pressed her shoulders down onto the bed and brushed her hair away from her ear. She longed to push the hair back over her ear; it felt so open and naked now, but she could not move. His hand trailed from her head, down her neck, and over her shoulder. He took the egg from her, and she reached back out for it, blindly. He whispered that he would store it somewhere safe for her until the next Sunday; somewhere Agnes would not find it. She only had to concentrate on keeping her eyes closed or the ointment wouldn't work. Elspeth nodded and relaxed back down. She lay there for a long time, wishing for sleep to fold over her. She had never found it so difficult to keep her eyes closed. She needed to fall asleep; she was afraid that the slightest sound would startle her into opening her eyes and the ointment would not work.

Her uncle paced, his boots thudding over the earth. Elspeth could sense him, moving towards and away from her bed, towards and away. Then there was a change in the sound. The thudding became a light tapping as though, whatever was moving behind her curtain, was not her uncle anymore. They were light, porous, creeping patiently. Her curtain rustled. She fought the urge to open her eyes. It was a test; she must keep them closed. Cold air wafted over her face as someone, or something, dragged open her curtain. She sat up, alarmed, 'Uncle?' A hand pressed over her mouth. It must have been a hand, because she could feel all its cold wet fingers, the thumb and fore finger pinching her nose, the others sticking to her lips.

A weight fell over her legs. 'If you scream, I will kill you.'

Elspeth stilled, hoping the creature would ease its hold over her mouth and nose, but it didn't. It would kill her anyway. Her head swam. She couldn't suck in any air between its fingers. The hand lifted from her mouth and pulled her shift up over her head. She froze from the shock of the air on her skin. The hand pressed once again over her mouth, pushing the material of the shift against her tongue. She gagged but tried not to make a sound. The other hand seized both her wrists and clamped them above her head. The creature was cold. She readied herself for pain, not knowing where it would be or how it would be done, but knowing it was coming, and it did, sharply, tearing through her abdomen, burning where her secret parts were. Her shift clung to her cheeks. She was crying out the ointment that had brought this thing to her, that had let it in to her bed, to her secret parts. A wet mouth panted over her cheek. Its spit mixed with her tears, binding her shift with her skin.

The weight lifted from her and she was once again alone in the bed. Blindly, she pulled her shift back over her chest. The wet material that had been over her face clung to her thighs.

Her legs throbbed. She thought that she must have wet herself in her fright. She moved away from the patch on the mattress, squeezing and squeezing her eyes, knowing she could not look to see what the dampness was. She pressed her arms into her breasts, her stomach, her legs, trying to rub away the cold the creature had left. She lay on her back, aching, drifting in and out of sleep. She thought, at several points in the night, that the thing had come back to hurt her some more: to touch her, to make her his. She wished away the wet on her mattress, on the straw, on her shift. It didn't happen, it didn't happen; it was a mare, only a mare.

XV

Cold light swam around her head. She heard her aunt moving around the fire. Morning had come. It was safe now, surely, to open her eyes, but she did not want to. She wanted to stay, lying there, in the dark, forever. She squinted. The roof of her box-bed looked the same as usual. She sat up, aching. She leaned over her legs, clutching her stomach. She had not wet herself. It was blood. It was on her bed clothes and shift. She knew what those red marks meant. She knew what they looked for on the marriage bed. She knew she was no longer pure. She had been visited and made someone else's; someone cold, someone of the Devil.

She dressed, choosing to ignore the blood on her shift and bed. It would turn brown, soon, and she would convince herself it was mud.

No Aunt, I will not have breakfast—I have too much to do.

No, I will not sit.

No, I am not ill.

She went outside. The air on her skin felt like the creature clinging to her still. It had happened. There, in the soil, was the half-formed creature from the egg her uncle had flung in the dirt.

It was her fault. Hadn't this been what she had wanted?

Elspeth's uncle came up to her that morning and said, 'Don't you say anything about last night. If Agnes were to know she would be very angry with you, and she would turn you out. Do you understand?'

Elspeth wanted to say, *but you helped me*, but knew that if Agnes found out, she would be the one in trouble and not her uncle. Elspeth only nodded and kept on with her tasks. She wanted to get as far away from him as possible. She wondered if he had seen the creature entering her bed: if he knew she was impure now. What they had done with the egg must have been very bad, to conjure up such a spirit.

She walked above the ground that whole day, her head following behind her body, watching, numb, as the new Elspeth went about her work.

The pain continued for that day and the next, and Elspeth found more spots of blood on her skirt. The creature had hurt her. She was scared that she was dying. She did not have much hope of entering heaven if she did.

Her uncle ignored her for five days afterward. Elspeth wondered if he regretted helping her with the ritual. Would he give her the egg again on the next Sunday? She did not know if she wanted him to or not.

XVI

The day before kirk, her uncle began to talk to her again. He was sitting by the fire and told Elspeth to sweep up the ashes. She had done it that morning. She did not know why he wanted it done again; there were not so many ashes in there, but she bent down at his feet to scrape them out, feeling his eyes, warmer than the fire, on her body. She had a strange feeling that he might be able to see through her clothing, and she had the urge to cover her chest with her arms.

'You're getting taller,' said her uncle.

She blushed. She was not sure if she was taller, but she was growing in other ways. Her bodice was becoming tighter and tighter, pressing painfully on her chest, and she was afraid that her uncle could see it. She thought of her sister, Margaret: of the shadows that grew underneath her shift when she was Elspeth's age, and of James Moodie touching those growing places behind their house when she thought no one was looking.

Elspeth dreamt that her uncle climbed into her box-bed and wrapped his arms around her. She felt his heart next to hers and the warmth of him. She was glad when her uncle's chair screamed her awake.

In kirk, Elspeth could not help but think of what she had dreamt, thinking that it meant that that was what she wanted: that she wanted to be like her sister, Margaret, touched behind the house; that she had wanted the thing to use her; that she had let it.

Marion did not speak to Elspeth at kirk. She only looked at her questioningly from across the room, and Elspeth nodded.

That night, Elspeth's uncle skulked over to her bed, timidly pulling the sheet back. He was trembling. He did not say anything, only reached out his hand. The egg rolled in his palm. Elspeth began to cry; she did not want to feel the pain again. She did not take the egg. He whispered that if she did not complete the ritual, she would lose her sight altogether: both natural and acquired. As Elspeth cried, she could feel the sight disappearing from her already; her vision was blurring, and her uncle was becoming thinner and thinner.

XVII

Elspeth woke with black marks all over her shift, her stomach, her breasts, and her hips. She moaned, turning onto her side and hugging her knees. She felt as though there was a hot band wrapped around her abdomen. The heat of it travelled down between her thighs, and her skin was swollen and tender. She slid out of her box-bed and reached for the bucket beneath it. There was an alarming wetness between her thighs, and she thought she had reached for it too late. She looked over her shoulder, pulling the back of her shift towards her; a circle of blood crawled across the linen. Hay stuck to the wet patch. She opened her box-bed curtain further. Blood had sunk into the centre of her mattress. She was reminded of the pale egg spewing out thick red blood. Her head spun. She crouched down and emptied the contents of her stomach into the bucket. The smell of what was already in there made her heave even more.

Elspeth had seen the same pattern of blood on the back of her mother's shift.

Elspeth had cried out when she saw it. Her mother had cried out too, as she bent over in pain behind the bench in their house. There was blood dripping down her ankles, but most of it was on her skirt.

Elspeth's father said that it was her mother's sin which had killed her, and that the thing that fell out of her behind the bench was the Devil's bairn and not his, which is why it had come out red and dead. It was a monstrous bairn. Her father threw it into the fire. 'Like the fire awaiting your mother,' he said, before she was yet dead. She was still moaning in her box-bed. Margaret was leaning over her, with blood on her hands.

That same sinful blood was on Elspeth now. Elspeth lifted her skirt to see if there was a bairn beneath it too, but there was not. What if, as she went about her tasks, one was to suddenly fall out of her? Who was the father of Marion's child? Was it the Devil's too? Would it soon fall out of her, red and dead?

Elspeth reasoned that, if there was no bairn, then the blood must be her soul, and that the blood on her mother had been her soul too and the bairn's along with it—that's why there had been so much.

Elspeth stood there, not knowing what to do, feeling the blood between her thighs thickening. Dazed, she left the bucket there, out in the open, and crawled into her box-bed. She lay down, the skin across her stomach tender as she stretched out. Her mother had looked grey and hot. She touched her forehead and upper lip. They

were slick with sweat. She began to shiver. Her mother had been doing that too. Why had her mother sought out the Devil? Did she send the Devil to Elspeth? Had she tried with Margaret, only to find her too pious? Elspeth had fallen for it, and it would kill her. She would die for her sins because her body, like her mother's, was not strong enough to continue without a soul. Oh, the blood; she did not think it was stopping. She saw her mother's bairn again, the white fluid on its head like eggshell sinking into blood. She curled over, thinking she might be sick again. She caught a glimpse of her aunt and uncle's bed. How long would it take for her to die? Would they wake before it happened? What would her aunt do if she saw her like this? Would her uncle weep for her? She couldn't picture his face, even though she had seen it last night. It kept moving in her mind, morphing, turning, flickering dark to light, his eyes bright then dead. She was sick again.

She sat up from the pail, picked up the bucket, and emptied it outside. There she was, standing small behind the house, the wind cooling the blood on the back of her shift, blowing it onto her legs. The pail twitched in her hands.

She went inside, took off her shift, and put on her dress. She felt between her legs. She was still slick. She wiped herself with her shift; it came away with a clot of blood. She folded the material and hurried out the door, clutching the cloth to her chest as she walked to the loch.

She didn't think about it; she stepped straight into the icy water. Her ankles were swollen. She sunk onto her knees, shivering uncontrollably. She needed to cool herself. Her mother had gotten too hot and she had died. It was the Devil's fire, burning inside her.

She wept as she scrubbed and scrubbed the cloth, thinking: my mother had felt this scared when she was dying, and I had done nothing.

Her father had stood there, telling them all to keep away from their mother, because she needed to pay the price for her sins.

Margaret hadn't listened. She had stroked their mother's head while Elspeth stood in the corner and cried.

Elspeth had no one to stroke her head. She found herself wishing that the two fairy men would come up behind her and embrace her.

Splinters of ice swam over her hands and clung to the bloated material. She pressed the shift under, squeezing the air trapped inside it. She scoured the cloth, not

much caring if it ripped. She knew that if she failed to remove the mark, she would have to look at it every morning and night. She would have to sleep with the rust coloured material wrapped between her legs. She would have to bathe in it. Blood would wash off of her skin but would never leave her shift. She thought about how, in the space to come, she would fret that someone would see it: that her aunt might catch it as Elspeth dressed, that a gust of wind might whip up her dress, revealing her sin, or that it might be visible through the stitches of her skirt. Elspeth thought about all the dresses she had ever worn, all the dresses she had sewn for herself, her mother, her sister, all the patches she had placed on her father's shirts. She thought about the colour of her shift: how it had turned from white to yellow, and then she thought about stains and how much she did not want to see a red mark on her shift. Realising her scrubbing was no use, she moved her hand onto herself, scratching her forearm until it sprouted blood. Then, she cradled her arm and sobbed bitterly. She did not know how long she sat there for, before wringing out her shift and turning back to her uncle's house.

Elspeth's kin had not yet woken. She needed to find somewhere to hang her shift. She caught herself staring at her uncle's coat, draped over his chair. Elspeth pinched the stain on her shift. Brown rubbed onto her skin. She stepped up to her uncle's coat, repulsed by the damp, animal smell of it. She lifted her shift by the shoulders. If she lay it over his plaid, the blood would surely drip onto the green wool, and transfer some of the stain to him. It was a vision pleasing to Elspeth: blood crawling over the back of her uncle's plaid like a fresh wound. Then he too would walk around marked. Why should she be the only one to bear a stain? Elspeth lowered the dress. The plaid leaked through the material around the stain.

Later, before Elspeth's aunt and uncle woke, a fog was lifted from Elspeth. It was as though the cloth that had covered her face the night before had only just been taken away. She took her dripping shift off her uncle's coat. Darkness crawled over the plaid in the shape of Elspeth's dress and, bleeding in the centre, was a thin rust-coloured stain. Elspeth tried to rub it away, but it clung to the plaid. She pushed the chair closer to the fire and thought, I should burn my uncle's coat. This thought almost made her laugh; I *should* burn it. The cloth was settling back over her eyes, her breath hot beneath it. She ripped it off once more; no, you can't. She stepped away from the chair,

terrified of herself. She hoped that, once the material was dry, no one would be able to notice the stain.

XVIII

That Sunday, Elspeth sat beside her aunt and uncle in kirk, listening to the minister read from his Bible. His voice, which used to put her to sleep, now woke her. She couldn't settle into the pew. She could feel something rising inside her; her body no longer belonged there, and it knew it. A hearth burned behind the minister, lighting up his eyes and cheek bones. She couldn't move under that stare. Her uncle also looked uncomfortable; they both knew he didn't belong there either.

'Will I see you tomorrow?' Marion whispered to her after the sermon.

Elspeth nodded, her stomach sinking.

XIX

Elspeth climbed into bed and pushed all the hay in her mattress to the edges of her box-bed, so it bulged in a rectangle around her. Then, Elspeth did the same with her blankets, arranging them around the edge of her bed, making sure there were no gaps between the wool. As long as the rectangle was closed, she would be protected against the spirit.

Her uncle handed her the egg as usual. She lay down, the oil of it swirling around her eyes. She prayed she would not have to wash her shift in the morning; prayed that what she saw when she opened her eyes would be better than before, would be worth the loss of her soul.

She must have broken the circle, for the weight fell over her again. She ate her shift, silent and numb. He told her she was pretty that night. His voice sounded like the fairy man's from the loch. *You are a pretty one aren't ye?* She thought she might have opened her eyes when he was upon her. She thought she saw him. She thought she saw a man clad in black. It was him, thought Elspeth. The black-clad fairy man had come to her again, as he had sworn to do if she spoke of him. She had, to her uncle. That was the first test, she thought, and she had failed. And her uncle—he was in on it. He

was letting him, his friend, into her bed. Her uncle had let the fairy hurt her because she had disobeyed him too: she had told Marion.

She hung her shift to dry inside her bed the next morning and walked into the barn with a milking pail. The cow looked at her pitifully with its large, watery eyes. It saw in her a kinswoman: another soulless creature. Her bleeding had stopped; she had emptied out completely. She touched the creature's side. How was it so warm still, without a soul? Elspeth touched her own side; the flesh there was thicker than before, expanding like dough. She was cold.

She sat down on the milking stool. Everything twisted before her. She blinked the tears from her eyes. She was sure she could taste some of the egg ointment in them. She wept into her skirt and tried to squeeze the oil out; she did not want it anymore. She didn't feel much different. She only felt lighter: no longer weighed down by the heaviness of her soul. Her secret pressed on her tongue. She wanted to run away from her uncle's house. She did not care if she died of cold, or hunger, or where she went. She crumpled her skirt, rubbing the tears and oil away. Marion was expecting her today, and Elspeth had nothing for her.

She walked out into the field, waiting for some plant or herb to reveal itself inside her new eyes but everything blurred, and she could not feel the ground below her. Marion would curse her again. Did curses work on the soulless?

XX

Elspeth envisioned Marion twitching, pacing, looking over the hills, thinking it was Elspeth approaching, only to see that it was a neighbour once they grew closer. She wouldn't have slept, not on Sunday night, nor the one after. Elspeth did not know if this was her new eyes opening, or just a waking dream.

Then it was Elspeth, peering at shadows on the hills to see if it was Marion. She heard Marion behind her constantly, pleading, 'Please help me.'

Sometimes, the vision of Marion was so real that Elspeth spoke back to it.

When the real Marion did approach, she didn't believe it. It was only when Marion took hold of Elspeth's wrist and demanded, 'Where is my cure?' that Elspeth looked at her properly.

'You said you would come days ago,' said Marion, tightening her grip.

‘I tried,’ stumbled Elspeth. ‘I did. But there is nothing that can be done.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Marion. She pulled Elspeth closer. ‘You said you could help me.’

‘I thought I could,’ said Elspeth. ‘I want to, but I cannot.’

Marion’s lips parted, and Elspeth was afraid more curses would stream from them.

‘You must go to someone else,’ said Elspeth.

‘*Who*?’ Marion spat. ‘*You* have the second sight; *you* tell me who I should go to.’

‘There is another,’ said Elspeth, looking over her shoulder.

‘Who?’

‘Will you take back your curse? I’m sorry—I thought I could help—don’t make me repent it, please.’

Marion twisted Elspeth’s arm. ‘Just tell me who.’

‘My uncle,’ said Elspeth. ‘He is friends with fairy men. He has skill. He can help you.’

Marion let go, and Elspeth rubbed her skin.

‘You will repent this,’ said Marion, turning.

Elspeth started after her. ‘That’s how I got the sight,’ said Elspeth. ‘He helped me. He is kind. He will help you.’

Marion kept walking.

‘He already knows,’ said Elspeth.

Marion paused. ‘How?’

‘I tell you he has the second sight—he knew it before I. He will want to help you—you’re kin.’

Marion’s eyes watered. ‘Where is he?’

‘I don’t know. We can find him together,’ implored Elspeth.

‘You will come with me?’ asked Marion. Her hands were limp and trembling at her sides. She gripped her skirt.

Elspeth thought she could see, then, the rounded outline of what lay beneath; it might already be too late. Elspeth’s stomach heaved as she thought about how big the bairn might already be, and of it coming out red and dead, and Marion dying with it. And once again, Elspeth did not know if this was a thought, or if it was the second sight, pulsing more frequently into her eyes, lying on top of everything.

As the two women walked to find Elspeth's uncle, Elspeth secretly prayed that he was not at the house. Elspeth tried to think of him smiling as he pulled some herb from his pocket that would solve everything. She thought of him telling Elspeth that she had done the right thing: that she had saved the family from disgrace. Elspeth hoped that she was seeing their futures. But when they did find him out in the field, and he stabbed his shovel in the ground and looked at them with cold eyes, Elspeth no longer thought that it would be. She felt the urge to grab Marion and tell her they should leave. Marion must have felt the coldness of their uncle's eyes too, for her steps slowed. Elspeth gripped Marion's hand. It felt like a wet, trembling bird, its little heart beating furiously.

'Marion,' said Elspeth's uncle. He jerked his lips into a smile, and now Elspeth's hands were sweating as well.

'What's the matter with you two?' said her uncle.

He must know, Elspeth thought, why they were there. He must have seen it before; he must have known, all along, what would happen. When he had warned Elspeth about the fairies at the loch, he must have known even then that she would meet them. And when he had made her promise that she wouldn't tell Marion, he must have known that she would anyway.

Marion was pale and still.

Elspeth would have to be the one to speak. 'Uncle,' Elspeth began. 'Please, we need your help. Marion is in trouble.'

'What kind of trouble?'

But he knew what kind of trouble, why was he making her say it out loud?

'You know,' said Elspeth.

Her uncle waited for her to go on.

'She's—with bairn.'

Her uncle frowned and glanced at Marion.

'And what's that have to do with me?'

Marion tugged on Elspeth's skirt. 'Let's go,' she whispered.

Elspeth ignored her. 'Can you give us a cure that might slay the bairn?'

'Why would I give you such a thing?'

'To help a kins—'

'You would ask *me* to sin, to conceal someone else's?'

Elspeth looked down.

‘Well I will not, not even for kin. Marion has brought this upon herself. Do not listen to what she has told you, Elspeth,’ he said. Her uncle crouched down and took hold of Elspeth’s arms. ‘Do not listen when she tells you that this will ruin the family. The only ruin that should fall will be on her own head. She should suffer for it, no one else.’

Elspeth felt weak.

Her uncle darted a look over Elspeth’s shoulder.

Marion was flitting down the hill. Her movements were awkward. There was something restricting her. Her neck—there was something around it: a dirtied rope.

Elspeth started towards her.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ said her uncle, holding her back.

‘How many people have you told?’ he said.

‘None. I didn’t even tell Marion,’ Elspeth promised, but he knew already that she had. ‘She came to me herself, asking for help,’ she continued weakly.

‘Does Katherine know?’

‘I don’t think so.’

Elspeth looked behind her. The rope was gone from Marion. She was smaller now but running faster without a noose around her neck.

‘What did you think you were doing?’ her uncle shook her. ‘Letting such a woman—trying to help in *that* way—it is unthinkable. Do you understand what she was asking? You are never to speak to Marion again,’ he ordered. ‘She will pay for her sins, do not let her drag you into it.’ He released her then, with a firm push backwards. Then he took up his shovel, and Elspeth thought for a moment that he might strike her with it, but he turned, his fingers tapping on the wood, and walked towards the house.

Elspeth sat where she was and stayed there, numb. She rubbed her eyes, trying to see a cure, trying to see what would happen to Marion, trying to remove the memory of the rope from them.

After a long time, she stood. There was a patch of soil where she had been sitting. She saw where her uncle had been digging, and she saw where Marion had pressed her heels into the earth. It was not a dream. Elspeth scraped her feet over Marion’s footprints, trying to erase them.

XXI

The next Thursday, Elspeth's uncle went to his sister-in-law's house as usual. Elspeth was surprised that he did, thinking he might make some excuse to avoid seeing the young woman, but he didn't appear nervous at all when he went off that morning.

Her uncle returned early in the afternoon, much earlier than usual from Katherine's house. He walked inside, put his coat on his chair and sat without saying a word to Elspeth or her aunt. He stayed there for the most part of an hour, while Agnes and Elspeth gutted fish for their supper. Elspeth could usually feel his eyes on her, but they were not that afternoon, they were fixed on the floor, his head bent at an odd angle.

Elspeth searched him for any sign of news about the young woman. Had her belly grown; was she melancholy; why had he returned so early?

Finally, he said, 'You're both going to find out eventually, so I'll tell you.'

Elspeth stopped. Agnes slowed.

Her uncle kept his eyes on the floor but shifted forward in his chair.

'The young woman, Marion—she's hung herself.'

He leaned even more forward, speaking into his lap. Elspeth did not think she had heard him properly; he was talking so low.

Elspeth asked him to repeat what he had said, and he said again, 'Marion has hung herself,' and Elspeth knew it was true. She had seen the rope about her neck already.

'In the barn,' he added.

Elspeth stepped towards the door, feeling very hot all of a sudden.

'What?' said Agnes. 'Why?'

'She didn't say.'

Elspeth convulsed. She searched for an empty bucket she could be sick into. Marion had hung herself, and her uncle was making fun.

'Did you see her?' croaked Elspeth.

'Yes.' He said he had cut her down himself and carried her into the house, and Elspeth hated to think of Marion's body, landing with a thud on the barn floor, and her uncle scooping her up, his hands all over her as he carried her inside, laid her down, and pulled a sheet over her head. She hated to think of Marion unable to breathe

beneath the sheet. She wanted to run to Katherine's and rip it off her. Elspeth wondered what she looked like.

'Foolish creature,' said Agnes. 'Why would she do such a thing? Why?'

All night Agnes kept repeating, 'Why?'

Her aunt said that Marion was a witless, feeble girl, and that she was now in a worse place: hell. But Elspeth did not think she was—no. She could see Marion, hanging from the roof of her uncle's house, beside the fire. The yellow light turned green on Marion's blue skin. Her legs swung. She looked so real that Elspeth stood from her stool and walked over to her. Marion's belly, with the creature cold inside it, was in line with Elspeth's head. She touched it. It was damp.

'What are you doing?' asked Agnes.

Elspeth's aunt couldn't see Marion, of course; she did not have the second sight. Elspeth's uncle looked at the floor still. She wondered if he would be able to see her. She wanted him to look up. Elspeth told her aunt and uncle that Marion was not in hell, 'She is right here, in the house.'

Agnes stood, her hands clenching her skirt.

Allane's eyes grew wide, and Elspeth was glad to have frightened him a little.

'Stop that,' said Agnes. 'Get away from the fire. What is the matter with you? The only place suicides go is straight to hell. She is with the Devil.'

Elspeth thought, if Marion *was* with the Devil, she was keeping a spot for Elspeth warm, right beside her.

Marion's lips, like two engorged leeches, convulsed into a slow, drawling: *you will repent this*.

XXII

Elspeth sat on a stool in the corner of the barn, talking to the cow, her fellow soulless creature. She wondered if she was drawn to soulless creatures. Elspeth thought how very strange it was that her uncle had walked into the house pretending nothing had happened, when he had just that morning seen Marion's lifeless body. Was she still swinging when he saw her? Warm? You would think he would have opened the door and told Elspeth and her aunt right away. How had he the nerve to sit on his chair as he usually did, without trembling? And when he had told them, it had been calmly, without any shake in his voice. He didn't seem to care at all that she was dead. The

only reason he *had* told them was because everyone would soon find out anyway. There was very much that he was keeping from her and her aunt, Elspeth thought, and it was easy for him to, for Agnes did not care to know; she preferred it when he said nothing at all, when she could pretend that her husband was a feeling man with flesh and blood and a soul, but Elspeth no longer thought he was. Elspeth remembered the twist of his mouth and the hardness of his eyes when he had spoken with Elspeth and Marion. He might have had it in him to kill Marion himself.

'I should never have brought her to uncle,' Elspeth said aloud.

The cow listened intently. The warmth of its body was more comforting than a fire, for it was alive. When the cow looked at Elspeth, it was with such knowing, for the beast had seen it all; it had seen Elspeth enter the barn every Sunday with a little less soul than the last. It had smelt the blood leaking out of her. It had seen the stains on her fingers from when she had tried to wash her shift. The cow looked at her with enough pity to make her cry, and Elspeth pitied it in return for it could not speak. She wished the beast had a voice, so it could tell Elspeth what it knew; for it had known her uncle far longer than she. Elspeth wished it could tell her who or what her uncle was, but then, maybe Elspeth was glad it didn't have any power over its tongue.

Elspeth's uncle walked through the barn door and turned to her. Elspeth felt very small. He trudged towards her. She stood, stepping behind the stool. When he was near enough, she kicked it into his legs and shrunk into the corner with a sharp squeal as she readied for him to hit her. He did not. He only leaned forward and spat, 'You are not to go to Katherine's. Stop whimpering and listen. Katherine knows. She felt the bump on Marion's body. And if you go, she will question you, and you do not want to be found concealing sin; it is a crime, and the Kirk session will punish you for it. And if you tell anyone that *I* knew, I will deny it. If you tell anyone what *you* know, you will be punished doubly, by both me and the kirk.'

Elspeth's tongue slackened, as weak as the cow's.

Her uncle did not wait for a reply.

XXIII

Elspeth went to kirk thinking she would see Marion; *sure* she would see her, unable to believe that she was really lying dead in Katherine's house.

Katherine came to kirk. She told everyone that Marion was very ill and like to die, and the minister led them in a prayer for her. Elspeth could not concentrate on the prayer. She was thinking about Marion, lying under a sheet, the cloth sinking into her open mouth. Had they removed the rope from her neck? She wondered if it had come away smoothly. She wondered if it had left a mark.

XXIV

Night after night, Elspeth dreamt of Marion fashioning her own death, tears streaming down her cheeks, fingers coiling around the rope, her hands slick. Sometimes Marion's face moulded into Elspeth's, and Elspeth could feel everything Marion did. Together they nodded, resigned, into the rope, and together they changed their minds the moment the stool fell away from their feet. The bairn writhed inside them, unable to tell if it was being forced into life or death. And when Elspeth woke, it was to the engorged stare of Marion, who had propped herself up permanently in the corner of her box-bed, making sure Elspeth never stirred or slept without thinking of her.

Some nights, Elspeth, too afraid to sleep, sat up, staring back at Marion's swollen face. She begged the girl to please, stop haunting her; stop whispering *repent*, and go forth to whatever place was waiting for her.

When Elspeth was feeling particularly cruel, she told Marion that her uncle was right. Marion had brought this upon herself; it was *her* sin and not Elspeth's. 'And if you had not already done such a good job of it yourself, I would wring your neck again for trying to blame me,' Elspeth spat. 'It was wrong what you did,' she added thinly. Elspeth wondered if Marion had been thinking of Elspeth when she kicked away the stool and if her last words had been a curse directed at her.

Sometimes, as Elspeth lay with her eyes closed, desperate for sleep, she could hear Marion banging her head against the wall of her box-bed—thump, thump, thump—in time with her uncle's steps on the other side of the curtain.

One night, Elspeth, tired of Marion, reached out and tried to stop her head. As soon as she sunk her fingers into Marion's forehead, her skin leaked with a clear oil-like substance, like the sweat of the egg, and, without thinking, Elspeth rubbed it into

her eyes, hoping it would blind her; hoping that the death oil would take away her second sight.

When she opened her eyes again, Marion was gone. Elspeth ran her hands over the corner where Marion had been to make sure.

Elspeth sighed and lay back down, but when she did, the black-clad fairy man climbed on top of her, and soon his spit was leaking through her shift, onto her cheeks.

In the morning, Elspeth touched the corner where Marion had been and apologised. 'Come back,' she pleaded. 'I know I ruined you, but please, come back and keep the man away.'

That night, the thump in the corner of her box-bed returned, and the man did not visit again.

She began to feel at ease beneath Marion's unblinking stare. Elspeth spoke to her quietly as she readied for bed, folding a circle of blankets around her body for further protection against the fairy man.

Elspeth had asked Marion several times who the father of her child was, but she never answered.

One night, Elspeth's uncle ripped open her bed curtain and asked Elspeth who she was talking to.

'No one,' said Elspeth.

'You keep saying *Marion*. Why?'

Elspeth looked at Marion, but she would not help her.

Elspeth continued rolling the blankets around her bed, ignoring her uncle. As she finished the circle, he walked away, his steps thumping on the packed earth.

Elspeth did not know how much time had passed. She only did whatever it was her aunt told her to do. If she said they were going to kirk, she followed; only then did she know it was Sunday. Sometimes it seemed that every day was Sunday, at other times, it seemed as though she had not been to kirk in months.

Elspeth felt faint during the day, and she often had to pause her work to be sick.

Her aunt told her: 'Stop walking around like that. Why should you be so sick with grief when you did not even know her?'

She never said Marion's name, only *her, her, her.*

XXV

Elspeth's uncle slipped a bannock into her apron pocket as she stood at the bench, washing the bowls from supper. The water had gone cold.

'How have you been sleeping?' he asked her.

Elspeth replied that she hadn't been.

He told her to sit down with him by the fire.

'No,' she replied. 'I have to keep working. I have to go to the burn.'

He leant closer to her and asked, 'Why, why are you having trouble sleeping lass?'

He had said it so warmly that Elspeth almost felt sorry for shunning him.

He said that he was alarmed by her talking. 'Would you like me to help you to get to sleep?'

She turned to him, looked into his eyes, and told him that she could not sleep because she saw Marion all the time.

Her uncle did not move. Slowly, he began to shake his head. 'It is a real shame, about Marion,' he sighed. 'But there's nothing can be done about it now, and there's no use thinking too much on it.'

Elspeth turned away, back over the pail, and scratched at the bowls. 'I keep thinking about who the father is,' she said, 'and whether it should be *him* with a rope stuck in his neck.'

'Why should you think such a thing, Elspeth?'

She shrugged.

He said, 'You know it was Marion, who brought this upon herself, don't you, Elspeth? Through her wanton, flaunting ways—sauntering around Katherine's house and kirk like she did.'

Elspeth's eyes started to water.

'And only a fool like her,' her uncle continued, 'would fix sin with sin.' He stepped closer. 'Here, Elspeth,' he said, rubbing her shoulder. 'She is not worthy of your tears. It was a good thing,' he said cheerfully, 'that she did it. The family has been saved disgrace. It was the best thing for everyone.' He wrapped his arms around her.

She had enjoyed the flutter of his heart when he first embraced her in the barn. Now the thick throbbing against her ear filled her with dread. Sweat boiled on her neck. She felt for a knife beneath the water.

He let go of her with a sigh and walked to the fire, leaving Elspeth alone and shivering. She stayed shivering all night. She did not hear her aunt's orders for the next morning, but she did not care. She did not need to know. She sat up in her box-bed, comforted by Marion's presence. She dared not speak to Marion out loud. She was scared to move from her hunched position, lest it bring the fairy man to her. She thought about how her uncle had treated Marion; how he had looked at her with kindness; spoken to her with the same soft voice he used with Elspeth; how he had asked about her and her day whenever he saw her, just like he did with Elspeth. Elspeth felt ill, thinking of how her uncle might shun her as suddenly as he had done Marion. Which one was her real uncle? She thought. How he could he be both kind and cruel at the same time? He acted differently towards Elspeth when her aunt was near than when they were alone. She wanted to think that the kind uncle he was when it was just them was the real him, but she was not sure. His fingers turned in her mind: warm then cold, soft then hard; his breath, easy then puffing; his embraces, curling then seizing; his eyes, dancing from empty to full to empty again; empty when he woke, full when he looked at her, empty when he went to bed.

The firelight on Marion's cheek thinned as the sun rose. Marion, with her eyes bloated and open, watched Elspeth curiously as she stepped out of the box-bed. Her uncle's coat hung limp over his chair. She felt sick with terror. For a moment, she thought it was him, sitting there, waiting for her. She knew then that she could not face him again.

Quickly, quietly, she took her coat, some coin, bannock bread, and cheese. She went into the barn to say goodbye to her soulless companion. The beast would be lonely without her. She embraced it for as long as she could.

She heard what sounded like her aunt stepping out of her box-bed, gave the cow one last kiss and fled, running, running, imagining Marion, with a rope about her neck, rushing down the same hill. How many days had it been since then? She hoped Marion would follow her to wherever she was going.

II

CAITHNESS

July 1613

Elspeth travelled for many days with whoever would take her with them. She gave a coin to a boat man on the loch to take her across. Then, she walked along the road for a while, until a minister came up beside her on his horse and asked where it was she was going and if he could help her in getting there? He was travelling back to his kirk, the Kirk of Murthlie, upon Spey, within Balvenie. Elspeth asked if that would get her closer to Caithness? He nodded and helped her onto the back of his horse. 'It is good you're such a light wee thing,' he said.

It was strange, sitting so close to a man she had only just met. She held onto his clothes so she would not have to hold his flesh, but he complained that Elspeth was pulling down his coat and told her not to be so shy and grip hold of him.

The jolting of the horse made Elspeth's head spin, and several times on the road Elspeth had to make the man stop so she could be sick in the grass. After the third time they had stopped, the man deliberately put one hand over Elspeth's stomach as he helped her back onto the horse, and as he did, he looked at her sharply.

Afterwards, she felt hot sitting at his back, and the man no longer spoke to her.

They stopped at an inn for the night. The minister told the people there that Elspeth was his ward, and that she would need a separate room. The beds were clean, and Elspeth slept long. Marion did not come to her.

In the morning, the minister gave Elspeth food and drink and watched her consume it. She was sick almost as soon as they set off again.

They arrived at his kirk at the down going of the sun. Elspeth was eager to warm herself inside the church. He opened the door and led Elspeth into his chamber, to the side of the pulpit. Inside was a desk covered in books and paper. The minister turned towards Elspeth, leaning on his desk, and nodded towards the corner of the room.

'Stand on it,' he said.

Elspeth followed his eyes. In the corner was a stool, which Elspeth recognised as the stool all kirks had: the pillar of repentance.

'Why?' she asked.

‘Just do it.’

Elspeth thought that he might be punishing her for lengthening his journey so much. Her cheeks burned. She stumbled over to the stool, though she really wanted to run out from the kirk. She stepped onto the seat. One of its legs was shorter than the others, and it rocked.

‘You have sinned,’ he said, ‘and have been very wicked indeed.’ He came towards her and put both of his hands on her stomach, smoothing the creases of her skirt over it. Elspeth pushed him away and stepped back behind the stool. He started towards her. She kicked the seat into his legs, but he stepped over it and shoved it behind him. He leaned close to Elspeth and began pulling at her skirt.

She cried out.

He put one hand over her mouth and continued fumbling through her dress with the other.

‘You are a whore,’ he said, ‘and anyone might have the use of you now.’

The way he had touched her stomach had been the same way a man might lay his hand over his wife’s belly if she were with child. He was searching for an excuse to use her and not have to pray for forgiveness for it. Both of them knew that she was not really with bairn.

Elspeth struggled with him, losing much of her breath inside his hand.

There was a call from outside the kirk, and the minister stilled.

Elspeth bit down, so hard she tasted blood, and tore at his flesh.

He cried, snatched his hand away, and she slipped out from beneath him.

He reached for her skirt and tried to tug her back, but she ripped herself free and ran out of the kirk.

Elspeth stumbled for the most part of that night along the road. As the sky lightened, she slept for an hour or so under a tree, and then, with her feet cut and the taste of the minister’s blood still on her tongue, she kept walking. Someone with a black horse and a name she did not hear plucked her up that afternoon. He took her to Inverness and then handed her over to another man who had a grey horse. The man took her to Caithness.

I

Elspeth skimmed over the earth towards a familiar house, her legs hollow and weak. She had seen the house many times in her mind; it had looked more real to her then than it did now. She was startled by the solid, forceful sound her knuckles made on the door.

It inched open. The hot breath of the fire and the smell of simmering fish wafted over her. Margaret looked as though she had just been bent over a steaming pot. Sweat boiled on her face. Her eyes were wide.

'It's me,' said Elspeth.

Her sister looked annoyed, 'I know that.'

'Your sister,' Elspeth continued, wiping her face, as though to remove some layer of dirt from it, a layer that had built up over her time in her uncle's house.

'I *know*,' huffed Margaret. 'Where have you been? Why did you leave?'

'Lochaber,' said Elspeth. Did her sister know it was her?

'Why?'

'With aunt and uncle.' Elspeth longed to sit down. She peered around Margaret, eyeing the stools around the fire.

Elspeth stepped forward and leaned on the door frame.

'You're ill,' said Margaret.

Elspeth, conscious then that she had to appear as though there was nothing amiss, pressed off the door, and stood as straight as she could. She shook her head, rattling the bones inside. 'I am well.'

Margaret sighed and stepped aside to let Elspeth pass. Elspeth tried not to show the aching of her feet as she hobbled to a stool. She lowered herself onto it carefully. The hardness of the wood sent a jolt up her spine, and her back ached as she straightened.

Margaret handed Elspeth some ale and bread, and she gulped them down.

Margaret stood, hovering over Elspeth, looking at her curiously. 'They fed you well, then,' said Margaret. 'Why ever did you leave if you hate it here so much?'

Elspeth spread her skirt taut over her knees and ignored her.

Elspeth noticed how thin Margaret's wrists were and how much extra string hung from the tie of her apron.

‘Our aunt,’ said Elspeth, ‘did not like me. I made her mad with everything I did, and she had finally had enough of me.’

Margaret sighed and sat next to Elspeth. ‘It is no wonder, Elspeth—she wouldn’t have been expecting you. What were you thinking? What will Henry say?’

Elspeth’s stomach tightened around the food she had swallowed. Her eyes filled. ‘Don’t send me back to him, Margaret—please,’ she pleaded.

‘What has he done?’

Elspeth shook her head.

‘Is that why you ran away? Henry?’

She was still.

Margaret sighed. ‘What am I to do with you? How can I keep you?’

‘I will work.’

Margaret stood, hardening her voice. ‘You cannot be a burden,’ she said, taking the empty pewter from Elspeth.

Elspeth sniffed, nodding.

‘You can stay as long as you’re useful,’ she said.

‘Thank you, Margaret,’ said Elspeth, turning towards her. ‘I will be—I will be. I promise.’

‘Come,’ said Margaret, ‘you look like death.’ She walked towards the room attached to the side of the house, stopped in front of the short, slanted doorway, and beckoned Elspeth to follow her.

Elspeth ducked beneath the door, after her sister.

The room was dark, lit only by a few strings of light that hung from the roof. It smelled of dust and peat smoke. A bed squatted in the middle and alongside it, pressed against the far wall, was a long, narrow bench.

Elspeth recoiled. On the bench was a bairn, white and still. Its lids were thin and veined. Was it Marion’s bairn? Had it fallen out of her after all? Elspeth looked around the room. Marion was not hanging anywhere. Elspeth took a deep breath and steadied herself. She tried to blink the vision of the bairn away, but Margaret walked over to it as though she could see it too. Then, Margaret reached down and picked up the creature. It was real. It was really there.

‘This is Henry,’ said Margaret.

Henry. Elspeth did not say it back. She sickened at the thought of the name coating her mouth.

‘It’s dead,’ said Elspeth.

Margaret looked up, alarmed, then angry. ‘It is not,’ she barked. ‘It’s *sleeping*.’ Margaret held the bairn out towards Elspeth. Its lips were moving.

‘Is it yours?’ asked Elspeth.

‘Yes,’ said Margaret.

‘I did not know you were—’

‘Yes,’ said Margaret. ‘He came early and is not yet a month old.’

‘You won’t tell our brother that I am back, will you?’

Margaret frowned. ‘I will not lie to him.’

‘Please,’ Elspeth pleaded.

‘You need rest, Elspeth,’ said Margaret. ‘You can sleep here,’ she said, nodding at the bench. ‘Get some rest; things will look different in the morning.’

What did Margaret mean, thought Elspeth, things would look different? Henry would reach straight for the whip when he saw her. Elspeth began to doubt whether she really *was* better off here than at her aunt and uncle’s house; whether she should have left; whether she could have stuck it out a few more days, a few more months; whether she had imagined her uncle’s cruelty towards her; whether she had only imagined the light leaving his eyes.

Margaret walked out of the room with the bairn, and Elspeth sat on the bench. She arranged the extra blankets in a circle around her and lay down. She wondered where her chamber friend, Marion, was, and thought, Marion would be comfortable here, with more room to hang herself than in their old box-bed. She wished Marion were there, but then she tried to convince herself that she did not need her anymore. Elspeth stared at the ceiling, at the damp walls, at the bed alongside her, trying to convince herself that she really *had* made it. She really was no longer in her uncle’s house; she could close her eyes without fear. The fairy man would not find her here, and she would sleep undisturbed.

Elspeth opened her eyes. White folds hovered before her. She caught her breath and readied herself for the feeling of material on her tongue, clogging her throat. She pushed it away from her face to find that beneath it was a soft, warm body, which erupted with a sharp cry. She gripped the bundle, pulling it towards her before it fell onto the floor and found herself looking into the face of her sister’s bairn, its skin grey and purple in the early light.

‘Elspeth?’ mumbled Margaret.

The bairn wriggled and cried. ‘Shh,’ whispered Elspeth. ‘Shh, shh.’

‘I’ll get it,’ Margaret croaked.

Elspeth picked up the bairn and stood. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I’ve got him. He’s just startled. Go back to—’ Elspeth paused. There was a bulge beside Margaret in the bed. It turned over, slowly. Elspeth saw the flash of a man’s face and grew cold.

‘No, I’ll—’ started Margaret.

‘Leave it, Maggie,’ groaned the man, and Elspeth rushed out of the room.

She had forgotten about Robert. Elspeth had not heard him come in while she was asleep. She should never again sleep deeply enough for someone to come into where she was without her noticing.

Maggie. How could Margaret stand sleeping beside him? With nothing between them, not even a curtain. Nothing to stop him from—

II

Robert moved around the house, brushing closely past Margaret whenever he could. Elspeth remembered how Margaret had cried and cried in the weeks leading up to her wedding. She did not look unhappy now; she looked at ease within the walls, at ease when working, when holding her bairn. The marks Margaret had made around the house settled comfortably within the walls, the floor, the pots, and the mugs.

Elspeth had only ever felt that comfortable within a house when asleep in her mother’s home, in the box-bed beside Margaret; warm, their skin sticking together. She missed the smell of the peat smoke in her sister’s hair beside her face. She wanted to return to that box-bed, before: before she had met the fairy men.

‘How did you sleep, Elspeth?’ asked Robert.

Elspeth’s chest tightened.

‘We hope the bairn didn’t—’

‘I slept well,’ said Elspeth. She turned away from him, towards Margaret. ‘What would you like me to do first?’

III

Elspeth missed the cow at her uncle's house. Margaret's did not take a liking to her, scuffing its feet and mewing as Elspeth struggled to grip its udders. She rubbed its side, trying to soothe the beast. Its hooves caught on Elspeth's skirt, almost stepping on her foot. She scolded the creature and then softened her voice, thinking scolding would get her nowhere. She told the beast about the friend she had made at her uncle's house.

She said, looking into its brown eyes, 'If you promise to be good for me, I will tell you a secret. Do you promise?'

It promised.

'I also,' she whispered, 'have no soul.'

The beast looked as if it could not care less whether she did or didn't. It was dissatisfied with this secret, but it was the only one Elspeth was able to share. The cow kept its promise and yielded to her hands. She began to fill the pail with clean milk. Elspeth thought about how Margaret had, just that morning, fed her own bairn from her breast, and then she thought once again about James Moodie touching her. Then, she wondered about Marion again, and how she might have gotten with child, and the milk she drew from the cow did not seem so clean anymore. As she sat there, bent over the bucket, Elspeth thought that she must be thinking too much about Marion and the bairn in her belly, because she thought she could feel a similar movement in her own.

As Elspeth arranged her blankets around her bench that night, she saw a pulse of white at the corner of her eye. It was Marion; she had strung herself up in the corner of the room. Elspeth gave her a small, grateful smile. 'I knew you wouldn't leave me, Marion,' she said.

Marion seemed amused at how Elspeth was arranging the blankets on her bench. Laughter gurgled in Elspeth's throat too at the thought of how strange she must look, but her mouth turned down once she felt a tightness in her belly, restricting her movements. Elspeth looked down at Marion's bulging stomach and the wide shadow of her skirt on the floor. Elspeth touched her own belly and felt as though the bench's legs had snapped beneath her. It can't be, thought Elspeth, it can't be. Her skin was taut over her rounded stomach and her chest felt tender and bruised. No, no, no, thought Elspeth. It is stomach sickness, she reasoned. Hadn't she been sick on her journey?

Yes, it felt just like stomach sickness: the spinning, the weakness, the pain in her lower back. It was the bloat, that's all.

IV

As Elspeth walked back towards Margaret's house with a pail of fresh water, she heard someone yell, 'What are *you* doing here?'

She turned.

Her brother was stamping towards her, his face set, his fists tight. Elspeth dropped the pail and ran into the house. She closed the door, latched it, and told Margaret not to let him in.

'Who?' Margaret demanded.

'Henry,' said Elspeth. 'He's murderous.'

Margaret frowned and moved towards the door.

Elspeth stepped in front of her and gripped her shoulders; 'Please Margaret, don't.'

'It's his house. I have to let him in.'

Elspeth shook her head. 'He will beat me Margaret.' There was a banging on the door.

'Aye, he might,' she said, elbowing Elspeth aside.

Margaret fumbled with the latch.

Elspeth ran into the bedchamber. There was not enough room beneath the bed for her to crawl into. She moved towards the bench. Henry stepped up behind her and gripped her arm. She screamed.

'What are you doing here?' he spat.

Margaret stepped into the doorway and said calmly, 'She's been at our uncle's house in Lochaber. She did not want to burden you any longer.'

'Uncle's?' said Henry, digging his fingers into Elspeth's arm. 'You would not have been so much of a burden if you only worked harder.'

Elspeth leaned away from him.

'She was only trying to help, though she was mistaken.'

'She ran away, Margaret—and now she's come begging you to take her in, has she? Is that right, Elspeth?'

Elspeth looked over his shoulder at Margaret.

‘Don’t look at *her,* look at me. Did I not feed you for three years, Elspeth? Is it only now you realise you were wasting my bread?’

Tears fell from Elspeth’s eyes.

‘Stop that. Stop your weeping. You could water my whole field with all your false tears,’ said Henry. ‘She is to come back with me.’

‘No,’ said Margaret. ‘That is not necessary.’

‘I will not have her burdening you,’ said Henry.

‘She is a great help, really. She has become a much better worker since she went away. Uncle must have taught her well.’

‘Fine,’ said Henry, flinging Elspeth away. ‘But if she is any trouble to you at all, send her straight to me.’

Elspeth’s back stung with the thought of what he would do.

‘Well?’ Henry said, suddenly, turning to Margaret. ‘Where is he?’

Margaret’s eyes widened. ‘Oh,’ she started. ‘Here,’ she turned into the next room. ‘He is sleeping.’

Henry followed her.

Elspeth stumbled back towards the bench and sat. She looked at the corner and saw Marion with a small smile on her face. Elspeth was sure she had enjoyed the spectacle. ‘You now know more about me than I ever knew about you,’ said Elspeth.

V

Elspeth did not stop working, because if she did, her hands would stop moving, and if her hands stopped moving, they would land in her lap, and she would feel her stomach. She had been working hard, but whatever she ate stayed around her middle.

Her brother came often to the house, sometimes three times a week. He would sit with his legs stretched out by the fire, sighing over little Henry. Her brother had two daughters, but he longed for a son. His wife was with child at the moment, and Henry kept saying things like, ‘My son will look just as fine as wee Henry, he will; with ten fingers and ten toes and a nail upon each one. He will look as fine.’

But Elspeth could not see Henry with a son. She was certain it would be another girl.

Elspeth wanted to know how his daughters Isobel and Chrissie were, but dared not ask her brother.

When she asked Margaret later, she said that they were both quiet, sullen girls, who spent their days hiding behind their mother's skirts. Elspeth did not care for Henry's wife, so did not ask about her. His wife had stood idly by while Henry beat and scolded Elspeth; and Elspeth did not like to think of the woman being with child, because as soon as she did, she started to think about her own bloated belly.

VI

Henry never brought anything with him from his croft when he came to visit: no milk, cheese, butter, or bread, but he left Margaret's with plenty in his pocket. He sometimes remarked that he should bring some food with him the next time he visited, but Margaret told him politely, 'No, no, we are doing very well.' Elspeth wished Margaret wouldn't lie to him. She was endlessly hungry.

Sometimes at night, when she could not sleep, which was most nights, Elspeth sat hunched over the dying fire eating stale bread.

One night, as Elspeth lay awake, she heard Margaret and her husband moving together. She lay there, tense, a scream pushing against her throat at the smack of skin and shifting of hay; at the sound of her sister's wet breath moving with Robert's, puffing, short. She wanted to run out of the room. Margaret let out a stifled whimper; was his hand over her mouth? Robert grunted and then sighed away from Margaret. Elspeth wanted to be sick.

VII

Margaret and her husband were up before Elspeth the next morning. Elspeth lay on her bench, listening to them in the next room. She looked at their bed. The blanket lay smooth over it, falling into two indents where Margaret and her husband's bodies had flattened down the hay. It looked as though two porous spirits lay upon the bed alongside one another, shoulders touching; one taller than the other. Elspeth imagined her sister and her husband filling those hollows at night. They lay close together. Elspeth wondered if her sister liked sharing a bed with Robert. Elspeth had never seen her aunt and uncle in bed together. Did they lie breathing into each other's mouths or did they lie touching backs? Elspeth had seen her uncle looking out from the curtain

before. Did he always lie like that, peering at Elspeth's bed, where she lay on her back, careful not to disturb the woollen mound she had curled around her? Her uncle did not sleep, and neither could she; stay awake, stay awake, stay awake. Hollow limbed, her fingers like reeds, bending at the slightest of pressure—and she heard the breaths again, Robert's or someone else's, she could feel the wetness of it—she gripped the bedclothes and shoved them into her mouth, stifling a scream.

There was no animal smell upon Margaret, no blood on her clothes, no bruises on her arms, or swelling in her lips. She didn't appear to be in any pain as she lifted and poured a bucket of water into the kettle.

Elspeth thought about asking Margaret if she was hurt and if she wanted to run away from Robert, but she did not know how to. Elspeth's tongue went limp every time she thought about looking in Margaret's face and asking her about the previous night.

Elspeth made sure she was not alone with Robert, so he did not have the chance to threaten or bribe her into silence about what he had done; but he did not appear worried. His forehead was creaseless, and his hands were steady as he wove fishing nets.

Still, Elspeth was relieved when Margaret told her that Robert was leaving for a fishing trip in one week; she could put off asking Margaret about that night—it would not matter for the time Robert was gone. She was glad for Margaret too: that she would not have to endure him for a little while.

VIII

Elspeth slept well with only her, Margaret, and the bairn in the room. She hardly noticed Marion. She could still see her, white, at the corner of her eye, and could sometimes smell the rot of her if there was no breeze turning through the house, but she did not feel the need to look at her for long or speak with her, because she could speak with Margaret. Elspeth might have even been happy there, with just the three of them, if it was not for the swelling in her stomach, which she was very aware of as she moved around the house. It was not going down but growing larger and tighter. It was as though her legs were filling with fluid now too, all the way down to her ankles.

IX

Elspeth went into the bedchamber to ready for bed and brushed past Marion's bloated belly. She turned to her, felt Marion's stomach, then her own. They were similar. Marion's stomach was even, to Elspeth's alarm, warmer than her own, as though she had been sitting close to a fire. The material over the swell was damp too, as if with sweat. As Elspeth stood there, with one hand over her stomach, and one hand on Marion's, she felt a flutter in her own stomach, and Marion, seeing Elspeth turn white, seemed to have a gleam in her eye that had not been there before, and then Elspeth knew; she knew that this was it: that the words, *you will repent this*, had taken stock in her belly, and were to grow into the same shape as Marion's. She did not want to die covered in blood like her mother and be sent to hell where she would smell herself roasting forever, which she surely would, with no soul.

X

Elspeth never did not think about her stomach, about what was in there, and how the creature within it could kill her. She never really thought about it turning into a bairn: a proper bairn. She did not see how it could, it having been placed there by a curse. How could such a thing live? She never thought about it forming skin, about it being separate from her, about raising it and feeding it, and having to give it her breast. She only thought about others glimpsing the shape of her growing belly if she moved a certain way.

She did not like to be in front of her brother at all. If she *had* to stand before him, she kept tugging at her skirt, making sure it fell wide over her legs. Her cheeks prickled every time Henry looked at her. She thought about him cutting her back with a bridle while he demanded to know how she had gotten it. She thought about him stringing her up like Marion and, not for the first time, wondered if Marion had really done it herself, but then she got to thinking about her uncle again and she didn't like to.

Margaret did not seem to notice Elspeth's state. So, Elspeth went on, burning her fingers against the rope of her bodice, tightening and tightening, until it sat as it used to. She hated to think what shape the thing inside her belly might be growing into. She wondered if it would be deformed and demon-like: a black mass. She wondered if it would have a beak and talons.

XI

A safe thing to do when Henry was around was knit, because Elspeth could sit down and smooth her skirts tightly over her knees to hide her belly. But that day, she could not knit for the kicking and twisting in her stomach, as if the thing were feeling its way through the dark, trying to find its way out. Elspeth wondered if it would, and when it would. She did not know how long it had to grow still. She hoped it would not get much bigger, because if it did, Margaret and Henry would surely see. She wondered where she would birth it and if she would have to do so alone. She thought that she could go onto a hill and birth it there by herself. Perhaps Marion could join her and act as midwife. Then, Elspeth could carry it home and tell Margaret that she had found it on top of the hill and ask her if she could keep it, and if Margaret said no, she would have to run away with it. She could not leave it to the fairies on the hill, knowing how evil their ways truly were.

Elspeth placed the wool she was spinning in her lap and tried to distract herself from the writhing in her stomach. She leaned over Margaret's bairn. It was in a cheerful mood. Its cheeks were smoothing out, and it looked around in wonder at everything. Elspeth waved wool over its head, and the bairn reached for it, its fingers bending and stretching. It let out a gurgled laughter, and Elspeth did too.

She poked the bairn's cheek, enjoying the softness of it, and the way it plumped up again when she withdrew her finger. The bairn wriggled and squeezed its eyes, as though it too were enjoying the feeling of it. Elspeth bent her head towards the bairn, so it could have a go at poking her cheek, though she knew it was not as soft as his. Elspeth told the bairn silently: 'You are going to grow up into the only man I will ever like.' She liked to think of how the bairn would love her when it grew taller; how it would tease her and help her and call her aunt.

The little creature sunk its fist into the side of Elspeth's face and she gripped her cheek as though it had hurt her very much, but she did not scold it for long, because she did not want it to begin screaming again.

Elspeth hoped the thing growing inside of her did not really have talons. She hoped it would come out clean and pink like Margaret's bairn. Her uncle's cow did not have a soul and could still birth healthy bairns, so maybe she would too. She thought that if she did have a bairn of her own, that she could talk to it, and that it

could warm her, and that they would never be alone. She wondered if Marion had really given her a gift.

How was it that folk kept bairns alive? They seemed so fragile, so much on the brink of death, like any moment they might forget to breathe and slip away. How did these small sacks of blood grow when everything in the world was so cold, hard, and unclean, threatening to burst them? One of the splinters on Elspeth's bench would be enough to kill it if it drew blood and became diseased. And Elspeth—she might smother it in her sleep, roll over it, and stop its mouth with her shift. How awful it would be for Margaret to have to bury her bairn to accommodate a sister she never thought she would have to look after again. If that happened, the bench would be Elspeth's alone at night. Elspeth frightened herself, thinking, perhaps, that was exactly what she wanted: sleep, alone. What if one of the splinters had already caught onto the bairn: on its ankle perhaps, or the back of its head? It would become rancid if they did not seal it with heat.

Elspeth looked all over the bairn for splinters: its feet, its belly, its back. The bairn began screaming. Elspeth blinked, pulled her hands away, picked up the bairn, and hugged it close. It squealed in her ear. She began to cry with it.

'Shh, shh.'

She wished someone would kiss her head as she was kissing the bairn's. She wished she were as small as it, as warm and carefully wrapped.

'I'm sorry I frightened you,' she whispered. 'You frightened me too.'

She rested the bairn on the swell of her stomach. Can you feel that there: that flutter? It grows more and more every day. Do you think, if I were to place your mother's hand upon it, she might feel the fluttering too? If Margaret said it out loud, then she would never have to. Margaret would know exactly what to do.

XII

Elspeth trudged up to her aunt's house with a pail of water. Her side was soaked. The water was never ending; every time it spilt onto her side, she looked down to see the pail still full.

Her shoes leaked. Her footprints turned to mud.

A scream erupted from inside the house, striking Elspeth in the breast. She dropped the pail, ran to the door, and flung it open.

'*Aunt*?'

But it was not her aunt. It was Marion. She was sitting on someone's lap, struggling. Soiled fingers sunk into her waist. Elspeth moved, straining to see the man in the chair, but no matter where Elspeth stepped, Marion's body obscured him. Marion writhed this way and that, yelling, 'Stop!'

Elspeth stepped close to Marion and tried to pry the man's fingers from her, flicking at his muddy nails one by one.

Marion twisted towards her and gripped her arm. 'Help me!'

Elspeth looked up. The girl's limp hair wrinkled, her features shrunk, her lashes paled; Elspeth was now staring at her own face. It undulated, as though reflected in water.

'Help!' Elspeth screamed, spit bubbling between her lips.

Now *she* was in his lap. His muscles twitched below her. Bruises blossomed on her ribs. She held the girl's arm fast. She was looking at herself still. Though this Elspeth, wrenching away, seemed much more solid than she had ever felt. Her skin was firm, the blood under it not watery, but thick. 'Don't leave me!' she yelled.

She was so afraid of herself. The other Elspeth's eyes were wide and frightened as she pulled away.

'Let me go,' the girl pleaded. 'I will get help, just let me go.'

But Elspeth did not trust her. The other Elspeth would never come back, and she would remain always in this house.

With a sharp twist of her wrist, the girl staggered backwards. As she did, Elspeth seemed to stumble back too; back into herself. Her feet were moving, her eyes on the floor. She turned, gripped the door, and slammed it behind her. She scrambled down the hill, slipping on her own footprints.

A pail was sitting at the bottom, full and silver in the sun.

Her aunt was waiting. She had to bring this to her. She heaved it up, spilling half of it onto her dress. She turned, slipping on the mud, and trudged towards her aunt's house.

A scream rushed out from the door.

'Aunt?' Elspeth yelled, dropping the bucket. She flung open the door. '*Aunt*?'

She woke. The wall of wool around her was damp. She shivered; her clothes wet. She pulled the woollen blankets over her shoulders and tucked them under her chin, but

she could only stay huddled like that for a moment before she was too hot. She pushed the wool back down to her waist but was soon shaking violently. She sat up, wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and looked at Marion's face. She was smug.

Hot fluid rose in Elspeth's throat. She ran out the house and was sick in the soil. There was a sharp pain in her belly. She sat, curled over her sick, her bones stiff, wondering if there was more pain to come and if this was it: if the bairn was coming. Should she begin walking towards the hill? But if she did now, in only her shift, the cold would surely kill her. The hills were thick with white. Elspeth could hardly see them.

She stood, moaning with the pain in her belly, and staggered back inside. She hovered inside the doorway, wondering if she wanted to sit close by the fire or as far away from it as possible. She began to cry as another pain moved through her. The wool she hugged around her clung to her arms. She wished her sister would wake and see her and know exactly what was the matter. Then Margaret would wrap Elspeth in her arms and lay her down in her own straw bed, and she would wash Elspeth and give her a magic drink that would make everything go away.

Elspeth heard her sister shuffling in her bed, and she knew that this could not be so. Elspeth wiped at the sweat on her face with the blanket, its brown string clinging to her temples. She stepped slowly back into the bedchamber, keeping the wool around her so Margaret could not see the line of Elspeth's stomach through her shift.

'You're up early,' said Margaret.

Elspeth smiled at her, hoping she could not see the beads above her lip.

'Get dressed,' said Margaret, getting out of bed. 'I'll put some water on.'

The strings of Elspeth's dress would not close as they used to, and the more she pulled at them, the sorer her belly became. The skin on her stomach, and all down her legs, was tender. Elspeth gave up trying to tighten the string. She thought she could hear a low scraping laugh coming from Marion in the corner. Elspeth sat on her bench, bent over her stomach, and cursed Marion. She prayed that Marion would go to the hot place and burn forever once she had quitted the in-between.

Once again, Elspeth squeezed tears from her eyes, her face aching as she tried to remove the oil her uncle had forced into them. She hated him for it, hated him so much her chest hurt. Her hands were hollow, longing to grasp something, anything,

and squeeze it tight: her uncle's neck. She wanted to feel the stubble of it scratching her fingers as she wrung breath from it like water from a damp cloth.

XIII

Elspeth spent the week feeling very ill. The floor lurched and fell below her. She often grasped onto the walls to steady herself. She stayed in bed for as long as she could, but her sister eventually asked her to get up and help with the work. Elspeth knew Margaret could see how she was gripping onto things. Elspeth was not much help to her, going out to get something only to forget what it was, straining to remember if she had completed a task or not, and going back to do things again because she had not done them right the first time. A pain lingered in her lower belly, and shivers travelled down the back of her. Her teeth hummed, and nothing stayed still. She felt always on the verge of being sick and kept an eye on the door just in case she needed to run out and empty her stomach. She wished her sister would tell her to go back to bed. Surely Margaret could see the sweat on her lip? Surely, she noticed how pale she was? She *must* be pale; she felt drained of all blood. She wondered how long this thing would be inside her, how long the pain would last, how much more she could endure, and whether she would be able to survive Henry's lashings and Margaret's anger when the bairn did come. The more Elspeth saw her skin thinning out over her bloated insides like Marion's, the closer she felt to that noose on the roof, and she wondered if it might be able to stretch over her neck too. The creature inside her writhed. It was feared; feared by that thought.

December 1613

There was a cry in the night. Elspeth was unsure whether it came from herself or from Marion; it sounded so strangled. She looked at Marion over the mound of wool that was piled over her body. Marion dipped and swayed as a sharp pain raked through Elspeth's stomach. She thought that the floor had caved in and tried to sit up. Hands pressed her shoulders down. It was Margaret. Her face hovered over Elspeth, blue in the moonlight. Margaret's shift wafted in the breeze and Elspeth jerked away from the material, not wanting it to drift over her face, not wanting it to catch in her mouth. She pressed her lips together, only now realising that they had been stretched open and

were emitting such awful sounds. Her throat was hoarse, and she wondered if the fairy man had found her in the night; her tongue felt as though it had been dried on a shift. The pain between her legs was familiar. There was a wetness between them. Margaret peeled the blankets off Elspeth. Elspeth pushed away her hands, but her fingers were powerless against Margaret's.

The wool below her was warm and sticky. Elspeth propped herself up on her elbows. Purple blood soaked through her shift. She leant over the edge of the bench and was sick over Margaret's legs. Margaret kept humming things that Elspeth could not understand. Elspeth wondered if Margaret was also seeing their mother's legs.

It was strange that she should still be leaking soul blood—she thought she had none left—but then she realised that it was the bairn's soul escaping from her now. Margaret moved to the end of the bench, in front of Elspeth's feet. Elspeth peered at Marion over Margaret's head, but Marion was not looking at Elspeth. Elspeth followed her eyes to the doorway. A dark shadow was strolling through it. Elspeth whimpered, 'No, no, no.' How had he found her? He stepped beside Margaret.

Her sister did not see him. Margaret spread Elspeth's legs.

She cried out. It felt like he was reaching into her. She tried to push him out. She thought she heard Margaret tell her to push again, so she did.

The man's voice pulsed in and out of the gaps between Margaret's words. He said, 'This won't hurt a bit.' Then he stepped next to Elspeth's head.

'Get him away,' Elspeth yelled.

'It's almost out,' said Margaret.

'The man—beside me—get him away.'

He leaned over her. He was holding a black cloth. He put it over her eyes. Elspeth could only just see the outline of his head through it. She felt the heat of his breath over her mouth as he said, 'If you tell anyone, I will have your blood.' Then he wrapped his hand around Elspeth's throat, and Elspeth let out all the breath she could as she pushed down again. Pain ripped between her thighs. Then her legs felt like they were pouring down over the sides of the bench. The man kept squeezing, sealing her throat shut. He told Elspeth to never tell a soul; never tell anyone that it was him who taught her to see and know anything she desired. 'If you speak, gentlemen will trouble you and make you give reasons for your doings, and you may be challenged and hurt.'

She pleaded silently that she wouldn't speak; she wouldn't say anything.

'Promise,' he demanded. 'Promise.'

She promised that she would keep counsel, and he let go. The black veil sunk down onto her skin and into her eyes, thickening, until the man's outline was gone and all she saw was black.

The cloth peeled off her face, and Elspeth felt air on her skin once more. It was dark still. She looked down at her legs, her neck aching. Someone had put a clean shift on her without her noticing; but Elspeth could still smell blood. In the corner of the room, beneath Marion's swaying feet, was a pile of bloody rags. She thought she heard voices in the next room. One of them was a deep voice. Her skin crawled at the thought that it might be Henry. Then there was movement. Someone ducked through the doorway. The black-clad fairy man walked easily towards her once again. He reached out his hand and touched Elspeth's shoulder. Crouching down beside her, he said, 'Why are you being so sour Elspeth? I do not like sleeping next to my wife. She snores and her breath is foul, and I used to sleep in here all the time; won't you move over and let me lie next to you? It is a cold night, and we should keep each other warm.'

Elspeth shook her head but could not make a sound. He pushed her limp body towards the wall, lay down, wrapped his arms around her chest, and squeezed. The moment she thought her limbs would crack, he softened and dissolved into a stream of engorged leeches. Some crawled down over her hips and between her thighs, others shivered up her sides and over her arms. They smelled of mould and blood. Some made their way onto the base of her throat, crawling around her neck like clammy fingers, then up onto her cheek. One leech fell into her left ear, another burrowed into her right, bringing with them a gurgling sound. Two warm, fat bodies, slipped over her eyes. She wondered if swallowing one of the leeches might loosen up her throat, for they seemed to be softening her bones, weighing them down, easing her clenched fingers apart. Her legs tingled. Her head was heavy. She couldn't envision ever moving again, but still, there was something that kept her from sinking into sleep: a nagging, like someone were pulling a strand of hair at the top of her head. Her thoughts pulsed, unable to focus on the source of her unease, until once again a hand wrapped around her throat, tightening slowly.

No one had built the wall of wool around her. She could hear voices, mingling. She tried to call out, but she had no power of her tongue. If they didn't arrange the wool

around her, he would come again. She licked the tears that were on her lips, trying to wet her throat.

She wondered if her bairn had nails or talons. But, if the low voice she could hear was her brother, Henry's, then it would not matter if it had toes or claws, it would be stiffening on the hill no matter what. Elspeth looked to Marion. She said, silently, 'Marion, can't you make a sound? Can't you call out for me?' But all Marion did was rock her body from side to side, as though trying to shake her head.

He came a third time. She woke to the feeling of his hand pressing down on her breast. Her shift could get no dirtier, she thought. She hoped Margaret would wash it for her.

Margaret leant over her, pulling the blanket out from underneath Elspeth. The bench was cold and hard. The blanket was stiff in Margaret's arms, the dried blood cracking and flaking away as she folded it. Elspeth could see her own feet now, over the still swollen mound of her belly. Her bairn. Where was it? She thought about asking Margaret, but she was frightened that if she said anything, anything at all, she would say the wrong thing, and the fairy man would come to her again and squeeze her throat tighter, until there was no breath in it at all; so she didn't say anything. She was not sure she could, even if she tried. Margaret went to the corner Marion was in and picked up the bloody shift and bed clothes that were there too. Her head brushed against Marion's skirt, but Margaret didn't seem to notice. Then Margaret went to the next room. Through the doorway, Elspeth could see her place the bloodied shift into the fire. The flames bulged.

'Is she awake?' someone said.

Margaret turned, as though looking at someone seated by the central hearth, but Elspeth could not see the stools behind the doorframe. Margaret nodded. A stool fell back. 'No—don't—you'll kill her if you move her—' started Margaret.

Henry strode into the bedchamber, and Elspeth wished she had bedclothes to pull around her. She flinched away from him.

He drove his fist into the bench beside her face.

She jumped, and a new pain spread through her belly. She began to cry, but this only made Henry angrier.

Margaret stood in the doorway, pleading, 'Let her be, Henry. You can punish her when she is well.'

Henry spoke over Margaret. ‘You are a selfish whore,’ he spat, bending close to Elspeth. ‘You have ruined the family. How will we ever find someone to marry you now? We will be stuck with you for good, and you will stuff your ungrateful mouth with our food always, while we work for you. You are a jade queen. It is a good thing the bairn came out dead; at least we don’t have to feed that as well.’

Elspeth wished she could stop his words with her voice but found that she really could not speak.

Henry kept spitting in her face.

Elspeth looked at Margaret and reached out her hand, pleading with her to make him stop and to show her her bairn; to tell her that Henry was lying; that her bairn was pink and small, with a nail on each finger and toe, and that she would never be alone again.

Henry gripped her reaching hand and wrenched it back.

Elspeth’s mouth twisted but made no sound.

‘Who is the father then?’ he said. ‘Who was the stinking bairn gotten by?’

He put it on the hill, didn’t he, Margaret? Elspeth thought. Did you even try to stop him from taking it? It had been alive, hadn’t it?

‘Who?’ Henry gripped Elspeth’s hair and pulled her face towards his.

Elspeth thought she could feel fresh blood leaking out from her thighs.

‘Don’t move her,’ said Margaret.

‘Speak!’

Elspeth shook her head, and Henry ripped her up from the bench. There *was* blood; it was trickling down her leg.

Margaret screamed that Henry would kill her, but Henry kept dragging Elspeth out the door.

The wind froze the blood on her legs. Elspeth tried her best to keep her footing beside Henry to stop the stinging of her head, but her feet were useless and weak. Henry pulled her into the barn, and Elspeth knew there was nothing to be done about it, so she knelt over the stool while Henry took the bridle off the wall and braced herself for the first blow, which came quickly after Henry had ripped her shift open over her back. The wooden bits on the bridle sunk painfully into the raw cuts made by the leather. Henry did not bother asking Elspeth to speak anymore. He was caught up in the whipping, slamming the bridle into her over and over again. Margaret was screaming outside but Henry did not stop. Elspeth fainted.

XIV

Elspeth lay on her stomach for five days, watching Margaret's shadow pass in front of the fire as she walked towards and away from Elspeth, holding a bucket of salt water and a cloth for Elspeth's back. She did not say much, but sometimes she crouched in front of Elspeth and begged her to speak.

'Why won't you talk?' she asked. 'What if Henry comes back? Please, talk.'

But Henry did not come back, not in those five days after he had beaten Elspeth. Elspeth liked to think he was ashamed; that his wife had seen the lines of blood in the folds of his wrist and would not let him touch her.

In the morning, Margaret came in holding her bairn. It was still and quiet and Elspeth wondered, not for the first time, if it was dead. She wished it were, and immediately scolded herself for that thought for it was wicked and had been put into her head by the fairy man; she did not recognise it as her own.

Margaret sat on the edge of her bed, her bairn at her breast, and said, 'Elspeth, I will tell you all about your bairn, if only you say something.'

Had she brought her bairn into the room just to make Elspeth more desperate? Elspeth lay there, looking through Margaret and her child.

Margaret pulled at a loose thread on the cloth around her bairn. After a while, she sighed and said, 'It was too early to tell if it be a boy or a girl.' She paused, making sure Elspeth had heard her. 'Its skin was very thin, and you could see all the blood inside it.'

Margaret stared at her bairn while she spoke, as though imagining Elspeth's in its place. 'It had ten toes and ten fingers, but they were all joined together. It had no breath in it.'

Elspeth knew that wasn't true; she had felt it moving inside her.

'It was very small, only a little bigger than my hand. It didn't even have eyes. Henry buried it,' she said, but did not tell Elspeth where.

The bairn must have still been warm when Henry put it in the ground, Elspeth thought. He would not have cleaned it. Its skin was not so thin. It was only covered in blood, and if they had cleaned it, it would have been pink like Margaret's bairn. Elspeth did not believe Margaret when she said it had been born dead. No, it had been wriggling and mewing when it choked on soil. Henry had placed it in the waste hole

outside. How could he have buried it so quickly otherwise? There was the hole, ready. She saw it: her bairn, planted in a puddle of waste, its blood reaching through urine like the veins that had reached over the yolk in the half-formed egg; and because she thought it, it must be true.

XV

On the sixth day after her beating, Elspeth laced her dress loosely over her back, and walked out into the next room. Margaret looked at Elspeth hopefully, waiting for her to say something, but she didn't. She only sat on a stool, looked into the fire, and tried not to think about her uncle, who had so often done the same.

Elspeth's bloody shift and blankets had produced a large pile of ash. The wind whistling beneath the door stirred it, and it shivered up through the air, stinging Elspeth's eyes. Margaret's efforts had been for nothing, for the cloth that had caught Elspeth's bairn still remained in the house. It clung to the damp walls, sunk into the gaps between the stone, and soaked into the fish above the fire. It was folded into the cloth wrapped around Margaret's bairn. It lined Margaret's fingernails, replacing the blood she had picked out from them; and every time Margaret tried to sweep it up, she pressed it further and further into the earth floor.

XVI

Elspeth's breasts began to leak with milk every time Margaret's bairn cried. Margaret knew a cure for it that her midwife had taught her. Margaret took two thin bowls of lead that had been made to cover her breasts. She warmed them a little over the fire and placed them on Elspeth. Elspeth lay there while Margaret sat beside her, breastfeeding. Sometimes, when Elspeth closed her eyes, the bowls turned into two hands on her chest, but when she opened her eyes again, he was not there. Elspeth knew he was near though, waiting for her to stir up her voice again and say something wrong; something about her bairn, about its father, and so she chewed her lips shut.

XVII

Her chest was near dry by the time Henry started coming around again. He tried to talk to Elspeth, constantly asking her questions to try and catch her off guard: to try and

trick her into speaking. Elspeth heard him talking low with Margaret. He said that he did not think Elspeth was herself.

Margaret said, ‘No, she isn’t.’

‘It wasn’t a proper birth,’ Henry continued, ‘and no one was watching her when the pains started. Suppose she is with the fairy and that thing I buried was a changeling Devil?’

Margaret did not reply.

Henry announced that Elspeth must go to kirk with Margaret on Sunday. No wonder the Devil had taken away her voice; she was a very easy victim, having been so long away from God’s house and word. She had broken every Sabbath since her return.

XVIII

The folk stared suspiciously at Elspeth. Henry walked close to her, pulling her behind him as if to protect Elspeth from the folk’s eyes. Elspeth was sure Henry was worried about changes the folk might see in her; that they might smell the milk on her, or the birthing blood that clung between her toes. Margaret walked behind them.

The miller’s wife stepped up to Henry and said, ‘Is that you, Elspeth? Back again?’

‘Yes,’ Henry replied.

‘*Elspeth*,’ she breathed. ‘How are you?’

Henry stepped between Elspeth and the woman. ‘She is very well,’ he said, pulling Elspeth into the kirk.

Henry sat in the closest spare seat to the front, but it was still not close enough for Henry. He looked enviously at the three rows in front, his hands in fists on his knees.

When the sermon was over, Elspeth stood to follow the woman beside her out of the aisle, but Henry gripped her arm and pulled her back. ‘We must stay,’ he said, ‘and pray—pray for your voice to be returned.’

Elspeth turned to Margaret, but Henry put his hand on the back of her head and pressed it into the pew in front. She struggled, pushing back against his hand, but he held her fast. She thought her skull might collapse. Henry told her to shut her eyes, but

she had already closed them. He pressed his cheek to hers. She could smell the grease in his hair. He prayed under his breath: a quick, panting prayer, which he repeated several times. He asked the Lord to fill Elspeth's heart once more, purging it of the evil which had taken root there.

Elspeth pleaded with God to make Henry's next prayer his last: his last in this church, his last in this world. The fairy man must be feeding her these thoughts, but she would not turn these ones away.

XIX

Margaret's bairn had been crying through the night and into the morning, spit clogging its mouth, its chest heaving, its body flushed. Margaret rocked it in her arms, begging it to *please stop*. Elspeth kept churning, and Margaret looked over to her often with hard eyes, as though annoyed by the constant slap of the churn handle diving in and out of the thin cream.

If Elspeth had had a voice, she would have explained to Margaret that the day was too warm and wet to be making butter and that she was mad to have asked her to churn; the bairn must be scrambling her wits.

Margaret's voice grew louder, 'Stop. Please, stop.' She looked at Elspeth. 'What should I do? Is he sick, you think?'

Elspeth shook her head.

'Won't you answer me, Elspeth? Help me.'

Elspeth kept churning.

'Oh, stop it!' yelled Margaret.

Elspeth jumped, unsure if she were talking to her or the bairn.

'Take him,' demanded Margaret, handing the bairn to Elspeth. 'Let me do this.' She took hold of the churn handle.

Elspeth, holding the bairn a little out from her, shook her head at Margaret once more, but this time to tell her that it was no use: the cream would not thicken that day.

Margaret spat, 'I am sick of seeing you shaking your head at me. I know you can speak. Henry is fit to throw you into a fire if you don't start talking soon. And don't hold the bairn out like that you'll drop him.'

Elspeth pressed the bairn into her chest, turned, and walked out the door to give Margaret a break from its crying. She strode towards the barn, passing the waste hole.

It had been packed with too much dirt; it bulged, forming a small slope on the otherwise level earth. Elspeth knew her bairn was beneath there. Even standing thirty paces away, she was certain she could smell blood in the plump soil. She did not know who she was speaking to—God or the fairy man—when she asked: why should Margaret's bairn breathe clean air while mine chokes on earth?

XX

The next time Elspeth's brother prayed for her in church, she hammered and kicked the pew in front, making as much noise as she could without her tongue. Some of the folk shuffled back into the kirk after the sermon and asked Henry what the matter was? Elspeth's brother told them not to concern themselves; he was only praying for his sister, who had recently turned away from the Lord. He said that Elspeth was only fitful because she could hardly bear the Lord's Prayer any longer. The minister overheard Henry and side-stepped into the pew in front. He bent down, looking very concerned before Elspeth.

He said that he had always known her to be a pious child and that he did not understand why she was acting so.

Henry replied that he believed she had come back from their uncle's house a changeling.

The minister nodded. 'I have dealt with such things before. Come, let us pray.'

The minister took hold of Elspeth's arm, threaded it over the pew, and slid his hands down until they were clamped around her fingers. His hands were wet. Every place he had touched prickled with cold. Together, the minister and Henry prayed. Henry's voice, though strong, was not enough to drown out the minister. The prayer increased in fervour and volume as Henry fought for dominance. It was *he* who had to save Elspeth: his voice, his faith. She would be *his* miracle, and his alone. But the minister out-prayed Henry with every verse. The minister's hands perspired more with each word. Sweat had begun to trail down Elspeth's wrist. She fought to calm herself, seeing no way out as long as her brother's hand rested on her head and the minister's greasy fingers were clamped around her.

XXI

Elspeth did not want to spend another Sunday in church with her brother's breath in her ear. So the next day, while Henry walked the cows and Margaret boiled the milk, Elspeth took up a broom and began sweeping through the croft. She made her way around the walls, before circling towards the hearth. Margaret was bent over the pot above the fire, humming as she stirred. Elspeth stepped behind her, moving towards one of the chairs: the one upon which Henry's coat hung. Sweeping still, Elspeth reached inside her brother's left pocket. It was empty. She ran her fingers over the bottom seams to be sure; soil wedged beneath her nails. She moved to the right pocket. There, she found a handkerchief, and it had been used too, the yellow stains upon it dry and brittle. Elspeth coaxed it up her sleeve and continued sweeping.

That night, as Margaret cooked, Elspeth strolled outside. Her feet seemed to hover above the ground, her shoes collecting no filth. The sun had recently set, and the earth was orange and shadowless. Elspeth floated towards the bulge in the earth, a shovel in hand. Once there, she began flicking the soil away. She did not want her shovel to hit bone, nor did she want to see—to *smell*—

She needed only to dig far enough to secure her brother's handkerchief beneath the earth. She dug two hands-lengths down, plucked her brother's cloth from her sleeve, draped it inside the hole, and dumped earth over it, weighing it down before it blew away. Elspeth could smell fish stew boiling inside, and hoped it was a while yet before it was ready. She filled the hole, making sure it swelled just the same as before. Then, she crouched over the mound and prayed for the curse to work. She touched the soil and, immediately, her arm softened, as though a small creature had travelled through her middle finger and buried its way up her arm, removing all the blood and bone in its path, until her limb was but skin, clean of all life, and puffed up by air. She rocked on her heels. She could feel the depth of the soil. What lay at the bottom weighed it down, like a fish pushing at the base of a net. Her stomach dived into the hole to meet the creature it had carried for five months. Elspeth prayed her brother would suffer the same fate it had. She willed the rain to trickle down through the soil and coax all that lay at the bottom up—up towards the cloth, where it would mix with Henry's dried-up fluids and, like a mould, the curse would breed inside that handkerchief, and her brother's lungs would also bubble with urine, shit, and blood.

Elspeth waited, watching her brother walk in and out of Margaret's house everyday with clean teeth and mouth. Whenever Elspeth walked past the mound, she paused and prayed for the curse to work. She began to think she had not buried the cloth deep enough and thought about retrieving it and placing it further down.

XXII

The third Sunday came, and Henry was well. His lungs were clean, his breaths deep. He liked to sigh; loudly. When near to him, you could feel the force of it on your face: the rush of air from his mouth. You could smell the ale on it, sour and full. You could smell fish stew. Elspeth hated it. Here she was, making herself smaller, holding every word and breath in so as not to take up too much air, and he *sighed* and *sighed*; after taking a drink, after sitting down, after putting on his jacket, after a meal: a heavy, open mouthed *sigh*.

Henry sighed as he sat down in the kirk. Elspeth's mind was not on the sermon, but on what would happen once it finished. She knew well the feeling of Henry's hand in her hair, slamming her forehead into the pew in front. She felt it over and over during the sermon, anticipating his sudden movement. She listened for a change in the minister's tone: a sign that he would soon finish. She leaned away from Henry, pressing against the legs of the woman next to her.

The sermon ended. The minister dismissed the folk. Henry moved towards Elspeth, about to take hold of her neck, but she bowed her head before he had the chance, resting her brow on her clasped hands. She did not speak but mouthed the same prayer Henry had recited the last two Sundays. Henry did not move. Elspeth could feel him staring at her. When the church was almost empty, he bowed his head too, mirroring Elspeth, and began praying as well. Elspeth started the prayer again with him.

After repeating it several times, Henry sat up. Elspeth followed him, keeping her eyes down.

He touched her arm. 'Elspeth, is that you? Speak to me.'

She turned to him and made her eyes water. It was not difficult. She had only to think of Henry as a little boy, sitting on a stool, weeping because their father had hit

him, and she, shuffling up to him, and placing her hand on his. As though he could see her thoughts, he placed his hand on hers. She wanted to tell him that she wasn't the only one who had changed. She wondered if a fairy had taken him away too.

Henry's face softened. He rubbed Elspeth's tears into her cheek. 'It's alright, Elspeth,' he said. 'I know you're in there. I can see you more than before. Just a few more Sundays, and I shall have you back.' His touch upon her cheek made her tears come faster. He gathered her up then and held her.

Back at the house, Henry informed Margaret of Elspeth's progress. He told her that she willingly recited the Lord's Prayer, if silently, and that he was certain their sister was coming back to them. Elspeth worked obediently for the next few days. Henry was at the house more often, a glimmer of hope in his eye. He watched Elspeth intently as she went about her tasks. 'See, Margaret?' he said. 'See how she is coming back to us?'

Margaret nodded, her eyes watering.

Still, nothing ailed Henry. He looked quicker than ever, his eyes clear and sharp. Hope had filled him as it had left Elspeth.

XXIII

Elspeth sat on her bench looking at Marion. 'If I were to leave here,' she asked her silently, 'would you follow me?' Elspeth did not know what she wanted the answer to be, but of course, there was no answer. Marion's face didn't even puff into that smile of hers; she looked bored. Elspeth wondered what Marion was still doing in the corner now that Elspeth was no longer with bairn. Her curse had worked, but it had not killed her. Perhaps Marion was hoping it would. Perhaps she would be stuck with Elspeth until she joined her. Elspeth almost felt sorry for Marion, for having such an uncomfortable afterlife. Elspeth was grateful that her own feet were planted firmly on the ground, and that she could use them to walk away: away from this house, away from the mound of soil over the waste hole, away from Henry.

'I think I will be sad to leave Margaret,' she continued, addressing Marion in her mind. 'I think.' She might even be sad to leave Margaret's bairn, though she hated

looking at it now. ‘But if you are able to find me where I’m going, could the fairy man find me too?’

Marion hung still.

Elspeth delayed her tasks, making sure Margaret went to bed before she had finished. She did not go back into the bedchamber. She did not glance at Margaret, her bairn, or Marion to say goodbye. She placed two bannocks in her pocket. There was only one coin in her sister’s coffer. She left with that too.

XXIV

The sky was only just beginning to lighten when Elspeth passed the miller’s house. The miller was outside with a mug in his hand, kicking the shovel that lay at his feet. He asked Elspeth what she was doing walking all alone dressed in her travel cloak? ‘Is it one of them ships you’re walking to? *Elspeth*, your brother will not like that,’ he mused.

His eyes were the same as the fairy man’s: dark and hungry. Wine had spilt down his shirt. It was still wet, clinging to the hair on his chest.

His eyes glistened. ‘It *is*,’ he sang, stepping towards her.

He asked where she was going, leaning close; so close she could smell wine and vomit on his breath. He didn’t seem to notice her lack of reply. ‘You’ll be needing coin,’ he continued, pretending to think deeply about it. ‘Those merchants do nothing for free.’

Elspeth tried to walk around him, but he kept following her.

‘It will hurt none,’ he said. ‘Not if you are as well practised as folk say you are.’

Elspeth sickened.

‘Come on, lass, think sensible. I am doing you a favour,’ he said, breathing heavily. He reached for her arm.

She ran from him, her blood quick.

‘Whore!’ he yelled, stumbling after her.

III

ORKNEY

February 1614

Elspeth arrived at the bay at dawn. There was a group of people lined up beside a large ship. The people at the front handed goods to the mariner standing at the end of the plank: fish, hens, corn, meal; things the merchants could sell in the place they were headed. The mariner inspected the goods and, when satisfied, nodded, and let them onto the ship. Elspeth walked over to the crowd and, hovering beside them, became horribly aware that she could not ask where they were going. She walked to the front of the line. The folk eyed her and told her to go to the back. She ignored them and stepped up to the mariner, waving her arms in a way she hoped he would understand. He said, 'The end of the line is that way.'

Elspeth kept flailing.

Then he said, 'Are you headed to Orkney?'

She knew of many Caithness people who had travelled to the Northern Isles to seek work, and as soon as the man had said *Orkney*, she knew it was right; that was the place she was meant to go.

She nodded, and he told her once again to go to the end of the line.

When she finally reached the front again, she handed him a coin.

There were around twenty of them below deck. Elspeth could only see them by the thin light that caught on the grease of their hair and cheeks when they moved. The mariners had handed them buckets as they climbed down. It soon became clear to Elspeth why. As the floor began to rise and fall, and tip from side to side, the retching started. Soon, most of the passengers were huddled over their wooden buckets. Sick washed over the sides of them. There was no food in Elspeth's bucket, just yellow water. The smell of it burned her nose. It mixed with the sour stench of all the other buckets below deck, held tightly between knees, heads pressed into rims, red lines cutting foreheads in half. The sick moved with the sea below. The smell was enough to keep Elspeth's stomach heaving, even as she got used to the swaying. Someone touched her back. A bucket had fallen over, or maybe it had overflowed. Sick slushed across the floor. The person it belonged to had eaten, and it looked red with wine. Then, with the rocking of the ship, the liquid tossed the other way. Elspeth thought she was empty, but she was sick again.

The walls began closing in on Elspeth. She thought, if only she could just get on deck, she might have a fresh gulp of air, and she would be fine. A fresh gulp would shove the sick back down and stay her retching. She swayed over to the ladder, her hands slipping over the greasy wood. She banged on it, then lifted it and slammed it down on the side of the hole. She began stepping up the ladder. A mariner poked his head through the hole and yelled at her, 'Stay down—stay down goddamn it. You'll fall overboard.'

She paused, gripping the ladder tight to keep from falling. The whole ship wanted to fling her out. 'Stay down!' he yelled, so urgently that Elspeth began to think that whatever was happening above was much worse than what was happening below. She climbed back down. Those who were not retching looked askance at Elspeth, but she could not say anything to them like they wanted her to. One man asked Elspeth what the man had said to her?

Elspeth pointed downwards to signal that they should stay below.

He seemed to understand and nodded. It was strange that he had asked her anything at all, even more so that he seemed to trust her.

Elspeth was thrown back against the side of the ship as she sat down. She gripped her head to try and keep it steady, but it did no good. They swayed endlessly. Elspeth sensed a great heaviness around them; a swelling, as if the sides of the ship were being swallowed by waves.

The men above were yelling. Water began to spray through the hole and trickle down the ladder. Elspeth thought that it was only a matter of time before that spray became a steady stream and she drowned in darkness.

Someone yelled down that they had arrived and to come up one by one, carrying their buckets, and if they weren't carrying their bucket, they would not be allowed up. Elspeth wondered how it was they had stopped, when the boat was still swaying; though there was no water trickling down the ladder anymore, and the men above seemed to be yelling less.

The passengers began walking towards the ladder with their buckets. Elspeth stood. She tried to grab hold of the wall behind her, but it fell away, and she stumbled into her bucket and spilled some on the ground. She almost retched again from the sight of it. Elspeth began to think that they had not docked at all. The men only wanted

them to come up so they could steal their coin and afterwards push them off the side of the boat.

But Elspeth heard no screams from the people who had gone up the ladder, through the patch of light, and so, she gripped the handle of her bucket and followed the last person up. She stepped carefully, one rung at a time. Both her hands, one over the ladder, one over the bucket, were clenched white.

She stepped blindly onto the deck. Someone took her bucket from her, and she heard something splashing over the sides of the boat. Then a hand was on her back, and she was walking down a plank, her feet skidding.

The ground moved like the ship.

She let the crowd carry her down the dock and towards a street near the bay. She pulled her shawl close around her and bent into the wind. It began to rain. The air shoved itself down her throat, making it difficult to breathe. It had been raining earlier that day, for the ground was already wet and muddy. The street was narrow. The houses down it were huddled in small groups, creating strange, jagged alleys between them, followed by wider gaps of mud, where peat was stacked against hen houses and barns. Elspeth slipped over the slated stone. The road was empty apart from the passengers that had just arrived. Some folk went into houses. The windows looked so warm. Elspeth wanted to touch the yellow glass and soothe her fingers. The wind whistled down the street, breaking here and there, as it found a wide gap between the buildings. She stopped in the light of an open doorway. Warmth rolled out of it. It was an inn. She stepped inside and was greeted by a woman who told her that a room cost three silver coins.

Elspeth shook her head and opened her hands to show that she didn't have the money.

'Then no room,' said the woman.

Elspeth clasped her hands together.

'Do you have somewhere else you can go? How old are you lass?'

Elspeth shook her head and pointed to her throat.

'You're dumb?'

Elspeth nodded.

The woman sighed and rubbed her forehead. 'You're not pretending? Cause if you are lass, I swear—'

Elspeth fell to the woman's feet, her hands clasped desperately. The men drinking inside the inn laughed at her.

The woman said, 'Get up—get up, lass. You can sleep in the kitchen tonight, but only tonight.'

And so, Elspeth slept in the corner of the kitchen, among a pile of sacks. There were women walking past her all night. They laughed and talked with each other loudly, but Elspeth was next to the oven fire and very warm, and she slept.

She did not want to get up from the sacks in the morning, not knowing what awaited her outside. She curled herself out of the cloth and looked immediately to the corner of the room, but Marion was not in it. She had been too tired to arrange the sacks around her person. She looked down at her skirt but there was no blood. She had been fortunate. He had not come to her, not since the birth of her child. She was glad she did not have to see Margaret or her bairn; would not see them, she thought, perhaps, ever again.

She wondered if Henry knew she was gone yet. She pictured Henry's fist slamming into a wall, and a purple bruise budding across it, tender. He would not be able to hold a bridle tightly. She wondered who he would use it on now: his wife, his children? She hoped the handkerchief in the ground would someday sprout blood in his mouth.

The oven still burned. Elspeth shuffled along the floor to warm herself next to it. She took the poker up, squeezing her eyes to stop the vision of her uncle driving his poker through the egg, and stirred the dying flames. Ash clung to her skirts. Dirt lined her palms and nails. Her dress still smelled like the birthing room, her breath like sick. She picked at the sand around her nose. She couldn't bathe in the sea. She would die if she were wet and forced to spend a night outside.

Elspeth took one of the sacks she had slept on, folded it, and put it in her apron pocket, thinking it might be of use to her later. She stood. The ground still swayed like the boat. The bannock she had eaten, seemed to have turned into a rock in her stomach. The crumbs were drying in her teeth.

She walked into the eating hall. A few men sat at the tables with mugs of ale before them. Elspeth saw the woman who had let her stay the night. Elspeth mimicked drinking out of a cup, and the woman told her how much it would be.

Elspeth shook her head, and the woman sighed. She brought out a cup of ale for her anyway. She asked if Elspeth had work?

Elspeth shook her head and looked at the woman eagerly, but the woman said, ‘Good luck to you lass. It is an evil place to be without work or lodging. You are to be out of here within the hour.’

Elspeth wondered what she should do and how she was supposed to ask for work. She tried her voice as she stood there, but she could not make any sound other than a high-pitched wheezing, which she squeezed out of her throat until it was dry.

I

Elspeth stepped outside and started down the street. The morning sun streamed across the narrow road in irregular lines, some fat and full, others only just creeping through thin alleyways. Behind the line of houses to Elspeth’s right was the bay. Behind the houses to the left were fields, stretching out, low and long.

She began knocking on every house she passed. She savoured the warmth that pulsed out of the open doors, leaning as far as she could into them, but the people who stood between her and their hearth fires looked at her with pinched eyes. They did not understand what she was trying to say as she touched her throat, her chest, and then pointed behind them. They thought she wanted to soak up their warmth and ale and offer nothing in return, and hard face after hard face barred Elspeth from their houses. When they did, Elspeth touched the warm wood of the closed door to soften her blue fingers, then skirted down the street once more. She flitted from alley to alley. She could breathe easily pressed inside the close lanes, without the wind punching down her throat. In there, she wiped the wet from her eyes, before stepping back into the tunnelling wind and up to the nearest house.

There was, about halfway down the street, a tall wall. On it was a bishop’s mitre and arms. The wall encompassed a great castle, built of large, sturdy stone. She had never seen a castle like it, squatting next to houses, looking onto a street. It cast a thick, cold shadow.

A little way down from the castle, was a red cathedral. It had three arched doors. There were a few beggars, sitting on the steps before each door, their hoods over their heads.

Elspeth walked up to the cathedral, opened the low, wooden gate that led into its kirkyard, and stepped inside. She touched every grave she walked by. The building seemed to bend and stretch with each turn she took around it. At one moment it was long and thin, and the next seemingly short and stout. With each step, she squeezed more and more water out of the soil. She thought of the bodies below her feet, drowning in mud, like her bairn.

Next to the cathedral was another grand building, with several round towers peeking over the perimeter wall. There was a gatehouse at its entrance, before which stood two officers in arms. Elspeth could hear men inside the outer walls. She dared not walk too close to the officers. She felt very exposed in the expanse of green between the cathedral and the grand buildings. She walked back towards the town's sole street. She longed to sit down but had nowhere to. She could not sit in front of the cathedral; the folk would think her a beggar. She knocked on the nearest door. The people inside did not answer, so she tried the next one.

II

The sky was darkening, and Elspeth still had nowhere to sleep. Men stood inside the doorway of the inn. Their eyes found Elspeth. They were wondering about her, she thought. They were wondering where she was from, and why they had never seen her before; why she was out, alone, at night, sauntering up the street. They wondered whether they should follow her, pull her into a dark corner, and press the coin she so clearly wanted between her breasts, while they slid their hands beneath her skirt.

Elspeth pulled her coat over her head and quickened her step. Thin, pale faces peered at her from the alleys. They were like rats, piled together, swaddled in cloth, their eyes bright and suspicious.

Leaning upon the damp buildings as she walked, she finally paused in front of an alley which appeared to have no one inside. Elspeth walked down it, stretching out her foot to feel for any bodies that might be curled on the ground. Satisfied, she sat down and bent her stiff legs into her chest. She stayed like that for a while, twitching at every sound to her left and right; she was sure there were real rats in the alley, but she preferred rats to the men from the inn. She put her coat over her eyes, hoping no one would see her there if they peered down the lane. She wished Marion were there to watch for strangers. As soon as she wished it, Marion was there, swinging before

her on the opposite wall, moonlight streaming across her face, a shadow cutting across her neck with the rope, making her head look as though it were floating.

I am very glad to see you, thought Elspeth. I did not think I would miss you, but I have.

It was too dark to see what Marion had attached her rope to in the alley, but it did not matter, she was there now, and Elspeth felt safe enough to close her eyes.

Elspeth woke with a weight on top of her. She tensed, thinking it was the fairy man. She looked to her side and saw a hood, with black hair pouring out from it. Faint breaths sounded from the creature. Elspeth scrambled out from beneath it. It reached for her, moaning, clutching at Elspeth's skirt, raking into the wool with its ragged, grey fingernails. Elspeth kicked the hand away and scrambled down the alley. At the entrance, she paused, breathing heavily. The thing had curled back into itself and was once again sleeping. A nose poked out from the hair over its face. It looked like a woman. She had a purple stain across her cheek. She was snoring. Elspeth shuddered.

III

A beggar sat outside the cathedral, looking small against the towering wall. Elspeth watched them from the street, hesitating. She saw, in the open sack before the beggar, one or two coins. Elspeth was aching with hunger. She trudged up to the beggar. It was the woman who had slept on top of her the night before. She recognised her by the stain on her cheek.

The woman nodded at Elspeth, and Elspeth sat opposite her, on the other side of the door. Then, Elspeth took out the sack she had taken from the inn and spread it over the ground.

A few moments later, another beggar woman walked around the side of the cathedral, towards the woman with the purple scar. Elspeth could not tell how old the woman was, she could have been either twenty or forty. She was putting what looked like mushrooms and other plants into a sack.

'Jonet,' started the woman with the scar, 'how did you do?'

'There's not so many this morning,' replied Jonet. She peered inside her sack, reciting silently the names of the plants she had found.

Jonet stopped and looked down at the two coins at her friend's feet and said, 'Good work.'

The woman smiled.

Jonet plucked up the coins and put them in her pocket. '*Very* good work. Keep it up,' she said. Then she strolled down the cathedral steps, swinging her sack beside her. The woman with the purple cheek stared down at her now empty sackcloth.

Elspeth joined her, staring at her own empty sack. It soon became the only thing in Elspeth's vision. Cloth brushed her shoulder every now and then: the coats and skirts of folk walking in and out of the kirk. She must have dreamed that one, two, three coins had fallen into her sack for, when she reached for them, there was nothing between the damp folds. Elspeth began to curse every soul that walked into the cathedral without so much as glancing at her.

As the day wore on, Elspeth felt her shoulders droop, her head bend forward, and the skin beneath her neck stretch thin, as though she were moulding into the shape of the woman who sat opposite her. Her cheek even began to burn, as though she were developing the same scar as the woman. She stayed there, behind her empty sack, even after the evening bells tolled, as did the woman with the purple scar. The woman had gotten two more coins. How? thought Elspeth.

It began to rain gently, and Elspeth trembled with cold. She glanced at the red brick above her; there was heat inside them. She stood, leaving her sack, and forced her way inside the heavy doors.

Gravestones lay flat on the ground at the front of the church. The stones must have belonged to noble men and women. They had pictures of skeletons dancing upon them with hourglasses perched in their palms. Elspeth bent down and touched the carvings. She ran her hand along the lines of what looked like a mountain or sundial. She felt the indents of the skulls, their eyes, their teeth, their elbows.

She walked past the graves and between the pillars, which were thicker than any tree she had seen. There was a large window at the end of the aisle, and pale light streamed through the twisted iron leaves within it. She slid into one of the pews. Henry's prayers began to pulse in her forehead, behind the spot he had pushed into the pew at kirk many times. Then Henry's thigh was rubbing against hers, his breath hot in her ear. She turned away from him, to her left, to see the black-clad fairy man at her other side. He had found her. He looked at the pulpit and said, wistfully, 'Neither of

us belong here, Elspeth. You won't tell anyone it was me who taught you to see and know anything you desire, will you? Neither of us are with souls, anymore. We belong with each other.'

Elspeth stood, scraping the pew back. The sound echoed through her chest, through the places her soul should have been. She ran away from the fairy man, over her brother's knees, brushing past the pillars, and out through the kirk door.

There was a coin inside her sack outside, she snatched it up and held it to her chest. The woman with the purple scar had gone.

The next day, as Elspeth sat, tucked into the corner of one of the grey buildings, picking dried blood from the soles of her feet, she saw the woman with the purple scar again, with the one she had called Jonet. They were knocking on one of the doors Elspeth had tried the day before. They were wasting their time, thought Elspeth.

The door opened. Firelight yawned over the women's faces. The person inside reached out their arm, placed a hand over Jonet's pointed shoulder and guided her inside. The woman with the scar followed. If Elspeth's feet were not leaking yellow and red, she would have started towards them and demanded to know why the woman admitted them and not her.

It began to rain as soon as the door closed again. Elspeth stretched out her legs, gasping as the rain prodded the open wounds on her feet.

IV

The poor haunted the street. Some were greedy and desperate, clawing and whining at passers-by like an evil wind. Others were dull and feeble, too tired to even hold out their hands. The beggar women, even the ones clawing at passing coats, were invisible during the day. But at night, when they slipped their hands back into their elbows, they became visible again, and the space where their arms had been was taken up by the hands of men, pushing out of their coats, swollen and ready, poking, poking; not demanding coin, but something else.

One night, Elspeth woke to a hand, sliding up her dress. But as soon as Elspeth told him to look upon the girl who had hung herself down the alley the man softened and looked as though he might be sick. Elspeth scolded Marion for not making herself

known sooner. She never slept alone in the alleys again. She huddled up next to strangers. In the mornings, it was difficult to tell whose coat belonged to who, they were so tangled, she had to sift through the material to try and peel herself away from them. The beggars had become, to Elspeth, not humans, but a pile of warm bodies to which she could attach herself for the night.

V

One-week later, Elspeth woke to a familiar tightness in her stomach. She walked into a dark corner in the alley and crouched to relieve herself. There was a line of blood trickling down the inside of her calf. She stood, pressed herself against the wall, and looked up and down the alley for the fairy man. She had seen him in the kirk. He must have found her again, at some point in the night. But she hadn't felt him upon her, and Marion had been there. How could she possibly be bleeding again? She thought that her soul had escaped her completely. Perhaps it was renewing itself, thought Elspeth, and he had come to pull it out of her once more. Or, perhaps it was like the blood on the marriage bed, and every time the man came to her, it was to ruin her again and again.

The man had found her. She needed somewhere she could protect herself: four walls, a barn. She had never slept in a barn before, though she knew of several beggars who had. She was scared of sleeping too late in one; of having a man find her in the morning and decide that, because she was on his property, she now belonged to him, and would use her as such. But she had learned to sleep lightly, and she decided to try one of the barns at the end of the street.

She could hardly see the barn as she approached it in the dark. She reached out, feeling for the door. When she opened it, she saw that there was a woman inside, lying on the floor with a rope about her neck, her face swollen. Elspeth sighed, relieved, and sat opposite her. She thought that it was peculiar for Marion to be lying down; she usually propped herself up somewhere. Marion's hair seemed lighter. Did hair do that, after death? Her skirt, also, did not bulge like it used to.

Elspeth recoiled in horror as she realised that it was not Marion at all, but some other woman. Elspeth wondered how long she had been dead for. Elspeth wondered

whether, if she had come to the barn only a few moments before, she might have found the woman still alive. She might have been able to pull the rope from her neck and save her. Then neither of them would have slept alone that night. Elspeth could have left and found another barn, but she didn't. This was her punishment. She was meant to find her; meant to always sleep and wake next to the image of someone with a noose about their neck.

At sunrise, Elspeth left the barn and the woman in it. Elspeth mourned for her that morning, thinking about how easily she might become her. But then Elspeth began thinking about all the layers of clothing the woman had been wearing, and her body rotting within them, and she wished she had taken them. She might have even pinned some of the extra cloth to her skirt to soak up the blood still leaking from her.

It took five days for the blood to stop. The stains were all over her shift, but it was too cold to undress and wash it in the sea. If the man was to keep coming to her and draining her, it did not matter anyway; there was no point in washing it anymore.

VI

Saturday was Market Day. Elspeth always saw the purple scar woman and Jonet lingering around the stalls, flicking glances at each other. Jonet took something off one of the stalls: a piece of bread. She turned into a corner, ripped off a quarter, and gave it to the scar woman. The woman gestured to the other loaves on the table, accusing Jonet of giving her much less than half. Jonet shrugged and walked away. The scar woman shoved the bread into her mouth.

Elspeth saw the two women again a few days later. They were walking together, a few paces in front of Elspeth. The purple scar woman trailed behind Jonet. She seemed off balance. She was walking on the sides of her feet, her ankles almost scraping the ground. They were heavy with scabs and bulging with blisters. She mumbled something. It sounded horrible, like the sound had escaped from the bottom of her belly, bubbling and weak. Jonet glanced behind her but did not pause. The scar woman reached out, her fingers brushing Jonet's skirt, and she let out another horrible sound before falling forward, onto the ground. She was still. Her grey hair splayed out over

her neck, shoulders, and above her head. Jonet glanced back again, her eyes widened a little, but she kept walking, faster than before.

Elspeth bent over the scar woman. She wondered if she should flip her over and check if she was alive, but the woman was very still, and Elspeth did not want to touch a corpse. Jonet, was weaving her way through the people ahead.

The passing folk wrinkled their noses at the woman at Elspeth's feet.

Elspeth stepped over the body. Her foot brushed her shoulder, and she felt the woman's soul snag on her heel, as though she had stepped into a noose, which tightened and tightened around Elspeth's ankle as she pushed forward. She hurried towards Jonet, dragging the woman's soul behind her.

Elspeth reached Jonet, who looked at Elspeth sideways and said, 'What? I didn't kill her.'

Elspeth shook her head, as though to say, 'I know, I know.' She put her hands up to signal that she was not trying to accuse her of anything; she was a friend. The woman narrowed her eyes and asked, 'What do you want?'

Elspeth tapped her throat.

'Oh, you're dumb, are you?' said Jonet. 'Well, good. You might get us a bed tonight.'

Jonet knocked on one of the doors at the end of the street. Elspeth recognised the woman who opened it. She shrunk behind Jonet, remembering the harsh words the woman had spat at her, but Jonet pulled Elspeth beside her again and said to the woman that they were both desperate for a place to sleep. She promised that they would sweep and milk and take out the waste buckets and do anything the woman wished, if only she would give them lodging for the night.

The woman hesitated.

Jonet nodded towards Elspeth and said, 'I cannot leave this little one, she being not yet ten years old and all alone on the street and vulnerable to all types of men. She has a very unfortunate story indeed,' said Jonet. 'Both her parents died of sickness a short time ago and left her with nothing. She came to Orkney looking for work, but has been turned away from every house on account of her being dumb and unable to speak for herself; doesn't the minister preach that you are to supply charity for such unfortunate and impoverished persons who have become so through no fault of their own?'

The woman sighed and let them both in the house.

Elspeth went to work immediately, flitting about, looking for anything to do: any buckets that needed emptying, any corners that needed sweeping, determined to make herself useful, so either the woman or Jonet would want to keep her. Jonet sat upon the spare bed. It seemed she had slept there before; she knew where to find the blankets and set to spreading them inside the box-bed that was to be hers and Elspeth's. Then Jonet sat by the fire, picked up a half-finished shawl, and asked the woman if she would like her to keep going with it? The woman blushed and said, 'No Jonet, that is for my daughter, and I want to do it all myself.'

Jonet shrugged and threw the piece back onto the stool beside her. She placed her hands in her lap, spread her feet towards the fire, and began talking at length about the weather and how difficult it was out on the street with the rain unceasing, and the hail stones coming three times a day. The woman nodded as she ground grain. Jonet remarked every now and then: 'What a good wee worker the lass is. Wouldn't it be nice to have a servant who couldn't talk?'

The woman had stopped nodding at Jonet and seemed to be determined to ignore her completely.

Soon, Jonet was dozing by the fire, her head nodding upon her shoulder.

Elspeth had to guide her towards the spare box-bed.

VII

Elspeth became used to breathing in the smell of Jonet's grease at night. Marion joined them in every house, swinging at the end of each spare bed. Jonet gave the same speech about Elspeth being an unfortunate orphan at every house they went to. The folk they stayed with seemed to know Jonet well. Jonet loved to talk, and some were just as willing to talk with her. Jonet seemed to know which houses belonged to widows and women whose husbands were away at sea. She seemed to like going to these houses in particular, because most of the women were very willing to speak to her, they being tired of staying in the house all day, seeing no faces other than their children's. These women did not appear to expect much work out of Jonet and were grateful for Elspeth's help. Jonet circulated around a few houses, taking as many nights and meals as she

could from each, before moving on to the next. She carefully spread herself throughout the town to prevent the folk from tiring of her.

One morning, as Jonet crawled out of their bed for the night, Elspeth noticed spots of blood on the back of Jonet's shift. Elspeth could not see the fairy man in the shadows of the house, but she knew that he had found her again. Had he used Jonet's body, thinking it was Elspeth's? Elspeth wanted to grip Jonet and apologise to her. She had been right next to Elspeth; how had Elspeth not noticed? But then, he had been quiet lately. Some part of Elspeth also wanted to thank Jonet for taking the man so she did not have to.

Jonet turned and said, 'What are you gawking at?' She pulled her dress around and saw the blood. She went red and asked, 'How old are you? Yours will come to you soon enough.'

He already has, thought Elspeth. How long had Jonet known him? She had not been frightened by the blood. He had visited her before. What had he taught her, in exchange for her soul?

Elspeth knew then that the purple faced woman was always meant to guide her to Jonet, and that Jonet and she were bound together by the same mark and master. Jonet bore it well. She showed no signs of pain or fear. She did not even seem to mind that Elspeth had seen it. Perhaps she thought Elspeth too simple to understand; to know that it meant she was a soulless creature. Elspeth made her eyes wide and blank and did everything Jonet asked, making sure Jonet kept thinking she was simple, so she would not suspect that Elspeth was the same as her. But perhaps she knew already. Perhaps the fairy man had told her all about Elspeth. Maybe that was why Jonet kept her around. But what did she mean then, by the words, *yours will come soon enough*?

VIII

Elspeth saw Jonet unpinning bloodied rags from her skirt as they readied for bed in Mrs Taylor's house, and Jonet once again scolded her for staring.

'Sit down, creature,' she said. 'Are you really that simple? I don't think you are.'

She folded the bloodied rags, put them into an empty sack, and sat beside Elspeth on the bed.

‘Have you ever bled?’ she asked.

Elspeth shook her head, fast.

‘Alright, no need to look so feared; it is not so very bad. Green sickness is, but millefole eases it well enough. Millefole is good for most things; do you know of the plant, lass?’

No.

Jonet pulled a plant out of one of her sacks and waved it in front of Elspeth. It had a long stem and white flowers.

‘It closes up wounds and keeps them from inflammation or fiery swelling. It cures blood in any part of the body. The leaves chewed are a remedy for toothache, and the leaves being put into the nose do cause it to bleed and ease the pain of the migraine with it.’

Elspeth wondered how Jonet could do all of that with one plant. She began to think that this is what the fairy man had given her; this was the cause behind her bleeding. He had gifted her with healing knowledge. Elspeth wondered if the plant could get rid of bairns too.

‘You know,’ said Jonet, ‘I think it might even give you your voice back, if we tried.’

Elspeth shook her head. She wanted nothing more to do with the fairy man.

‘Don’t be feared,’ said Jonet. ‘It will work, I think. Wouldn’t you like your voice back?’ Her voice was thick and sweet. ‘You could just talk to *me*, and to everyone else you could pretend to be dumb still.’

Elspeth shook her head again.

Jonet sighed and said, ‘Suit yourself.’

Over the next few days, the spots of blood on the back of Jonet’s shift hardened into copper coins. Elspeth thought of plucking one out from the material and using it to buy them a decent place to sleep.

IX

Jonet left Elspeth alone in Mrs Taylor’s house for several nights in a row. She returned in the early hours, reeking of ale. She usually fell asleep right away, breathing with her mouth open. Elspeth could see the blackened teeth at the bottom of her mouth and hear

the air scraping down her throat. There was no more sleep for Elspeth after she came in. So, Elspeth stared at Marion, who never slept.

Jonet never told Elspeth when or where she was going at night, but Elspeth knew it was to the inn. Jonet never asked Elspeth to come with her, and Elspeth was frightened she was tiring of her.

Elspeth stayed sitting up for some time, speaking silently with Marion, while Jonet was gone. She asked Marion what she thought of Jonet, and if she should trust her. Marion seemed glad that Elspeth was consulting her again, for Elspeth had been ignoring her since she found Jonet. Elspeth knew how that felt, now Jonet was seeking company elsewhere. Elspeth was sorry for Marion, for it must be so lonely having no one to talk to, having to hang there all by herself. She wondered what Marion did during the day. She might have been satisfied with just Marion's company, if she talked back to her. Elspeth wondered if that was why Jonet had been neglecting her. Perhaps she was bored and needed someone who would talk back. Elspeth envisioned Jonet coming back into the house with her arm through a stranger's, whose tongue was quick and sharp, and Jonet picking up her sack and waving goodbye as she walked out the door. It might not be so bad if she let Jonet cure her voice. If it meant Jonet would stay by her for a few more months, then it would be worth it. And what was the worst that could happen? She had endured the worst from the fairy man, and she had no soul anymore to lose.

It was almost light by the time Jonet came back into the house that night. She leaped next to Elspeth and, seeing her eyes already open, pressed her mouth to Elspeth's ear and whispered that she had found somewhere for them to live. Elspeth sat up. Jonet grinned and said that there was a man named William Scottie who said that they may stay with him for as long as they would like.

'What's the matter?' Jonet asked. 'Aren't you happy? He is in love with me, I tell you Elspeth; you should see the way he looks at me.'

Elspeth's stomach twisted. Did he live alone? She did not want to live alone with a man. Suppose Jonet were to spend more nights at the inn and leave Elspeth with him. Elspeth shook her head and patted the bed to say that she was fine where they were.

'Mrs Taylor is set to throw us out any day now. She has been complaining of us to all her neighbours. I have been at the inn these past nights, trying to find us

lodging. Aren't you grateful, Elspeth? It was not easy snagging Scottie, but I tell you he is in love with me,' she laughed.

X

Scottie's wife had died some years ago and had left him no children. He said he would be glad to have the company of Jonet and Elspeth. He looked to be slightly younger than Jonet. He was a cordiner. Shoes were strung up from his roof and nailed to his walls. Jonet was taller than both Elspeth and Scottie and bumped her head on a pair as she stepped into the house.

Scottie apologised for the dampness of the room. Elspeth longed to open the door to let some fresh air in. It smelled as if something were festering at the bottom of the food store.

The first night Elspeth and Jonet were with him, he sat down with a pair of boots and told them that he needed to finish them that night, but all evening his eyes were fixed on Jonet. He asked her all about the food she liked, the weather she liked, and the kind of boots she liked. He hardly touched the shoes at all and seemed to have forgotten that the buyer was coming for them the next morn.

After supper, Scottie put his hand low on Jonet's back and guided her towards his box-bed. Jonet crawled inside it willingly and let out a soft laugh as Scottie went in after her and closed the curtain. Elspeth hurried into the box-bed that was supposed to be for her and Jonet. She pulled the strings of her dress apart; she wanted to be in bed with a circle of wool around her and a blanket over her ears before the noises started, but she was too slow, and she soon heard Scottie grunting, and Jonet moaning very loud, and Elspeth wanted to scream. She arranged the wool around her and was sad to see Marion so squashed in the corner of the box-bed, with no room to hang her feet. She was tucked up small, her belly pressed against her knees, her neck bent at an even more uncomfortable angle than usual. Elspeth told Marion silently that she hated them: Jonet and Scottie both.

XI

Jonet spent each night in Scottie's bed. Elspeth could hear the two of them moving together most nights. Scottie did not speak to Elspeth very much. He seemed to falter

whenever he did, as though he were unsure if she were deaf as well as dumb. Though he often smiled at her and pulled strange faces as if she were a child that he was trying to make laugh. Sometimes he would roll his eyes at Elspeth at something Jonet had said, as though the two of them were friends, and more and more, Elspeth could feel his eyes staying upon her. Scottie did not like Jonet working, for he always wanted to be around her. So, Elspeth worked, and she was glad whenever she could go out into the field and be away from the lovers. She looked forward to every Saturday, for Scottie would spend the whole day at the markets, selling his shoes, and Elspeth could pretend that the house belonged to her and Jonet alone. When Scottie returned, he pulled Jonet close and complained that he was making little profit. 'The people,' he said, 'are so impoverished that they barely have coin for meal, let alone shoes.'

XII

Scottie was always asking Jonet whether she was glad to be there, staying with him. At first, Jonet answered him sweetly, but then grew tired of the question, and started getting short with him.

One day, Jonet answered Scottie with, 'Of course I am glad. Do you have to ask me all the time?' Then, seeing his face slacken, and feeling his arms retreat from her, she pulled them back around her waist and tried to mend things by saying, 'You should know I'm constant. Aren't I happy, every moment we're together? Can't you see? It makes me sad to think you can't see it.'

Scottie, apologising, embraced Jonet. Jonet grimaced at Elspeth over his shoulder, and Elspeth's stomach fluttered, thinking that they might leave sooner than she expected.

XIII

A man came to Scottie's door.

Jonet and Elspeth never answered it. They hugged the walls, away from the line of the door, though the folk knew that they were staying there. Whenever Jonet or Elspeth left the house, the words *Scottie's whores* followed them. No one in the islands knew Elspeth's name; she could not say it aloud. When she looked too long at things on the market stalls, the folk called her, not 'you' or 'beggar' anymore, but 'Scottie's

whore'. They often added that she should go back to her bawdy house; go back to Scottie.

The man at the door was speaking harshly. Jonet edged around the walls, climbed into Scottie's box-bed, and closed the curtain. Elspeth did not move.

The man told Scottie that he was to pay five months arrears in rent in one week's time.

Scottie stuttered that he could not do it; he only had enough for this month. The man said, simply, that if Scottie did not have the money, then he would lose his house and goods. Then, the man turned on his heel and walked away.

Scottie stood, staring out at the empty doorway. The wind slid past him, disturbing the central hearth.

They could hear the man speaking to Scottie's neighbours.

Scottie closed the door, walked over to the fire, and sat down. He ran his hand through his hair. Jonet did not twitch inside the box-bed. Elspeth couldn't even hear her breathe. Elspeth wanted to crawl into her own bed, but she was scared to move from the wall, in case she remind Scottie she was there, eating food and coin he could give to the tackman. Would he demand she pay him for her bed? Jonet had paid with her body. What would she pay him with?

Jonet stepped out of Scottie's bed.

Scottie looked up from the fire with red eyes.

Jonet walked over to him, knelt at his feet, and stroked his cheek. 'They are full of greed,' said Jonet. 'And they consume his majesty's rent for their own uses; I tell you it does not reach the king. They will have every one of the folk starving while they gorge on our coin and meal.'

Scottie nodded, pulled Jonet onto his lap, and buried his face in her neck.

Elspeth scurried into her bed and shut the curtain. She pressed up close to Marion. She could still see the lovers through the gap.

The pair sat together, with Jonet whispering soothing words to Scottie, for the most part of an hour.

Elspeth thought of copying Scottie and burying her head into Marion's neck; and she would have, if the rope had not made such a state of it.

XIV

One morning, Elspeth gestured to Jonet that she was going to fetch some water from the burn. Jonet, who was churning milk with Scottie wrapped around her back said, 'No, I'll do it,' and stepped away from the bench, but Scottie held her fast, kissed her neck, and said, 'No, don't go, Jonet. Keep churning.'

Elspeth hesitated at the door with two buckets.

Jonet wrenched Scottie's hands away from her waist and said, 'No, I would like to do it.'

'I will come with you,' said Scottie.

'No,' Jonet said. 'I will do it alone.' Then, softening, she added, 'You look tired, my love. Rest a while.' Without waiting for Scottie's reply, Jonet snatched one of the buckets from Elspeth. She reached for the other, but Elspeth pulled it behind her and motioned that she would come with Jonet.

Jonet said, 'God's cause, can't I have a walk alone?' She reached behind Elspeth, snatched the other bucket, and walked out the door.

For a while, Scottie sat dejectedly by the fire, staring at the flames.

Elspeth took up the churning Jonet had left. She fell into a trance, lifting, twisting, and pushing the churn handle. She sensed Scottie stand and move towards her. She stepped away from him and churned faster than before.

Scottie said, 'Jonet can be a cruel woman sometimes, can't she?'

Elspeth ignored him.

He touched her hand to stop her grinding and said, 'Isn't she cruel to us? How can we stand it any longer?'

He leaned forward to embrace Elspeth. She elbowed him away and stepped back. He stared wetly at her, his cheeks sinking.

'You are both cruel,' he said. 'The pair of you. And I have given you such kindness. Name any other man in this town who would treat you as kindly as I.'

He moved forward again, but Elspeth stepped away and flitted out the door.

She spent the morning on the street, huddled in an alley, watching for Jonet.

Jonet was gone much longer than she should have been. When she came back, carrying two buckets, Elspeth ran up to her and touched her arm before she could draw any nearer to Scottie's house. Elspeth motioned for her to put the buckets on the ground and pointed down the street to say that they should leave presently. Jonet frowned and

said she didn't understand and kept walking towards Scottie's house. Elspeth tugged at her skirt. Jonet spilt some of the water and spat over her shoulder, 'Let me alone. If you wish to leave, leave. I don't care much what you do.'

Elspeth stepped back, her eyes filling, and watched Jonet walk back into Scottie's house.

She spent the rest of the day shivering in the alleys, and, come nightfall, snuck back through Scottie's door, and crawled into her box-bed, where Marion was waiting for her. At least the dead were constant.

XV

In the morning, Elspeth pulled Jonet aside.

Jonet sighed and said, 'I wouldn't have snapped at you yesterday if you hadn't made me spill the water, and I didn't like you snatching at me either. Between you and Scottie, you two are always pulling, pulling, pulling, and I'm tired of it. And I don't see why I should do all the dirty work and lie with Scottie each night—I say it's about time you took on some of the weight.'

Elspeth's eyes watered at this.

Jonet paused, sighed again, and said she was sorry; she was tired was all. 'You have to do nothing of the sort.'

Elspeth put her arms around Jonet.

Jonet stiffened and then relaxed and patted Elspeth on the shoulder. 'You seem much troubled in your mind, lass. What is it?'

Elspeth pulled back. She pointed to her throat, and then to Jonet's bag, where she kept the plant that she had told Elspeth about before.

Jonet smiled weakly and said, 'Good. It would be much easier if you could talk. We will cure your tongue on Saturday, when Scottie is at the mercat.'

XVI

That Saturday, after Scottie left, Jonet called Elspeth in from the field, and told her to kneel by the fire on her right knee. She did. She felt unsteady and gripped onto one of the stools for balance.

Jonet held a plant before her face and started speaking.

Elspeth began to feel strange. The floor dipped below her as it did when she crossed the ocean to the islands. She saw Jonet's mouth moving as she twisted the plant she called millefole in her hands, but could not understand what it was she was saying, though she understood that Jonet was carving out a gap between this world and the next with her garbled words. The ground was adjusting, trying to find a steady plain between the earth and the in-between. Elspeth thought she could hear Marion moaning from the box-bed as they crossed into her world. Then, standing behind the fire to Elspeth's right, a shadow stood up behind the flames, stretching as he always did when he rose from his chair at night: the fairy man.

Elspeth wanted to stop Jonet's words, to put her hand over her mouth and close the gap between heaven and earth once again. She did not want to bleed. She did not want to feel the pain in her stomach. She did not want to hear his honeyed words, but she could not get up; the earth seemed to be pulling her knee down, and she thought, suddenly, about her bairn and how heavy it had been beneath the earth.

Jonet held out the plant for Elspeth to take hold of. The fairy man stepped beside Jonet and shook his head in warning. 'Elspeth,' he said, 'if you tell anyone about us, they will not understand; you will be challenged and hurt.'

Elspeth ignored him and took the plant from Jonet.

'Put one of the plant leaves inside your nostril,' Jonet instructed.

It was witchcraft. Elspeth thought about throwing the plant into the fire, but the fairy man said, 'Little hypocrite, you will do a ritual for your eyes but not for your tongue? You have no soul left to lose. Speak if you want to, just not about me. You must keep counsel about me.'

Elspeth pinched one of the leaves, rolled it tight, and pushed it into her nostril, feeling it unfurl once inside. Her eyes began to water.

Jonet said, 'Now take the rest of the plant and place it between your second finger and thumb. And, while saying the words *in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti*, you must pull and pull the plant through your fingers.'

Elspeth's nose was burning now and streaming with hot, thin fluid. She licked her lips. She tasted iron. She looked down at her knee. There were drops of blood on her skirt. She was not sure if she was allowed to wipe her face. She let the blood drip off her chin.

'Say it with me,' said Jonet, 'until your voice wakens: *in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti*.'

Elspeth joined Jonet. Blood coated her tongue, then her cheeks and throat. The second *in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti,* was but a gurgle in the back of her mouth. The warm blood soothed Elspeth's throat, loosening it. The third prayer whistled out from her throat: a quiet, high moan. All the while, Elspeth kept pulling the plant through her fingers.

She snorted and felt a wave of blood fall down the back of her tongue. The next prayer slid easily from her, and she said, '*In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti*.'

Jonet smiled and made Elspeth say it once more.

Elspeth swallowed and said, '*In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti*.' Her voice was clean and clear. She said it again, just to feel the throb of sound in her teeth.

'Say something else,' said Jonet, taking the plant from Elspeth. It trembled in her hands.

Elspeth hesitated. She did not know what to say. She considered pretending her voice had left her once more. The fairy man was no longer beside Jonet. She hadn't seen him leave; she had been so intent on the plant in her hands. What was safe to say? She said, 'My name is Elspeth.'

'Elspeth,' said Jonet, 'what a nice voice you have.'

Elspeth warmed.

Jonet motioned for her to get up.

She tried.

Jonet, seeing she was unsteady, gripped Elspeth's elbow and helped her. 'Where are you from, Elspeth?' Jonet asked.

Her chest tightened. She knew the line of these questions. She knew they would lead eventually to the fairy man, and she had to be careful. 'Caithness,' she replied. 'Are you a witch?' said Elspeth, suddenly.

Jonet frowned and said, 'Where did you hear that?'

Elspeth shrunk. 'You gave me my voice back.'

'It is a simple cure,' Jonet said. 'Say anything about me being a witch again, and I'll make you regret wanting a voice. Have you been feared of me all this time?'

Elspeth shook her head. 'No,' she said, realising she no longer needed to shake her head in reply. 'You have been kind.'

Jonet laughed. 'Sit,' she said.

They sat together by the fire.

Jonet stared at Elspeth for a little while. ‘It is very strange hearing you speak,’ she said. ‘Say something else.’

‘I only want to hear more about you,’ said Elspeth; ‘about who learned you the cure.’

Jonet said that a man had taught it to her.

‘Who?’

‘Someone I met in Harray. What do you think of Scottie?’

‘I hate him.’

Jonet laughed again, open-mouthed. ‘I wish you had talked sooner,’ she said. ‘I hate him too. Should we curse him?’

Sweat sprung on Elspeth’s palms. ‘I know no curses,’ she said.

‘Of course you don’t.’ Jonet sat in thought for a while. ‘He has some nice sheep outside,’ she said. ‘Suppose we stole some of their wool? If we steal enough, we may make enough of a profit to live on our own for a while, what do you say? We could go out every Saturday, while Scottie is at the market.’

Elspeth hesitated.

‘Scottie’s taken a liking to you,’ said Jonet. ‘It won’t be long till he’s dragging *you* into his bed,’ said Jonet. ‘How old are you?’

Elspeth had to think about it. ‘Fourteen,’ she said, uncertainly.

‘You do not look it,’ said Jonet. ‘Have you ever lain with anyone?’

Elspeth shook her head.

‘I was your age, or thereby,’ said Jonet. ‘The first time.’

‘What was it like?’ asked Elspeth.

‘I was looking for work,’ she said, ‘when I met a husbandman above the Kirk of Harray. He said he would give me coin if I kept his cows while he was gone to Kirkwall for two days. I said yes. It was strange, staying in his house, all alone. I kept his cows and was very careful with them, thinking that if I looked after them well, he might take me on as his servant. I watched the beasts from inside, looking out at them through the door, which I left a little open. I huddled by the fire to keep myself warm, and they grazed out there until it was time to bring them into the barn at night. Three days passed and the man still had not come back. I was uneasy amongst all his things. His wife’s clothes were piled inside a basket, and I wondered what had happened to her. I had used up all the food he left, which was not much. I did not like the smell of his bed.

‘One day, as I sat watching the cows, I felt myself growing heavier and heavier in the chair, until the sight of a great black bull pulled me out of my sleep. The bull was walking amongst the cows, suckling on them. The beasts did not move; they seemed to not see or feel the bull at all. Then, the bull turned its bright eyes on me, looking straight through the gap in the door. It began walking towards me, and I realised that the creature was not a bull, but a man. He walked through the door and looked down at me. He said I looked sad and hungry. He asked if I had food, and I answered that the man of the house had only left enough for two days, and I could not harm any of the cows because they had been placed in my charge—and not really knowing why, I begged him, ‘Don’t hurt the cows—please don’t.’ He said he would never. He said he would never hurt me either.

‘He bade me call home the cows and he would direct me to his house and give me some flesh to eat. I put the cows in the barn, and when I was done, I turned to him, a little afraid, avoiding his eyes, which never left my face. We walked to his house, him all the way telling me of his croft, and his loneliness, and how he had no help with the land. When I saw his house and the state of it, I agreed that he could use some help, and that I would be glad to for coin. And he replied, looking very sad, that he had no coin to give. Then, he walked into a small section at the back of the house and brought out a cut of flesh and said that I could have it to eat. I took it from him; it was heavy and damp. I asked what flesh it was? He said it was cow.

‘I thanked him and, becoming aware of how close he was standing, began to move towards the door. He began to speak again about his miserable state. He said his wife had died, bringing with her their first bairn. I said I was sorry for it. He then told me that he found it difficult to talk to people, especially women, for he saw so little of them. I asked him why he had come to the house? He said it was because he had heard that his neighbour William, the owner of that house, had perished in a boat, and he wished to see if the cows were being taken care of, and he was glad they were so well. Did you know him? The man asked. I shook my head. He then began talking about how his crops had failed that year and that he had very little money, but I could see the flesh he kept in the back of his house and wondered where he had gotten it from because I had seen no cows or barn outside. He said that he would be grateful if I could leave some coin for him for the flesh, and I shook my head and said I was sorry—I had no coin, but I could work for it. He said he could not keep me as a servant—he hardly had enough for himself. And then I held out the meat for him to take back,

apologising and saying that I never would have come if I didn't think he was offering me charity, and I was very sorry to have led him astray. He pushed the meat back towards me and, touching my cheek, said that perhaps I could pay for it another way? My heart beat very fast, and I felt very frightened. Then he took the meat from me, put it on the bench, and I felt sick to see it placed there, among the dust and dirt. He slid his hand around my waist, and that was the first time I lay with a man.'

'Did you bleed?' asked Elspeth.

'Oh, yes.'

'And did you see him again?'

She nodded and said, 'The next morning I woke before the man did and walked back to the husbandman's house, for I did not know where else to go. I was so tormented by my thoughts, thinking that every little sound was the ghost of the drowned man inside the house, angry with me that I would take advantage of his death as I was, and I hated being alone with him and alone with my thoughts, my body sore with the memory of what I had done. I went into the barn to be amongst the warmth of the cows, and it was a comfort. The man came to me again in the morning. He told me to milk the cows, and as I did, he sat in the corner, talking on and on as he liked to do. He said how happy he had been since last night; I had not left his head. He said he had never been so happy, not even with his wife, and the more he talked the sicker I felt. I did not say anything in reply, but he did not seem to want one. He kept an eye on the pail between my legs. He took it away as soon as it was full and put another empty one in its place. He left carrying all the milk I had gotten that day.

'The next day, he came back with a butchering knife, at which time he told me that if I was to serve him, he would let me want for nothing, but I have done nothing but want since I met him.'

'Do you see him often?'

'Sometimes,' said Jonet. She looked sad, and Elspeth wished she could tell her that she had also met the man, that she had also bled, and that she also saw him again and again. She envied Jonet. She spoke of the man without fear and of the bleeding without shame.

'I will help you steal the wool,' said Elspeth, for she knew that as long as she stayed friends with Jonet, no harm would come to her.

Jonet nodded. ‘We must be very careful. Scottie must not find out, not with Finlayson’s man demanding coin from him. We don’t want him blaming us for his debts.’

‘Who is Finlayson?’ asked Elspeth.

‘Sheriff Finlayson, now,’ said Jonet. ‘He is a tackman. He is evil. You are lucky to have had no dealings with him. He is a stranger, sent here by the king after the former Earl Patrick was arrested in Edinburgh to answer to his own evil doings. The man at the door the other day, he was one of Finlayson’s men. They harass the poor ones of this country. I have seen them throw whole families from their houses when they could not pay them in time. The beggars you see on the street; many of them were put there by Finlayson. The whole country is in danger and like to perish through his greed if he is to continue as sheriff. Many of the people want his death. And I myself, have prayed for it.’

XVII

The next Saturday, Jonet and Elspeth went out into Scottie’s field with two knives and began cutting away small pieces of wool from their bellies. They shoved the wool into sacks and, once they were done, pressed those sacks into the corner of Elspeth’s box-bed, beside Marion’s feet.

Elspeth pretended she was still dumb in front of Scottie. Jonet seemed to forget sometimes that Elspeth could talk now, for she did not say much to her, and sometimes, when Jonet asked Elspeth a question and Elspeth answered her with more than a nod or shake of the head, she looked taken aback. Elspeth liked cutting the sheep’s wool, for it was the only time she spent alone with Jonet. Jonet gradually began asking Elspeth more and more. Elspeth thought carefully about her replies, making sure that none of them led to the fairy man.

Jonet asked about Elspeth’s family: what they were like, and why she had come to Orkney. Elspeth told her most of the truth but did not tell her about her aunt and uncle, or her bairn. She said that her sister and her brother had children of their own and could not keep her anymore, and so she went to Orkney to find work.

Then Jonet asked her how she had lost her voice, and Elspeth said that she had been much frightened by a bull that had charged at her outside her sister's house and had not had the use of it since then. Jonet did not ask any more questions about it.

XVIII

Finlayson's man returned after a week. Scottie begged him for more time, but he refused him. So, Scottie gave him butter, meal, two sheep, and as many boots as it took to satisfy the man, who went away with a cart-full of Scottie's goods. Scottie spent the rest of the day in Jonet's arms by the fire, staring blankly at the empty hooks in his wall, where his boots used to hang. They had hardly any food left between them.

XIX

The sacks of wool began to take up a large part of Elspeth's bed, resting on Elspeth's legs as she slept. Elspeth was worried that Scottie would become bored of Jonet. She was afraid he would come to her instead, and when he did, that he would see the wool. Then, after he had had his way, he would drag her to the Kirk session and demand a rope for her head.

It had been Jonet's idea to store the wool inside Elspeth's bed. It was clever of Jonet to do so, for it made Elspeth appear like the guilty one. Jonet had more wit than Elspeth realised, and if Jonet had to, Elspeth was sure she would watch gladly while Elspeth swung upon Heiding Hill. Elspeth thought about placing the wool inside Jonet's bags instead but did not think on it long.

'We have more than enough wool to sell now,' Elspeth told Jonet. 'We can leave during the next Market Day.'

Jonet did not say anything in reply.

When Elspeth asked her what she thought, she said, 'I don't know.'

They cut more wool that Saturday. 'There will be no more room left in my bed if we keep going,' said Elspeth.

Jonet ignored her.

‘I am leaving with the wool at the next Saturday, whether you are coming with me or not.’

Jonet frowned and said, ‘You wouldn’t dare.’

Elspeth stared back at her.

Scottie and Jonet had been getting louder and louder at night, and Elspeth was beginning to think that Jonet liked his bed a little too much.

XX

Elspeth had no choice, lest she be suffocated by the bags of wool in the night. She had to put one of the bags amongst Jonet’s sacks. It was not Elspeth’s fault that Scottie saw it in the morning, though he was slow to do so. He sat across from Elspeth by the fire, while Jonet lay awake in bed, for three quarters of an hour before he noticed the bulging sack on top of Jonet’s plants. When he saw it, he remarked, ‘That’s strange.’

Jonet, turning in Scottie’s bed, mumbled, ‘What’s strange?’

‘That bag over there,’ said Scottie. ‘Did you buy something at the market?’

Jonet looked sharply at Elspeth over the fire, and Elspeth uncrossed her legs on the stool, ready to run if she needed to.

Scottie walked over to the sack and looked inside. ‘Are you sure you didn’t buy a bag of wool?’

Jonet, swinging her legs over the side of the bed said, ‘Yes, I remember now that I did.’

Scottie turned towards her, his face red. ‘Where did you get the money for it?’

Jonet shrugged and said she had some saved.

Scottie stood there for a moment, staring down at the bag.

Elspeth held her breath while Jonet looked at her evilly.

Scottie inhaled sharply and started out the door.

Jonet sat tense on the bed and said, ‘He’s gone to check the sheep.’

Elspeth did not move.

‘We’ll both hang for it.’

Elspeth wondered at the word *we* and thought it much more likely that it would be *Jonet* who would hang for it; though, of course, she hoped it would not come to that.

Jonet stood and began to pick up her things. ‘We’re going,’ she said, and that was all Elspeth wanted, so she got up too. Jonet told Elspeth to take as many bags of wool as she could carry.

‘But he will see,’ whispered Elspeth.

‘He is in the field. He won’t if we leave now.’

‘You carry them,’ said Elspeth, shoving a bag of wool into Jonet’s arms.

Jonet pushed it back. ‘No,’ she said. ‘*You* carry them.’

‘I will carry the herbs,’ said Elspeth, reaching down for the sack beside Jonet’s feet.

‘I’m not carrying the wool,’ said Jonet.

‘Neither will I.’

They both turned towards the door as Scottie stepped back into the house.

He went straight for Jonet and ripped the woollen sack out of her hands. ‘Flit your kist,’ he spat.

Jonet’s eyes grew wide. ‘We only meant it as a favour to you,’ she stammered.

We? thought Elspeth.

‘I’m sure you did,’ said Scottie, ‘and I’m grateful for all the bags, but you will not get a cut from them. And if I see you at the market selling even a tuft of wool, I will have you both before the Kirk session.’

Jonet placed her hand on Scottie’s arm and told him sweetly to please, think about it for a moment. ‘We only did it to save you the work.’

Scottie flung her arm away and told Jonet again to remove her things.

Jonet’s face turned sour, and she spat on him.

Elspeth gripped Jonet’s arm, and began to pull her towards the door, afraid of what she might say, but the tugging only angered Jonet more. She flung curses at Scottie as she struggled against Elspeth.

‘You’re a weak man,’ said Jonet. ‘Weak of body, and weak of mind.’

Scottie followed them out the door, and yelled into the street that Jonet was a jade queen, and to make it clear to those outside that he was the one throwing them out, and not them who were leaving, he bellowed twice more, ‘Flit your kist!’

Jonet, in the middle of the street, cursed him. She told him that he would not live without her. She spat at him. It landed on his neck. As Scottie rubbed it away, Elspeth saw a rope, winding itself around his neck. It tightened, pulling the flesh of his

neck inwards and, for a moment, Scottie's cheeks swelled, and his fat purple tongue pressed out between his thin lips. Then, the rope was gone.

XXI

Elspeth never forgot Jonet's words, nor did the townsfolk who heard her say them that day. For, one month later, it was announced in kirk that William Scottie, who had been travelling to Westray to sell his goods, had perished in the firth alongside five other men and one woman, who were riding out in Robert Sinclair's boat; and the words *you will not live*, cemented themselves in the minds of the folk, and turned into a curse of death.

After the announcement of Scottie's death, Elspeth and Jonet were turned out of the house they were staying in, and, when they asked their neighbours for lodging, the folk avoided looking directly into Jonet's eyes, mumbled an apology, and shut their doors. In front of one of these houses, Elspeth saw, as Jonet turned away from the door, a rope appear about Jonet's neck; the same rope she had seen around Scottie's and Marion's necks the last times she had seen them both alive. Jonet took a step towards Elspeth, but the end of the rope was caught beneath the door. It tugged on Jonet's throat and she lost her footing. She quickly regained it and continued walking past Elspeth. The rope moved freely beneath the door now, sliding out from the house as Jonet walked further and further away. Elspeth wondered if the ropes she had seen around Scottie and Marion were signs of their deaths. She hoped it was not so, for that would mean that Jonet's throat would soon be empty of breath too.

That night, Elspeth and Jonet slept in an alleyway. Marion hung before them, keeping one eye on the opening of the alley, and one on the end.

'I saw Scottie's death before it happened,' Elspeth whispered. 'I saw a rope wind about his neck, the moment you told him he would not live without you.'

Jonet scoffed. 'That's easy to say after his death. Why didn't you say anything before?'

'I didn't know what it meant before, but now I'm sure it was a sign of his being soon to die.'

'Do you regret his death? I thought you hated him.'

‘I did,’ said Elspeth. ‘It is only that, I have seen the same rope about your neck.’

Jonet’s hand flew to her throat. The rope was still there, pulsing as though it were alive. It seemed Jonet could feel it upon her, as sure as Elspeth could see it.

‘Truly?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you think I killed Scottie?’

‘I do.’

Elspeth couldn’t be sure in the darkness of the alley, but she thought she saw Jonet smile.

XXII

Elspeth was pinched awake. She looked up. Standing before her and Jonet was an officer, wiping the hands he had just used to pinch Elspeth and Jonet on his thighs. He only looked at Jonet as he spoke. He said that she was to come with him presently and stand before the Kirk session to answer to some accusations concerning her and the sinking of Robert Sinclair’s boat. ‘Slander,’ said Jonet. ‘Who’s saying it?’

The man gripped Jonet’s arm and hauled her upwards.

Jonet twisted away from him, but he held tight. His fingers reached all the way around Jonet’s arm.

He didn’t seem to notice or care about Elspeth, who walked behind him as he dragged Jonet through the town. Jonet looked over her shoulder and said, ‘Wait for me.’

Elspeth followed them to the kirk and curled up outside the door. She wondered if Jonet would ever come out again: if the next time she saw her would be on the hill, swinging like Marion. She wondered if she would have two bloated corpses haunting her soon.

Jonet was inside the kirk for the most part of an hour. When she came out, she dragged her feet over to Elspeth and told her, ‘They said that I caused William Scottie and all the others in Robert Sinclair’s boat to perish in Westray firth by witchcraft.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I denied it, of course. They started telling me some of the other things that folk had said I had done by witchcraft, but I denied them too. In the end they had to let me

go, but they wanted to punish me one way or another, so they got me for breaking the Sabbath almost every Sunday for the past year and told me I have to stand at the kirk door for the next three Sundays on the pillar of repentance in sackcloth for it.'

XXIII

The pillar of repentance was a wooden stool. Its legs were of an uneven length. Jonet's toes clung to the edge of the teetering seat. Elspeth had never seen so much of Jonet. She wore only a sack, which went down to her knees. Her knees were like two white eggs, bobbing in water. Sweat sprung from them, and Elspeth pictured herself wiping it off and into her eyes. Then she pictured the minister driving a hot poker through them while Jonet screamed. Jonet had been standing there for three quarters of an hour, and already she was hunching over her legs to relieve her back.

Her bones, as thin as they were, seemed to be weighing her down terribly. By the time the sermon had finished, and the folk had returned to their homes to pray further, Jonet was shivering violently.

The sun had set. Jonet no longer cast a shadow. The minister stepped out of the cathedral, holding Jonet's dress, just as Elspeth was asking her where they could sleep that night. He eyed Elspeth as he handed Jonet her dress and said, 'Aren't you the dumb lass?'

'It comes and goes,' croaked Jonet.

'How old are you?' the minister asked Elspeth.

She shrugged.

'Am I free to go?' said Jonet, folding her dress around her arms.

The minister glanced at Jonet, gave her a sharp nod, and walked back into the kirk.

Elspeth helped Jonet down. Jonet's fingers made four deep lines around Elspeth's wrist.

Neither of them said it out loud, but they both knew Jonet would not be able to stand there again on the next Sunday; if she made it to the next Sunday, thought Elspeth. She had probably already caught sickness, and if they had to sleep outside every night until then, Jonet would likely die.

No one let them in that night. They had all seen Jonet outside kirk, and they were afraid that they, if seen with her, would be made to stand there too on the next Sabbath.

Elspeth wrapped her arms around Jonet's quaking body in the alley and breathed warmth onto her cheeks, which, Elspeth noticed, were wet.

XXIV

They left the town of Kirkwall the next day. Jonet leaned heavily on Elspeth as they walked down the narrow street. Every time they walked past an alley, their hair and skirts were blown sideways by the tunnelling wind. It surprised them every time. Elspeth stared at her mud-stained feet. Her blisters were yellow and green.

She was not afraid to leave the safety of the town. She knew Marion would follow her wherever she went. The cobbles turned to mud, which eventually turned into rough grass and heather. Jonet recited the names of the crofts they passed to keep track of where they were going. They passed the farm of Greenbuster, then Firth, Clarth, Cowbuster, and Howland. Land and water stretched out around them. There were no trees: no shelter from the gale. The wind flanked them, pushing at their backs. Then, as the wind changed, it held them up, opening their shoulders, and drying their eyes and throats.

Every now and then Jonet stopped to pick some herbs and put them into the sack that she hugged to her breast. As she did, Elspeth stood, scraping her heels desperately on the ground. Jonet told her to stop; that she would disease the cuts if she opened them again. 'If you keep scratching,' she chided, 'you will need these.' She waved some plants in front of Elspeth's face. 'Or, risk losing the foot altogether.' Elspeth stopped scratching after that.

Birds seemed to be following them, circling, waiting for one of them to drop.

They passed a dead sheep, half rotted at the base of a hill. The birds had already gotten to it. Elspeth was glad Marion's corpse was so pretty.

They soon made it to Harray. Jonet knew all the names of the crofts there. They passed the farms of Nerstaith, Myrkbuttie, and Garth, and stopped in front of the croft of Corstath. Jonet told Elspeth that the family there had housed her many times when she was younger.

As they stood there, pushing back against the wind, Elspeth looked at Jonet properly, for the first time, it seemed, since they had left Kirkwall. Jonet's face was grey, her lips purple, her eyes red. There was a croak in her voice. Her hands were white around her sack. She was catching sickness. Elspeth walked Jonet to the door. A woman opened it and, taking one look at Jonet, let them in immediately.

Jonet lay sick in the woman's spare bed for a week. Jonet asked Elspeth to take some herbs out of her sack. She watched as Elspeth sifted through the plants and told her which ones to take and which ones to leave. Most of the plants looked the same to Elspeth, and she did not know how Jonet could tell them apart. The only one she recognised was the plant with the white flowers, which had cured her voice.

Elspeth decided that there, outside of Kirkwall, she would speak freely. The goodwife housing them did not say much to Elspeth, but she was eager to speak with Jonet. She asked Jonet how she had been and where she had been staying. She had three children. Jonet had saved the younger one's life when it was a bairn. The child was now eight years of age and, according to the woman, thriving and strong; he had never been sick since, unlike her other two, who were always taken with illness.

Elspeth could feel the goodwife's eyes on her as she plucked the correct herbs out from Jonet's bag and then, as instructed, crushed them into a paste, which she then rubbed onto Jonet's chest and back. The mixture was clean and sharp. The smell of it burned Elspeth's throat. It warmed Jonet and made her eyes and nose stream.

When Jonet was well enough to stand, the woman asked her if she could teach her how to make the cure. Jonet did, and she left her with the herbs to make it the next time her children were ill. Elspeth had enjoyed her days at Corstath. She liked being out from the frowning street of Kirkwall. She wished they could remain there for longer, but Jonet did not want them to outstay their welcome.

They moved on, travelling from farm to farm through the parishes of Harray, Stanehouse, and Sandwick. In Sandwick, at the croft of Wosbuster, the woman greeted Jonet like an old friend, and told her that the goodwife of Gorne had been sending for her. 'I have just come back from Gorne,' said the woman. 'I spent the night there

watching over the goodwife's newborn bairn. I'm surprised it survived the night. I do not think it has long in this world. The goodwife is in want of your cures.'

XXV

Magnus Sinclair of Gorne was an important man. Jonet told Elspeth that he would pay her well if she cured his newborn, but Elspeth was frightened of what he might do if Jonet failed. Now that Jonet had disobeyed the church's orders, and had accusations of witchcraft against her, Elspeth did not think the punishment would be the stool again: it would be much worse. The stool would be kicked out from under her, Elspeth thought, and she would be caught by the rope that clung to her neck, day and night.

Magnus Sinclair answered the door.

'We heard your bairn was sick,' said Jonet.

'Who told you that?' he said.

'Who is it?' yelled someone inside.

'Beggars,' said Magnus, closing the door.

'Who?'

A woman walked up behind Magnus. 'Jonet, is that you?' she said. 'I have been sending for you.'

'*Marion*,' warned the man.

Elspeth shivered.

'Come in, come in,' said Marion, ignoring her husband.

Jonet and Elspeth shuffled past Magnus, into the house. It had a slate floor, not an earth one. They followed Marion into a room on the right. A bairn lay inside a cot. There were several women hovering around the chamber, close enough to see the bairn, but not close enough to catch its sickness.

Elspeth inched her way towards the whimpering newborn. It was swaddled in cloth. Its face was red from crying.

Suddenly, it opened its mouth, which, Elspeth saw, was full of soil. It wailed and pushed the dirt out with its tongue. Elspeth recoiled. The smell of blood, soil, urine, and filth filled her nose. A shadow fell over the bairn's face. The fairy man leaned over the cradle. The floor tilted with him. He reached out, as if to pick it up.

‘Get away—get away,’ screamed Elspeth. Someone gripped her. ‘Out! Get out! Get away!’

She was pulled outside. Rain needled her face. The man was gone. She was safe.

‘What did you see?’ asked Jonet.

Elspeth wanted to tell Jonet about the fairy man, but her own tongue turned to soil.

‘Who were you yelling at?’

She stayed silent.

There was a muttering behind her. She turned. All the women, including the goodwife Marion, were gathered in the doorway, staring at her.

Jonet told Marion that Elspeth had had a vision. The bairn would die. Elspeth had seen such things before, and if she saw it, it would come to pass. ‘But,’ said Jonet, holding the weeping Marion, ‘I will do my best to prevent it.’

XXVI

Marion gave Elspeth and Jonet the guest room. They slept on a feather mattress. Jonet found it difficult to get out of the bed. She asked Elspeth to mix the bairn’s morning poultice for her, as she had done before for Jonet. Some days, Elspeth had made the poultice and rubbed it all over the bairn before Jonet had woken. Jonet said that the mixture was to warm the bairn’s lungs, which had gotten too cold.

Jonet mixed the poultice in the evenings but made Elspeth rub it on the bairn. Elspeth tried not to look at the bairn’s face as she smeared the thin, green paste over its chest and back, afraid she would see soil inside its mouth again.

XXVII

One night, some men came to visit Magnus Sinclair. There were four of them. They sat around the hearth in the main room, drinking and talking for hours. Jonet mixed the ointment in a small pantry off the back of the main room. Elspeth went with Jonet to help her. Jonet moved slowly, plucking off the necessary leaves one by one. She told Elspeth off for crushing them too loudly and took the bowl off of her, but she

hardly mixed it at all. Instead, she moved as close as she could to the doorway and kept an ear on the conversation in the next room. Elspeth listened too. She heard the names Robert and Patrick Stewart. The rest she did not quite understand; something to do with taxes and estates. They also said the name John Finlayson.

Jonet finished mixing the poultice, handed the bowl to Elspeth, and motioned for her to go on without her.

Elspeth couldn't hear the men when she was in the bairn's room. As she was rubbing the ointment on the newborn, Marion came in to see her child. 'I like the smell,' said Marion. 'She is looking better.'

Elspeth nodded.

'What did you see, when you looked at her the first time?'

Elspeth shook her head and wished she had pretended to be dumb when she arrived.

'You told someone to get away; who was it? The Devil? A fairy? Have you seen them again? Tell me.'

'I have not seen them again,' said Elspeth.

'Who?'

'I can't say.'

'But they are gone?'

Elspeth nodded.

'And my bairn will be well?'

Elspeth, wishing to ward off any more questions, nodded.

The men stayed the night, and Elspeth and Jonet had to sleep on benches in the main room. Jonet, on a bench next to Elspeth's, whispered, 'Did you hear what they were saying?'

'No,' Elspeth replied.

'They said that the former Earl of Orkney's son, Robert Stewart, has returned. He has been travelling about, collecting the rents his father is owed, but means to put them to use immediately; he means to start a rebellion, and take back his father's estates. Those men, they were former servants of the earl, Alexander Layng and Thomas Black; I did not recognise the other two. They were trying to get Magnus to join them, or support their cause by giving them food and coin. They want enough

food to last them if they have to go into a siege. They promised to give Magnus more land if they succeed. They said that Robert Stewart attended an afternoon's drinks at Edmund Calendar's house last week, and that everyone there who heard him speak has pledged their hearts and swords to Robert's cause. Robert is now staying with Bernard Stewart inside the castle of Birsay. He means to win Bernard over as well. That's where the men are headed tomorrow.'

'What did Magnus say?' asked Elspeth.

'He wasn't sure.'

'Do you think it will happen? There will be rebellion?'

'Yes, though I don't think they will succeed. Robert Stewart and his men tried to take the castle two years since, but they did not keep it long. Robert Stewart is stupid enough to try it again.'

'Do you want them to succeed?'

'I hope they kill Finlayson, but I do not want the earl to rule again. The people will join Robert. Many have told me that they wish for the Stewart Earls back, but they have forgotten the wrong the Stewart Earls have caused them. They were just as evil as Finlayson. The Orkney people,' Jonet continued, 'should rule themselves. We should be our own country, apart from Scotland. We shouldn't have to answer to foreign strangers who do not know how to work our soil, who judge our ways, and call us superstitious and popish. We could have our own religion; we could return to the Catholic way, and we would be the better for it; there are no better rulers for Orkney than the families that have worked this land for centuries.'

XXVIII

The men left in the morning without Magnus Sinclair. Jonet whispered to Elspeth that Magnus was smart not to join them. 'It will not bode well,' she said, so confidently that Elspeth wondered if Jonet had had a vision, or if the man she had told Elspeth about had given her some information.

The two women rolled back onto their feather mattress that night, where they slept for a week more: the time it took for the bairn's lungs to warm, for the fluid in them to melt away, and its cries to become clean and clear. Jonet had stopped Elspeth's death

prophecy from coming true. The Sinclairs no longer had need of the women. They were forced to leave, but they did so with heavy pockets.

XXIX

The women that had been watching over Marion's bairn must have told their neighbours about Elspeth: how she had seen some invisible figure bending over the bairn and had forced it away, saving the newborn's life. For, the people Jonet and Elspeth stayed with in the parishes of Sandwick and Harray, only admitted them if Elspeth would look over their kin and tell them if there were any images of death upon them. They wanted to know if they or their daughters would die in childbirth, if their bairns would be stillborn, if their children would recover from their illnesses, and if their livestock would last the winter.

Elspeth looked over the families gladly. She did not see the fairy man again, but she saw many ropes, fixed about thinning necks. Elspeth announced which family members were likely to die, and, for an extra three silver coins, Jonet gave them a mixture of herbs to prevent it. Mostly, the people did recover, and those who did not, had not used the herbs properly.

Some ropes were faint and fleeting, others were solid and fixed. Sometimes, Elspeth could see every hair that stuck out from the braided nooses. These ropes were coiled around the old in their beds or infants with thick breaths. It was a sign that the ropes were permanent, that there was nothing that could be done; the person would surely die. At times, these ropes weighed the old down so much, they couldn't even walk to their front door and had to rely on others to bring them food and ale. Elspeth only took the first three coins from these houses and then told them that there was nothing more they could do.

Some people did not want Elspeth anywhere near their houses or kin, thinking that it was Elspeth that weaved the invisible ropes around people's necks: that it was her who brought death with her wherever she went. Some were too frightened to even step in front of Elspeth, lest they hear a terrible gasp erupt from her and see her trembling finger aimed at their throats.

XXX

Elspeth and Jonet made their way to the parish of St Ola, south of Kirkwall. There, they stayed with a woman named Janet Whyte. Janet's husband, William Paterson, had gone to join Robert Stewart and his men in Birsay. Janet said he had pledged his heart and sword to Robert and his cause and had left the house avowing that *he* would be the one to run John Finlayson through. Janet had heard of Elspeth; the one who could tell you whatever you wished to know. The goodwife Janet let Elspeth and Jonet into her house without question and immediately wanted to know if death surrounded her or her bairn, but most of all, her husband, who she had heard nothing of for weeks. The goodwife and her bairn both had clean necks. Elspeth told the goodwife that she could only see someone's fate by looking upon them directly and could not tell her if her husband would live or die. The goodwife's eyes watered at this, but she found some comfort in knowing that her and her bairn were safe. She asked Elspeth the same question every morning: 'And how is my bairn today, Elspeth? Will he be well?'

Elspeth gave her the same answer every time: 'He will be well.'

XXXI

With her husband away and a young bairn still on her breast, the goodwife needed extra help around the house, especially as it was peat season. The goodwife could not go and collect peat and leave her bairn alone, so Elspeth and Jonet went for her.

One day, Jonet went out by herself to put the peat out to dry, while Elspeth and the goodwife stayed in. Elspeth made bread while the goodwife mended some blankets. Jonet was away for some time. Elspeth and the goodwife worked in silence to the sound of the rain pelting the door.

Jonet returned in the evening, dripping, her face red and eyes bright. 'Robert Stewart has taken the castle of Birsay,' she breathed. She took off her shawl, hung it over a chair, and leant over the fire, holding out her peat-covered hands.

'What?' exclaimed the goodwife. 'How?'

'Bernard Stewart refused to help Robert take back his father's lands. Robert stayed with him for two weeks trying to persuade him over to his side, but Bernard would not yield. Robert was growing impatient, and one day, he turned on Bernard and drove him from his home with a sword, keeping his wife as prisoner. Finlayson

came to Birsay with eighty men, demanding Robert surrender the castle, but Robert answered him with musket fire and drove him off. He says that Robert is now in full control of Birsay and plans to take Kirkwall too.'

'Was my husband among them?' said the goodwife.

'Who told you this?' Elspeth asked.

Jonet shrugged and said she did not know the man's name.

Liar, Elspeth thought. It was the man Jonet had met when she was Elspeth's age. The same man that came to Elspeth every month: the fairy man. He had been coming to Jonet for a while now, Elspeth thought. She had seen the blood. She had seen her master's mark.

'My husband?' repeated the goodwife. 'Is there any news of him?'

Jonet said she did not know.

'Are they winning?' implored the goodwife. 'Will they succeed?'

'They will get the castle and country,' said Jonet. 'But they will not keep it long.'

The goodwife let out a cry.

The man had told her that too, Elspeth thought.

'I *told* him not to go,' said the goodwife. 'I said, why would you give your life for that bastard Robert Stewart when his father did nothing but torment us? And now my bairn is never to know his father,' she cried. 'Can't you tell me, lass,' she turned to Elspeth. 'Can't you tell me he is alright?'

Elspeth said once again that she could not, not if the person is not before her.

'What good are you to me, then?' she said. 'You burn the bread, you are a slow churner, and you can't tell me if my husband is alive or dead.'

Elspeth and Jonet shared a wary glance.

'I suppose I can try,' said Elspeth. 'Do you have something of your husband's?'

The goodwife's eyes widened. 'Yes, yes.'

She walked over to a coffer with her bairn still at her breast and opened it with one hand. She pulled out a stained shirt. Will this do?' she asked.

She nodded and took it from her.

Elspeth pulled one of the stools away from the fire, into the centre of the room, and sat in it. She clutched the shirt in her lap and closed her eyes. She could hear the rustling of Janet's skirts and sensed the woman standing expectantly before her, shuffling her feet. She could even hear the smacking of the bairn's lips on the woman's

breast and the crackle and whisper of the fire. She tried to shut them out, squeezing her eyes tight. She tried to imagine the owner of the shirt in her hands. She could smell the stale sweat upon it, feel the roughness of the material, the holes in it. She imagined how those stains and tears were gotten and soon had a clear picture in her mind of what the woman's husband looked like, even though she had never met him before. Elspeth could see a stone wall behind him. He was sat at a table with a group of men. The men were arguing, but Elspeth could not see or hear them, could only sense them like one might sense a person approaching from behind. She knew they were arguing by the man's tight expression and short retorts, though she could not hear him either; she could only see his mouth twisting. Elspeth focused on his neck. His shoulders were weightless, his throat loose. He breathed easily and turned his head without strain.

Elspeth opened her eyes. Janet Whyte swayed before her.

Elspeth was floating above the chair. She had to blink several times to still the earth and settle back onto the seat.

'I saw him—inside the castle,' said Elspeth. 'He will be well. He will live through this, and your bairn,' she said, nodding to the creature in the goodwife's arms, 'will know its father.'

XXXII

They received news that Robert's men were travelling around the islands, offering food, drink, and warmth to those who joined Robert's army in Birsay. They promised more land to those who fought, if they succeeded, and more and more men left to join the rebels.

The goodwife Janet told her neighbours what Elspeth had seen, and those with kinsmen in Birsay sent for Elspeth as well. When she came, they gave her an item of their husband's or son's clothing, and Elspeth sat in their houses and went into a trance-like state. The floor dipped below her, while her head seemed to move in the opposite direction, floating upwards, so that her feet suddenly felt very far from the top of her head, and she was stretched out like a length of dough, her thinning, sticky flesh ready to catch whatever vision came. Most of the men Elspeth had never seen before, but she could picture them clearly with her eyes closed. If she felt a tightness in her neck as she looked at theirs, then she knew that death was waiting for them. Only a small few had ropes about their necks, and most women were very glad to give Elspeth and Jonet

lodging for the next few nights for confirmation that their kinsmen would be safe. Some of these women kept Elspeth and Jonet for a long space. They were afraid that, though their kinsmen were safe one day, a rope might tangle about their throats the next. So, they had Elspeth conjure up a vision of their kin every morning and assure them that no harm was coming to them still. Elspeth was glad to do it for them, for it was easy work, much easier than churning and milking, which Jonet was forced to do while Elspeth sat. After her trance, the women could see that Elspeth was faint, and gave her all the food and ale she wanted. Elspeth thought Jonet was getting jealous.

Jonet lay in bed next to Elspeth and asked Elspeth how she did it, how she saw them so clearly? Could she really see them, or was she pretending? Elspeth did not answer her and feigned sleep. By the end of the rebellion, Elspeth thought, Jonet would see; Jonet would see that all she had predicted would come to pass, and then, it would be Jonet following Elspeth around town, depending on *her* for food and meal. Elspeth slept with a smile, thinking of it.

XXXIII

Elspeth's hands slipped over the cow's udders as musket shots sounded in the distance. Elspeth stepped out of the barn at the farm of Grymseter and saw other shadowed figures looking out over the low hills. Elspeth could not see anything in the distance. Neither, it seemed, could the shadows, for they began walking towards Grymseter, where they knew Elspeth was staying. They gathered at the door, shaking their husband's and son's clothing in front of Elspeth, demanding she tell them where they were, what they were doing, if they had holes in them, and if they were still breathing.

Elspeth, with trembling hands, took the items from them. She sat away from the fire, in line with the open door, because she was so warm. She shut her eyes, but there was a blockage, something pushing at the top of her head. She could not see what she wanted to; she could not grasp what was happening. She opened her eyes to desperate, floating faces, gleaming in the fire light, their skin like a roasted pig's, yellow, turning and turning; she said she felt ill, tried to stand, but stumbled. One of the women caught her.

They gave her ale. She could not stomach the bread. She told them that the musket shots were ringing through her head; she could not concentrate. She told them that she needed rest and would try again tomorrow but they would not leave her. They

pressed closer, demanding she tell them what was happening. Elspeth's breath came short. The thing pressing on the top of her head was now pressing on her throat. She hoped it wasn't a rope.

The goodwife of Grymseter, Mrs Grieve, told the women to wait outside while Elspeth caught her breath.

Jonet had been watching from the corner, her arms crossed.

The women, reluctantly, filtered outside, clutching their things.

Mrs Grieve dragged Elspeth to a bed and told her to lie down a while. She went to get her a hot cloth.

Jonet moved towards Elspeth and said, 'It must be Robert Stewart, finally making his advancement on Kirkwall. Are there many deaths? Is that it? Do you not want to tell them?'

Elspeth wished Jonet would leave her be.

'Just soothe them,' said Jonet. 'Say that they are all fine and that you will check again tomorrow. Make sure they give you a coin for every vision. Should I let them back in?'

Elspeth shook her head.

'They will leave,' said Jonet. 'Tell them anything.'

'I won't lie,' said Elspeth.

'It will do them good.'

Mrs Grieve came back and lay a cloth over Elspeth's head. It quickly turned cold.

Elspeth sat up, dragged it down her face, and told Jonet to admit the women one at a time.

Jonet collected their coins at the door.

Their kinsmen's things warmed Elspeth's lap. She told each of the women that their kin was one of two hundred men who had advanced on Kirkwall with Robert Stewart. She said that the men had taken Kirkwall and that all were well, for now; but it would be a long battle, and things would change by the day.

July 1614

Women came to the door often, asking Elspeth if there was any news. Coins weighed down Jonet's bag of herbs. Elspeth did not trust her to share it evenly between them,

so she kept her own store of cash in a sack below her bed. She still felt a weight on top of her head, keeping her from floating up from the chair, which she needed to do in order to see the men they were asking her about. Her second eyes were not opening. She began to wonder if she had cried all the ointment out. The fairy man still came to punish her for her sight, though. She woke with red on her shift at the start of every month. Sometimes she saw him, and her muscles took on a familiar tightness, and she could not move or scream. Sometimes, her voice would not work for the most part of the next day. Other times he came and went without her noticing. She was becoming used to the bleeding and the pain. She pinned cloth to her skirts, like she had seen Jonet do. She burnt the rags after she had used them, before Jonet could see.

One day, a man from Kirkwall came to the house Elspeth and Jonet were lodging in. He said he was from the castle. He said that Robert Stewart's men had taken the kirk, palaces, and castle in the town and that they were waiting for a response from the king. They were preparing for a siege and were asking for supplies from the inhabitants of the islands. Those with kin inside the castle took malt, meal, butter, bere, fish, salt, sheep, and cattle to the castle gate. The goodwife Janet Whyte, who had barely enough food to feed herself and her bairn, was one of the first to take her goods to the castle.

August 1614

Every farm Elspeth and Jonet travelled to was talking about the rebellion. Those with kin inside the castle resented those men who had stayed at home. Those who had stayed maintained that the rebellion would not end well. Disputes broke out between houses. They tried to get Elspeth to end them: to tell them how the rebellion would transpire. Elspeth didn't respond. She was still unable to see a clear vision of the rebels. When the folk grew mad and began calling her a fraud, she had to come up with an answer. She echoed what Jonet had said: that Robert Stewart would take control of the castle and country but would not keep it long.

In late August, there was talk that the king's men had travelled to Orkney. It was said that they had landed in the isle of Shapinsay, north of Kirkwall, under the leadership of the Earl of Caithness. The earl was sending letters to the gentry, appealing for their support against the rebels. The Sinclairs of Elsinquoy had received such a letter. They

had gathered a group of men together and left to meet the earl and his men in Carness. Some folk said that the earl had two hundred men with him, others said there were twenty.

XXXIV

Many, anticipating the arrival of the king's army, decided to leave Kirkwall and stay with kin or friends outside the town. They were scared of being caught in the crossfire. Jonet hoped some of the Kirk session members would be struck by a musket ball, so she would not have to worry about them dragging her back onto the pillar of repentance once the rebellion was over.

The king's men marched on Kirkwall. Trumpets, drums, musket shots, and cannon fire rang out from the town. Edward Cors had fled Kirkwall in the middle of the night. He was now staying in his brother's house, a few miles from where Elspeth and Jonet were. He went from house to house, spreading news of the rebellion. He told Elspeth and Jonet, proudly, that he had seen the whole thing: the rebels riding out to meet the king's men in Carness; had heard them shouting bravely at the king's officers that they would fight, even if outnumbered twenty to one. Another man from Kirkwall, who visited the day after, said he had seen the rebels fleeing from the king's army; the cowards had let the earl walk straight into town without any resistance.

XXXV

Within the first week of the earl's arrival, he had taken back the palace, cathedral, and castle of Birsay. The last of the rebels had retreated to Kirkwall Castle. Elspeth and Jonet were once again lodging in Janet Whyte's house, who had demanded that they come back and give her daily assurance of her husband's safety.

The goodwife Janet shook with the sound of the cannon. She was becoming sickly and grey.

Jonet made the goodwife a drink at night that would help her sleep, but Elspeth still heard her pacing around the hearth while she and Jonet lay in their box-bed. The sound made Elspeth want to scream.

Marion, who was bundled in the corner of the bed, silently assured Elspeth that the footsteps were too light to be the fairy man.

Elspeth wondered how Marion could be so sure, given she failed to protect Elspeth from him at least once every month.

XXXVI

The cannon and gunfire ceased. Elspeth wondered if the siege was over, and if so, who had won.

A few days later, a man knocked on Janet Whyte's door. He wore the king's colours. He demanded that the goodwife Janet come with him to stand trial before the Earl of Caithness in Kirkwall for aiding and conversing with the rebels. It seemed the king had succeeded.

Janet muttered that she had done no such thing.

The man ignored her, told her to gather her things, and be ready to leave within five minutes.

Janet left with her child. She forced Elspeth and Jonet from her house, despite their offers to look after it while she was gone. She said she did not trust the two women to do so. Elspeth hoped the goodwife would say nothing about her or Jonet at her trial.

XXXVII

One week later, they received news of Robert Stewart's surrender. Elspeth and Jonet made their way, slowly, back to Kirkwall. The beds that they had occupied were now filling back up with the men who had been inside the castle. Elspeth wondered what they would find in Kirkwall: ruins, bodies, houses burnt in ashes, beggars crushed by fallen stone or dead on the roadside from hunger.

XXXVIII

They stepped onto Kirkwall's cobbled street. The castle turnpike was damaged; there were a few bullet holes in the buildings, and a window in St Magnus had been shattered, but for the most part, the town looked the same as it did before.

The male beggars they found inside the alleys took up more space than they used to. Their cheeks were plump, their skin pink, their clothes full. The women alongside them looked all the more gaunt. Most of the male beggars had joined Robert Stewart's cause and had feasted on the meal and ale the folk had offered up to the rebels. They had spent months warm, fed, and rested. Now, forced back onto the street, they resented the king all the more. They had been promised land from Robert, and they felt that they had been robbed of what they rightfully deserved.

Jonet asked the beggars if Robert Stewart had killed Finlayson. They said he hadn't; Finlayson had been put on a ship bound for the south. Then, Jonet asked what had happened: how the surrender had come about.

'I don't know, nobody told us anything,' said one man. 'I only stayed by the ale barrel and the feasting table all the time, until one day, people started walking out, told me we had surrendered, so I filled up a sack with food and went on my way.'

Another said, 'Robert Stewart had been having meetings with the earl, who was trying to discuss the terms of his surrender but Robert was so feared of what his father would do to him if he learned of his surrendering that he refused all of the earl's offers. Robert's advisor, Patrick Halcro, wasn't happy with this and wanted done with the whole business and snuck out to speak to the Earl of Caithness himself, without Robert's knowledge. He came back with the minister of Hoy and told everyone to gather to hear the minister preach, and I began to feel the sting of my own conscious as the minister spoke—very well too—about our sins against the king and country and our Lord saviour, and I, having been losing sleep over joining the rebels on the promise of a full stomach ever since I came to the castle, was one of the first to beg forgiveness from the minister and leave. Only a small handful of sinners remained inside—poor fools, blind with loyalty towards that pitiful creature, Robert Stewart, who is more afraid of his father than God and the king.'

Another explained, 'Some minister came to preach to us, a babbling fool who was having much trouble deciphering the words in his bible, and after he had finished spitting at us, the man Halcro told us to pray for forgiveness from God and his majesty, and he promised that all those who left the castle right that minute would have their lives, and anyone who didn't, would be hung alongside Robert Stewart, and I had heard enough at that point, and made out of there with haste and two legs of ham.'

8 October, 1614

There were twelve bodies hanging from the castle gate. For a moment, Elspeth thought she had imagined them, but she was not the only one who could see the corpses. There was a crowd gathering outside the castle, looking at them.

The ropes quivered in the wind. It was as though the lockman had reached down into each man's throat, stretched their tongues out long enough to tie around their necks and over the parapet, and the men were still trying to pluck out a sentence. Elspeth stared closely at their sagging mouths. Every one of them was trying to say: *you will repent this*. Elspeth looked across the line of men, trying to work out who the bloated faces belonged to. She did not recognise them. She hoped she had told no one that they would live.

As she stood there, she began to feel her own face bloat and her skin numb. She liked staring at them because everybody else could see them too. Elspeth committed them to memory: the colour of their skin, how the sun stroked their bodies, how their feet circled, so that when she saw someone else with a rope about their neck, she would know if they were real or not.

Some of the folk in the crowd were sobbing. One of them, Elspeth recognised, was Janet Whyte. Her trial must have gone well, Elspeth thought. Folk pressed up around Janet, stroking her arms, shoulders, and bairn. They whispered, 'He was a brave man,' and, 'It will be alright.'

Elspeth went cold. She stepped back from the crowd.

Then, suddenly, the goodwife Janet raised her wet eyes and saw Elspeth. '*You*,' she said.

The crowd shrunk away from the goodwife, leaving the space between her and Elspeth empty.

'You said he would be well,' yelled Janet. 'Look at him,' she said, pointing at the castle gate. 'Does he look *well* to you?'

Elspeth could not tell which corpse she was pointing to. They all looked the same, in death.

'If you had told me otherwise, I could have warned him. I could have called him out from the castle and convinced him to come home with me, but you lied. You liked his bread and meal too much.'

Janet addressed the crowd. Her bairn was wailing now. 'This lass is a liar.'

‘I thought you were dumb,’ yelled a man behind Janet.

‘Me too,’ yelled another.

The crowd pressed towards Elspeth, drowning out Janet and her cries.

The folk gripped Elspeth’s dress, her hair, her arms. She struggled out between their bodies, shoving her way to the edge of the crowd. She thought once again of the beggar outside the kirk in Lochaber: the crowd surging around her, the men hitting her with sticks.

Elspeth freed herself from them and ran towards the street, feeling exposed, even as she ducked inside one of the alleyways. She bumped into a stranger inside the lane and wanted to wrap the person’s coat around herself and disappear. She thought she could hear footsteps slapping over the ground toward the alley, so she kept running and hid inside someone’s barn. Marion was nowhere to be seen. The cow inside did not listen when she told it that it was one mistake, just one she had made; hadn’t every other one of her visions come to pass? Were they not accurate?

She wished she were talking to the cow in Lochaber, but then, her uncle would be able to walk into the barn and there would be nothing between them; no door or stool or curtain could keep his arm from her waist. She trembled, staring at the door, hoping no one would barge in.

XXXIX

Elspeth found Jonet in one of the alleys and told her what had happened. Jonet said that the goodwife Janet had only just escaped the same fate as her husband. She had heard that the jury at her trial needed to take the night to think on whether she was guilty of aiding the rebels or not. Jonet said, ‘In the end, before her trial reconvened the next morning, several witnesses came forth, avowing that Janet was too poor to give her food away to the rebels, as she needed all she had as a necessity for her and her child. The judge delivered this information in the morning, and some say the jury had to rethink on their verdict again, and in the afternoon, they cleared her of all charges. But I do not think she will last long without her husband to work the land. I suspect her tears were more for her and her child than him.’

‘We will not last long either,’ said Elspeth, ‘if no one will give us lodging. They think I am a liar. They think I pretended to be dumb, pretended to see visions.’

‘We’ll find someone,’ said Jonet. ‘In the meantime, John Grant left us some of the earl’s ham.’

XL

The Earl of Caithness held several courts in Kirkwall, trying those who were allegedly involved in the rebellion, and more and more bodies were strung up on the castle gate. Elspeth walked to the castle every morning to check if there were any new bodies. Each new corpse hung there for twenty-four hours. Elspeth tried to remember if she had spoken to the kin of those who appeared on the gate. She wore her shawl over her head at the castle in case anyone recognised her.

XLI

The Earl of Caithness left in early November, but some of his men stayed behind. Different bodies started appearing on the castle; not dead ones, but living folk, who climbed over the parapet, with hammers in their hands. They began smashing and tearing at the bricks, but the stone did not give way easily. It took the men one week to remove the first layer.

Elspeth kept walking by the castle every morning. She watched their progress, alongside many other onlookers. The folk had always known the heavy shadow of the castle over the street and did not want it to go. The empty space would leave them exposed. The hammering, starting at dawn and ending at sundown, reminded the folk of musket fire, and people hesitated inside their doorways before stepping out into the street, just in case the rebels had decided to try and reclaim the castle before it was dust. Many believed the rebels *would* try again. There were rumours that Robert Stewart and his father, Patrick Stewart, would escape from prison and come back to Orkney to take back what was theirs. Some said that Patrick’s brother, John Stewart, would lead the next rebellion.

Some of the folk piled fallen bricks into their carts to use in their own homes. Others would not go near the stone, maintaining that the Devil was its mason, which was why no cannon could destroy it. Some of the workers said that they had felt a weight pushing against their arms as they tried to bring their hammers down, as if the Devil himself were stopping their blows.

One evening, as Elspeth and Jonet walked through the street begging for lodging, a group of workers spat at them and said that their master, the Devil, was making tough work for them.

April 1615

Where the castle used to be, was now a lump of dark stone. Wind whistled through the ruins and into the street. Abandoned hammers and pewter mugs lay in the rubble. Children liked to climb inside the ruins and run through any undamaged hallways, pretending they were the Stewart Earls. Sometimes they acted out the rebellion, aiming their fingers at each other's breasts, their mouths exploding like musket fire. They laughed as they knifed one another in the back. Sometimes they stabbed each other in the hand, like Bernard Stewart of Birsay was said to have stabbed one of Robert's men: Archibald Murray. Archibald was now dead. He had been hung alongside Robert Stewart in February at the Market Cross of Edinburgh. Elspeth had never been to Edinburgh. When she thought of a market cross now, she thought of the one in Kirkwall, the one she and Jonet weaved through every Saturday. Sometimes, when they saw someone selling a sack of wool, they shared a sly look with one another, remembering the time they had stolen William Scottie's wool, and then they remembered he was dead. Elspeth wondered what Jonet thought about that: whether she was thinking of the people who had accused her of causing it.

Jonet never did stand for the last two Sundays in front of the cathedral. The elders did not seem to remember. Even so, they avoided begging for too long outside the kirk on a Sunday, for fear that one of the Kirk session members would see them, remember, and force Jonet to pay a fine and carry out her punishment. They had a pile of money from the rebellion, and they could, probably, pay the fine, but they wanted to keep their coins for as long as they could, for money was not flowing easily to them now. The rebels had taken much of the folk's stock during the siege, and the people were trying to make it up. They were not as generous as before.

Janet Whyte had been telling people not to admit Elspeth or Jonet because they were both liars and would do nothing but curse their loved ones, so they could take their places at their tables.

Some of the folk recited the goodwife Janet's words at them while shutting their doors. To these people, Jonet spat that Janet Whyte's husband had authored his

own death by entering into a doomed cause. She said that Elspeth had seen a vision of all the rebels, including Janet's husband, with ropes about their necks before the Earl of Caithness's coming to the country and that any rumour that she had ever said Janet's husband would be well was a lie.

Other folk said that Elspeth had told the truth; that she had said their husbands and sons would live, and they had. They called their neighbours fools for not making use of Elspeth's and Jonet's skills. These people had housed Elspeth and Jonet many times, and they folded them warmly into their homes still. Marion hung comfortably in the corners of these crofts, accustomed to their ceiling heights.

When they could not find lodging, they slept in the ruins of the castle. They sometimes woke to the sound of young boys, who were shooting at them with their mouths and fingers, pretending they were dead bodies they had successfully killed. Other mornings, they woke to the sound of Finlayson's men in the street, collecting rents still. Finlayson never went out himself. Since the failure of the rebellion, the folk had tried twice to kill him in the street.

XLII

Elspeth was waiting in the rubble with a sack of bannocks, running her hand over the lumpy gums of the castle wall, when Jonet came sauntering up to her. The low afternoon sun caught on Jonet's gleaming, upturned mouth. She was holding something underneath her shawl. 'The wind is evil today,' said Jonet. 'I have something to warm us up.' She took a wine bottle out from under her arm.

'Where did you get that?' Elspeth asked.

'Doesn't matter. Do you want some?'

Elspeth said she had never drunk any wine.

'It is warming,' said Jonet, sitting beside Elspeth.

The cork was already gone from the bottle. Elspeth thought Jonet must have swiped it from one of the tables in the inn.

Elspeth's father had found something to scold in everyone who crossed his path when he held a wine bottle, bellowing and flinging his body around, as if the drink were making his blood boil.

Jonet drank. Her lips were stained with purple. She had already been sipping from it.

Then, she held it out to Elspeth.

Elspeth stared at the fat, green bottle.

Jonet shook it, and said, ‘Go on.’

Carefully, Elspeth took it from her. She didn’t want Jonet to call her ungrateful or feeble, so she took a sip. It burned her throat. Warmth spread through her chest.

Jonet snatched it back and took another drink.

Elspeth drank from the bottle every time Jonet handed it to her. She began to feel heavy and pleasant. Her arms fell away from her sides, and the two of them were soon laughing about the people they had stayed with and how dim-witted most of them were.

Rain began to fall gently, almost invisibly, from the darkening sky. Elspeth and Jonet huddled close together under the narrow roof over their heads. Soon, Jonet was talking fast about Finlayson and how she had hoped that, if anything, the rebellion might have resulted in his death. She complained that the rebellion had only made things worse, with the addition of more of the king’s men in the town, who were greedier than ever. Elspeth was warm all over, even where rain soaked into the back of her dress. She was happy to sit and listen to Jonet. Her eyes drifted closed. She had even forgotten about Marion.

Jonet sat up suddenly. Elspeth, feeling a shock of cool air where Jonet had been, reached for her desperately. When Jonet pulled away, Elspeth rubbed her side, but her hand was cold.

Jonet stood and pulled Elspeth up. She hooked her arm around Elspeth’s and started to trudge further into the ruin. The sky was grey but not yet completely dark. They bent towards each other, trembling, heads driving into the wind. Jonet said that if she were not holding Elspeth, she would be blown away in the air.

‘Where are we going?’ Elspeth asked, laughter gurgling in her throat, bright, and unfamiliar. Jonet looked strange, her arm hooked behind her like a broken wing, her neck pecking forward, her nose driving towards something, it seemed, only she could see. Jonet’s feet skidded over the ground as she halted in front of a winding staircase. Rain dribbled down the broken stairs. Jonet untangled herself from Elspeth and climbed onto the first step.

‘What are you doing?’ Elspeth asked. ‘You will be blown away,’ she said, thinly.

‘The Devil has hold of me now,’ replied Jonet. ‘I am going up to the head of the castle.’ Her eyes were fixed on the highest point of the ruin, at the top of the round tower, which was now one charred finger. The stairs reached halfway up the hollowed-out tower. If Jonet was going to get to the head, she would have to balance along the walls, step through the windows, and haul herself up onto the turret.

Jonet started up the steps, swaying left and right. When she reached the last stair, she stopped and looked up at the section of wall still connected to the tower. It was above her head. One of the stones at the top of it fell, and shattered on the ground beside Elspeth, as though someone had kicked it, but there was no one there.

Elspeth’s laughter was sour in her mouth now.

Jonet reached up, her fingers fluttering, as though feeling for some invisible hand. She climbed the wall with little effort, as though someone were helping her. She stood and swiped rain from her eyes with the hand she had held out. When her hand fell away, the skin around her lids was black.

‘Jonet?’

She kept climbing, up and up, her feet and arms flailing.

‘*Jonet*,’ yelled Elspeth. ‘Come down! You will kill yourself!’

Jonet yelled back that it was alright: *he* had her.

‘Please—come down—’

The air grew heavy behind Elspeth.

A group of people were walking towards the castle, looking fearfully up at Jonet. ‘What is she doing?’ they asked Elspeth.

Jonet circled the staircase, weaving in and out of the fractured walls. Every time she disappeared from sight, Elspeth was frightened that her companion would not appear again: that she had fallen down on the other side of the tower and was lying broken in the rubble. Elspeth moved back to see Jonet better, joining the crowd on the street.

Jonet appeared again. She was almost at the top. ‘Oye!’ Jonet called out. Her voice sounded strange. A lower tone accompanied it. ‘Oye!’ she yelled again.

More and more people gathered around the base of the castle.

‘Oye!’ Jonet cried one more time. She waited as the folk closed in.

‘Gather all your strength,’ she cried, ‘and together, we shall put the new rulers away, so that the kindly country people might rule.’

The folk hummed.

Jonet repeated once again that the kindly people should rule themselves. A few cried out their assent, and, after repeating it a third time, Jonet had most of the crowd shouting with her. They began to press up behind Elspeth, against the outer wall. They reached over the edge as if to haul themselves up, but they did not; they rubbed their hands on the slick stone and drew their fingers below their eyes, blackening their cheeks like Jonet had. Elspeth shivered.

For a moment, Elspeth thought she saw someone standing beside Jonet: a dark face, eyes bright. It was the fairy man.

May 1615

After Jonet's outcry, many let Jonet and Elspeth into their homes for no other reason than to hear how they were going to do it: get the Orkney families to rule. Jonet told the people that she was not ready to reveal her plan just yet. She told them to trust her; that there were some powerful Orkney families readying to rule as they spoke. Their neighbours warned these people not to do anything foolish; to remember what happened to the Stewart Earls. The people replied that this time was different; this time, they had witches aiding them.

XLIII

Elspeth and Jonet spent the next Sabbath begging at the kirk door. When the sermon had finished and the people were filtering out of the cathedral, a man reached out from the crowd and pulled Jonet up. He told her that she needed to come with him to face the Kirk session. He dragged her through the folk and into the cathedral.

Elspeth waited for Jonet. She was brought back out by two men. Two more trailed behind her, carrying the stocks between them. They placed the stocks down in front of the cathedral steps and pushed Jonet inside. Elspeth could see the ripples of Jonet's spine through her dress as the men pushed her head down and clamped the wood around her wrists.

When the men had gone back inside, Elspeth ran up to Jonet.

'What happened?' Elspeth asked.

Jonet said the man who had dragged her inside was someone named Magnus Hammie. ‘He demanded that I stand before the Kirk session to answer for my going up to the head of the castle and calling upon the Devil to get rid of Orkney’s new rulers. I told them that the Devil had nothing to do with it and that I had only acted out of anger towards Finlayson. They did not care. They said that they were taking complaints of witchcraft against me, and that I would do well to stop abusing the people of Kirkwall. They said that the next time I was secured to wood, it would be set on fire shortly after.’

Jonet’s throat pressed against the wood. She shifted her knees, trying to find a comfortable position.

‘Did they mention my name?’ asked Elspeth.

‘No,’ said Jonet. Then, after a moment, she said, ‘Stop gawking and find us some food and lodging for when I get out of here.’

Elspeth watched from behind a building as an officer freed Jonet from the stocks at sundown. He went back into the cathedral. Jonet stood there for a moment, shivering and rubbing her wrists and neck as she looked around. Elspeth had never seen her look so lost. She doesn’t know what to do with herself without me, Elspeth thought; she needs me. She walked towards Jonet with a bannock in one hand and a mug of ale in the other. ‘Here,’ she said. Jonet took them, biting and drinking at the same time. ‘Lodging?’ said Jonet, her mouth full.

‘Mrs Reid has set up a bed for us. One of her bairns has a coughing sickness.’

‘What is that, the third time this year?’

‘It is the eldest this time.’

Jonet nodded. ‘I’ll have to gather some plants in the kirkyard before we go.’ She paused and frowned at her feet.

Rotten food surrounded the stocks.

‘They threw it at me,’ said Jonet. ‘*Magnus Hammie* threw this one,’ she said, bending down and picking up a bannock that was blue with mould. ‘And then he pissed on my feet.’ She inspected the bannock and put it in her pocket.

In Mrs Reid’s house, Jonet put the rotten bannock into her bag of herbs. Elspeth asked her what she was going to do with it, but Jonet pretended not to hear.

The bannock festered inside the sack, turning the cloth green. Wherever they went, Jonet brought with her the smell of rot. The smell of Magnus Hammie's piss had sunk into her skirt too, but Jonet refused to wash it. She said she needed to remember the wrong he had done her. Elspeth begged her not to do anything to harm him; that she was in enough trouble as it was. 'What,' said Jonet, 'have you had a vision?'

Elspeth shook her head.

'Can you still see a rope about my neck?' she asked.

Elspeth nodded.

'Is there one around Hammie's?'

'No.'

'There should be. And what about these new sheriffs? Any around their throats?'

Elspeth said she hadn't seen them.

Jonet said that the people might be persuaded to revolt, if they knew it would end well.

'What are you saying?' asked Elspeth.

Jonet shrugged. 'I'm saying that they would disobey Finlayson if they knew they wouldn't be punished for it.'

Elspeth kept silent.

XLIV

The word *witch* filtered through the town. Each new utterance became a link in a chain that had started in the street and spread down the alleys. If you needed information, the beggars were the ones to ask. You didn't really need the second sight if you were a beggar. You knew who was pregnant, who was feuding with who, who had been summoned by the Kirk session, who was making a good profit, and who was not. Elspeth had thought, at first, that the word *witch* was attached to her and Jonet, but she soon found out that two witches had been arrested in the isle of Westray: a woman named Jonet Drever, and another named Katherine Bigland. Jonet Drever had left her bairn on the hill for the fairies, and Katherine Bigland had tried to murder her master by casting a wasting sickness onto him.

XLV

Jonet paced back and forth underneath their narrow roof inside the ruins. She walked one way in shadow, the other in moonlight. She said, ‘These southern men have brought their witch hunts with them. King James is the greatest witch hunter of them all.’

Elspeth did not really understand what Jonet was saying or how she got the information she did about the king and the sheriff men.

‘We need to part with the south,’ said Jonet, ‘or I’ll be next. They’re already calling me witch. I don’t know why they’re not talking about *you*,’ said Jonet. ‘You’re the real witch. I can’t tell prophecies.’

‘But I haven’t hurt anyone,’ said Elspeth.

‘Not according to Janet Whyte.’

Elspeth warmed.

Jonet put her hand on her neck.

‘Still there,’ said Elspeth.

Her hand fell away.

‘They torture witches you know,’ said Jonet. ‘In the boots—and the thumbscrews. How long do you think it will take until they have them ready for trial?’

It took a month. They were tried in the morning, and in the afternoon, news came that they had both been found guilty. Katherine Bigland was sentenced to be strangled and burnt at the stake at two in the afternoon the next day, and Jonet Drever was to be scourged from one end of town to the other and then banished from the islands, never to return, under the pain of death.

7 June, 1615

The street hummed as officers wheeled peat, wood, and barriers towards Heiding Hill. In the afternoon, a drummer walked through town, signalling it was time. People walked out from their houses, following the drummer. Elspeth turned to Jonet and said, ‘Are we to go?’

‘Do you want to?’

Elspeth shrugged. ‘I want to know what it’s like.’

‘It smells. You never been to one?’

Elspeth shook her head. ‘I want to see the women.’

Jonet was silent for a moment. ‘What if they decide to string me up too?’

The drums were fading.

‘I’m going to go,’ said Elspeth. She began trudging out of the rubble.

She had walked a few steps up the street when she heard Jonet calling behind her. ‘I will come too,’ she said, ‘to keep you out of trouble.

They were tying the woman, Katherine Bigland, to the stake by the time they made it to the top of the hill. Elspeth wondered how it felt to know that in the next few moments you would have no more breath in you; your lungs would be empty; your heart would be stopped; and you would be cold. You were about to be forced out of your body, as you had been forced out of your home and town. It was the last place the kirk could drive you out of: your own flesh.

The folk had seen many executions, but each one was a surprise. Every person faced death differently. They were never boring, not even the ones who were half dead when the noose was tied around their neck; and if a witch did not scream or beg, or piss over the peat below her, there was always the burning to look forward to.

William Donaldson was the lockman. He had been one of the loyal rebels who stayed inside the castle after Robert’s surrender. He had escaped hanging but was sentenced to act in the office of lockman for the rest of his life. His first task as executioner was to hang his friends by their necks on the castle wall. Elspeth wondered if they followed him around too. Before that moment, Donaldson would have only killed animals, who did not speak to him beforehand. Elspeth could see the woman’s mouth moving as Donaldson threaded the rope around her neck and through the hole in the stake. Elspeth wondered if she was cursing him. His hands trembled as they slid over the rope.

When the lockman moved behind her, she closed her mouth and seemed, then, to slip out of her body. She had chosen to remove herself from it before the fire did. The crowd pressed forward in anticipation, leaning against the barriers that kept them from getting too close the fire. All there wanted to see it. You didn’t go to the hill if you didn’t want to see it, at least a little. Elspeth herself wanted to see it, though not from too close. The crowd pushed forward around her and Jonet. Elspeth dug her heels into the ground. She was becoming lightheaded, as she did when she sat on a stool

with a stranger's shirt in her lap. She might float up from the ground if she didn't plant herself inside it.

Jonet said, 'I don't like this. I want to go.' Jonet looked at the people around her, who were almost salivating at the scent of the peat mixing with the woman's grease. Elspeth wondered what the woman would smell like burning. Jonet stepped back. 'Let's go,' she said.

Elspeth did not think Jonet would be so faint hearted. She thought *she* would be the one begging Jonet away from the crowd. But, standing there, she felt that she needed to be there. She needed to watch the woman die, and she needed to think of Marion as she did so. She needed to see Marion's face in the woman's and picture how Marion would have died; then she would be able to understand, fully, what it was like to choke to death. She needed to see the woman's pain; the uncontrollable twitch as her body fought for air. She saw all this as the lockman began to strangle the woman. He leaned back on the rope, and, at the same time, they set fire to the peat below. The flames reached upwards, but Elspeth could not look away from the woman's face. She was taking a long time to die. The lockman, it seemed, wasn't pulling hard enough. The fire was reaching upwards, and Elspeth, feeling a sense of kinship with the woman, who she was suddenly unable to separate from Marion, fought the urge to climb up to the stake and help the lockman kill her quicker.

Flames licked the woman's feet. She screamed, which seemed to delay her death further, as though the air pushing out of her throat was opening it back up again, letting some breath leak in.

The woman's shift caught.

The crowd cheered.

Some yelled at the lockman to let go of the rope; let her burn alive.

The lockman, as if shocked by the cries, yanked the woman's flailing head back onto the post and pulled harder. The flames were up to her knees by the time she stopped breathing. After one hour, the flames had burned through the ropes around her arms and neck, and with nothing to hold her up anymore, her open, charred body, crumpled into the fire. The smell of the burning peat, blood, and hair filled Elspeth's nose. The crowd split apart. Wind weaved through them, bringing the smoke with it.

Someone's shoulder hooked on Elspeth's, pulling her around and down Heiding Hill. The hair of the people in front of Elspeth smelled like Katherine Bigland's body. Jonet was no longer beside her.

The folk spread out at the base of the hill, around the second witch, Jonet Drever. Her hands were bound in front of her, and a man was leading her forward. Elspeth wondered if Jonet Drever had watched Katherine Bigland die and if she had known Katherine Bigland in life; if they were friends, like Elspeth and Jonet. A man, with a whip in one hand, ripped the back of the woman's shift with the other. The crowd stepped back as he sent the first stroke across the woman's skin, leaving a clean line of red.

Elspeth felt the blow across her own back and her brother's words on her neck: *who is the father*. The hands of the officer dragging the woman forward transformed into her uncle's hands. She had seen them many times wrapped around a rope, dragging the cow into the barn.

There Elspeth was, falling behind the crowd, with her uncle tugging her forward while her brother whipped her. She had to suffer through this too. She did not dart into one of the alleyways as they followed the witch down the street, slipping on her blood; no, she had to endure every stroke silently.

When they reached the end of the road, the officer sent three final strokes across Jonet Drever's back. Her skin was dripping off her. She had to be held up by two men. They placed her down on a fish barrel, which was, like her, soon to be hauled onto a waiting ship and sent south. She was curled into herself. Her hair was stuck to her open back. A rope appeared about her neck. She would die on the streets in the south: from hunger or her diseased wounds, whichever poisoned her first.

XLVI

Jonet found Elspeth later in the ruins. Elspeth could not see Jonet, but she knew her body and the way she held her hands out from her sides when she walked.

'How could you watch it?' Jonet asked.

Elspeth shrugged and swallowed a sob. She couldn't tell Jonet that she had watched it for the same reason she stared at Marion every night until her eyes drifted closed: she needed to punish herself. She didn't really know what for, only that she needed to, desperately.

Jonet sat down beside her, and the two of them were silent for a long time.

July 1615

Elspeth had told the Cooper family that their youngest child had a rope about his neck, and that Jonet needed to mix the child a drink every morning and night to prevent a deadly sickness from taking him. They had spent two nights with the Cooper's and would stay for as long as it took for the rope to disappear from the child's neck. But, one day, after the family had returned from sermon, the goodwife told Elspeth and Jonet that they had to leave immediately. They would pay Jonet for a week's worth of the cure, but they could stay there no longer.

'But you said we could stay,' said Jonet.

'My sister is coming to visit,' said the goodwife, 'and we need the bed.'

'We'll keep it warm until she arrives.'

'She is coming this afternoon,' said the goodwife.

'We'll stay till then.'

'No, I need to clean.'

'We'll help.'

'*No*,' said the woman. 'We need you to leave.' The goodwife sighed and said, 'Please, don't think ill of us—we are grateful for your cures, Jonet, and your prophecies,' she turned to Elspeth, 'it is only that—in the kirk this morning—they announced some new laws. They said that no man should support, supply, or entertain vagabond persons who have not been born nor brought up within the islands, under the pain of forty shillings.'

'I have been brought up in the islands,' said Jonet.

'But *she*,' said the goodwife, nodding at Elspeth, 'hasn't. Even so, they said that all beggars should return to the parish they were born in, and that every parish should sustain their own poor.'

Elspeth's chest tightened at the thought of having to go back to Caithness, having to see her brother and sister again, and that pile of soil where her bairn was now bone.

'They will support you in Harray, Jonet.'

'There are only so many houses in Harray who will keep me. They will tire of me before the year is up, and I will have nowhere to sleep but on the fields, where I will wake a corpse.'

The goodwife could not look at Jonet.

‘I’m not afraid of the officers,’ said Jonet. ‘What more can they do to me?’

‘They could burn you,’ said the goodwife.

Elspeth saw the rope around Jonet’s neck tighten.

Jonet scoffed and said she would like to see them try. She said, ‘If they do, I will ask the Devil to blow all their crops in the air. And I’ll cast a wasting sickness on them that will last as long as they stay in the islands. A wasting sickness,’ Jonet continued, ‘like that which is coming for your youngest bairn. He will not survive it, not without my cure.’

The woman paled. ‘Please, Jonet,’ she said, ‘leave us the drink.’

Jonet laughed cruelly and shook her head.

Elspeth took hold of Jonet’s arm and whispered, ‘Let’s not leave here with nothing.’

‘No,’ Jonet started. ‘No, I will not take this fool’s money. She will get what she deserves,’ she said, looking into the woman’s eyes. ‘She will watch her youngest boy die.’

‘Please, Jonet,’ said the woman.

‘More afraid of the king’s men than the Devil himself,’ Jonet scoffed.

Elspeth began tugging on her arm.

Jonet wrenched away and walked out the door.

The woman cried that she was sorry. ‘Please, understand.’

Elspeth ran after Jonet.

She was still spitting curses down the street. The folk looked out of their shutters and doors. Jonet yelled that the new rulers had sentenced the poor to death.

‘Go back to where you came from,’ someone yelled back.

Jonet cursed him. She was trembling with anger.

Elspeth told her to lower her voice; ‘They will throw you in the stocks again.’

Jonet turned on Elspeth. She said that Elspeth was a feeble beast; feeble like all the people in the town, frightened of the king’s men, who could do nothing if the folk stood together against them. They neared the ruins, and Elspeth was frightened Jonet would climb them again.

‘The new rulers,’ Jonet continued, ‘seek to force all the Orkney families from their homes with their taxes and give their houses to men from the south. They will watch us all die on the street. There will be no more Orkney names in the islands.’

Elspeth ducked into the ruins, away from Jonet, who continued to spit and curse at the wind.

XLVII

Finlayson's men stopped knocking on people's doors. Finlayson, too frightened to step out onto the street, had given up his office and travelled back to the south. Jonet saw this as the people's victory. Their threats and violence towards Finlayson had driven him from the islands; and they might do the same with the new rulers.

Finlayson's men were replaced by the king's men. The new officers did not threaten to burn down the houses of those who could not pay them. They only threatened fines, which were small compared to the rent they owed the king. The folk began to spit at these officers and drive them away from their homes with shovels. Even rich men like Edmund Calendar, who had the money to pay their rent, refused them. It was said throughout town that Edmund Calendar, who had been a good friend of the late Earl Patrick Stewart, had told the king's men to get away from his door, and that he only answered to the Stewart Earls. The folk waited for him to be arrested and strung up on the hill, but the king's men did not come for him.

The beggars started saying that the reason he hadn't been arrested was because the king had decided to reinstate the islands to the Stewarts. Patrick Stewart's brother, John Stewart, was to be the new Earl of Orkney, and his brothers would take up the offices of justice, sheriff, admiral, and chamberlain. It was said that the king's officers were acting out of their own selfish greed; that the money the folk gave to them would not reach the king at all. The king had given up Orkney, and the officers were only taking advantage of the folk's ignorance while John Stewart made his way to the islands.

August 1615

A woman came looking for Elspeth inside the castle ruins. She asked Elspeth to tell her if the rumours were true: if the Stewarts were coming back. 'Do the islands really belong to them again?' she asked. 'Should I refuse to give the officers coin? What is to happen to me if I do? Is it treason?'

Elspeth was silent for a moment. Jonet was out trying to find something for her and Elspeth to eat. Elspeth wished Jonet was there so she could look into her face and see what she should do. She thought, if the folk refused to obey the king's tax laws, then they may also refuse to obey their new law concerning beggars. Elspeth and Jonet could be admitted into the folks' houses once more, and she would be saved from having to return to Caithness. If they all banded together against the king's officers, the king may really hand the islands back to the Stewarts, or, better still, he may give them back to the Orkney families, like Jonet wanted. How Elspeth wanted to see those men who had ordered the folk to refuse them charity with spit on their cheeks, refused money like the folk were now refusing her and Jonet. The townsfolk could drive the officers out onto the street, and they would have to go back to the south to beg in the parishes they were born in.

Elspeth told the woman to wait a moment; that she needed to go into a trance to see her answer. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, she said, 'Yes, it is true; the king has given the isles over to John Stewart. The king's officers have no more power here, and you should disobey them at every turn. They are but traitors, who have refused the king's orders to leave the island. They remain here in the hopes of tricking the folk into handing all their money and goods over to them before the Stewarts arrive.'

Elspeth told Jonet what had happened when she came back. Jonet told her that she had done good work, and the two of them watched the street eagerly for signs of the folk's disobedience. They heard Elspeth's prophecy echoed down the alleys. The details were slightly different each time: some said it was a different one of the earl's brothers who was coming to take the earldom. Others said that John Stewart would never arrive in Orkney and was to rule over them from the south. Some said the earldom had been given back to the Sinclair family. Others claimed that they had seen John Stewart already: that he had landed in Shapinsay. The folk spat at the officers, refused to open their doors to them, or listen to their speeches at the kirk or market. They threw rotten eggs at their houses and called them greedy liars in the street.

LXVIII

Jonet was giddy. The ruins they were in might as well have had walls and a roof again, for Jonet acted like she was ruling the town. The folk turned to them for reassurance that their disobedience would not be punished. Jonet answered them before Elspeth could, encouraging them to keep doing what they were doing. There were no more bodies in the stocks outside the kirk or standing on the pillar of repentance. The officers could not make anyone carry out their punishments.

Jonet still carried around the blue bannock Magnus Hammie had thrown at her. She would not let anyone touch it. The herbs she fed to sick bairns were covered in a thin web of mould, which had grown out from the bannock.

One day, Jonet skipped up to Elspeth after the markets, her eyes bright. 'Why are you so happy?' Elspeth asked. She thought Jonet may have news of the Stewarts.

Jonet threw her sack of herbs at Elspeth.

Elspeth caught it and felt that the bag was now empty of the bannock that had weighed it down for so long.

'What did you do?' asked Elspeth.

'I was walking past the inn and saw Magnus Hammie inside there, and so I went in and, sneaking around so he would not see me, I stood in the corner and waited for him to finish his drink, praying ill for him all the while to pass the time. Magnus asked the serving girl for another drink. She went to get it, and I told her that I would fetch it for him. She said no—that I shouldn't be in there, but I threatened to cast sickness upon her if she did not let me, and she stepped away immediately, and I poured the ale. Taking the rotten bannock out of my sack, I put it inside the cup, and then I walked to him, and he did not even look at me as I placed the drink on the table. I stood by and watched him take a long drink. He swallowed it too, and then went to take another sip! I should have known he'd like the taste of rot, he being all rotten inside. But as he brought the cup to his lips, he glanced down, started, and pulled the cup away. I could not help it then; I began laughing very heartily. He looked at me and stood, clutching his throat. He looked so frightened, I could not stop laughing, and then he pointed at me and said, you witch—you have poisoned me. He looked all around him and announced it. Then the serving girl announced too that I had said that I would cast her with sickness if she did not let me fetch Hammie's drink. The folk all turned

their eyes on me. Some began advancing, and I sobered up quickly then, elbowing my way past them and out the door, hearing all the while Hammie call for me to be strangled and burnt.'

Jonet's face fell as she concluded the story. She put her hand to her throat and asked Elspeth if there were still a rope around it?

Elspeth nodded.

Magnus Hammie was sick for the space of eight weeks.

February 1616

On market day some months later, a group of officers in arms rounded up the folk. They carried muskets. They told the people to be quiet, step away from their stalls, and gather in the middle of the market to hear a proclamation authored by the king himself. They said that anyone who did not obey would be arrested for treason and brought to Edinburgh to answer before his majesty.

Elspeth and Jonet shuffled into the market cross with the other folk.

A man stood on top of a stool before them, holding a piece of paper. He cried *oye* three times and demanded silence. The crowd hushed. 'I am here by his majesty's orders, to declare that the reports and rumours that the king has relinquished the whole islands and the offices of justice, sheriff, admiral, and chamberlain to the brothers of the late deceased Earl Patrick Stewart, given out and dispersed among you, are most false and untrue, and that the dispersers and out-givers thereof seek no other thing but your wreck and ruin and destruction, by enticing of you to embrace and follow out such foolish courses as in the end will involve you under the guilt of high treason. Therefore, beware that you give not ear to such foolish, false, and untrue reports and rumours hereafter, and acknowledge and obey his majesty's judges, officers, and chamberlains, who have charge over you, and make thankful payment of your meals, rents, and duties to his majesty's said chamberlains at the terms of payment, as any and all of you who answer upon the contrary do so at your highest charge and peril.'

The man stepped down from the stool and the crowd hovered, unsure if they were allowed to move again.

A woman moved towards one of the officers along the street and told him that she had only refused the king because her neighbour had told her that the rumours

were true. Her neighbour yelled that he had only said so because a different neighbour had told him the same, and soon everyone was shouting accusations at each other.

The woman who had come up to Elspeth in the ruins yelled that the witch, Elspeth, had told her it was true. There were cries of agreement, and the crowd began calling for Elspeth. Some folk split off to look for her so she could answer for herself.

Jonet and Elspeth slipped out from the trembling crowd and into one of the alleys.

The folk repeated Elspeth's name over and over to the officers. 'It is not my fault,' they pleaded. 'It is the witch, Elspeth, that told us. Please, do not send us to the king.'

Elspeth and Jonet did not return to the ruins. They cowered in a lane, their shawls pulled down over their faces.

That night, as Elspeth slept alongside Jonet, she felt something slip over her head and tighten around her throat. She looked up. The fairy man's face was close to hers. His stained hands were knotting a rope around her neck. Then came the feeling of lifting upwards, of being tugged, not so much by her neck, but by the top of her head, floating, as if in water, to hang beside Marion on the wall. Marion was facing away from her. The rope was firm about Elspeth's neck, but not uncomfortable. It was as though she were already dead and had no more need for breath. The breeze grew stronger and Marion swung into Elspeth. Her body was warm and wet. The fluid beading out of her stained Elspeth's dress. The wind spun Marion around until she was facing Elspeth. Marion's chin had been forced up by the rope, and she looked down her nose, accusingly. Marion tried to move her jaw, pressing her lips down into her bloated chin. Her voice was hoarse but clear enough: 'Repent, repent, repent.'

XLIX

Witch; shouted, spat, and whispered. The folk were beginning to see through Elspeth and Jonet: through their chests, to the emptiness there. They were realising that the two women were as soulless as their goats and sheep.

Elspeth told Jonet that she could feel a rope about her own neck now.

Jonet rubbed her throat and said, 'Mine's getting tighter. I don't want to burn.'

‘I don’t want to either.’

‘You should leave Orkney; go home to your own country. If you tarry, you will be hurt.’

‘Would you come with me?’

Jonet shook her head. ‘I’ve never left the islands, and I won’t now. I want to die here.’

Elspeth’s eyes filled.

‘I’ll be fine,’ said Jonet.

‘They say Magnus Hammie has complained of you to the Kirk session again.’

Jonet shrugged and said, ‘They have been calling me witch for years and nothing has come of it. You should leave.’

Does she want me to leave? thought Elspeth. She did not think that she could do without Jonet, but Jonet had been doing just fine without Elspeth before she came to the islands, and she would be fine afterwards. Elspeth wished Jonet would beg her to stay.

L

One week later, Jonet was arrested for witchcraft. The two of them were walking down the street, shawls over their heads, when an officer pulled Jonet aside, ripped her hood down, and said he was arresting her. Jonet only nodded, pulled her arm away from the man’s and said she would walk herself to wherever it was he was taking her. Jonet was so steady and calm. The whole thing seemed unreal to Elspeth. It was as though she were bargaining at a market stall. Jonet turned to Elspeth. Her mouth was moving, but Elspeth did not know what she was saying. She might have said goodbye. She might have told her to go back home to the south. She might have assured her she would be alright. She might have sworn to avenge her own death. But in a moment, she turned away, and Elspeth was watching her walk down the street they had walked so many times together without her. The rope about Jonet’s neck dragged along the ground, and Elspeth knew it was the last time she would see her friend.

LI

As Elspeth lay in the alley, she reached out for Jonet, as if to pull her closer, but her hand met damp stone. She pressed her head into the ground, rubbing the ache in her temples. She had not eaten or drunk that day. Would anyone give her anything now she didn't have Jonet?

In the morning, she sat up, leant on the wall, and looked straight into Marion's eyes. When she asked Marion what they would do that day: where they would go, and who they would steal from, she had no reply. The realisation that she was completely alone, and had probably always been, pulled her down. She curled up on the ground once more and pictured herself wasting away there, growing thinner and thinner, until her blood slowed, and eventually stopped. The thought gave her a sense of relief. But then she thought about how she would rot, and how the birds would peck at her flesh. She scrambled back up and ran from the alley, out into the open, to stop her vision from coming true.

Did she really want to die? No one would be there to bury her. She had to wait for Jonet. She wanted to tell Jonet about what she had seen. She wanted to ask her if she thought it was a vision. She needed to find out where they had taken her and beg the officers to let her in; she only wanted to speak with Jonet, but she had no idea what she would say. Maybe she only wanted to ask Jonet if she would care if she died.

Elspeth would care if Jonet died. She did not want to watch her burn on the hill.

IV

WARD

I

Elspeth was taken from the Bay of Kirkwall to the Palace of the Yards. The officers had shoved her into one of the underground cellars inside the Earl's Palace. Elspeth had turned on them and said, 'I am with child—you cannot strangle and burn me,' but they only laughed as they closed and latched the door.

She thought she heard someone cry out from one of the cellars next to her. 'Jonet?' she yelled. 'Is that you?'

There was no reply.

She kept calling her name. She hoped Jonet was in one of the other cellars. She hoped she would hear her and be comforted.

An officer banged on her door and said if she would not be quiet, he would come in there and make her quiet.

She pressed herself into the far corner, her throat seizing.

She sat, shivering and dripping in the dark. A thin line of light flickered under the door. Her skirt soaked into her legs. They had not given her a dry dress, but she did not mind; she hoped the cold would kill her, preferably before morning. She hoped Jonet would die before morning too, and that they would burn their bodies together.

She looked up, remembering her friend in the in-between, and saw Marion. How good for Marion, thought Elspeth; there was a hook in the middle of the side wall, and Marion had set herself up there nicely. Elspeth had never been so glad to see her. She thought about Marion's other body, rotting in an unmarked grave. They would all have nameless graves: the three of them.

The earth below Elspeth turned to mud. She scraped at the weakened soil. They were going to make her talk about the fairy man. She would need all the protection she could get against him.

She stared up at Marion and pictured, once again, tears running down her face as she fashioned her own death. Elspeth cried into the soil, wetting it further. She cried loudly, hoping someone outside would hear and feel sorry for her. She carved two lines around herself: a long one at her side, connected to a shorter one. When joined with the corner walls behind her, these two lines formed a rectangle, about the size of a box-bed. Hay lined the edge of the cellar. She arranged it around the shape she had carved, making sure there were no gaps. Then she lowered herself into the rectangle of hay,

careful not to disturb it. She rested her head on the earth. It was safe, now, to close her eyes.

II

Her dress was still damp in the morning. Two gentlemen came into her cellar, carrying stools and a table. They dug the furniture into the ground and sat. Elspeth was glad they were beyond her box-bed lines.

The man on the left took ink, a pen, and paper out from his coat.

'Elspeth,' said the other man, 'won't you tell us a little more about yourself.'

'I don't know what to say,' she said.

The scribe started writing.

'There are those that say you saw the rebellion men with ropes about their necks, before the Earl of Caithness's coming to the country, is this true?'

Elspeth nodded.

'How long have you been having visions like that?'

'I'm not sure. Since I was twelve, maybe.'

'And how did you learn your visions?'

Elspeth chewed on her lip.

'Come, lass. Did a man teach it to you?'

She hesitated.

'Was he clad in black?'

Her cheeks burned. She shook her head.

'Don't lie to me, lass. I can see you are lying.'

Her eyes filled.

'There now,' said the man, standing. He stepped inside the lines she had drawn around herself and crouched down. 'What is the matter?' He put his arm around her shoulder.

She tensed, remembering how her uncle had held her the same.

'Were you very sorrowful when you met this man?'

Elspeth nodded. She was.

'And did he promise you things?'

He did.

'And did he give you gifts?'

She nodded again.

‘There now. We have a minister outside, lass. Repent, repent.’

Elspeth looked up at Marion. Marion echoed the man, *repent*.

‘He told me not to say anything about him,’ said Elspeth.

‘When?’

‘When I first met him—and every time I have met him since.’

‘When did you first meet him?’

She paused.

‘It is the wickedness in your heart that keeps him near,’ they said. ‘He can see it. It makes you weak and easy for him to control. Has he ever lain with you?’

She kept still.

‘Have you ever had a child?’

She nodded.

‘Who was it gotten by?’

She said she did not know.

‘You must know.’

She shook her head.

‘*Someone* pulled up your skirts. Who was it?’

Her throat tightened; her teeth turned to cloth.

‘Was it the man clad in black?’

She shook and shook her head.

‘Has anyone touched you? Has anyone put their hands beneath your skirt?’

She nodded.

‘Who?’

Pain spread through her stomach.

‘Was it the Devil?’

‘No,’ she said. She remembered kicking a stool into a man’s shins. The man had stepped over it, and he had slid his hands up her legs. ‘It was a minister, named James Mitchell.’

‘At which kirk?’

‘The Kirk of Murthlie, in Balvenie.’

‘Is he the father of your child?’

She said that she supposed he was.

‘Has the man in black ever lain with you, like the minister did?’

She shook her head.

The scribe kept scratching his page.

‘The minister will hear all you have to say,’ said the man. ‘You can unburden your heart to him, and he will help free you from the Devil’s grasp.’

She asked them if she truly would never see the man again if she spoke?

They nodded.

‘But you will burn me for it,’ she said.

‘Not if you speak true,’ said the man. ‘Tell us all, and you should have your life.’

She thought of Katherine Bigland, burning alive on top of the hill. ‘And Jonet,’ said Elspeth. ‘Can she have her life too?’

‘Of course,’ said the man. He called for the minister.

The minister took Elspeth’s hands and began to pray. There were tears in his eyes. He reminded her of the minister in Caithness. She felt a bruise spreading on her forehead and her brother’s hand on her neck, and it was her brother’s voice that sighed out of her mouth when she prayed with the minister.

III

‘I do not know his name,’ said Elspeth.

They told her to think harder. ‘What do you call him?’ they asked.

‘The fairy man.’

They did not like this, so they got an officer to walk her back and forth inside her cell, from the far wall to the door, on and on. They did not let her pause to stretch her legs or rub her ankles. They did not let her sleep. If she collapsed, they lifted her back onto her feet, and dragged her up and down themselves. Every few hours the men changed, and someone else came in to walk her. They only let her stop to answer their questions. Even then, they would not let her sit, because then she would close her eyes. She could hardly understand what they were saying to her and did not like the questions they were asking. They kept repeating the names of the rebellion men who she had seen with ropes about their necks, and for a small time, the rebels joined Marion along the wall.

‘When you were arrested, you told the officers that you were with bairn. Is that true?’

She nodded.

‘Who was this one gotten by? Was it one of the rebellion men?’

Yes. Better them think it was a rebel, than the man clad in black.

‘Who? Alexander Layng? Patrick Traill?’

She nodded.

‘Which one lass? Patrick?’

She kept nodding.

They looked happy with her answer.

She told the men that the rebels did not matter anymore; they were dead. They replied, ‘Yes, they are dead, but we are certain that friends of theirs are still alive.’

They kept saying the name John Stewart until it held no meaning anymore. They liked the name John Stewart, they liked it when she flung it back at them.

IV

Elspeth did not think that they would want to hear about Marion, but Elspeth could not let Marion sit in the cell and not let her talk some, so she did, and her inquisitors wrote down every word. Elspeth watched the scribe’s hand as he sewed brown looping stitches onto the paper on his table. Marion sat there, flapping her lips at the court men. She was a great storyteller, but at times she was difficult to understand. Her mouth had been swollen for so long that she seemed to have lost control over it. Her tongue seemed to be missing. Elspeth thought it must be lying flat down Marion’s throat, but that did not stop her from talking on and on about how Elspeth—she is squawking about *me*, Elspeth thought—had come to her grandmother’s house and had ruined her. She told the men about all Elspeth had done and not done, including how Elspeth had given her no cure to remedy the pain that she had caused her. Elspeth interrupted one of the inquisitors, who seemed so sickened by Marion’s appearance that he refused to glance in Marion’s direction. The men sat closer to Elspeth than they should have, just to be as far away from Marion as possible. It was difficult to keep sight of Marion behind their wide shoulders; Elspeth did not like this. She liked to watch Marion’s mouth, twisting and flapping, so she could be sure that it was in fact Marion talking and not herself.

Elspeth interrupted Marion once to ask her: ‘Marion, who was your child gotten by anyway?’

She said it was a stranger; she did not know his name, but the two of them knew this to be a lie. It was the same man, of course, who had sewn the cord around both their necks.

V

Elspeth wondered where her uncle was now. She almost felt sorry for her aunt, who would be with him still, doing the exact same thing they had always done, moving in the same ways, having the same conversations, night after night. How she hated him: his dead eyes, his thin hands, his clothes that sagged from him like loose skin, his coat; she hated them all. She did not know if her uncle would find pleasure in knowing she had burnt, did not know if he would even recognise her if he saw her now, or even if he thought about her. She thought about him all the time. Elspeth hoped the blood had not come out of his coat, hoped it smelt as much as Marion’s corpse did, and hoped he never came across Marion’s unmarked grave because that was her bed now; she hoped he would not go near any beds, belonging to the living or dead. Elspeth cursed him. She could see his arrogance in her inquisitors’ eyes, the way they asked her questions with a knowing smile as they anticipated her stumbling answer, which is exactly what she gave them, and she hated it; hated giving them exactly what they expected.

VI

Elspeth was glad whenever Marion could take over talking for a while, because Elspeth was tired, so very tired. Her teeth vibrated, as though they were trying to loosen themselves from her mouth. Everything inside her was bubbling into liquid, but her skin stayed intact. She wanted to turn into a puddle on the floor, but her skin stopped her. She trailed blood back and forth in the cellar, and Marion followed, swinging from side to side in great sweeping arcs. The constant rush of wet air made Elspeth sick. Marion was making such a mess of her neck, swaying as she did.

VII

The men asked her why she kept looking at the wall beside them. ‘Is it the man clad in black?’ they asked. ‘The man that visited you in your sister’s house?’

She said, ‘No, it isn’t. It is the young woman, my kin. She had been by my bedside too.’

‘With the man?’

Elspeth nodded.

‘Is the man with her now?’

‘No.’

‘How is it you can see her?’

‘She was slain by my uncle—Allane McKeldow—at the down going of the sun and is neither dead nor living but ever to stay between the heaven and the earth.’

‘And so, you can see her by your second sight?’

Elspeth was annoyed that they had not written that down. She felt that it was very important. She said, ‘Yes.’

And then they wrote it down.

VIII

The men lied. They said that the man in black would leave her alone if she spoke of him, but he had come to her again in the night. As she walked alongside the officer, she knew. She could feel the ache in her belly and the warm wetness between her thighs. She did not know when he had come, for she was sure she would have walked all through the night, though she could be wrong; maybe she had been left alone for some part of it, maybe she had fallen asleep, and he had taken his opportunity. She tested out her voice to see if it still worked, and she was glad that it did, thinking of all the iron they might press into her skin if it did not. They would have beaten her like her brother. They had liked it when she told them about that, though she did not know why. She wanted them to weep, but they had smiled. They liked that her brother had tried to pray for her. They might have been good friends, them and Henry. They too wanted to save her, and look at her now, with blood dripping down her legs. She could not be saved. Her only hope was to stay in the in-between like Marion had.

The lockman, William Donaldson, was one of the men that walked her up and down her cellar. He liked to talk about what he would do to her, when the time came: how he'd loop the rope about that smooth neck of hers and squeeze all the air out of it; then how the fire would lick the flesh from her bones and she would fall in chunks onto the peat, and all the starving folk's mouths would water from the smell, which was not unlike a roasting pig, though Elspeth would, hopefully, be dead by then.

She used to reply that she had been promised her life, which he thought very funny. She didn't say it that morning, and he almost looked disappointed. But the promise would not matter anymore. When the men saw the stains on her dress, they would be fixing up the stake on the hill for her that afternoon. The rope was thick around Elspeth's neck and nothing could be done about it; no herb could fix this. She would be dead within the month. She wondered if Jonet was still alive.

The blood had dripped down onto her ankles, and she was too frightened to look at the back of her skirt, she just kept walking, with Marion snickering and swinging beside her while she leaked. The lockman noticed the blood on the floor but thought it was from her blisters. He looked down at her feet and paused. He asked if she had a blister further up on her legs?

She shook her head. She had stopped too suddenly. The room spun. Her legs buckled. The lockman turned and left the room. She crawled into the corner. 'This is it,' she told Marion. They would be back with a rope. They would skip the trial and drag her straight to Heiding Hill. 'Do you think I'll be able to join you, with no body?' she asked.

Marion did not answer.

'Stop that swinging,' Elspeth snapped. 'You are making me ill.'

She fell asleep.

IX

Her inquisitors looked at her stained skirt with disgust. She shrunk away from them. She had worn out the lines of her box-bed with her pacing. That was how the fairy man had gotten to her. It was their fault. She told them so. She said, 'I drew this so he

wouldn't get to me, and now you see that he has.' She said that she had been praying desperately and did not want to be his anymore; had never wanted to.

They sat down, and the scribe set up his table and writing materials. Then the man said, 'So, he has gotten to you then, even in ward: the Devil?'

'Fairy man,' she corrected him.

'At what other times have you seen and conversed with the Devil?' they asked.

She was glad they were letting her stay seated. She said she didn't remember. She couldn't remember a thing; she was so tired.

'Think,' they said. 'You saw him in Caithness, after your bairn was born. Then where did you see him?'

'I think I saw him at the miller's house,' she said.

'Good, good. Where does the miller live?'

'Near the wag, in Caithness.'

'Good, lass. We will make sure he does not come to you again tonight. Keep on.'

'I saw him in Magnus Sinclair's house.'

'Good. Did you see him in Edmund Calendar's house?'

'Will you let me sleep again, after you leave?'

They nodded, and so she nodded too. Yes, yes, yes.

X

It felt as though she was being dragged up from the grave when they woke her the next morning. Immediately, they made her start walking again. Her legs ached even more now. Tears streamed down her neck, one after the other.

She could no longer tell the men beside her apart. They might have been the same person, but they couldn't be, because that meant that they too wouldn't have slept in ten days. She had so much air trapped in her lungs that she felt she could have screamed endlessly, clear and full. She could have bitten into the men's cheeks and ripped away their flesh. She wanted to scratch her own skin off, but then thought that it would be better to scratch theirs; the underside of her nails had never felt so hollow; she needed to fill them with something, needed to poke a hole in her skin, needed to pool out of that hole and onto the floor and sink into the earth and *sleep, sleep, sleep*.

One day, she looked beside her and saw, not an officer or the lock man, but the fairy man, leading her back and forth. She asked him to please kill her like he had promised he would if she talked. He said he had promised no such thing. She said, how then did he plan on making her quiet? He shrugged.

XI

The hook above Marion writhed like a worm pushing blindly up through the ground. The sight of it wriggling through the knot in the rope made Elspeth's palms itch, but she couldn't look away from it. If Elspeth looked away it might push itself out of the wall completely and climb up her legs. Who knew how long its body extended behind the stone? Elspeth did not want it to squeeze itself free. She needed it where it was.

'That hook,' said Elspeth, nodding above Marion. 'I wish there were two.'

'Well,' said Marion, she would have shrugged if she could lift her shoulders, 'there isn't.'

'But I wish there was.'

'But there *aren't*.'

'Maybe you could get down from it?' Elspeth asked tentatively.

'I don't want to.'

'But you're dead. It's done. Your throat is small enough.'

'No.'

'Maybe we could share the same noose then?'

'I'd be glad to,' said Marion. 'Here, you will have to really pull it out from me—it is very deep.'

Elspeth tried to pick the rope out from Marion's neck, but she only managed to flick away chunks of flesh around it, forcing the noose deeper and deeper. Elspeth would need a rope of her own.

XII

Elspeth had stared at Marion for too long. So long, she no longer recognised her. She tried to remember what Marion was like but couldn't. She realised how little she knew

of her to begin with. If Marion were not in the room, Elspeth might have convinced herself that she never existed at all; she knew no one who could tell her otherwise. Every day, Marion grew to look less and less like herself, and more and more like Elspeth; and every day, Elspeth mistook Marion for a sign of her fate soon to come. All Elspeth had really, was Marion's name, but she was losing that too. Elspeth hoped the men wrote it down.

5 March, 1616

Jonet was gone. She was so thin, in the end, that her steps hardly made a sound as they passed Elspeth's door.

Elspeth had not sensed Jonet's weight leaving the earth. She did not believe the officer when he told her. 'But,' said Elspeth, leaning on him heavily, 'the men said that she would have her life.'

The man did not say anything.

'They said I would have my life,' repeated Elspeth. 'I am to have it. They promised me; they did.'

She asked if she could see Jonet's ashes, and they brought a handful to her. The ashes were bound together with rain. Elspeth scraped the black pulp out of the man's hand, leaving four pale, worming lines over his palm. Jonet was cool in her hand. She stood there, staring at the lumpy mass. She did not notice the man leave.

Elspeth did not know what to do with Jonet now that she had her. She did not want to smear her anywhere in the cell and regretted even asking the man to bring her in there; it was selfish of Elspeth—Jonet had just escaped, and Elspeth had brought her right back. She should be in the ground, Elspeth thought, but she had her now; she would force Jonet to be at her side in death, just as she had forced Jonet to be at her side in life. Elspeth drew two lines down each of her cheeks with the mud, like fat tears. She ran some of Jonet through her hair, cooling her scalp. She smeared Jonet over her chest, reaching down her shift, and wiped every last bit of her on the material.

Then, Elspeth thought; what if they were lying to her? What if this was not Jonet at all, but a pile of mud? Elspeth hoped it was so. She hoped there was none of Jonet back in the cellar.

Elspeth called the guard back and told him not to lie to her; 'Tell me truthfully whether this really is Jonet's ashes.'

The man looked with horror at the streaks of ash on Elspeth's cheeks and chest. 'It is,' he replied.

'Were you there? Was she feared?'

'She was very weak,' he replied. 'Couldn't walk on her own. They had to lift her out from the cart and carry her to the scaffold. She was so thin, they only needed one man to do it. I think she fell asleep at the stake, before the lockman strangled her. She may have even been dead—who knows. She was not sensible at all during the strangling.'

Elspeth hoped she had been dead before the lockman had the pleasure of doing it himself. If anyone could will themselves to die, Jonet could. Elspeth knew she had no such power over herself. She would need help.

XIII

The inquisitor came in. Elspeth stepped away from the officer at her arm and into her corner, where she answered all the questions they put to her, but the inquisitor told her that she had said enough and that she needn't answer any more. He said that she could stop walking now and ordered the officer out of the room.

She sunk down into the corner and immediately began to draw out her box-bed lines once more. She had no thoughts other than sleep. She did not much care whether they let her go or not, for at least she was sheltered in her cellar. All that awaited her outside was wind and rain, doors closed against her, and cold sleep in the alleys, with strangers in the space Jonet should be.

XIV

They let several women into Elspeth's ward. The women did not bring her anything, they only came to beg Elspeth not to say that they had consulted her during the rebellion. Elspeth promised them she would not, if only they would bring her a rope to hang herself with. The women's eyes widened. Some said they would never do such a thing. Others promised that they would.

Only one came back with a rope, but one was all she needed. It was the goodwife, Marion Sinclair, of Gorne. Her bairn was thriving. Elspeth did not look at the

goodwife's face, only at the rope sliding around her wrists. 'It is a strong rope, and an easier death than to be burnt,' said the goodwife. She had hung many carcasses with it, and it had not yet frayed; it would be strong enough to hold Elspeth in the thin state she was in. 'It is yours, if only you promise not to say that I asked you to heal my bairn.'

Elspeth said that she wouldn't tell them a thing, which was not quite a lie, because, seeing as she had already told them, and that they had written it down, she would not need to again.

The goodwife nodded sadly and handed Elspeth the rope.

Elspeth deepened and widened one of the lines she had carved into the earth floor and buried the rope inside it.

XV

It was too cold to sleep. Elspeth found herself crawling out from her box-bed lines, towards Marion. She seated herself beside her, leaning into her limp legs, draining the warmth from them. She could see herself from above, sitting there, shivering next to the hanging girl. Elspeth looked the same as she did when Marion was alive. Marion would ever be a young woman, and Elspeth would ever be twelve years old. Her eyes drifted closed. She dreamt Jonet was sitting next to her, her head resting on her shoulder. Jonet said, 'Why did you bring me back in here? Why not let me dry up on the hill and drift away? We will never leave this cell now. I am in the walls. And so will you be.'

Elspeth cried and said she was sorry. She had been selfish; she had only wanted Jonet to be with her still. She had not given a thought to what Jonet might want. She wondered if she ever had. She wondered if Jonet had ever thought about what Elspeth wanted. Had Jonet ever really cared for her? Had she really led the officers to her?

She and Jonet wept together, thinking about how everything might have been different.

12 March, 1616

An officer pulled her out from between Jonet and Marion, where she had spent the last three days. He took her outside. The light hurt her eyes. Every five steps, she felt the

need to turn. She had not moved this far forward in so long. Turn around, turn around; she needed to turn; she needed to go back to where she had been. She pulled away, but the officer held fast.

He dragged her to the entrance of the Bishop's Palace. The door swung open, and there was nothing she could do about it. She was inside, in the largest room she was sure she had ever been in, and she was being taken towards four men sat behind a long table.

She was forced into a seat before them. They all had stares like her uncle. She closed her eyes and felt a familiar floating in her head and sinking in her feet, but the only rope she could sense was around her own neck.

The men were introducing themselves. She blinked. She looked at their mouths, not their eyes. Procurator fiscal, magistrate, magistrate, clerk. The clerk was writing. One of the magistrates started speaking in what Elspeth recognised as Latin. The lockman was sat in the corner of the room, drifting asleep.

To her right sat more men, spread over three benches. More dead eyes. She looked away. Sweat spread over her skirt, beneath her hands.

The magistrate started speaking Scots. He said, 'The which day concerning the dittay criminal given in and pursued at the instance of Robert Coltart, procurator fiscal of the said Sheriffdom, against Elspeth Reoch, daughter to the deceased Donald Reoch, sometime piper to the Earl of Caithness, for certain points of dittay of witchcraft underwritten.'

Elspeth twitched as the magistrate said her name. It was strange to hear it spoken by someone who did not know her—her father's name too. Had she told them about her father? She must have, but she couldn't remember doing so.

'For art part using committing and practicing of the abominable and devilish crime of witchcraft in giving ear and credit to the illusions of the Devil, whereby she pretended herself dumb and eluded and deceived his majesty's subjects in manner underwritten.'

Pretended to be dumb, she thought; she had done no such thing and would not confess to that.

'Do you have any lawful cause why you should not pass to the knowledge of an assize?' asked the magistrate.

Elspeth did not realise he was speaking to her. The room waited for an answer.

The magistrate repeated the question, this time with her name in it, so there was no mistake.

She shook her head, hoping that was the correct answer.

'In the first,' the magistrate continued, reading from a piece of paper in front of him. 'For that you confessed that when you were a young lass of twelve years of age, or thereby, and had wandered out of Caithness, where you were born, to Lochaber, you came to Allane McKeldow's wife, who was your aunt, and having remained with her be the space of eight weeks, who dwelt with her husband in a loch, that you upon a day, being out of the loch in the country, and returning and being at the loch-side awaiting when a boat should fetch you in, that there came two men to you, one clad in black and the other with a green tartan plaid about him.'

She had been washing at the loch, not waiting for a boat. She remembered that now that she had slept. She could not remember if she had told her inquisitors otherwise. Maybe Marion had told them that. She would not confess to that either. It was wrong. Had she been washing her bloodied shift?

The magistrate kept talking. Elspeth wanted to plug his mouth with something. With each word he was reaching closer and closer to her end, and suddenly, she did not think she was ready for it at all.

Elspeth saw Jonet beneath her fingernails and felt her hardening on her cheeks. Jonet's face appeared before Elspeth's, and the mud on Elspeth's cheeks turned into Jonet's shrivelled hands. She pressed at the sides of Elspeth's head and said, 'Don't confess to any of it; live for the both of us.'

'The man with the plaid said to you, you were pretty,' the magistrate continued, 'and he would learn you to know and see anything you would desire. The other man said you would not keep counsel and forbade him. He answered, he would warrant you, and you, being desirous to know, said, how could you know that? And he said, take an egg and roast it, and take the sweat of it three Sundays, and with unwashed hands, wash your eyes, whereby you should see and know anything you desire.'

The magistrate unpicked the words Elspeth had watched her scribe sew, flinging the string at her. She did not recognise the thread; it was too straight, falling in a neat pile at her feet.

'And to persuade you, he directed you to an aunt's house of your own, who was a widow that had a grandchild that was with child to another wife's husband, unknown to any. And when you came, you should look in her face and tell her she is

with bairn to another wife's husband. And so, within a short space thereafter, going to your aunt's house, how soon you saw the young woman, you said she was with bairn as the man had said to you, and she denying, said to you, you would repent it within a short space. Thereafter, the young woman, considering that you knew her state, desired some cure at you that she might part with bairn, who answered you could give her none. But remembering that you was come in to Allane McKeldow's house that day that the two men came to you; that he having asked at you what men those were that were with you at the loch-side and what they had said to you, and you denying, he forbade you to fear, for they were friends of his who would do you no hurt, and that he knew what they said to you. So you remembering that Allane had skill, you said to the young woman that he would help her. Whereupon she and you went together to the loch and spoke with him, who refused to give you anything to slay the bairn.

'And thereafter, within two years, you bore your first bairn, which was gotten be a James Mitchell at the Kirk of Murthlie, upon Spey, within Balveny. And being delivered in your sister's house, the black man came to you that first came to you at Lochaber and called himself a fairy man, who was sometime your kinsman called John Stewart, who was slain be McKee at the down going of the sun, and therefore neither dead nor living but would ever go betwixt the heaven and the earth.'

They had written that down wrong, Elspeth thought, or maybe he had read it out wrong. Her name was Marion, and she had told them that she had been killed by McKeldow, not McKee, and she was not the same as the fairy man; hadn't Elspeth made that clear? She was *with* the fairy man; the fairy man was not her, but she could not correct the magistrate now. His voice went on and on and on; it was impossible to stop it. She did not want to hear the next part. She looked at the jury; she did not want them to hear it either.

'The man dealt with you two nights and would never let you sleep, persuading you to let him lie with you would give you a goodly fee, and to be dumb for having taught you to see and know anything you desired.'

She saw now that the string the magistrate kept flinging at her feet was the colour of her hair. She wondered if, as the magistrate plucked out the words, he was also plucking out her hair. She felt more naked with every strand she lost to the floor. She hoped that some of it would stay inside the cracks in the stone for much longer than she had left in this world, which was not much, she thought.

‘He said that if you spoke gentlemen would trouble you and make you give reasons for your doings, whereupon you might be challenged and hurt. And upon the third night that he came to you, you being asleep, he laid his hand upon your breast, waking you, and thereafter seemed to lie with you.’

You, you, you; stabbing at her. She wished the magistrate would let her disappear from the room. She wished he would talk about her as though she were not there.

‘And upon the morrow you had no power of your tongue nor could not speak. Wherethrough your brother beat you with a branks until you bled, because you would not speak, and put a bow string about your head to make you speak. And thereafter took you three several times Sundays to the kirk and prayed for you. From the which time you still continued dumb, going about and deceiving the people, afterwards telling and foreshowing them what they had done and what they should do.’

She hadn’t deceived anybody; she hadn’t been pretending. She had told them about her brother so they could see that no matter how much he beat her, she could not speak. Wouldn’t she have stopped him if she could have? She was tired of telling them she had not pretended.

‘By the second sight granted to you in manner foresaid, you saw Robert Stewart, son natural to the deceased Patrick, sometime Earl of Orkney, with Patrick Traill, to whom you was with bairn, and certain others with ropes about their necks in Edmund Calendar’s house at their afternoons drink, before the Earl of Caithness’s coming to the country.

‘By the plucking of the herb called millefole, which causes the nose bleed, he had taught you to tell whatsoever should be asked at you, be sitting on your right knee and pulling and pulling it betwixt your mid finger and thumb and saying of *in nomine patris filii et spiritus sancti*, be virtue whereof you healed a bairn to Magnus Sinclair in Gorne at the desire of his wife, at which time, on yule day, you confessed the Devil which you call ‘the fairy man’ lay with you, at which time he bade you leave Orkney and go home to your own country because this country was Priest-gone, which he explained that there was over many ministers in it, and if you tarried you would be hurt. And further, for art part using, hanting, and conversing with the Devil at diverse and sundry times and at several parts.’

She wished they would stop talking. She couldn’t remember when she had said all of this to them.

‘First, Caithness after you had borne your first bairn, next in the miller’s house be the wag in Caithness, twice in Edmund Calendar’s house in Kirkwall, a time in Gorne, a time in Archibald Dass’s house there, a time in Alexander Layng’s, and last in Alexander Pottinger’s house, where she received response and diverse information at which time off him.’

The magistrate paused and said, ‘And at mere length is content in the said dittay.’

Elspeth could not sit still. She fought the urge to start pacing back and forth again.

The magistrate asked, ‘Do you confess to the whole points of the dittay before said?’ But she could not remember all of it. Every time Elspeth stretched her cheeks to say something, she felt Jonet trying to pinch them into a different shape: into a ‘No’. Elspeth began to cry then, and Jonet began to soften and drip down her face. Elspeth hoped that meant that Jonet understood. Elspeth could walk back and forth no longer: she wanted to be in the ground like her bairn. What was she meant to say? Jonet wanted her to lie; she had always wanted her to lie, but Elspeth *had* told the men those things, hadn’t she? She swiped at her cheeks. The mud was on her fingers; she rubbed it into the cracks in her lips. She hoped Jonet would help her lie, would help her die.

‘Yes.’

She waited for a rope to fall over her head, but it did not come. She had confessed; she had repented. Are they now going to let her go?

‘Do you have any objection to any of those admitted upon the assize?’

She looked at the men. They were no longer attached to their seats. They were flying off the bench in a line. They began to circle around her, their thick breaths on her cheeks, a chain of moving eyes, glistening.

‘No.’

She wanted to stop them moving, stop the magistrate from handing the paper he had read from to an assize member; to take it off him and rip it.

She wanted to die, didn’t she? But how soon would they do it? And would it hurt? And what would happen to her afterwards? She wanted to talk to the jury herself, to tell them to listen to her, and not to read what was on the paper. She had already forgotten what was on there. Had they recorded Marion’s name? Had they recorded that she only did it to help her; that she did not know the fairy man was the Devil?

The lockman pulled her up and led her into a room off the hall. He shut the door behind her, and she was alone. She was comforted by the size of the room, for it was only slightly bigger than her ward. She did the only thing she knew how to do and that was pace, back and forth, proud that she no longer needed the weight of an officer to keep her standing. She was walking much faster than she had before. The whole of her vibrated, and she thought she might be sick.

They did not take long, the assize. Her tongue was swelling. She was breathing very fast. She could not stop her legs when the man came back in. He had to rip her from her course and pull her back into the room. She thought she recognised some of the assize men from the markets in Kirkwall, but she could not be sure.

She wanted to see Marion. Why wasn't Marion there, in the corner of the room? They are to judge us Marion; they are to tell us that we're to be free. Elspeth did not really understand if she had done anything wrong or not. She had not enjoyed being in the fairy man's company; he only had hold of her because she was weak. And she had only become weak through trying to help her kinswoman. I had tried to help you hadn't I, Marion? Where was she? She looked in every corner. She should not have paced so fast. Perhaps Marion had been in the small room; perhaps she had left her there.

Elspeth wanted Marion tied around her when it ended; she wanted it to be with Marion's rope. There was the lockman, filling up the corner where Marion should have been. Won't you use her rope? she pleaded with him. It is difficult to get off, but you might get it eventually, even if it takes you days. What is another two days on this earth? It would mean nothing to you, but it would mean everything to me.

She sat down. The chair was cool through her skirt. She was glad to sit. She thought she might have peed herself if she was not sitting. She remembered the stains of blood on her dress; she was as guilty as sin. They had all seen it, she thought, as they had led her to the next room.

'Who have you nominated and elected as chancellor?' the magistrate asked the assize.

She was glad he was looking so pointedly at them, or she may have answered.

'William Bannatyne of Gairsay,' said one of the men.

'Can the said chancellor please rise.'

He did.

'What is the deliberation of the assize anent the dittay produced and whole points thereof, by your mouth?'

‘The whole assize find the said Elspeth guilty of the whole points of dittay and remit sentence to the judge and dome to the dempster.’

How easily he had said it. They have looked over her document, and found it stained with sin. Elspeth wondered if that was it. Would Marion not show her face? Was there not somebody who would charge through the door and speak for her? Or at least someone who would wrap their arms around her, stroke her head, and say they were sorry? Her uncle used to stroke her head. She had once hoped that he would do so forever. But not even the man in black would speak for her now.

The magistrate said something about accepting the deliberation, and another man on the table said something about her being strangled at a stake and thereafter burnt in ashes. He had given a time for it. It could not be that afternoon; is that what she had heard? Everyone else in the room would cast a shadow the next morn, and she wouldn’t.

The lockman picked her up out of her chair, but she was sick of walking now. Would someone please tell her when they would kill her? She wanted to be insensible by the time they did.

XVI

They dragged her back into her cell and left her there. Her legs would no longer move, so she crawled backwards and forwards along the lines of her box-bed. She traced the lines over and over, hoping to dig a trench deep and large enough so no one could step over it and get to her, and she could sleep undisturbed.

She felt a rope beneath the earth. Had she buried that there? She pulled it out and placed it inside her bed.

She thought about how she had dug through her bairn’s mound with her brother’s handkerchief up her sleeve. She ripped a piece of her skirt off, rubbed some of Jonet on it, placed it into the shallow trench, and covered it up again. They would burn Elspeth’s body, but they would not get to her cloth. She would stay in there. She, Jonet, and Marion, would claim that room inside the Earl’s Palace for themselves. Marion would hang on the wall, and Elspeth and Jonet would sleep beside her. Once they had rested enough, they would find a way to free Marion from her rope so they could all skip around the room together and carve lines in the floor with their feet forever. They would ward off any visitors with the sound of their laughter, and if

anyone intruded on their room, they would push and spit and curse them. If no one would give them a proper grave, they would have to make one for themselves. Elspeth could feel the power stirring in her now. She felt, with sudden clarity, that her curse had worked on her brother after all. He was in the ground, and blood was the last thing he had tasted. She could hear the words Margaret was saying to her bairn that very moment as she spoke to him of her sister, Elspeth. She could feel her uncle's loneliness as he sat by the fire night after night after his wife had gone to bed, and the resentment that filled him as he crawled next to Agnes's cold body. She did not know what to think about her aunt. She hoped only that, one day, she would leave that bed and not return to it.

'She and she gaid together'

Elspeth picked up the rope and gave it to Marion. Her hands were trembling too much to do it herself. Marion, her face tilted permanently upwards, tied the rope into a noose. She had done this before. Elspeth turned, and Marion threaded the rope over Elspeth's head. It fell softly onto her collar bones. Elspeth lifted her hair out of the rope, and Marion tightened it, quickly, not letting Elspeth think twice about it, and with anger too, and a strength Elspeth did not know Marion had in her bloated hands. Then, Marion flung the rope around the hook on the wall and pulled with that same surprising strength, and Elspeth's feet lifted off the ground.

There they hung like two mirror images, their faces tilted outwards, Marion's to the left, Elspeth's to the right. The knotted ropes were stacked on top of each other on the iron hook. They wondered when Jonet would slip out from the wall and join them. They were cold, but hanging there, like that, their bodies leaning against one another, they were as warm as they could possibly be in death.

‘She had No Power of Her Tongue’: Re-writing the Trial of Elspeth Reoch

Abbreviations

ACM	*Abbotsford Club Miscellany*
MCM	*Maitland Club Miscellany*
RPC	*The Register of the Privy Council*
SC	*Sheriff Court Records*

A Note on Source Material

The archival material, predominantly court records, quoted throughout this exegesis are in Older Scots and appear without alteration, unless otherwise stated. I have chosen to include any errors in the original documents inside these quotes (crossed out words, for example) for, as I will go on to argue in this exegesis, these inconsistencies can give us insight into the ways the document was constructed. Translations into Australian English, in accordance with the *Macquarie Dictionary,* have been provided in footnotes for ease of reading. At some points, Older Scots quotes will be repeated in the text in Australian English. As these are translations, and not direct quotes, they will be placed in single quotation marks. All Older Scots words have been translated using the *Dictionary of the Scots Language.*

There were no agreed rules for spelling in seventeenth-century Scotland. Therefore, some names and words may vary in spelling, even when repeated in the same document. Further, seventeenth-century court documents have little, if any, punctuation. In some cases, for the sake of argument, I have placed modern punctuation throughout the source material, with acknowledgement.

After a vision, or some spectral illusion also, Elspeth Reoch “had na power of hir toung, nor could not speik.” But the character of the dumb does not seem to have been improved by their calamity, nor were they rare. Elspeth Reoch went about “deceaving the people” and abusing them was alleged of another.

– JOHN GRAHAM DALYELL,
Darker Superstitions, 1835.

Her silence is not her own; it is a sign of her fairy lover’s care for her, but also his power over her.

– DIANE PURKISS,
“Sounds of Silence,” 2001.

Reoch’s mutism was pronounced, and indicative of significant psychosis ... Her mutism falls within the category of ‘catatonia’.

– JULIAN GOODARE,
“Away with the Fairies,” 2020.

INTRODUCTION

Gaps and Silences

> PHI … What can be the cause that there are twentie women given to that craft, where ther is one man?
>
> EPI. The reason is easie, for as that sexe is frailer then man is, so is it easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Devill, as was over well proved to be true, by the Serpents deceiving of *Eva* at the beginning, which makes him the homelier with that sexe sensine.
>
> – KING JAMES VI & I,
> *Daemonologie*, 1597.

I first came across Elspeth Reoch in John Dalyell's *Darker Superstitions of Scotland*, when researching Scottish fairy belief. One of the most valuable insights we have into seventeenth-century fairy belief is *The Secret Commonwealth*, a study of the fairy folk by Scottish Reverend, Robert Kirk, written in 1691. The fairies Kirk describes are far from the delicate, winged creatures we know today. They are volatile, menacing spirits, who the townsfolk did their best to avoid. Their tendency to strike those who offended them quickly, and unapologetically, caused the folk to adopt respectful names for them, such as "the good people", to "prevent the dint of their ill attempts" (Kirk 49). Fairies, with their evil demeanours and ability to imbue others with magical powers, featured in several witch trials from Scotland, of which Elspeth's is one. Like several accused witches, Elspeth allegedly gained her occult knowledge from the fairy folk, specifically, two fairy men she met by a loch-side when she was twelve years old.

The passage quoted in Dalyell's text—my first glimpse at Elspeth's trial—is perhaps the most widely cited section of Elspeth's document. In it, Elspeth's fairy describes himself as "ane farie man" named "Johnne Stewart, quha wes slane be McKey at the doun going of the sun, and thairfoir nather deid nor leiving, bot wold ever go betuix the heaven and the earth"[1] (Dalyell 536). This description of someone

[1] John Stewart, who was slain by McKey at the down going of the sun, and therefore neither dead nor living, but would ever go between the heaven and the earth.

who is at once a man, a ghost, and a fairy, poses several questions: Who is John Stewart? Was he real or a hallucination? Why did he tell Elspeth he was a fairy? When I looked further into Elspeth's case, I did not find any answers to these questions. What I found were more anomalous, highly detailed descriptions of Elspeth's interactions with this so-called fairy man and more unanswerable questions.

The two men who approached the twelve-year-old Elspeth were clad in black and green tartan plaid, respectively. This loch-side meeting is the first, and only, encounter Elspeth has with the man dressed in green. The man in black, who later calls himself 'John Stewart', however, continues to appear to Elspeth at several points throughout her life. Despite this, the man in black has very little to say at their first meeting. It is the man in plaid that greets Elspeth. He tells her that she is pretty, and then, despite protests from his companion, offers to teach her a ritual for the second sight. He goes on to instruct her how to make an ointment for her eyes, which will give her the ability 'to see and know anything she desires'. The section that follows this is, for me, the most interesting passage in Elspeth's document. The man in plaid, seemingly in an attempt to convince Elspeth that he himself possesses special knowledge, tells her a secret concerning a member of her family. He tells her that a young woman, who is currently staying with an aunt of Elspeth's, is pregnant with an illegitimate child. He then instructs Elspeth to go to this young woman, look in her face, and tell her she is with bairn to another wife's husband.

Elspeth obliges, and the young woman instantly denies the accusation. However, sometime later, the young woman approaches Elspeth, admits that she is with child, and asks Elspeth to help her get rid of it. Elspeth tells the young woman that she cannot but suggests someone who might.

When Elspeth returned to her aunt and uncle's house after meeting the two men by the loch-side, her uncle approached her and asked who she had been talking to at the loch and what they had said to her. Elspeth denied that she had spoken to anyone. Her uncle told her not to fear; the men were friends of his, who would do her no harm. It seems that this information, rather than suggesting that the two men were not the magical beings they appeared to be, is confirmation that Elspeth's uncle is not who he seems: he is friends with fairy men. He knew what they had said to Elspeth before she told him, and therefore, must also have special skill. Thus, Elspeth suggests to the young woman that her uncle may be able to help her. The two approach Elspeth's uncle together, but he refuses to procure an abortion for the young woman.

The story of Elspeth's unnamed cousin—the 'young woman'—preserved in her document, contains rare insight into the experience of a pregnant, unmarried, seventeenth-century woman; an experience which is often missing from archives and history books. Even more intriguing, is the fact that the young woman's story, after its end, is more or less repeated, this time with Elspeth at its centre: within two years after Elspeth met the men by the loch, she herself becomes pregnant with an illegitimate child.

The two women seem inextricably linked. Their stories are entangled, so much so that Elspeth told the story of this young woman alongside her own, in the pressured environment that is a witchcraft examination, during what she likely knew were the last days or months of her life. It was these two women that I wanted to know, their histories I sought answers to, and their voices I intended to amplify in a fictional novel.

Unfortunately, most of the textual traces we have concerning seventeenth-century women of the lower classes, a predominantly illiterate group, have been obscured by the hands recording them; but witch trial documents pose unique challenges of their own. The words of the accused were not delivered voluntarily. They were elicited by pressure, bribery, and sometimes, torture.

Elspeth's tale is at the mercy of her judges, inquisitors, and scribe, through whom her words are filtered, edited, and interrupted. When analysing Elspeth's document, it became apparent that the figures of Elspeth and the young woman were almost entirely unreachable beneath the influence of the court officials. Elspeth's voice cannot be freed completely from the control of her inquisitors. So, I shifted the way I approached Elspeth's document and sought, not concrete answers, but to reach as close as possible to Elspeth's voice, in order to write an Elspeth who was, as much as possible, untainted by the biases of her previous narrators.

My creative work aims to expose the problems of this kind of historical research: attempting to uncover the voices of women from textual traces. It supplies Elspeth with voice and life, while paradoxically proposing that Elspeth, as a subject, is almost entirely unknowable. Historiographic metafiction is a literary form which does not seek to deliver any conclusive answers to historical questions, or any singular truth, rather it asserts "that there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just others' truths" (Hutcheon *Poetics* 109). By inserting "the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history" (Hutcheon *Poetics* 114) into larger histories, historiographic metafiction questions

who has been left out of the record, and "*whose* truth gets told" (123). Thus, historiographic metafiction seemed like the most appropriate form through which to explore a highly problematic source like Elspeth's trial document, which is the work of multiple, almost indistinguishable authors, all working to narrate the story of one, marginalised figure. This exegesis explores how an author of historiographic metafiction can engage with witch trial records to uncover the voices of the accused, while questioning whether such a task is even possible.

Finding Elspeth's trial document

Extracts of Elspeth's trial document were first published by Dalyell in 1834, in *The Darker Superstitions of Scotland*. Dalyell's text traces the popular beliefs contained in witch trial documents throughout Scotland. It was the first study to consult the full judicial records of Orkney from the years 1615 to 1643 and remains the only to do so. Six years later, what was thought to be a complete transcript of Elspeth's trial document was published in volume two of the *Miscellany of the Maitland Club* (1840); and all subsequent analyses of Elspeth's trial have consulted this transcript, rather than the original source.

After looking at several primary witch trial documents from Orkney, I found that they were not nearly as neat as Elspeth's transcript appeared to be in the Maitland Club's publication. They were littered with crossed out words, corrections, and margin notes. Further, in some cases, before and after the trial documents, were notes about the proceedings surrounding the trial: initial accusations brought forth by neighbours, summons for the accused to appear before the court, and, in some instances, notes on what occurred following the trial and execution. Therefore, I wanted to locate Elspeth's document so I could identify if it too contained the discrepancies I found in other trials, as well as any pre- and post-trial notes. However, the references to Elspeth's trial given by both Dalyell and the Maitland Club are inadequate. They mention her trial is contained in the Sheriff Court Records of Orkney, but do not specify which of the eight references in this category (SC10/1/1-8) it can be found within. Thus, I began searching through each reference that included the year of Elspeth's trial, 1616.

During several visits to the Orkney Library and Archive and the General Register House in Edinburgh over almost two years, I searched through all the relevant

records, but was still unable to locate Elspeth's document. On my final research trip to Scotland, I decided to leave no stone unturned and consult those records which did not cover the relevant dates, including the reference SC10/1/3, which supposedly terminated after May 1613. I was hopeful that, in the very least, I may find some initial accusations towards Elspeth, submitted to the court in the years prior to her trial. When I opened this record, I discovered that it had been categorised incorrectly. The court book did not terminate after 1613, it continued on to 1630. On page sixty-four, I found Elspeth's trial. My search for this document was entirely worthwhile, for, as I began reading the document while comparing it to the Maitland transcript, I noticed that there were several crossed out words that were not included in the published version. Further, a few words had been incorrectly transcribed, which altered the meaning of the document. But, more significantly, there were, towards the end of Elspeth's trial, several lines that were not contained in the published document. The last few points against Elspeth, encompassing seven lines, had been omitted by the Maitland Club. In the transcript, these lines have been replaced by "&c &c" (190). The use of this 'etcetera, etcetera', strongly suggests that this section was deliberately excluded by the transcriber. The reason for this can only be speculated about. It may be that the transcriber had difficulty understanding this section, but it seems unlikely given that it is of no poorer quality than the rest of Elspeth's document. These lines list several households within which Elspeth allegedly saw and spoke with the Devil. One of these houses belonged to a notable figure in this period of the islands' history. Consequently, all the analyses of Elspeth's trial following Maitland's publication, have consulted an incorrect and incomplete record. Thus, this study of Elspeth's trial will be the first to consult her document in its entirety.

While I found no references to Elspeth in the minutes before and after her trial, I did discover another witch trial, which took place one week prior to Elspeth's: that of Jonet Irving. Extracts of Jonet's trial are quoted in Dalyell's text, but her full document has never been published, and consequently, has never been the source of analysis. Jonet's accusations and story of witchcraft are similar to Elspeth's in structure and subject matter. Both trials contain references to the tumultuous events that took place in Orkney in the years previous, which saw rebellion and a change in leadership and law. Jonet's trial allowed me to build a fuller picture of what was taking place in Orkney's courts around the time of Elspeth's trial, and discovering it, along

with the errors in the Maitland transcript, vastly altered the way I read Elspeth's document.

Methodology

In the formation of this exegesis and creative work, I consulted several primary sources originating from the early modern period (1500-1800) including demonological texts and travel diaries; but of central importance to this thesis are witch trial documents. Scotland's witch trial documents were first cited in studies of folk belief, such as Dalyell's *Darker Superstitions* (1835) and Walter Scott's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1884). In these texts, much weight is given to the superstitions illustrated inside trial documents. However, little interest is given to the people articulating them, and the ways in which these beliefs may reflect personal hardships and desires. Orkney historian Ernest Walker Marwick has written about and compiled a wealth of information on Orkney's witch hunts.[2] However, his use of these documents is similar to Dalyell's and Scott's. Marwick does not give much attention to the individual narrators in witch trial documents, choosing, rather, to relate the beliefs illustrated in them to wider folk superstition, failing to consider what he views as the testimonies of "pathetic, ignorant creatures" in much depth ("Northern Witches" 345). The focus of this exegesis is on the speakers within Orkney's witch trial documents, of which the female peasantry are one.

In historical studies of seventeenth-century Orkney, witch trial documents have often been overlooked as sources. Texts such as William P. L. Thomson's *The New History of Orkney* and Peter Anderson's *The Stewart Earls of Orkney* make use of but one witch trial document, belonging to Alison Balfour, for its relevance to the political schemes of Orkney's earls. Witch trial documents are a unique form of evidence in which the usually unseen words of the female peasantry have been recorded and preserved by educated men, who were uniquely interested in hearing about a woman's hardships, for these pointed to times when a woman might have been desperate enough to accept help from the Devil. Therefore, delving into the, still largely untapped, witch

[2] See Marwick's *The Folklore of Orkney and Shetland,* pp. 47-57, and his article "Northern Witches" in *An Orkney Anthology,* pp. 333-83. Marwick's notes and papers on Orkney's witch trials are contained in Orkney Library and Archive's Marwick Collection, D31/4/3 and D31/4/4.

trial records of Orkney has the potential to add new perspectives to a history dominated by elite voices.

My use of witch trial documents has been informed by Gallagher and Greenblatt's approach to literary history, new historicism. New historicism asserts the value of those sources which, like witch trial documents, have previously been "regarded as too minor to deserve sustained interest and hence marginalized or excluded entirely from the canon" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 9). It treats "*all* of the written and visual traces of a particular culture as a mutually intelligible network of signs" (7; my emphasis). By expanding the range of sources from which we gain historical and cultural knowledge, new historicism incorporates new perspectives into history. As Gallagher and Greenblatt note:

> figures hitherto kept outside the proper circles of interest—a rabble of half-crazed religious visionaries, semiliterate political agitators, coarse-faced peasants in hobnailed boots, ... freed slaves, women novelists dismissed as impudent scribblers, learned women excluded from easy access to the materials of scholarship ... —have now forced their way in, or rather have been invited in by our generation of critics. (9-10)

This exegesis consists chiefly of an analysis of Elspeth's trial document: a text which is non-literary, but is partly authored by an early modern peasant woman, who was marginalised and illiterate, and whose singular, idiosyncratic tale has been dismissed as the product of "a poor deluded creature" (Marwick "Northern Witches" 366). New historicism's insertion of previously disregarded voices into the canon, inevitably calls into question the ways in which we distinguish between 'major' and 'minor' works, and how we determine which texts are valid sources of historical study, and which are not (Gallagher and Greenblatt 10). Its commitment "to the value of the single voice, the isolated scandal, the idiosyncratic vision, the transient sketch" (16), works to disrupt dominant histories. This exegesis looks closely at the figure of Elspeth, whose presence interferes with the larger picture of seventeenth-century Orkney.

My reading of textual traces has also been informed by feminist literary criticism. Though containing glimpses into the experience of the female peasantry, witch trial testimonies have still been elicited and inscribed by learned men with their own agendas, who held the power of life or death over the accused. Therefore, I have read witch trial documents cautiously, so as not to mistake the intentions of the inquisitor for that of the accused. In doing so, I have drawn from the methods of Judith

Fetterley, who asserts "the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader", only then can male texts "lose their power to bind us unknowingly to their designs" (xxii-xxiii). This resistant reading extends to all texts consulted in the formation of this thesis: both primary and secondary.

My analysis of witch trial documents has been informed by the methods of several scholars of witchcraft, including Marion Gibson, Carlo Ginzburg, and Liv Helene Willumsen.

Marion Gibson, in *Reading Witchcraft*, outlines a methodology for reading witchcraft stories. Though Gibson's focus is on witchcraft pamphlets, her methods can be applied to court records. Gibson stresses that witch trial documents are the product of several authors, including the inquisitor(s), witch, and clerk. These 'co-authors' enter into a negotiation with one another, in order to produce a coherent legal document, which satisfies the court's desire for causality, and will ultimately be able to convince a jury of the accused's guilt (14). Gibson is concerned with separating out these authors, in order to determine how each individual wanted the witch and witchcraft to be seen (35). Gibson notes:

> it is actually very important to analyse in detail which author is responsible for each idea, because we can learn far more about witches and witchcraft, and about the creation of such myths, if we can go beyond the idea of composite/composition as 'fact' and see it is a mosaic of stories. (49)

One method of separating these authors is examining trial documents for signs of how they were formed: what questions were asked to produce and shape them. The questions posed to accused witches were edited out of the final document by the clerk (14). Their omission makes it difficult to establish where the inquisitors' influence starts and ends. We do not know, for example, if the questions were open or closed, leading or not. By attempting to uncover the questions behind the content of trial documents, we can begin to separate out the composite authors and determine the role each had in the document's development. Drawing on Gibson's methods, my analysis will attempt to strip the words of the accused from the influence of legal officials.

Searching for incoherence and inconsistencies in trial material can also aid in distinguishing between their authors. For example, authors who refuse to compromise on a particular detail can create 'cracks' in the material. Gibson states that these "slippages" "show how the meaning of witchcraft is negotiated and mutable, that co-

authorship is demonstrably at work" (27). "Examinations are not unified wholes", they develop and change as the narrative moves forward (27). Historian Carlo Ginzburg, who analyses witch trial evidence in *Ecstasies*, also pays close attention to "the anomalies, the cracks that occasionally (albeit very rarely) appear in the documentation, undermining its coherence" (10). In Elspeth's trial, there is a tension between what Elspeth says and how the court wishes to manipulate her words. The 'cracks' in Elspeth's document often appear when her motivations clash with her inquisitors' and a compromise is forced onto the material. Within these, the authors and their conflicting interests separate themselves.

At other points, compromises within the material are less obvious. An accused witch may tell a story suggested by a victim or inquisitor, but "in a way which serves the witch's interest as well as, or against, those of the victim or questioner" (Gibson 22). This measured resistance can be seen "in stories that are really about something other than witchcraft, as it is defined by statute … stories which appear cooperative but in fact are less obliging than they look" (Gibson 22). For this reason, my analysis of trial documents prioritises the idiosyncratic details that do not comply with the stereotypical tale of witchcraft set out in demonological texts and statute law, as these details were likely brought to the material by the accused themselves.

I have also drawn from the methods of Liv Helene Willumsen, who analyses witch trial documents in *Witches of the North*. Willumsen adopts a narratological method, examining both the language and structures of the narratives contained in witch trial documents. Similar to the methods of Gibson, Willumsen focuses on distinguishing between the different individuals in trial documents. However, rather than viewing the figures of the witch and inquisitor as co-authors of a written text, she reads trial documents as a record of speech, focusing on "the verbal interaction taking place" between the inquisitor and accused (31). Drawing on the work of Walter Ong, author of *Orality and Literacy*, Willumsen pays close attention to the aspects of orality in trial documents, for these can provide insight into the speaker and how they might have expressed information.

Elspeth's trial document can be separated into three parts: (1) when Elspeth meets the two men by the loch-side in Lochaber; (2) when the man clad in black appears to Elspeth again, this time following the birth of her first child in her sister's home in

Caithness; and (3) when Elspeth puts her second sight to use in Orkney to divine the futures of the townsfolk.

Over the course of these parts, two stories emerge: Elspeth's and the court's. My focus in Chapter One: Re-Reading Elspeth's Trial Document is on Elspeth's story. In this chapter, I conduct a close reading of the first two parts of Elspeth's trial document, which privelages her voice and explores what kinds of experiences may be in articulation in these sections.

Chapter Two: 'Rebellion is as the sin of Witchcraft', will focus on the story of the court, which becomes pronounced in the third part of Elspeth's trial. In this chapter, I will continue my analysis of Elspeth's document, alongside another witch trial from Orkney: that of Jonet Irving. The similarities between Elspeth's and Jonet's confessions suggests that they were delivered in response to a similar line of questioning. By paying close attention to these similarities, we can gauge what kind of information the court was interested in. This chapter will discuss the role of legal officials in shaping Elspeth's and Jonet's narratives to suit their own political purposes.

In Chapter Three: The Impression of a Life, I analyse *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood, and *The Daylight Gate* by Jeanette Winterson. Both novels utilise techniques of historiographic metafiction to depict criminalised women who exist only, and obscurely, in textual traces. My analysis will focus on how each author has engaged with archival documents when rendering their subjects.

Silence permeates Elspeth's trial document. What this exegesis will highlight is how absent Elspeth is within her own story. She has very little agency. Things happen *to* her, rather than because of her. She is largely silent. Within her folktale she barely speaks. Her responses can often only be inferred through the reactions of others. When Elspeth first meets her fairy man, he asks her to 'keep counsel': to keep their meeting a secret. When he appears to Elspeth the second time, he takes matters into his own hands and forcefully removes her ability to speak altogether. After his evening visit, Elspeth wakes to find that "she haid na power of hir toung nor could not speik"[3] (Reoch Trial 64). She spends a significant amount of time speechless. This is not the last time Elspeth is severely punished for what she says. A significant part of her

[3] She had no power of her tongue, nor could not speak.

accusation for witchcraft revolves around her fortune-telling. Once again, she has said too much, and she is sentenced to death for it. In her trial itself, her words are cut off by the judge, with the phrase: "at mair Lenth is content in the saidis dittayis"[4] (64). The court had received enough information to determine Elspeth's guilt and were anxious to conclude her trial. Some two hundred years after her death, she is interrupted once more, when the Maitland Club chose not to transcribe seven lines from her document.

This exegesis is preoccupied with voices: the voice of Elspeth, silenced on numerous levels, the voices of her inquisitors, the voices of the historians that have entered into conversation with her before, the voices of criminalised women who, like Elspeth, persist in legal records, and the voices of the authors that have written them into fiction. None of these voices are pure or easily accessible, though some ring louder than others. What reverberates most in Elspeth's trial document are its gaps and silences, which act as a constant reminder that Elspeth is, ultimately, unreachable.

[4] At this length is satisfactory in the said indictment.

Elspeth Reoch, another young, unmarried visionary, described her sexual activities in particular detail. The formation of a sexual relationship with her spirit-guide, John Stewart, was definitely his idea rather than hers, though she was vague as to whether it had been seduction or rape.

– JULIAN GOODARE,
"Away with the Fairies," 2020.

Elspeth also was harmless, a poor deluded creature much abused by men whom she took to be fairies.

– ERNEST. W. MARWICK,
An Orkney Anthology, 1991.

In 1616, neighbors accused Elspeth Reoch, a hermit in Scotland, of witchcraft. Under interrogation, she admitted to being taken by a man whom she thought to be a fairy.

– BRITTANY GODBURN,
The Monstrous Regiment of Women, 2019.

CHAPTER ONE

Re-Reading Elspeth's Trial Document

> Their Chamaeleon-like bodies swim in the air, neer the Earth with bagg and bagadge. And at such revolution of time, Seers or men of the Second Sight (Females being seldom so qualified) have verie terrifying encounters with them...
>
> – REVEREND ROBERT KIRK,
> *The Secret Commonwealth*, 1691.

Following the publication of Elspeth's trial transcript in the *Maitland Club Miscellany*, Elspeth has featured in several investigations into fairy and witch beliefs in Scotland. These analyses tend to focus briefly on one aspect of Elspeth's narrative: the visitation of the fairy man after the birth of her first child, alongside other witch trial documents. Literary historian Diane Purkiss is the only scholar to engage in a close reading of Elspeth's document. She does so in *Fairies and Fairy Stories*[1] and in her chapter, "Sounds of Silence". Purkiss's analysis spans, what I have separated out into, the first and second parts of Elspeth's document. It explores how Elspeth may have drawn upon fairy folklore, either consciously or unconsciously, to represent an incestuous relationship, which otherwise could not be spoken about directly. Purkiss's idea that fairies could be used to both fill and create gaps in an accused's story is one that this analysis will extend on. However, while Purkiss makes several insightful points about fairy belief and its potential to shape personal stories, she does not fully take into account the interests of legal officials in also shaping tales of witchcraft.

Purkiss reads Elspeth's testimony as a deeply personal story, authored and delivered relatively free from the influence of court officials. Purkiss notes that "Scottish witches told stories about fairies not out of any straightforward belief in fairies, not out of any longing to satisfy their interrogators, but because the court setting allowed these women to talk about feelings, experiences, and desires that could never normally be given a hearing within their cultures" ("Sounds" 81) . The narratives they

[1] A reprint of Purkiss's *At the Bottom of the Garden*.

tell are "stories that are paradoxically liberating, though told under terrible duress" (82). In order to read these stories, Purkiss asks readers to "abandon some of our preconceived notions about witchcraft", and suggests:

> rather than seeing the interrogators and the justices as enemies to whom words had to be given, placatingly, obediently, we might see them as therapists, a class of persons who also have all the power, all the authority, but who might be the only attentive audience a woman has ever had *with* that power and authority. (81-2)

Purkiss, though alluding to the duress under which these stories were told, does not fully consider the legal context in which these stories were delivered, which may have had a bearing on the narratives set down in the final document. In Elspeth's case, Purkiss notes that speaking about fairies "is clearly Elspeth's way of saying something about herself, something about herself so important that she would rather die than stop saying it" (90).

I agree that the experiences of women were listened to during a witchcraft examination, and what has been recorded are narratives about, and partly authored by, early modern women, which contain some personal truth. However, I disagree with the depiction of interrogators as therapists, to whom the accused feels they can, and want to, tell deeply personal stories, freely and cathartically. The legal and historical context in which trial documents were produced should not be overlooked. To not actively seek out where Elspeth's voice starts and her interrogators' ends, is to risk reading the interests of the court as Elspeth's own.

This chapter consists of a close analysis of the first two sections of Elspeth's document, which aims to separate her voice from her inquisitors, in order to ascertain what information she may have brought into her trial, and how this information may have been articulated by her in the form of a folktale. It will explore how readily available folktale structures may have enabled Elspeth to speak about difficult personal experiences to an audience demanding she do so, under the threat of death.

The legal context

There are several factors which may have influenced the kinds of personal stories set down in trial documents. These include the strategies used to elicit information from

the accused, the all-male audience the accused were expected to deliver their stories to, and the questions that shaped the tale being delivered.

The confusion and fear of accused witches is evident in several trials from Orkney. Barbara Boundie, when arrested for witchcraft, "ran into the sea, to her craig, and was flyed out of her wit" [2] (Boundie Examination 257). Further, while in ward[3], Barbara, threatened her inquisitors "that if she should be put to death, the whole cornes[4] should be blowne in the ayre by [the Devil]" (254). When Barbara was asked to confirm, in front of an audience, whether or not she had spoken these words, she "answered she spake it for weaknesse of her own flesh, and for feare of her lyfe" (254). The consequences were clear to Barbara, and her statement was an attempt to gain power over her interrogators in, quite possibly, the only way she could: laying claim to her relationship with the Devil. The possibility, even likelihood of execution, was known to these women, and was a constant source of anxiety. From the time of their arrest, to their appearance in court, the threat of death would have influenced what accused women agreed to and what they did not; what they said and what they did not. Annie Tailzeour, tried in 1624, exhibits great anxiety when responding to her inquisitors: she "said scho was uncouth, and wist not quhat to say"[5] (*ACM* 144) .

Further, strategies used during interrogation could force the accused to say all manner of things. In some witchcraft cases, the accused was able to expose these tactics publicly, in an effort to secure their innocence. The well-known Orkney witch, Alison Balfour, revoked her confession at the site of her execution. She claimed she only confessed to put an end to the horrific tortures her, her husband, and children were made to endure (Pitcairn 377; vol. 1, no. 3). Similarly, during Barbara Boundie's examination, she attempts to discredit several statements she made in prison, by asserting that they were "put in her mouth" by her interrogators (Boundie Examination 256). These accused witches are vastly different to those Purkiss describes as storytellers given the ultimate stage and audience: there is a fear surrounding what could and could not be said, and what should and should not be agreed to, that does not conform to the interpretation of witchcraft stories as ones conveyed liberatingly to interrogators, like a patient to a therapist.

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2 Ran into the sea, to her neck, and was scared out of her wits.
3 (A place of) custody, confinement or imprisonment.
4 Crops
5 She was uncouth, and did not know what to say.

During a witchcraft examination, courts demanded that the accused speak about their most intimate experiences in public, with severe consequences for saying the wrong thing: death. Garthine Walker, discussing seventeenth-century rape depositions in "Rereading Rape and Sexual Violence in Early Modern England", cautions against separating the narratives imbedded in court documents from their context. Walker notes that "despite the broad cultural resonances of legal language, one ought not to assume that the inferences of language used in the magistrate's parlour or the courtroom were precisely the same as those found in everyday conversation" (Walker 4). Further, "the gender of legal officials (all male of course) might have had some impact on how a story was framed" (4). Rape depositions, unlike the testimonies of accused witches, were given voluntarily to court officials by alleged victims of sexual assault. However, both an accused witch and a victim of sexual assault would have been expected to talk about intimate and painful experiences in a legal setting; experiences that would not normally have been talked about publicly, let alone in front of a powerful, all male audience. Women "talking about rape formally before male officials might have produced a differently nuanced account from, say, that which a young woman told her own mother" (Walker 4); as might a woman accused of witchcraft, speaking about their own intimate, often sexual, experiences before their inquisitors, and later, the fifteen male jurors who were to decide whether the accused deserved to live or die based on this account.

The questions posed to accused witches would have shaped the kind of content included in the final trial document. These questions would have been geared towards crafting a story of witchcraft that left no doubt in the jury's mind of the accused's guilt. By acknowledging that testimonies are a record of the accused's answers to questions posed to them by court officials, we can begin to ascertain what information the inquisitors were interested in.

The examination of Barbara Boundie is an incredibly useful source, as it is set out in question and answer form, and is, to my knowledge, the only witchcraft document from Orkney to do so. Most of the questions posed to Barbara were closed, yes or no, questions. During her public examination, the court officials repeated statements formerly made by Barbara, and asked her to confirm her words in front of an audience. These statements were not just those given by Barbara in private meetings with her inquisitors, but comments made by her at any point after her arrest. Thus,

everything the accused said, from their arrest up until their execution, was potential evidence that could be used against them. The words of the female peasantry, after imprisonment, suddenly held a lot more weight than previously. Over the course of her examination, Barbara becomes increasingly aware of the attention given to her words. She denies every point made against her or gives reasons for why she said what she did, in order to remove their power. If Barbara denied an accusation, she was asked to elaborate: to give her interrogators more words, which they might then twist. These accusations were often put to Barbara again, with different wording. Repeating and rephrasing questions was likely a tactic used by interrogators to build pressure and cause confusion, so that the accused might be tricked or coerced into eventually saying 'yes'.

Several of the questions posed to Barbara encouraged her to speak about periods of hardship in her life. This is perhaps linked to a demonological idea advanced by King James VI and I in *Daemonologie,* a treatise on witchcraft, which resulted partly from James's own involvement in the North Berwick witch trials of 1590-1, the first large scale witch panic to take place in Scotland. In this text, James establishes himself as the ideal monarch, and the most powerful and zealous adversary to the Devil on earth. In it, James argues for the reality of witchcraft, denouncing the scepticism of scholars like Johann Weyer and Reginald Scot who had previously published texts disputing the existence of witches.[6] *Daemonologie* is set out in the form of a dialogue between two figures, Philomathes and Epistemon. The arguments of Weyer and Scot are echoed in the questions of Philomathes, to which the authoritative Epistemon systematically dispels his companion's doubts as to the reality of sorcery, while offering practical suggestions regarding the examination and execution of witches.[7]

James argues that those who are miserable and hopeless are more vulnerable to the Devil's persuasions. Therefore, in examinations, these are the kinds of experiences interrogators would have encouraged the accused to speak about. James notes the Devil seeks out those that "are in great miserie and povertie", who he "allures to follow him, by promising unto them greate riches, and worldlie commoditie" (32).

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6 See Weyer's *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, and Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*.

7 Orkney is given special mention by James, who notes that this location is particularly overrun with the diabolic. When discussing the Devil's ability to lie with both men and women, James notes that "this kinde of abuse is thought to be most common in such wild partes of the worlde, as *Lap-land*, and *Fin-land*, or in our North Iles of *Orknay* and *Schet-land* … Because where the Devill findes greatest ignorance and barbaritie, there assayles he grosseliest, as I gave you the reason wherefore there was moe Witches of women kinde nor men" (69).

The Devil, finding such people in "utter despair", "prepares the way by feeding them craftely in their humour, and filling them further and further with despaire, while he finde the time proper to discover himself unto them" (32). When he finds the appropriate time to appear, "alwaies without the company of any other" (32), his victim's "mindes being prepared before hand … they easelie agreed" to the Devil's demands (33). Here, James is associating depression with the Devil, even arguing that the Devil intensifies the misery of those he wishes to entice into his service, in order to make them desperate and willing enough to accept him. Gibson notes that the questions posed to accused witches were focused on establishing cause and effect (15). Therefore, in order to justify an accused witch's pact with the Devil, inquisitors would have prompted them to speak of their personal hardships and griefs. They wanted to know about times when an accused witch was desperate; desperate enough to accept the Devil's help. In Barbara's examination, her examiners bring up a particularly difficult period in her life. She was "asked, if she upon occasion of necessitie in Yetland[8], did condescend to serve the Devill", to which Barbara "Answered, That being travelling with ane unhoven[9] childe four years and being fainted by the way, she became speechless, and so remained for the space of 24. houres, and was sore tormented, and the people said, that she had been with the Farie, she answered, she saw no Farie" (Boundie Examination 254-5). The judges appear to have prior knowledge of Barbara's 'occasion of necessity in Shetland' and purposefully prompt her to speak of it, in order to find out if she had been despairing enough to give herself over to the Devil.

Inquisitors were also interested in a woman's sexual history. James discusses sex with the Devil in *Daemonologie* (66-9), making this an element of witchcraft which inquisitors would have sought to fulfil. In order to do so, they had to ask a woman about her sexual experiences. Barbara's inquisitors repeatedly prompt her to speak about another suspected witch: Marjorie Paplay. Many of these questions were focused on Paplay's sexual history. Barbara was asked to speak about "the Devill … and his having carnall copulation with Marjorie Paplay ... as a man hes adoe with a woman" (Boundie Examination 255). Barbara's answer is inadequate. Therefore, the inquisitor repeats the question, this time worded differently: Barbara, "Being asked

[8] Shetland
[9] Unbaptised

againe whither she knew it to be of veritie, that she had seen the Devill ly with Marjorie Paplay on the ball ley? Replyed that she knew nothing of it" (255).

Thus, the accused was asked to respond to questions about past experiences, both difficult and intimate. Therefore, we are dealing with remembered experiences. I have discussed how the legal context may have influenced the communication of these memories. The weight placed on an accused's words, as mentioned, often resulted in confusion and incoherence. I would like to delve deeper into how an accused witch may have navigated this pressure and explore how an illiterate woman may have both recalled experience, and communicated it to a powerful, educated audience. Doing so may shed some light on how Elspeth communicated her own experience to her inquisitors.

Elements of orality

Walter J. Ong in *Orality and Literacy* discusses the speech and thought patterns of those in oral societies. Elspeth lived in a predominantly oral culture where words could not be visualised, only heard; where they could not be fixed onto a page, only recalled. Elspeth would have known of literate people, and heard the literate classes speak, either in conversation or to an audience—in church, for example, where she would have also heard written compositions read out. However, Elspeth herself would have been illiterate, as would the circles she moved in. Ong, referencing the work of A. R. Luria, argues that "such passing acquaintanceship with literate organization of knowledge has, at least so far as [Luria's] cases show, no discernible effect on illiterates" (Ong 56). Therefore, knowing of the existence of writing would not have affected Elspeth's thinking patterns.

Sections of Elspeth's trial document are characteristic of orally based thought and expression. The opening passage of Elspeth's document has a strong rhythm. Ong notes that sustained orally based thought "tends to be highly rhythmic, for rhythm aids recall" (Ong 34). Below, I have added commas and italicised additive and subordinative conjunctions throughout Elspeth's first accusation, to highlight its rhythmic quality:

> In the first, for that sho confest that quhen shoe wes ane young lass of Tuelf yeiris of age or therby *And* haid wanderit out of Cathnes, *quhair* she wes borne, To Lochquhaber, ye cam to alleine mckildowies wyfe, *quha* wes

> your ant, *And* haveing remaneit with hir be the space of aucht wickes, *quha* duelt with hir husband in a Loch, That she upon ane day, being out of the Loch in the contrey, And returning and being at the Loch syd awaiting quhen the boit sould fetch ~~yow~~ hir in, That thair cam tua men to hir, *Ane* cled in blak and the uther wt ane grein tartane plaid about him, *And* that the man with the plaid said to hir she wes ane prettie.[10] (Reoch Trial 63)

The rhythm of this passage ebbs and flows. New information is provided, followed by a subordinative clause, which lingers on this information, explaining it in further detail, before the narrative is pressed forward again with an additive clause. There is a traceable line of thought throughout. Each thought spurs on the next: they follow one another closely, propelling the narrative ever so slightly forward with each new clause. This thought process is easy to trace on paper. It would not have been so easy to trace for the illiterate speaker. Ong notes that "writing establishes in the text a 'line' of continuity outside the mind", and that if a person is distracted during the writing process, they can simply look back through the page to retrieve their line of thought (39). For the oral storyteller, once a word is spoken, it vanishes. Therefore, "the mind must move ahead more slowly, keeping close to the focus of attention of what it has already dealt with. Redundancy, repetition of the just-said, keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track" (40). The use of redundancy and repetition also buys the speaker time to figure out what to say next, without halting the tale and risking losing the line of thought altogether (40-1). Each clause in this section of Elspeth's trial is closely allied to the previous, moving forward in a slow but fluent way.

Elspeth's document is chiefly a record of her experiences as a young adolescent. We do not know how much distance Elspeth had from these events by the time of her trial, as her age is not recorded. With the inability to record experiences and preserve thoughts in writing, her act of remembering would have been more difficult. Ong observes, "in the total absence of any writing, there is nothing outside the thinker, no text, to enable him or her to produce the same line of thought again or even to verify

[10] In the first, for that she confessed that when she was a young lass of twelve years of age or thereby *and* had wandered out of Caithness, *where* she was born, to Lochaber, you came to Allane McKeldow's wife, *who* was your aunt, *and* having remained with her by the space of eight weeks, *who* dwelt with her husband in a loch, that she upon one day, being out of the loch in the country, and returning and being at the loch-side awaiting when the boat should fetch her in, that there came to men to her, *one* clad in black and the other with a green tartain plaid about him, *and* that the man with the plaid said to her that she was a pretty.

whether he or she has done so or not" (34). Elspeth would have been prompted to recount past conversations and experiences, but without the ability to preserve thoughts in writing, how, as Ong asks, "do persons in an oral culture recall?" (33). In answer, Ong states, that such persons must "think memorable thoughts" (34).

> In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero's 'helper', and so on), in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form. (34)

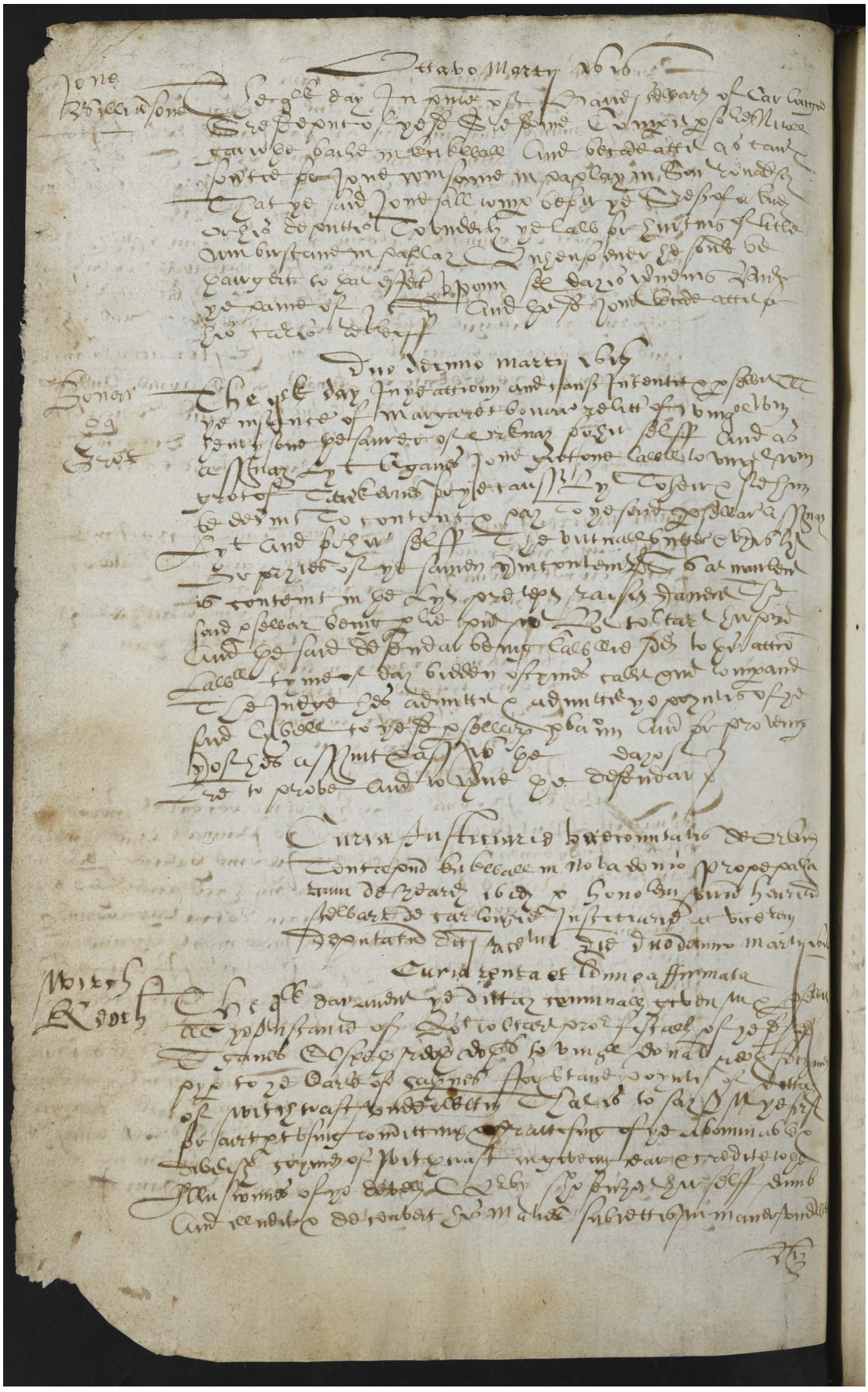
Thus, thoughts had to be formed using available formulas and patterns. For example, those that recur again and again in heavily circulated proverbs and traditional tales; these being accessible structures, formulated for ready recall, with well-known and easily organised schemas. Formulas were helpful not only for recalling important information, but for communicating it to others. This is evident in the methods for teaching trades in an oral society. With no written manuals available, trades had to be learned through "observation and practice with only minimal verbalized explanation" (43). That which needed to be verbalised, such as navigation procedures, were "embedded in a narrative presenting specific commands for human action and accounts of specific acts" (43). One highly rhythmic aspect of Elspeth's tale is the instruction for the egg ritual: the method through which Elspeth is to gain the second sight. It makes sense that this ritual should be imparted in a rhythmic way, for it was made to be remembered:

> He said Tak ane eg and rost it, And tak the sweit of it thre Sondayis, And with onwashin handis, wash hir eyes, quhairby she sould sie and knaw ony thing she desyris.[11] (Reoch Trial 63; punctuation added)

[11] He said take an egg and roast it, and take the sweat of it three Sundays, and with unwashed hands, wash her eyes, whereby she should see and know anything she desires.

This pattern may have been one heard in oral tale after oral tale. Its rhythm may have been a common one used to deliver magical instruction.[12] Patterns like these made traditional tales flexible; they could be easily manipulated to suit the speaker's intentions. As Ong states, traditional tales are not fixed: "there will be as many minor variants of a myth as there are repetitions of it, and the number of repetitions can be increased indefinitely" (42). The fluidity of such tales meant they could be distorted to suit a new purpose and audience, and to communicate new experiences or instructions. They were also a simple way of communicating important information, which the listener could easily digest and later recall. Thus, the events communicated in the first part of Elspeth's document may have been subsumed into a popular tale; a tale which may have helped Elspeth both to make sense of her experiences and communicate them in a high-stress situation.

[12] Instructions with a similar rhythm are given in the trial of Jonet Irving: "gif she buire ill will to ony bodie, That she sould luik upoun thaime wt opin eyis, And pray evill for thame in his name, That she sould get hir heartis desire" ('if she bore ill will to any body, that she should look upon them with open eyes and pray evil for them in his name, that she should get her heart's desire') (Irving trial 61); as well as the trial of Catherine Jonesdochter: "gif the kyne want the proffeit of thair milk, to milk thame throw the ring of the cleik, and that the nutte being keipt upoun ane, is guid to keep thame from danger" ('if the cows want the profit of their milk, to milk them through the ring of the hook, and that the nut being kept upon one is good to keep them from danger') (Donaldson 38).



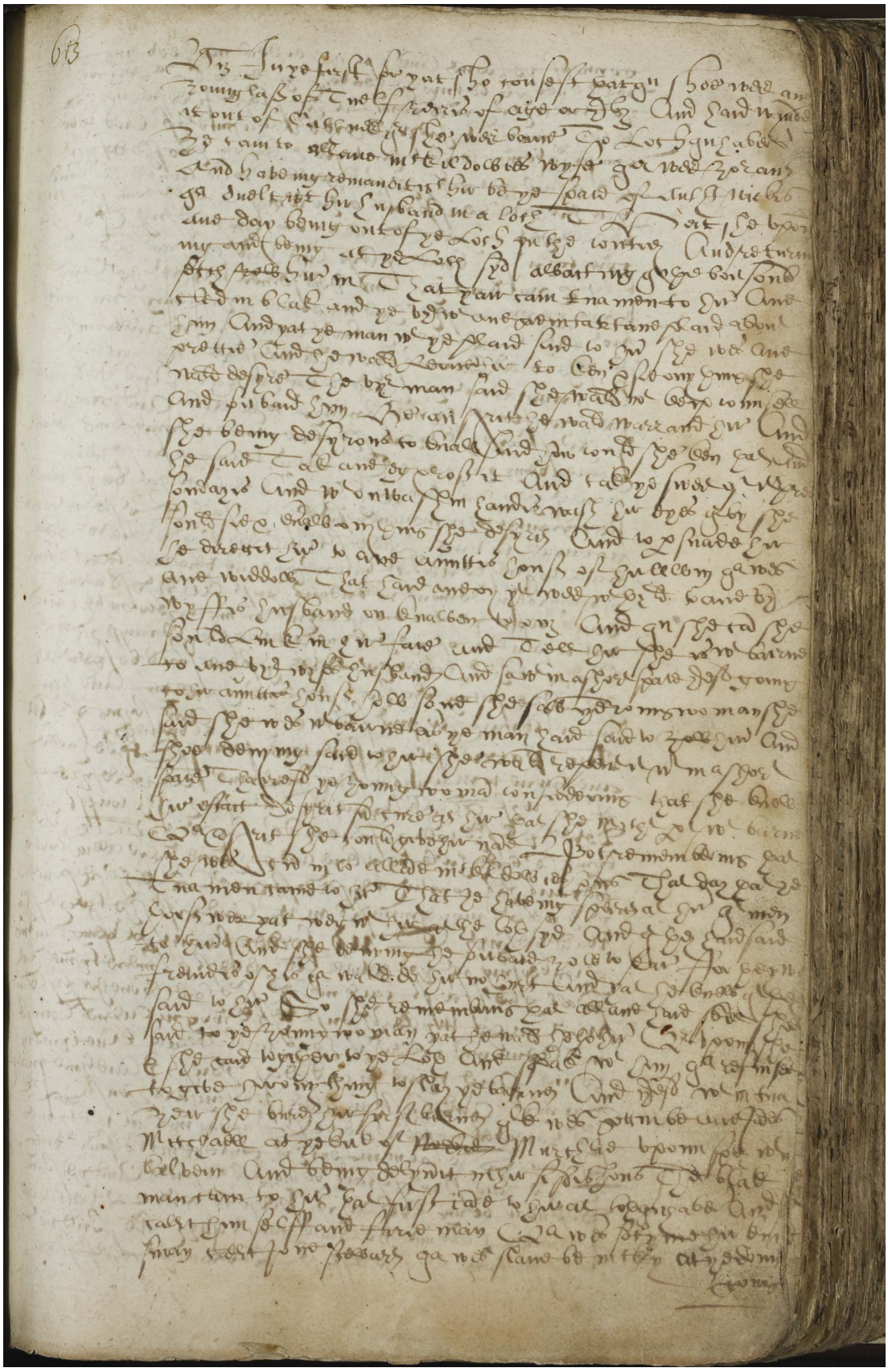


Fig. 2 and 3. Elspeth Reoch's trial document, 12 March 1616. Sheriff Court Records of Orkney and Shetland, National Records of Scotland, General Register House, Edinburgh, SC10/1/3, pp. 62A-63. Crown Copyright.

Elspeth's tale

Elspeth's tale appears at first to be a singular, and highly unique account of her adolescence. However, if we strip Elspeth's testimony of its idiosyncratic details and reduce it down to its core elements, we can see that Elspeth's testimony follows a well circulated formula, seen time and time again in traditional tales. Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* is a study of the forms and structures of traditional tales. In this text, Propp develops a scientific method of analysing tales, which involves stripping them down until they are but a set of functions: a clearly defined formula which can be applied to many common stories. This skeleton structure is then analysed in terms of its order, the role of its parts, and which characters are the central actors. Utilising Propp to analyse Elspeth's trial document will expose the similarities between Elspeth's testimony and traditional tales and propose that the way the characters in her testimony act is not unique, but reflective of a deeply ingrained way of telling stories. I will argue that Elspeth may have formulated and expressed past experiences using familiar structures, in order to make sense of, and then articulate, traumatic events for which she otherwise had little language.

Tales usually begin with an initial situation, in which the family concerned, or hero, is introduced. Elspeth's trial also begins with an initial situation. Elspeth is around twelve years of age, has recently left her family home in Caithness, where she was born, and has come to live with her aunt and uncle in Lochaber. After eight weeks in her aunt's home, the action of her tale begins; the initial situation has been established, and the tale's first function is introduced. This function fits under *absentation*: action incited when the main character(s) are isolated in some way. In some tales, the parents leave home on an errand, or, in some instances, pass away (Propp 26). In others, a member of the younger generation absents themselves by leaving home on their own pursuit: to visit someone, gather berries, etc. (26). Elspeth is a member of the younger generation who absents herself: she goes out into the country for the day, and, making her way back, she finds herself waiting alone at the loch-side for a boat to fetch her in.

In this instance, Elspeth has been twice absented: she is away from her parental home and from her current guardians: her aunt and uncle. Purkiss notes that Elspeth is also in an in-between state: a state familiar to the fairy folk who were thought to be "betwixt man and Angell" (Kirk 49). Elspeth is standing on the edge of the loch,

between the country and her uncle's home, between the familiar and the unknown (Purkiss "Sounds" 85). This liminality is both spatial and physical; she is also an adolescent, hovering between childhood and adulthood (85). It is in this isolated and in-between state that Elspeth becomes vulnerable to the influence of the fairies: the villains.

Two men come to Elspeth at the loch-side, one clad in black, and the other with a green tartan plaid about him. The man in the plaid tells Elspeth that she is 'pretty', which can be seen as a kind of grooming: an attempt to flatter Elspeth into trusting him. He then offers Elspeth a gift: he would teach her to know and see anything she might desire. He is tempting Elspeth with another alluring speech, dangling the carrot in front of her eyes. But the other man, clad in black, swiftly pulls it away. He forbids his friend from doing so, warning that Elspeth "wald not keip counsell" [13] (Reoch Trial 63): that Elspeth would misuse the gift and fail to keep the source of it a secret. This comment, warning that Elspeth would not keep counsel, can be seen as some form of weakened *interdiction*. Interdictions may appear in the form of advice, an order, or a suggestion: don't look inside the closet; do not venture into the woods; do not leave the tower (Propp 26). The suggestion that Elspeth would not keep counsel indicates that silence is a condition of the gift offered to her. Therefore, it is suggested that in entering this pact with the men at the loch, Elspeth must also abide by their rules and keep their interaction a secret.

The man in plaid dismisses his friend's concerns and says that "he wald warrand [Elspeth]"[14] (Reoch Trial 63). To offer a gift then immediately threaten to take it away can be seen as another tactic to entice Elspeth. It also asserts the men's power over her: they have the ability to give a gift, but also to take it away. The temptation, followed by hesitation, draws Elspeth into completing the next function of the tale: *reconnaissance*. In some tales the villain will prod the victim with questions in order to find out desired information: the location of children, precious objects, etc. (Propp 28). In Elspeth's tale, an inverted form of reconnaissance takes place: "when the intended victim questions the villain" (28). These questions may concern something the villain has that the victim wants. Propp provides the following example: the victim exclaims to the villain "what a swift steed you have! Could one get another

[13] Would not keep counsel.
[14] He would warrant Elspeth.

one somewhere that could outrun yours?" (28). This function is followed by *delivery*: "information gathering evokes a corresponding answer" (29). The villain responds, and "the secret of the swift steed" is revealed (29). Elspeth wants the knowledge the two men appear to possess. Before the man in black has a chance to form a rebuttal, Elspeth, 'being desirous to know', intercedes with a question: "how could she ken that[?]"[15] (Reoch Trial 63). Elspeth receives her answer, and the secret to the second sight is revealed. The man in plaid supplies her with a ritual, which involves roasting an egg and using the sweat of it as an ointment on her eyes for three Sundays.

Trickery follows: the villain deceives his victim by use of persuasion. The lines directly following the egg ritual read:

> And to persuade hir he directit hir to ane aunttis hous of her awin quha wes ane widdow That haid ane oy that wes with child to ane uther wyffis husband on knawen to ony And quhen she cam she sould luik in hir face and tell hir she is with bairne to ane uther wyfes husband. [16] (Reoch Trial 63)

Here, the fairy man is persuading Elspeth that he does in fact possess special knowledge and knows what others do not. By imparting this information to Elspeth, he is giving her a taste of the type of knowledge she will soon possess with the gift he has given her. This information is particularly valuable to Elspeth as it concerns a member of her family.

Elspeth, like most characters in tales, has little agency in her own story. Propp observes that, in general, "the feelings and intentions of the dramatis personae do not have an effect on the course of action in any instances at all" (30). Elspeth is driven only by the functions of the tale. An act of trickery has taken place, and she must respond with *complicity*: "the victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy" (30). Propp notes that "*deceitful proposals* are always *accepted* and fulfilled" (30). Elspeth does, without question, what she is told to do: she goes to her other aunt's house, where the young woman is staying, and as soon as "she saw the

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[15] How could she know that?

[16] And to persuade her, he directed her to an aunt's house of her own, who was a widow that had a grandchild that was with child to another wife's husband, unknown to any. And when she came, she should look in her face and tell her she is with bairn to another wife's husband.

young woman she said she wes with bairne as the man haid said to ~~yow~~ hir And shoe denying said to hir she wald repent it within a short space"[17] (Reoch Trial 63).

Propp notes that tales can be made up of multiple moves. A tale "may be termed any development proceeding from villainy (A) or a lack (*a*), through intermediary functions to marriage, or to other functions employed as a denouement", where "each new act of villainy, each new lack creates a new move" (Propp 92). Elspeth's tale consists of two moves with one common ending. Elspeth has completed her role as the victim; she has aided the villain in carrying out his act of villainy: to expose the young woman in front of her family, injuring her reputation, and compromising her place in the home and community. Now, a new move in the tale begins, in which the young woman takes Elspeth's place as victim. While an act of villainy is the catalyst for Elspeth's tale, lack is the catalyst for the young woman's.

In tales beginning with lack, the absence or need for an object, a companion (for example, a friend or bride), or a magical agent is made known, and the seeker-hero, who Elspeth will become in her tale, goes out in search of it (Propp 35-6). Elspeth's complicity in carrying out the villain's task propels the young woman into the victim position: she forces the young woman to seek out something that will liquidate her misfortune and protect her reputation. The young woman makes her lack known to Elspeth by asking her for help:

> The young woman considering that she knew hir estait desyrit sum cure at hir that she micht part with bairne. [18] (Reoch Trial 63)

The young woman regards Elspeth to be a safe person to go to for help, as she already knows her condition. She may also think that Elspeth, who knows what no one else seems to, may be in possession of the second sight, and thus has access to occult power. It is a magical agent the young woman is seeking to terminate her pregnancy. Here we see Elspeth step into her new role in the tale: the seeker-hero. Having been approached with a request from the victim, Elspeth must now agree to the request and/or decide upon a *counteraction*. In this function, the seeker-hero must decide on how to act; it precedes the search and is sometimes expressed in plain terms: "permit us to go in search of your princess" (Propp 38). After the young woman has approached Elspeth

[17] She saw the young woman, she said she was with child, as the man had said to her, and she denying, said to her she would repent it within a short time.

[18] The young woman, considering that she [Elspeth] knew her estate, desired some cure from her, that she might part with bairn.

and confirmed her misfortune, Elspeth tells the young woman that she is unable to give her a cure.

The function which follows is *the connective incident*. In Elspeth's case, "a call for help is given, with the resultant dispatch of the hero" (Propp 37).

> Bot remembering that she wes cum in to Allane Mckildowies hous That day that the Tua men came to hir That he haveing speirit at hir quhat men thois wer that wer with hir at the loch syd and quhat they haid said to hir And she denying he forbaid yow to fear ffor they wer freindis of his quha wald do hir no hurt And that he knew quhat they said to hir So she remembring that Allane haid skill shoe said to the young woman that he wald help hir. [19] (Reoch Trial 63)

Elspeth's memory of her interaction with her uncle, Allane, can be seen as a device to connect one function with another. This section, rather than occurring after Elspeth's return from the loch, is imparted just as Elspeth is deciding upon a counteraction. It reads as a justification for choosing to approach her uncle. The uncle seems to possess the same traits that led the young woman to approach Elspeth: he seems to already know what the two men told Elspeth, and thus the young woman's secret, by way of his own comradery with fairy men. This also suggests that he too may have inherited special knowledge from them. The functions being connected here are: the *departure* of the two women in search of Elspeth's uncle, and *the first function of the donor*. Propp explains, "if functions which follow one after another are performed by different characters, the second character must know all that has taken place up to that time" (71). This information may be imparted by one character to another, or, if this notification does not take place, the second character may be all-knowing (71). It is implied by the phrase "he knew what they had said to her" (Reoch Trial 63), that Elspeth's uncle is all-knowing, and it is this quality which allows him to know all that has occurred in the tale so far by the time the two women approach him. It is not stated whether Elspeth recites what the men told her to her uncle or not. So, it is possible to read this passage as a passing of information, where the words 'he knew what they had said to her' may be a persuasive device employed by her uncle in order to get Elspeth

[19] But remembering that she was coming to Allane McKeldow's [her uncle's] house that day the two men came to her, that he having asked her what men those were that were with her at the loch-side and what they had said to her, and she denying, he forbade you to fear, for they were friends of his, who would do her no hurt, and that he knew what they had said to her. So, she remembering that Allane had skill, she said to the younf woman that he would help her.

to spill information to him. If this is the case, Elspeth, in telling her uncle, would also break the interdiction to 'keep counsel'. Propp notes that interdictions, if present in a tale, are *always* broken (30). That Elspeth did inform her uncle of the two men by the loch becomes more likely when we reach the second part of her tale, in which the fairy man takes away Elspeth's voice; this may be seen as a direct consequence of the broken interdiction.

So, the two women depart: "she and she gaid togither to the Loch and spak with [Elspeth's uncle]"[20] (Reoch Trial 63). Elspeth's uncle acts in the role of the *donor*. The donor's first function is to test the hero. This test, based on the hero's response, sets them up to receive either a magical agent or helper. The uncle greets and interrogates the young woman and the seeker-hero, Elspeth. In tales, this "interrogation assumes the character of an indirect test. If the hero answers rudely he receives nothing, but if he responds politely, he is rewarded with a steed, a sabre, and so on" (Propp 40). In this case, Elspeth's answers are inadequate, and the uncle refuses to give the young woman "ony thing to slay the bairne" (Reoch Trial 63). In those instances where the hero fails the test, the only functions which can occur next are: "the transmission does not take place" and/or "the hero is severely punished" (Propp 46). In Elspeth's case, she does not receive the magical agent that will abort the unborn bairn, and she receives her recompense through several forms of villainy inflicted on her by the fairy man.

At this point, Elspeth's tale skips forward abruptly by two years. Elspeth is back in Caithness, in her sister's house, and she is pregnant with an illegitimate child, which was allegedly fathered by "James Mitchaell at the kirk of ~~Norlie~~ Murthlie upoun Spey within Balveny"[21] (Reoch Trial 63). Elspeth is made to endure several punishments for her failure. The first of which seems to be some kind of *substitution*. Substitution is a common form of villainy. For example, "a nursemaid changes a bride into a duckling and substitutes her own daughter in the bride's place" (Propp 35). The birth of Elspeth's first child follows her failure to procure a magical agent for the young woman. One seems to influence the other: Elspeth fails in her task, and so, is forced to endure what she could not prevent. Here, the young woman drops out of the document. Elspeth seems to be a direct substitute for her, taking her place in the tale altogether. We do not learn what happened to the young woman; we do not see her pregnancy through to its

[20] She and she went together to the loch and spoke with Elspeth's uncle.

[21] James Mitchaell at the kirk of Murthlie upon Spey within Balvenie (likely the location of Mortlach Kirk, Dufftown).

term. It is Elspeth, rather, who appears to bear the burden of the woman's unwanted child. It is Elspeth who carries the child to term, and it is Elspeth who gives birth to it. The first of Elspeth's reprimands seems to be to not only suffer the same fate as the young woman, but to endure it for her, in the young woman's place.

Elspeth gives birth to her first child in her sister's house in Caithness. At this time, Elspeth is visited again by the man dressed in black, who she first met at the loch. The man calls himself "ane farie man Quha wes sumtyme hir kinsman callit Jone Stewart quha wes slane be mcky at the doun going of the soone And therefor nather deid nor leiveing But wald ever go betwix the heaven and the earth"[22] (Reoch Trial 63-4).

Elspeth, having undergone the first consequence of her failure, is now made to suffer the next. Propp lists the different forms *villainy* can take. The next form Elspeth endures is: "the villain torments at night" (Propp 34). The fairy man "dealt with [Elspeth] for two nights and would never let her sleep, persuading her to let him lie with her would give [her] a guidly fe[23]" (Reoch Trial 64). He then threatens to make Elspeth "dum for haveing teachit hir to sie and ken ony thing she desyrit"[24] (Reoch Trial 64). He then appears to offer her some advice, which works to reinforce the interdiction. He says, "gif she spak gentlemen wald trouble hir And gar hir give reassounes for hir doings Quhairupoun she mycht be challengeit and hurt"[25] (64). The night torments continue: "And upoun the thrid nyt That he com to hir she being asleip And laid his hand upoun hir breist and walkint hir And therefter semeit to ly with hir"[26] (64). This act seems to be the method by which the villain succeeds in his next action, *seizure*; "upoun the morrow she haid na power of hir toung nor could not speik" (64).

Here, the villain causes bodily injury as a form of seizure. It is through this act that he is able to acquire Elspeth's voice. An example of seizure by bodily injury given by Propp is: "a servant girl cuts out the eyes of her mistress" (32). These eyes "are placed by the servant girl in a pocket and are carried away; thus they are consequently

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[22] A fairy man, who was in former times her kinsmen called John Stewart, who was slane by McKy at the down going of the sun, and therefore neither dead nor living, but would ever go between the heaven and the earth.

[23] A regular or occasional payment for services; remuneration.

[24] Mute for having taught her to see and know anything she desired.

[25] If she spoke, gentlemen would trouble her and make her give reasons for her doings, whereupon she might be challenged and hurt.

[26] And upon the third night that he came to her, she being asleep, [he] laid his hand upon her breast and woke her, and thereafter seemed to lie with her.

acquired in the same manner as other seized objects and are put in their proper place" (Propp 32). Elspeth's voice also has the quality of a seized object: it does not disappear entirely. Rather it seems to be in the fairy man's keeping as, later, he is able to give it back. It should be noted that it is the man dressed in black who revisits Elspeth, not the man in plaid who gave her the ritual for second sight. The man in black is the one who mistrusted Elspeth from the beginning; he was the one to deliver the interdiction that she must keep counsel. It seems that Elspeth has broken her interdiction, and he has come to punish her for this transgression. This punishment might be seen as a consequence of divulging the young woman's secret in her family home; it might also be seen as a consequence of speaking with her uncle about the men she met at the loch-side.

Sometime later, Elspeth's brother, finding her unresponsive, "deing hir with ane branks quhill she bleid Becaus she wald not speik And pat ane bow string about hir heaid to gar hir speik And therefter tuik hir thrie severall tymes sondayis to the kirk And prayit for hir ffra the quhilk tyme she still continewit dumb"[27] (Reoch Trial 64).

Purkiss suggests that, here, Elspeth's brother may believe his real sister has been taken by the fairies in childbed, and substituted by an unresponsive, mute double (*Fairies* 106). Childbed was a place where women were particularly in danger of being snatched away by the fairy folk, as they were in constant need of woman to nurse their own fairy children. According to Kirk, "women are yet alive who tell they were taken away when in Child-bed to nurse ffayrie Children, a lingring voracious image of theirs being left in their place (like their reflexion in a mirrour)" (54). Kirk recounts an incident involving a woman who was taken out of childbed and "a lingering Image of her substituted in her room, which resemblance Decay'd, dy'd, and was buri'd" (69). This 'lingering image' was also known as a changeling: a stock which resembled the seemingly absent woman, with very little life in it.[28] After this act of violence committed by her brother, Elspeth's tale dissolves. It loses its structure, and the role of the actors becomes less clear.

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[27] Struck her with a bridle until she bled because she would not speak, and put a bowstring about her head to make her speak, and thereafter took her three consecutive Sundays to the Kirk and prayed for her, from which time, she still continued dumb.

[28] Changelings were generally treated with cruelty. In a witch trial from Stirling, Margaret Dickson is said to have told a woman named Isobell Johnson that her child was a changeling, and advised her to 'put on a good fyre, and cast the bairne into it, for the bairne was not hirs' (qtd. in Henderson and Cowan 97).

The story of witchcraft outlined by King James in *Daemonologie* also reads like a folktale. King James notes that the Devil cannot assail someone who is not first in utter despair. After centring on his miserable victim, the Devil then opens up the crack of sorrow that brought him to them, and worms his way in, enlarging it, filling it with more and more sorrow, while he patiently waits for the perfect opportunity to show himself to his victim (James I 32). These are times when a person is walking solitary in the fields or lying in their beds, "but alwaies without the company of any other" (26). Then, the Devil, "either by a voyce, or in likenesse of a man", asks the person what troubles them and promises to give them a remedy for it, "upon condition on the other parte, that they follow his advice; and do such thinges as he wil require of them" (26). The people, having been made desperate by the Devil, agree easily. The Devil then proceeds to prove his loyalty to his newly appointed follower by teaching them ways to enact revenge or obtain worldly wealth. The two of them then have regular meetings, which are often sexual in nature.

Thus, there are elements of Elspeth's trial which do fit the typical story of witchcraft outlined by James: Elspeth's isolation, her vulnerability, that she learns her craft from a supernatural being, and later enters into a sexual relationship with them. However, these elements are structural, much like those outlined by Propp. The detailed descriptions of Elspeth's conversations with the fairy men, the young woman, and her uncle, are highly idiosyncratic, and were most likely experiences brought to the trial by Elspeth herself. Further, Elspeth does not meet the Devil; she meets a fairy man, who could be forced by her inquisitors to fulfil this diabolic role. The details that *do not* fit King James's tale of witchcraft are more substantial than those that do. The rhythmic qualities of Elspeth's tale and the copious amount of personal detail within it, suggest that a majority of it was imparted by Elspeth herself.

By breaking down the opening of Elspeth's trial using Propp, it is possible to see the ways the structure of traditional tales may have had some bearing on the way Elspeth communicated her story. The people in it assume typical roles: hero, victim, villain, and donor. In ascertaining, by their actions, which roles each character occupies, it is possible to learn how Elspeth may have viewed her own role in the tale and the role of those around her. The two men by the loch-side are not helpers, but villains, whose intentions from the beginning were to persuade her to harm the young woman's reputation, by making her illegitimate pregnancy known. Elspeth acts as the unknowing victim, tricked into harming a member of her family. Then, perhaps

recognising the real target of the fairy men's villainy, Elspeth steps out of the role of victim, and assumes the part of seeker-hero, whose task is to correct the wrong she inflicted on the young woman, by procuring a magical agent that will dispose of the problematic bairn altogether. Ultimately, though, Elspeth fails in her task, and becomes, in the end, a failed seeker-hero. She may have seen the events which followed as a consequence of her failure to repair the damage she caused, or even as a justified penance. As the young woman warned Elspeth after their confrontation: she would repent it within a short space.

A narrative of sexual assault

Several scholars have speculated on what experiences underlie Elspeth's tale. The focus of analysis is usually on the section in which the fairy man visits Elspeth's bedside and subsequently lies with her. Dalyell presumes that the man who visits Elspeth is "a vision, or some spectral illusion" (43). Julian Goodare classifies Elspeth as a "visionary": someone who claims to have had encounters with a being from the spirit world ("Away with the Fairies"). In several articles, Goodare speculates on the underlying cause of Elspeth's visions. Goodare proposes that Elspeth's "visionary encounter" after the birth of her first child may have been induced by a difficult birth or "the breakdown of her relationship with the father" ("Visionaries" 109). In another chapter, Goodare and Margaret Dudley suggest that Elspeth is describing an instance of sleep paralysis, which may also be "a fantasised reworking of some trauma – rape, perhaps, or failed courtship" (134). Sexual assault is also vaguely suggested by Marwick, who notes that Elspeth was "much abused by men whom she took to be fairies" ("Northern Witches" 366). Mariah Hudec in *Changelings and Sexual Coercion* is more definitive in her interpretation of Elspeth's account, arguing that "it is very clear that the sex that she has with the fairy in black is coercive and non-consensual" (56). She suggests that Reoch, in speaking about a visionary experience, is also speaking about an "abusive family situation in addition to trauma caused by at least one coercive sexual experience" (58). However, Hudec does not go on to explore this in detail.

In the following discussion of Elspeth's trial, I will expand on the idea that Elspeth is describing an instance of sexual assault from a family member, by comparing her tale to other legal narratives of rape that are partly authored by early

modern women. I will then go on to explore the difficulties that surrounded speaking about instances of sexual violence in a court context, and speculate why Elspeth may have drawn on popular tales to navigate the limited language available to her.

After the birth of Elspeth's first child, the man clad in black visits Elspeth again and tries to persuade her to lie with him. This section of Elspeth's trial is analogous to rape depositions delivered by early modern English women, analysed by both Garthine Walker in "Rereading Rape" and Miranda Chaytor in "Husband(ry)". The actions of both Elspeth and her fairy man are comparable to that of the victims and perpetrators described in these sources. Elspeth's fairy man

> delt with [her] tua nytis and wald never Lat hir sleip persuading hir to let him ly with her wald give yow a guidly fe And to be dum for haveing teachit hir to sie and ken ony thing she desyrit He said that gif she spak gentlemen wald trouble hir And gar hir give reassounes for hir doings Quhairupoun she mycht be challengeit and hurt And upoun the thrid nyt That he com to hir she being asleip And laid his hand upoun hir breist and walkint hir And therefter semeit to ly with hir.[29] (Reoch Trial 64)

The fairy man is relentless in his attempts on Elspeth. First, the man offers Elspeth money to sleep with him: 'I will give you a goodly fee'. Then he tries threatening her: 'I will make you dumb for having taught you to see and know anything you desired'. This comment could be read as: I have given you this gift, and now you have to give me something in return, and if you do not give me your body, your voice, instead, will be the price. The man then goes on to tell Elspeth that if she speaks, gentlemen will trouble her, 'whereupon she may be challenged and hurt'. In this instance, he seems to be convincing Elspeth that he would be doing her a favour if he took away her ability to speak. Elspeth appears to have no agency here. She does not answer the man, nor does she physically struggle against him. The focus is on the man's behaviour, not Elspeth's. However, Elspeth's resistance, though not described explicitly, can be inferred through the man's actions. His persistence suggests that he has been met on multiple occasions with opposition.

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[29] Dealt with her two nights and would never let her sleep, persuading her to let him lie with her would give her a goodly fee, and to be dumb for having taught her to see and know anything she desired. He said that if she spoke gentlemen would trouble her and make her give reasons for her doings, whereupon she may be challenged and hurt, and upon the third night that he came to her, she being asleep, and laid his hand upon her breast and awakened her and thereafter seemed to lie with her.

It appears that Elspeth's resistance is reliant on her staying conscious. She is able to defend herself against the man for the two nights she spends awake. However, the fairy man's perseverance exhausts her. On the third night, Elspeth, unable to stay awake any longer, falls asleep, leaving her body open to the man. He is then able to lay his hand on her breast, awaken her, and seemingly lie with her. Elspeth's taxing efforts at resistance are reminiscent of Anne Fownall's rape deposition from 1623. Anne was attacked by a man named John Freise, who tried to rape her in a barn. Just as Elspeth must stay alert, Anne must hold onto a cart 'with all might' to stave off her attacker. Anne describes the event like so:

> [Freise] by force pulld me and the Cart up and downe the barne untill at length I weried and [I] not able to keepe my hand on the Cart any longer he pulld me forciblye frome the Carte and threwe me downe on the Barne floare … wheare he in most Savage and barbarous mannor spent his lust on my Clothes… (qtd. in Walker 13)

Walker, in her analysis of this case, notes that Anne's attempts at resistance are not aimed at her attacker. Anne "keeps her body closed, tight, rigidly holding on with all her strength to a cart until, exhausted, she is overcome, thrown to the ground, and forced to become the object of [Freise's] sexual satisfaction" (Walker 14). This can also be applied to Elspeth's trial. Elspeth's resistance is not aimed at the fairy man, it is power over her own body that she must maintain. She must keep alert and keep herself closed, until, exhausted after two nights awake, her defences drop, and the man is able to touch her intimately without obstacle. There is an element of control here: control in staying awake and losing it when asleep. When asleep, the man is able to take advantage of Elspeth, taking control of her body himself, and through doing so, he is also able to take control of her voice.

Absent bodies

There are several gaps and silences in this section of Elspeth's trial document, carved out by the absence of both her body and voice. Her resistance to the fairy man is only described in terms of her staying awake. She does not kick; she does not struggle. Further, her answers to the fairy man's pleas are not recorded. Her successful resistance to the fairy man's attempts can only be inferred through his persistence. Further, the sexual act itself is not described. The word 'seemed', in the sentence 'he

seemed to lie with her', obscures the experience even further. This sentence may have been a summary of Elspeth's words by the inquisitor or scribe, based on a scant, or elusive account given by Elspeth, from which her listeners had to draw their own conclusions. Elspeth's lack of agency and the hesitation around the sexual act has led scholars like Goodare to conclude that the instance being described is "vague as to whether it had been seduction or rape" ("Away with the fairies" 41). However, the absence of the speaker's body is a common feature of accounts of sexual assault given by early modern women in court. In these accounts, "the raped body scarcely appears" (Chaytor 404), and "the absence of a detailed account of the sexual act, the bleeding, the physical pain" (Walker 2) is common.

Both Walker and Chaytor, in their analyses of early modern rape depositions, highlight the gaps left by the absence of the assaulted body. Chaytor notes that these gaps may point to "the failure, the repression, of memory" (380). However, Walker is critical of Chaytor's approach for reasons which are similar to my reservations about Purkiss's analysis of Elspeth's document, in that it overlooks the influence of the courts on the form and content of rape depositions. Thus, Walker attempts to provide an alternative explanation for the gaps, one which is firmly imbedded in the historical and legal setting which shaped them.

Walker conjectures that one of the reasons for the absence of the body in rape depositions is the lack of appropriate language available to women to describe instances of sexual assault. For early modern women, consent was already described in terms that they 'submitted' or suffered men to have intercourse with them: they are used, occupied, known (Walker 6). These terms present women's sexual roles as passive, while the men have the active role; they are the ones with the will and the drive, and women 'submit' to that will (6). This language would have made it difficult for women to describe an incident of sexual assault, for the sexual language associated with women, which indicated consent, was already so entangled with the idea that the woman was the submissive party, giving in to the male drive. If this was the language for consent, then "there was no popular language of sexual non-consent upon which women could draw" (Walker 8). Walker suggests that this is the reason for the lack of descriptions of the actual sexual act in rape depositions. Rather, the focus is given to the context around the rape, with only short, legal phrases like 'carnal copulation' in place of the sexual act (Walker 7-8). If we remember that these documents have been constructed as a response to prompting from court officials, it becomes clear that the

absence of detail about the sexual act is indicative of a lack of prompting by court officials for this kind of information (Walker 8). They were not concerned with the details of it. What they *were* concerned with was the context: the actions surrounding the act, in which courts sought to determine "the extent to which a woman was coerced into sexual relations, the extent to which she withheld or gave her consent" (8). However, even then the language available to women to prove their resistance was limited. In rape depositions, we see the majority of women depicting "themselves as being subjected to male violence rather than as actively responding to it" (Walker 9). The reason for this was that it was unfavourable for women to describe any physical strength, for "within legal testimony and popular literature effective female violence could at once make a woman less womanly and emasculate her male adversary" (9). Therefore, descriptions of resistance drew upon the image of the "woman as the suffering victim" (Walker 10). In depositions outlining resistance, there is usually a pattern of successful resistance, followed by overthrow. There is evidence of a push and pull, where the struggling woman manages to ward off the male attacker, but only momentarily. Walker discusses this pattern using extracts from the examination of Ellen Howley (1663), who was "overcome by force or exhaustion through 'overmuch struggling' and being rendered 'insensible through fright'" (Walker 23). This is a pattern that can be seen in both Anne Fownall's and Elspeth's testimonies.

There may be another explanation for the absent bodies in rape depositions: the inability for those in primary oral cultures to describe themselves in an abstract way. Ong notes that individuals living in primary oral societies engage in situational rather than abstract thinking. In Ong's discussion of the modes of orally based thought, he references psychologist A. R. Luria's investigations into operational thinking in *Cognitive Development*. In this text, illiterate subjects interviewed by Luria display a lack of ability to engage in self-analysis. The process of self-analysis "calls for isolation of the self, around which the entire lived world swirls for each individual person, removal of the center of every situation from that situation enough to allow the center, the self, to be examined and described" (Ong 54). Ong argues that this is a near impossible task for individuals in an oral society, for whom abstract thinking and articulated self-analysis are foreign, as both derive from text-formed thought (55). Luria, prompting his interviewees to speak about their internal world, is met with descriptions of the external. Luria asks an illiterate, thirty-eight-year-old man, "What

sort of person are you, what's your character like, what are your good qualities and shortcomings? How would you describe yourself?" (qtd. in Ong 54). Their interaction is as follows:

> 'I came here from Uch-Kurgan, I was very poor, and now I'm married and have children.' 'Are you satisfied with yourself or would you like to be different?' 'It would be good if I had a little more land and could sow some wheat'. (qtd. in Ong 54)

The man's character is inherent in what he does, and how others perceive him. The man describes insufficiency within his sense of self by describing what he owns, and his desire for more land and the means to sow wheat. In another interview by Luria, a thirty-six-year-old man responds to a similar line of questioning with:

> 'What can I say about my own heart? How can I talk about my character? Ask others; they can tell you about me. I myself can't say anything.' (qtd. Ong 55)

As Ong comments, "judgement bears in on the individual from outside, not from within" (55). This could, perhaps, explain why the self—the inner turmoil—is largely absent from rape depositions; why the trauma described in these documents is illustrated through a description of external factors: the context around the sexual assault, and the actions of the perpetrator. This may be why Elspeth's body and inner life is almost absent from her trial document, why Elspeth does not describe her pain, only what is inflicted upon her; why she does not describe her resistance, only the results of it: the fairy man's persistence.

In Chaytor's analysis of seventeenth-century rape depositions, she highlights how harm is not inflicted on the individual, but on their work. Victims "emphasize how, at the time they were raped, they were engaged in some useful activity – bringing the cows home for milking, fetching ale from the alehouse, baking, knitting, peat-cutting, taking hay to the calves in the barn" (379). These victims are women who 'belong'; who have a "place among [their] household and kin" (379). Their rapists prevent them from fulfilling the very tasks through which they establish their importance in the home and community. In one deposition discussed by Chaytor, a woman named Barbary Elder describes how she was carrying some ashes out from the house when her rapist attacked her. She begged him to not dirty her clothes, "for my mother would

be angry if her coats were foiled" (qtd. in Chaytor 382). Barbary's fear—of the man's violence, of her tarnished reputation, of the ruin of her family—is communicated through her fear of her mother's anger. The completion of Barbary's task is obstructed, and the means through which she earns the approval of her family and society is fractured.

Chaytor argues that common metaphors in rape narratives could substitute for the victim's body, which is otherwise absent. As previously noted, Chaytor suggests that these metaphors point to thoughts "which cannot even be consciously known" (394). However, as I have argued with reference to Walker and Ong, there are several contextual factors that may have influenced the content of rape narratives, which provide other explanations for their use, other than the suppression of memories. While I do not completely agree with Chaytor's interpretation of metaphors as repressed memories, her discussion of how metaphors could communicate for a body of which victims were "otherwise unable to speak" (382) is insightful.

Victims of sexual assault, in describing the disruption of their work, the ruin of their possessions, and the effect the assault had on their sense of worth in their household, may be read as attempting to articulate an inner turmoil for which they otherwise had no language. Harm is not inflicted on the body; it is inflicted on outside objects. In several depositions, the rape victim's clothing is "stolen, tumbled, trampled on, soiled, 'slitted from bottom to top' – just as they themselves had been stolen and trampled on, their bodies slitted and soiled" (Chaytor 383). In depositions discussed by Chaytor, money and goods were also stolen. In Elspeth's case, her voice is stolen, and, as noted in my Proppian analysis of her trial document, it is treated as an object: her voice is tangible, able to be grasped and hidden, until the fairy man chooses to hand it back to her. This could be read as a metaphor for the silence imposed upon Elspeth as a result of rape.

In Purkiss's analysis of Elspeth's trial document, she argues that Elspeth's relationship with a fairy man is a metaphor for her incestuous relationship with her brother (*Fairies* 107). Purkiss reasons that fairies are a logical stand-in for that which "cannot be said", due to "the cross-cultural taboo on even saying the word 'fairy'" ("Sounds" 82). Silence is imposed upon communities bordered by the fairy folk, but even more so on those who interact directly with fairies, just as silence was demanded of Elspeth as payment for the second sight.

I would like to expand on this idea of fairies as ideal metaphors for that which cannot be articulated directly, and provide some more reasons why fairies and fairy stories may have been ideal figures and structures to draw upon for women wishing to speak about subjects that, like fairies, demanded silence: incest and sexual assault.

In Elspeth's tale, we see a kinsman, a fairy, the Devil, and the dead, blur together to become one being: the man clad in black. This figure's ambiguity is indicative of the confusion surrounding the nature of fairies following the Scottish Reformation of 1560. At this time, fairy belief was in a process of redefinition. Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan examine this process in detail in chapter four of *Scottish Fairy Belief*. The Catholic church allowed for the existence of purgatory, but the Protestant church did not. Thus, during the transition from the Catholic faith to Protestantism in Scotland, the middle ground, between heaven and earth, in which spirits like fairies and ghosts were thought to exist, was eliminated (Henderson and Cowan 116-8). Therefore, religious officials had to find a new place for these liminal beings who were cemented in folk belief and unable to be eradicated completely. Ultimately, the fairy folk, like ghosts, were consigned to hell (116-8), and the lines between fairies, the Devil, and the dead, were blurred.

The consequences of a sexual relationship with any and all of these beings is the destruction of life, in the shape of death, deformity, and miscarriage. Lyndal Roper, in *Witch Craze*, discusses how, in the early modern era, the possibility that the Devil could produce offspring was a source of much fear and contention amongst demonologists (98-103). In *Daemonologie*, James considers this idea. He reasons that the Devil is able to have sex with a person using one of two methods. Firstly, he can assume the form of a "spirite", and "stealing out the sperme of a dead bodie" lies with another in such a way that they cannot see "anie shape or feeling anie thing, but that which he so convayes in that part" (James I 67). Alternatively, the Devil "borrowes a dead bodie and so visiblie", in the likeness of a man, engages in sex (67). In both forms, his "sperme seems intolerably cold to the person abused" (67). Medical practitioners theorised that heat was essential to fertility (Roper 98-101). Here, James is attempting to dismiss the notion that the Devil could father children, by arguing that the Devil, in taking the form of a dead body to lie with a woman, could not possibly produce a child: "the cold nature of a dead bodie, can woorke nothing in generation", for such a body is "wanting the naturall heate, and such other naturall operation, as is necessarie for working that effect" (68).

It was commonly thought that rape, like sex with the Devil, could not result in pregnancy. Patricia Crawford in "Sexual Knowledge in England, 1500-1750" notes that "until the end of the seventeenth century, most writers insisted that sexual pleasure was necessary for conception" (87). The theories surrounding the necessity for pleasure vary. Lazare Rivière argues that a woman's womb would not open without sexual pleasure, barring the man's seed from entering (351). It was also believed that both the man and the woman had to orgasm simultaneously in order to produce a child: that the woman's seed had to eject at the same time as the man's so they could meet more or less in the middle; so that by the "meeting of the seeds, conception may be made, and so at length a child formed and borne" (Paré 889). This medical theory formed the dangerous opinion that if a woman became pregnant after an alleged rape, it could not have been rape at all, as medical practitioners proclaimed that both parties had to relish in the sexual act for a child to result from it (Crawford 87). Sexual violence was often thought to be "the antithesis of healthy sexual relations; a sexual act which causes the destruction of life" (Walker 13-14). Several rape depositions describe miscarriages and still births as evidence of sexual assault (13-14).

Incest was also thought to yield the destruction of life. In a witchcraft case discussed by Roper, Anna Moll describes sex with an 'evil spirit'. Her reaction to this encounter is physical revulsion: "when the evil spirit had done the work of unchastity for long enough, she vomited, and so he had to leave her then" (qtd. in Roper 94). Like Elspeth's loss of voice, this is a strong, poignant reaction to a sexual experience. Anna Moll was executed alongside her father. Both confessed to "committing incest with each other" (Roper 94). Therefore, as Roper argues, Anna's "revulsion towards diabolic intercourse may have mirrored her feelings about sex and its results in her life" (94). Elspeth may have also drawn from her own experience of sex when describing her encounter with the fairy man. The words he spoke to her—the bribe, the threats, the coercion—and her subsequent speechlessness, may have all been integral to Elspeth's experience of sex throughout her life.

Further, eggs are present in both Elspeth and Anna's testimonies. Anne uses eggs to hurt and kill others. When wishing harm on someone, Anna gave them eggs smeared with salve (Roper 94). Eggs are a symbol of fertility. In Anna's testimony, eggs do not bring life, they take it away. Elspeth also uses eggs for an inverted purpose. Her eggs are not to grow into life, nor to be eaten. Elspeth must also refrain from washing her hands before gathering the ointment from the egg: she must be unclean,

impure, for the ointment to work. In doing so, Elspeth both defiles a fertile symbol, and infects the potential food. Purkiss notes that "to refuse food, or water for washing, is to refuse the household that offers them", in this case, Elspeth's aunt and uncle's household ("Sounds" 86). Almost Anna Moll's entire family was put to death during the witch hunts: her mother, father, aunt, uncle, and grandmother. Incest was a common theme running through the cases of these family members. Roper observes, "in the case of the Molls, sex had led not to the increase and fecundity of the family but to its almost complete extinction"; therefore, it was a "small wonder that Anna chose eggs to revenge herself on others" (95).

As previously discussed, these subjects—incest and sexual assault—are ones that not only had little language from which a victim could draw in order to articulate non-consent, but were also ones that necessitated silence. There is a clear line of similarity that links the various forms Elspeth's black-clad man takes: a kinsman, a fairy man, a ghost, and the Devil. A sexual relationship with any of these figures was seen to be the inverse of marital sex: one that did not result in life, but death. Incest and sexual assault were thought to yield similar results. It may be that, Elspeth, in describing this figure, was attempting to articulate an experience which was, to her, the opposite of a healthy sexual relationship: one that could not produce life, but destruction; one that was connected to the misuse of a fertile symbol, which required Elspeth to reject her aunt and uncle's household; and one that forced her into silence, which similarly provoked the displeasure of Elspeth's leading male relative in Caithness.

Purkiss notes that a witch might have drawn from popular folktales "to make silence rather than to break it" (82-3). In Chaytor's analysis of the trial of Mary Knowles, she draws a similar conclusion. Mary Knowles, tried for infanticide in North Yorkshire in 1680, claimed that her pregnancy was a result of rape. Mary alleged that she was sexually assaulted by a man she did not know: "a traveller coming in to light a pipe of tobacco" who "immediately after went away" (qtd. in Chaytor 378). Chaytor notes that the figure of a "passing stranger" appears in several court documents from this period (378-9). In a trial held seventeen years earlier in a nearby parish regarding a political conspiracy, a weaver giving evidence claimed that the conspirators were strangers, who "only came in there and lighted a pipe of tobacco and went their ways" (qtd. in Chaytor 378). Chaytor suspects that the pipe smoking stranger was "an often-used

fiction", utilised by those who wished to conceal someone's identity (378). In Mary's case, this archetype may have been used to replace a man she could not name, such as a neighbour, family member, or someone she depended on for lodging or income (379). Fairies, like the passing stranger, were common figures in popular folklore. Further, like the stranger, fairies were anonymous, liminal figures, who could easily be inserted into stories to stand in for someone who otherwise could not be named. It is possible that Elspeth, in speaking about a fairy man, was concealing something else. The fairy man is a kinsman of Elspeth's. It could be that he, like Mary's stranger, was pulled from common folklore and inserted into Elspeth's narrative to conceal the identity of a family member she could not name. This might also account for Elspeth's stolen voice. The man, in lying with Elspeth, simultaneously forces her into silence.

Like the fairy man in Elspeth's document, Elspeth's uncle also appears to traverse the line between this world and the next: he is at once Elspeth's kinsman and a magical being; he is friends with fairy men, is all-knowing, and potentially possesses a magical cure for the young woman's unwanted pregnancy. He housed Elspeth when she first met the men by the loch-side, and before she herself became pregnant with an illegitimate child. Of course, while any 'truth' within Elspeth's account is unobtainable, it could be speculated that her uncle is the figure behind the fairy mask; the family member Elspeth could not name.

I am proposing here that Elspeth's story is one laden with difficulty. We see in the trial of Barbara Boundie that her judges prompted her to talk about periods of hardship in her life. Elspeth, it seems, was also impelled to speak about difficult past experiences. In the first part of her tale, Elspeth appears to be detailing a time when she was manipulated to reveal a family member's intimate secret, an action which she is unable to rectify. She then details what happened following the birth of her first child when she was around fourteen years old. I have argued that the fairy man's persistent advances towards Elspeth are indicative of sexual assault and may reflect an experience of rape Elspeth had in her life, potentially from a member of her family.

There are several factors that may have led Elspeth, either consciously or unconsciously, to use a medium familiar to her—a medium which aided understanding, remembrance, and communication—to articulate an instance of sexual assault inflicted by a family member. Elspeth would have been expected to articulate intimate experiences, which usually never left female circles (Crawford 94), to her all-

male court officials. These officials would have been educated and also powerful: they held Elspeth's life in their hands, and she would have been aware of the consequences of saying the wrong thing. Further, the language surrounding sexual assault left few words victims could use to argue non-consent. Thus, it may be that Elspeth drew upon familiar folktale structures, characters, and metaphors to depict a sexual experience or relationship that was, to her, the very opposite of a healthy one: one that forced her into silence, and potentially drove her from several family homes. Portraying her unwillingness to enter into this relationship may have been of vital importance to Elspeth when pressured to speak about illicit subjects in front of legal officials, who were to decide whether she lived or died based on her words.

The Earl's Castle and Bishop's Palace are to the south of the Cathedral, and adjoining. The Earl's Palace was built in 1600 by Patrick Stuart of Orkney ... Here also, in 1616, the trial and condemnation of Elspeth Reoch, a young and beautiful woman, for witchcraft took place.

– REV. S. M. MAYHEW,
"Notes on North Caithness and Orkney," 1889.

Perhaps this is an older woman recalling the unbelievable oddity of adult sexuality as seen by a maturing child.

– DIANE PURKISS,
"Sounds of Silence," 2001.

Her two pregnancies outside marriage indicate a lack of the social self-control expected of early modern women. She appears to have been still in her teens at the time of her arrest. Perhaps she would have been able to settle down eventually, but she was deprived of the opportunity to do so.

– JULIAN GOODARE,
"Away with the Fairies," 2020.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Rebellion is as the sin of Witchcraft’

> The most notorious traytor and rebell that can be, is the Witch. For she renounceth God himselfe, the King of kings, she leaves the societie of his Church and people, she bindeth her self in league with the devill.
>
> – WILLIAM PERKINS,
> *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 1631.

While the previous chapter focused on the voice of Elspeth, this chapter will focus on the voice of the court officials. The influence of the court on Elspeth’s document is most pronounced in what I have separated into its third section. This part details Elspeth’s alleged activities in Orkney, which include divining the outcome of a rebellion that took place in the islands two years prior to her trial.

Orkney’s first witch panic began in 1615 (Willumsen 161-2), the same year as the execution of Patrick Stewart, Earl of Orkney, and his son Robert Stewart, for raising rebellion in 1614, among other charges. Despite this, there has been little investigation into how political unrest may have incited witch persecution in the islands. The only scholar to explore this idea is Liv Helene Willumsen in *Witches of the North* (2013), who lists several political and religious factors that may have triggered the first panic, including the rise and fall of the rebellion. Further, Willumsen suggests that “the 1615-16 panic may have been a ‘new regime’ witch-hunt following the establishment of the sheriff court” (162). Other historical investigations into this period scarcely mention witch persecution. William P. L. Thomson, in *The New History of Orkney*, and Peter Anderson, in *The Stewart Earls of Orkney*, make no mention of the witch hunts, with the exception of the well-known trial of Alison Balfour, for its strong connection to Earl Patrick Stewart. Ernest W. Marwick, in “Northern Witches”, quotes a passage from Elspeth’s document, in which she confesses to correctly divining the outcome of the rebellion before its end. Despite this, Marwick does not explore how the tumultuous events at the beginning of the seventeenth century may have influenced the witch persecution that succeeded it. This

chapter will attempt to do just that by looking closely at the trials of Elspeth Reoch and Jonet Irving, each tried in March 1616, a year after the Earl of Orkney Patrick Stewart's execution.

Analyses of Elspeth's trial usually focus on the relatively coherent folktale that spans the first two parts of her trial and overlook the accusations surrounding Elspeth's actions in Orkney. This may be because the clarity of the first two sections begins to break down in the third. The pronouns are confused, as is the sequence of accusations. Further, the judge terminates this section abruptly, eager to move on to sentencing. This part also contains the lines that have been excluded from the Maitland Club's transcript. Their omission may be another reason why the significance of this section has gone unnoticed and why its references to the 1614 rebellion have never been considered in much detail; the missing lines contain information about a key player in the rebellion, Alexander Layng, and their erasure obscures the political notes in Elspeth's trial.

The lack of information about the trials that took place before and after Elspeth's further conceals its political connections. Only a handful of Orkney's trials have been published. In studying these trials alone, we are only seeing part of the picture. It was only after uncovering the trial of Jonet Irving, which took place one week before Elspeth's, and discovering that it too contained references to the rebellion, that I began to seriously consider the possible political functions of both trials. Therefore, in order to examine the third part of Elspeth's document, I also need to discuss the trial of Jonet Irving. Extracts of Jonet Irving's trial appear in Dalyell's *Darker Superstitions*. However, Dalyell ignores the sections which refer to the rebellion, choosing to pluck out fragments which illustrate folk superstition. Jonet's trial has never been fully transcribed, and thus, has escaped the attention of scholars. This is the first analysis of her trial to draw on her primary document in its entirety.

Further, in previous analyses of Elspeth's trial, its unique historical and legal contexts have often been ignored. Willumsen, in *Witches of the North*, compares the pattern of Orkney's witch hunts to those in mainland Scotland. In doing so, she highlights the differences between these two contexts, noting that "the most severe years of witchcraft persecution [in] Orkney do not coincide with any of the five largest panics on the Scottish mainland" (162). Elspeth's trial is often analysed alongside others from mainland Scotland. As a result, the unique events occurring in Orkney at the time of Elspeth's trial have gone unnoticed. Purkiss argues that Elspeth's story can

be read as a narrative that is free from any heavy political or religious influence because Elspeth was tried outside years of witch panic in Scotland. Here we see why Orkney should be considered separately to the mainland. The years 1615-16, though not years of panic in the south, *were* years of severe witch persecution in Orkney. Therefore, Purkiss is mistaken in arguing that Elspeth was "not accused simply because everyone was making accusations", and so was "almost certainly … accused for local reasons, rather than because of large political or religious ideologies put suddenly onto innocent heads" (*Fairies* 97). I will argue that Elspeth's trial *was* inherently political, as was Jonet's. This chapter proposes that Orkney's newly appointed officials used the words of Elspeth and Jonet to further their own political interests; that is, to help legitimise their rule, and frame the rebels negatively in the eyes of the Orkney folk who might have considered taking action against officials in the years following 1614.[1]

The Orkney rebellion of 1614

In the years before the rebellion in Orkney, there was growing civil discontent in the islands. Numerous letters had reached Edinburgh complaining of the tyrannical Stewart Earls, beginning with Robert Stewart, first earl of Orkney (b.1533 - d.1593), and continuing with his son Patrick Stewart, but the Crown neglected to take the complaints seriously. In 1608, the king, unable to ignore the "continowall outcryis and exclamatiounes" of the "poore distressit peopill" of Orkney, "whose hard fameishing estait is worse than death", finally ordered his Privy Council to investigate the situation and order Patrick Stewart to appear before the court in Edinburgh, so they may "be no farder troubleid and importuned with [the folk's] Petitiones" (Pitcairn 319; vol. 3, no. 1).

Patrick was placed in ward in Edinburgh castle in 1609, and stood trial for treason in 1610 (Thomson 291). He was accused of holding fake courts with "pretendit deputtis and Judges" in order to sentence a number of landowners to banishment, in which case their property and possessions were forfeited to the earl (Pitcairn 83; vol. 3, no. 1). He forced numerous men to sign a contract stating that if they overheard any plans to harm the earl or his ventures, they must reveal it to him within twenty-four

1 This chapter has arisen chiefly out of an article I wrote for the *New Orkney Antiquarian Journal*. A reference to this publication is contained in the Appendix.

hours, "under the pane of tynsell[2] of lyfe, landis, and guidis", even if it meant going against the king and council (Pitcairn 83; vol. 3, no. 1). He restricted the passage of ferries in Orkney and Shetland, forbidding anyone to leave Orkney without his permission (Pitcairn 84; vol. 3, no. 1). He forced the townsfolk to labour unpaid and unfed, uplifted "great and exorbitant taxes"; and, lastly, prohibited the buying and selling of goods without his consent (84). These charges were difficult to prove, as they could only incriminate Patrick if it was established that he had no authority to enforce these laws in the islands. At the time, Orkney operated under different laws to Scotland—Old Norse Law—and Patrick argued that it was within his rights to implement these acts (Pitcairn 86-7; vol. 3, no. 1). The court in Edinburgh was unable to fully convict Patrick, and he was placed back in ward, where he would stay for the remaining six years of his life. In order to dissolve Patrick's acts and place the inhabitants of Orkney—both the elite and the townsfolk—under tighter controls, Norse Law was abolished and replaced by Scots law. Further, the offices of justiciary, sheriffship, and bailiery, as they stood under Earl Patrick, were discharged and replaced by the king's officials (Thomson 293).

Two years later, the first act of open rebellion took place. Earl Patrick sent his son, Robert Stewart,[3] to the islands under the guise of collecting the arrears of rent owed to Patrick, but with the ulterior instruction to take back Patrick's estates by force. Robert succeeded in taking the earl's palaces and Kirkwall Castle, but quickly gave them up following negotiations with Bishop James Law (Thomson 293-4).[4] In October 1612, Orkney was annexed to the Crown, and Earl Patrick lost any remaining hold he had on the earldom estates (Thomson 295).

A more successful attempt at rebellion took place in 1614. Patrick Stewart, infuriated by his son's quick surrender, sent Robert back to Orkney "to repair the oursight and wrang he had committit by delivering of the Castell to *the Bischope*; and if by ony meanes he could come be this Castell, to tak it agane" (Pitcairn 306; vol. 3, no. 1). This time, Patrick was aware of the importance of having the country people's support, and he ordered his son to win over the townsfolk and persuade them to fight

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2 Loss

3 Robert Stewart was around 20 years of age at this time. See Pitcairn (272-3; vol. 3, no. 1) for a description of Robert from January 1615.

4 Bishop James Law presided over the bishopric of Orkney from February 1605 to July 1615, when he was promoted to the Archbishopric of Glasgow. His position in the islands was filled in August 1615 by Bishop George Graham. See *RPC* (381-2; vol. 10).

for their cause. Robert arrived in Orkney again in May 1614 and had successfully acquired the castle of Birsay by June. He used his time in Birsay to gather the support of the townsfolk, likely using their current source of discontent as a bargaining chip: John Finlayson. After procuring the earldom estates, the Crown appointed Finlayson as the new tacksman,[5] and he quickly earned himself a reputation even worse than Earl Patrick's: he was "hated, to the death, be all sortis of men" for his "evill demanor" and unrelenting collection of rents (Pitcairn 292; vol. 3, no. 1). With the establishment of Finlayson, Earl Patrick Stewart began to seem like the lesser of two evils and the idea of his restoration like "a return to some kind of normality" (Thomson 295). Thus, Robert was able to gather ample support for his cause.

In July, Robert took the kirk and steeple in Kirkwall 'under night' and furnished it with men and weapons (Pitcairn 276; vol. 3, no. 1). The next morning, Robert, encouraged by his successful securing of St Magnus Cathedral, charged upon Kirkwall Castle with around sixty men, "in oppin and arrayit battell, with sounding of trumpettis, streking of drumis, schuiting of muscatis … and all uther weirlyk advancement"[6] (276). Robert and his men seized the castle with little difficulty. The guard, being "bot of a few number", were unable to "withstand [their] violent assault", and likewise, the rebels succeeded in taking the Bishop's and Earl's Palaces, the last of Kirkwall's strongholds (276).

In hopes of bringing the rebellion to a swift conclusion, the king and his council sent Patrick Stewart's longstanding enemy, George Earl of Caithness, to Orkney, with the men and weapons necessary to take back its strongholds (Pitcairn 277; vol. 3, no. 1). The Earl of Caithness arrived in Orkney on August 22, 1614, and was met by Robert and his army, made up of five hundred countrymen (286). Robert succeeded in keeping the earl out of Kirkwall for two days, but the earl made steady advancement, and Robert's army was "unhable to keip the feildis, or hald him out of Toun", and so retreated to their strongholds (278).

The earl pressed forth, and by September 2, had regained control of all Robert's strongholds except for Kirkwall Castle, where the remaining rebels stayed under siege (Anderson 237-8). The siege lasted a little over a month. On September 29, 1614, the

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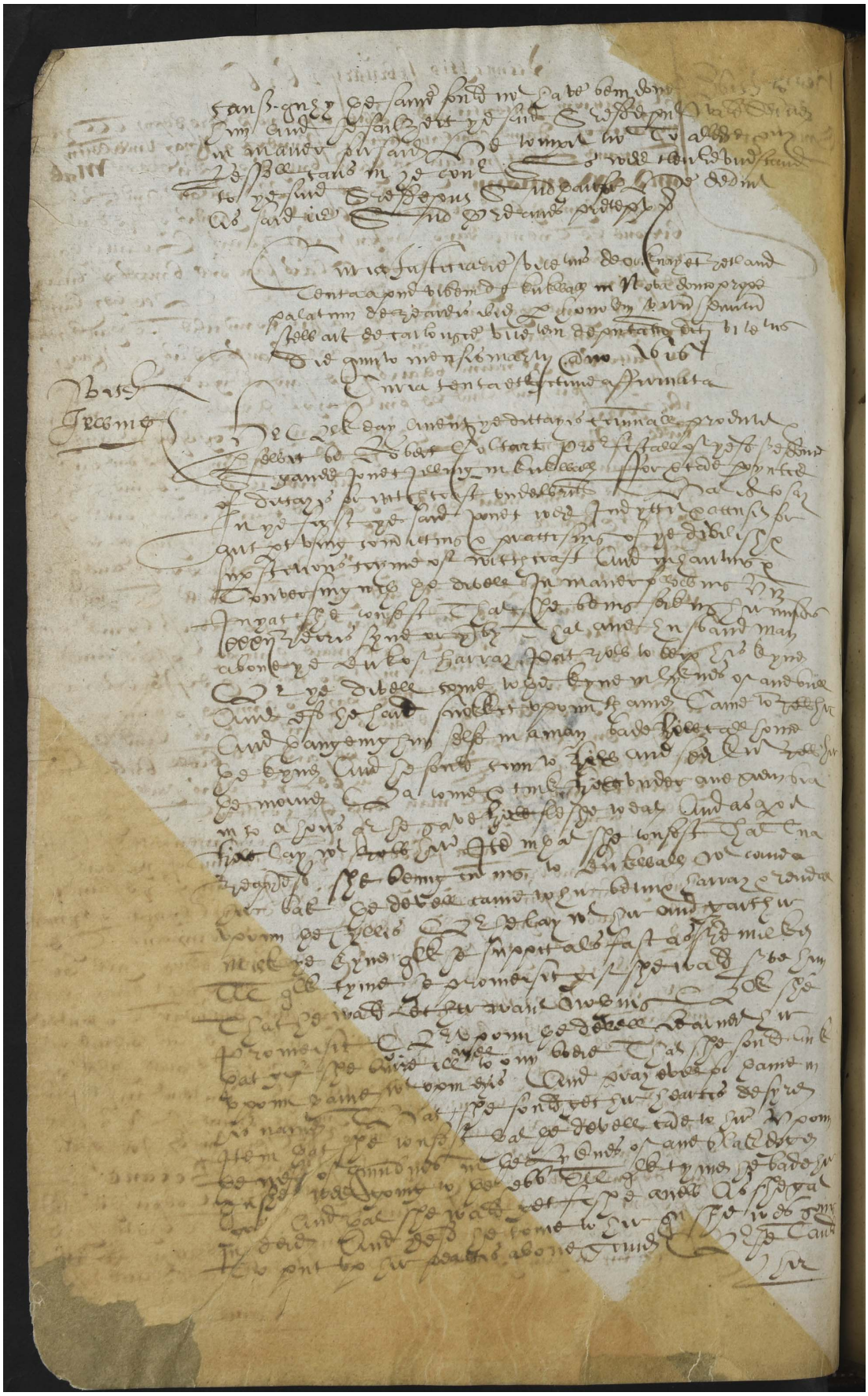
[5] One who leases land, a tenant farmer, or one who leases land to sublet, also a lessee of property, mills, fishings, the collection of customs, teinds, dues, etc.

[6] In open and arrayed battle, with sounding of trumpets, striking of drums, shooting of muskets … and all other war-like advancement.

earl succeeded in negotiating Robert Stewart's surrender (Anderson 242), and Robert and his chief supporters were sent to Edinburgh to be tried for treason. Robert Stewart was hung alongside five of his accomplices on January 6, 1615, and Patrick Stewart, Earl of Orkney, was beheaded at the Mercat Cross of Edinburgh in February 1615 (Pitcairn 272-3; vol. 3, no. 1). But the execution of Patrick and Robert Stewart by no means put an end to discontent in Orkney.

A proclamation ordered by the Privy Council on January 25, 1616, states that the people were unwilling to accept the king's rule in the islands. Rumours spread by "some factious, seditious, and restles personis, lovearis of trouble and unquietnes, being grievit at the course of his Majesteis proceidingis in suppressing and punisheing of the laitt treasonable rebellioun" were stirring up "some new disordoris in the saidis boundis" and withdrawing "the hairtis of the inhabitantis thairof frome thair obedience to his Majesties officeris whome his Majestie hes placed to reule over thame" (RPC 449; vol. 10). The talk in the islands was that the king intended to relinquish his hold on Orkney and assign the maintenance and keeping of the whole lands and estates to the late Earl Patrick's brothers, who were to assume the positions of justiciary, sheriff, admiralty, and chamberlain. As a result, "a grite many" of the country people were refusing to obey the king's officers or give them any kind of payment (449). The Crown, increasingly concerned about another uprising, ordered Orkney's officers in arms to declare that the reports were false, and that the dispersers of this information sought nothing but the persecution, ruin, and destruction of the townsfolk, by enticing them to carry out "suche foolische courses as in end will involve thame under the guylt of heich treasoun" (449-50).

The rebellion may have been officially over, but ill-feeling still lingered. Those newly appointed in Orkney were charged with investigating the rebellion and punishing those who had been involved (Anderson 259-60). Further, because of the threat of another uprising, Orkney's new officials were tightening their grip on the townsfolk in order to establish their authority. Historian of Scottish witchcraft, Christina Larner, notes the tightening of social controls like this nurture the attack on certain types of deviance, "of which witchcraft was the supreme example" (59). Certainly, the turbulent atmosphere in Orkney was ideal for the cultivation of witch hunts: less than two months after this proclamation, on March 5, 1616, Jonet Irving was tried for witchcraft. Exactly one week later, Elspeth Reoch was tried for the same crime. Both were sentenced to be strangled and burned at the stake.



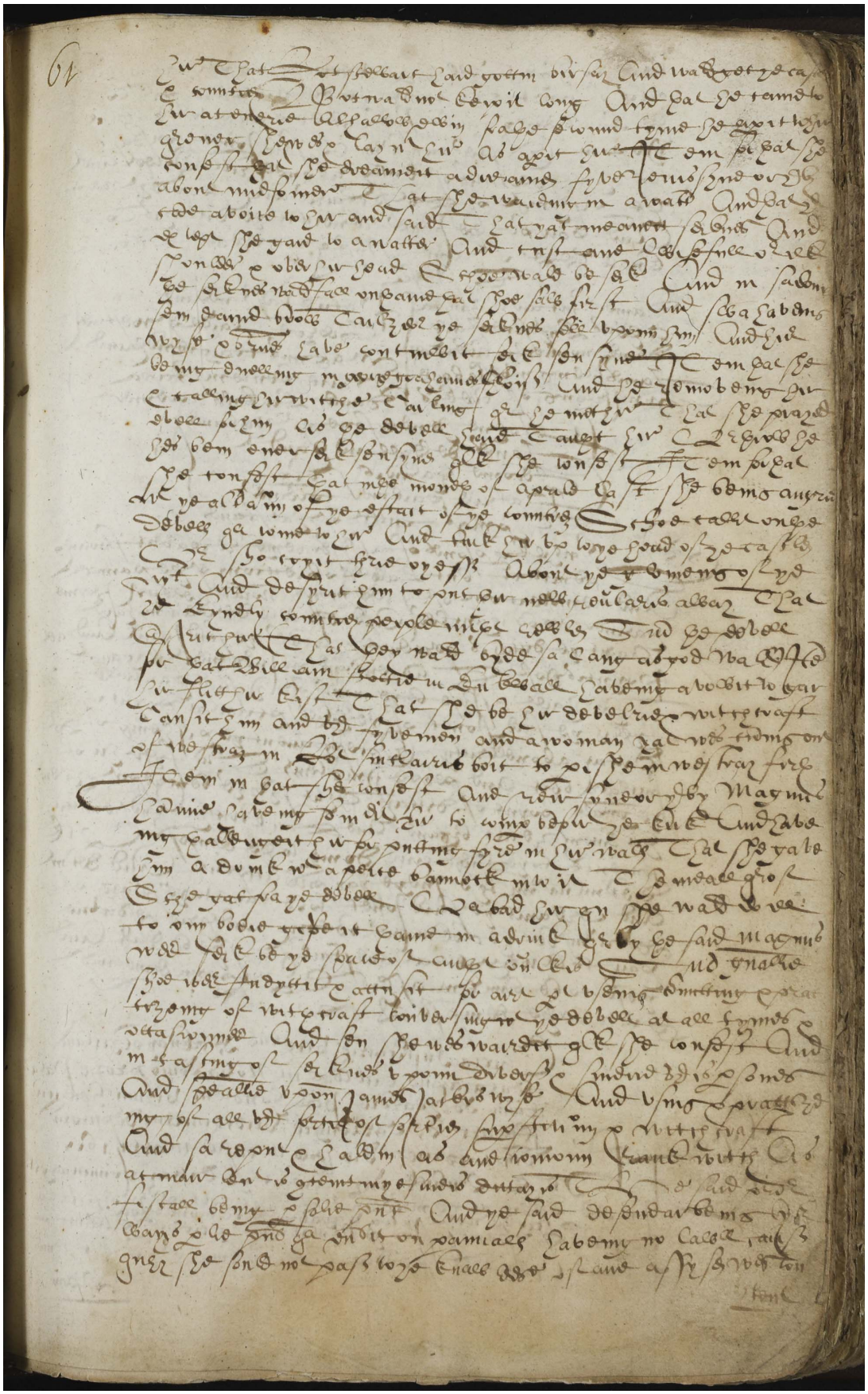


Fig. 3 and 4. Jonet Irving's trial document, 5 March 1616. Sheriff Court Records of Orkney and Shetland, National Records of Scotland, General Register House, Edinburgh, SC10/1/3, pp. 60A-61. Crown Copyright.

The trials of Elspeth Reoch and Jonet Irving

The trials of Elspeth and Jonet begin with a story of how each woman met the Devil. Elspeth, as detailed in the previous chapter, met her Devil figure, the fairy man, by a loch-side when she was twelve. Jonet's story of witchcraft begins around thirty-two years before her trial, when she was out searching for her ministers. At this time, she met a husbandman above the Kirk of Harray, who asked Jonet to keep his cows. While she was doing so, the Devil came to the cows in the shape of a bull, suckled upon them, and then came to Jonet. He changed himself into a man, ordered Jonet to call home the cows, and said he would come and speak with her in the morning. The next day, he led Jonet under a "grein bra"[7] and into a house, in which he gave her meat to eat and then lay with her. The second time the Devil came to Jonet was between Harray and Rendall, where he lay with her again and made her "milk the kyne quhilk he suppit als fast as she milkit"[8]; at which time, the Devil promised her that "gif she wald serve him That he wald Let hir want nothing"[9] (Jonet Trial 61). Then, the Devil taught Jonet "that gif she buire ill will to ony bodie That she sould luik upoun thame with opin eyis And pray evill for thame in his name That she sould get hir heartis desire"[10] (61).

In both Elspeth's and Jonet's interactions with their Devil figure, some kind of exchange takes place: Elspeth receives the gift of the second sight, and in return she is asked to keep that gift a secret; Jonet is asked to milk the cows and enter into a blood promise with the Devil, and in return he teaches her how to use the evil eye, and promises her that, from then on, she will want for nothing. The analogous content of these testimonies suggests that they were communicated in response to a similar line of questioning: 'When and where did you first meet the Devil? In what shape did he appear? What did he say to you? Did he teach you your witchcraft?'. There seems to be an impetus on the part of the inquisitors here to create a demonological narrative, in which Elspeth and Jonet each receive magical powers from their close, reciprocal relationship with the Devil.

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7 Green brae. This detail suggests that the man Jonet is speaking about here may have also been a fairy.

8 Milk the cows, which he sipped as fast as she milked.

9 If she would serve him, that he would let her want nothing.

10 If she bore ill will to anybody, that she should look upon them with open eyes and pray evil for them in his name, that she should get her heart's desire.

The voice of the court official introduces both trial documents, stating the act which has been contravened, and the accused's primary accusation. Both Elspeth and Jonet face the charge of dealing with the Devil. However, there is a significant difference in the language used in Elspeth's opening accusation compared to Jonet's. Jonet was indicted for "hanting[11] and conversing with the divell" (Irving Trial 61), while Elspeth was accused of "giveing ear and credite to the *Illusiounes* of the devell Quhairby scho fenyeit hirselff dumb And illudit and deceaveit his Majesties subjectis" [12] (Reoch Trial 63; my emphasis). Whereas the man described in Jonet's trial is, according to Jonet's judges, indisputably the Devil, there is some doubt as to the kind of being Elspeth is in communication with. Elspeth, it seems, resists the judge's attempts at casting her fairy man as a demonic illusion, asserting that he is what she says he is: a fairy. The phrase, "the Devell quhilk *she* calls the farie man Lay with hir"[13] (Reoch Trial 64; my emphasis), which appears later in Elspeth's document, severs Elspeth's voice from her inquisitors' and places them in direct opposition. Here it is suggested that Elspeth has been calling the man 'the fairy man' consistently throughout the examination process. The power, of course, lies with the court official, who decides the true nature of Elspeth's visitor, relegating 'fairy man' to a name only; a name, it might be deduced, the scribe has replaced with 'the Devil' throughout the document.

There is no evidence that Elspeth views this figure as one that is demonic; a demonic identity is being imposed on him by her inquisitors. There is some disconnect here between Elspeth (lower class, illiterate) and her inquisitors (elite, educated) on the nature of fairy belief.[14] This divide is indicative of the transformation fairy belief underwent following the Reformation, discussed briefly in the previous chapter. King James makes his opinion of who and what the fairy folk are clear. James writes that "the *Phairie* … or our good neighboures, was one of the sortes of illusiones that was rifest in the time of *Papistrie*" (73-4). For those who claim to have met the fairies, James explains that "the devil illuded the senses of sundry simple creatures, in making them beleeve that they saw and harde such thinges as were nothing so indeed" (74). James is arguing here, that, as beings like fairies were no longer allowed to exist, those

[11] Practice, use; frequenting; resort.

[12] Giving ear and credit to the illusions of the Devil, whereby she pretended herself dumb, and deluded and deceaved his majesty's subjects.

[13] The Devil which she calls the fairy man lay with her.

[14] See Henderson and Cowan (106-41) for more on how the process of redefining fairy belief caused a rift in the ways the elite and the folk viewed fairies.

who claim to have met or spoken with them were really witnessing an illusion conjured up by the Devil. The redefinition of fairies that occurred following the Scottish Reformation, as well as the teachings of King James, would have allowed the judges to plausibly link those who claimed to associate with the fairies with the Devil; they may have also believed that fairies *were* the Devil in a, more approachable, mask.

In Elspeth's document, we see evidence of court officials manipulating the words of the accused to fit their own desires, as the goal of Elspeth's inquisitors would have been to make her testimony fit a demonological mould that reflected the agreed narrative of witchcraft at the time, as promoted by King James I. The court official, in accusing Elspeth of 'giving ear and credit to the illusions of the Devil', is instructing the jury to distrust Elspeth when she speaks about her fairy man, and to deduce from her words his real identity: an apparition conjured by the Devil to win Elspeth's trust. Further, the suggestion that Elspeth was fooled by this illusion, 'giving ear and credit' to it, casts Elspeth as someone who is easily mislead. She is also positioned as a liar. The judge suggests Elspeth's silence is an act: that she "fenyeit" (to pretend to be or do something) herself dumb, and "illudit" (to impose upon, befool, delude) the people (Reoch Trial 63). These opening statements illustrate Elspeth as someone who is guileless, deceitful, and fraudulent, and throw an immediate shadow of doubt over the rest of Elspeth's account.

The court official's voice interjects at several points in Elspeth's testimony to cast a similar uncertainty over her words. After the description of Elspeth waking speechless, and her brother's attempts to force her out of it, the judge takes control of the narrative. He hastily summarises: Elspeth "still continewit dumb going about and deceaveing the people" (Reoch Trial 64). He then skips forward to a time 'afterwards', when Elspeth has a voice once more and is making good use of it: going about, "telling and foir shawing [the folk] quhat they haid done and quhat they sould do"[15] (Reoch Trial 64). Here, the court official is carving out a substantial gap in Elspeth's testimony. The time between Elspeth losing and recovering her speech collapses. The recovery of Elspeth's voice appears almost instantaneous, casting further doubt over the severity of her ailment. This leap forward suggests that the inquisitors are more interested in what Elspeth *has* said in the past, than what she has not. The focus immediately shifts to how Elspeth chooses to use her voice after it is returned to her;

[15] Telling and foreshowing the folk what they had done and what they should do.

that is, to deliver prophecies and offer advice based on what she knows about the person in question's past and future. Here, Elspeth fits the description of those 'unquiet' and 'restless' people the Privy Council were so concerned about: a dishonest person, spreading information and instruction throughout the town.

Elspeth's trial document gives the impression that Elspeth had some kind of association with the rebels. In the document, it is noted that she was with child to a man named Patrick Traill, who was a core member of the rebellion. He was one of the men inside Kirkwall Castle at the time of Robert's surrender, and was sentenced to be led "backwards, as a traitor" to his death, along with his comrades, who hung "on the gallows at the castle gate for 24 hours" (qtd. in Anderson 247-8). It is noted that Elspeth had a vision of this event "befoir the earle of Cathnes cuming to the country", in which she saw, "be the secund sight grantit to hir", "Robert Stewart sone naturall to umquhill Patrick sumtyme earle of Orkney with Padrick Traill to quhom she wes with bairne and certeine utheris with towis about thair craigis"[16] (Reoch Trial 64). It is impossible to know whether or not Elspeth truly did carry Traill's bairn. Nevertheless, if this information did not come from Elspeth, it came from her inquisitors, who either *believed* Elspeth had had sexual relations with Traill or were trying to build a strong connection between the pair. Either way, the inclusion of this information suggests that the court wanted to establish a link between Elspeth and the rebellion men.

Jonet delivers a similar prophecy in her testimony. When Jonet was putting peat out to dry, the Devil came to her and "Tauld hir That Robert Stewart haid gottin Birsay And wald get the castle and country But wald not keipit long"[17] (Irving Trial 61). This information suggests the inclusion of the question: 'Did you have any visions/did the Devil tell you anything concerning Robert Stewart and/or the rebellion men?' in both Elspeth's and Jonet's examinations. Like Elspeth, Jonet predicts the failure of the rebellion. However, converse to Elspeth's prediction, this information has been delivered straight from the Devil's mouth, which suggests that the Devil has a vested interest in Robert Stewart's campaign and its outcome.

Another key player in the rebellion makes an appearance in Elspeth's trial document: Alexander Layng. Alexander was Earl Patrick Stewart's servant, and was

[16] Robert Stewart, natural son to the deceased Patrick, former Earl of Orkney, with Patrick Traill, to whom [Elspeth] was with bairn, and certain others, with ropes about their necks.

[17] Told her that Robert Stewart had gotten Birsay and would get the castle and country but would not keep it long.

tried and hung alongside Robert Stewart in Edinburgh. Elspeth allegedly saw the Devil in Alexander Layng's house, where she "receaveit respons and diverse Infoirmatiouns" from the Devil (Reoch Trial 64). This statement further strengthens Elspeth's affiliation with the rebellion men: not only was she close enough to them to be pregnant with one of their children, but she was allowed inside their houses. This statement also reinforces the strength of Elspeth's relationship with the Devil, a relationship it seems those like Alexander Layng took advantage of, perhaps using Elspeth as a medium through which he was able to communicate with, and gain information from, the Devil. Layng appears guilty here of the charge of consulting with both a witch and the Devil. His known involvement in the rebellion suggests that the purpose of these meetings was to gain information that would help further their cause.

The Earl of Caithness, in several letters to the king and secretary of the state, suggests that the rebels have the Devil on their side. On October 10, 1614, the earl declares to the secretary of state, Lord Binning, that Kirkwall Castle, then occupied by the rebels, "is one of the strongest Housses in Breitane; for I will bring with me to your lo.[18] cannone billetts, both brokkin lyk goulfe balls upoune the Castelle, and clovin[19] in twa halffis" (Pitcairn 289; vol. 3, no. 1). The earl suggests the Devil is the architect behind the castle's superior strength: "I protest to God the Hous hes nevir bene biggit[20] by[21] the consente of the Divil; for it is one of the strongest houlds in Britane, without fellow" (291). Here we see the idea emerging that the rebellion men are being strengthened by demonic forces.

Affiliating the rebels with the Devil serves a dual purpose. If the rebels and what they stand for are driven by the Devil, then the rulers they seek to depose must have been chosen by God, for why would the Devil support the rebel's cause if it did not involve diminishing Godly society? At one point in Elspeth's testimony, the Devil tells Elspeth to "leave Orkney and go home to hir awin contrey Becaus this countrey wes Preistgone Qlk he exponit that there wes ower mony ministeris in it And gif she taryit she wald be hurt"[22] (Reoch Trial 64). Here, the Devil is being pitted against

[18] Lordship
[19] split
[20] built
[21] without
[22] Leave Orkney and go home to her own country because this country was priest-gone, which he explained that there was too many ministers in it, and if she tarried she would be hurt.

Orkney's ministers, but he is not a fearless enemy; he is wary of the power of religious officials and concerned for Elspeth's safety if she stays. This works to reinforce the idea that to oppose the ministers is to oppose God, and those who oppose God, must be in league with the Devil. Further, this statement also seems to suggest that the ministers in Orkney are more zealous than those in Caithness. It is implied that Elspeth, while in danger under Orkney's ministers, would be out of harm's way amongst Caithness's. The northern ministers strike fear in the Devil, where the southern ministers do not, seemingly because the might of the ministers to the south does not match those to the north. A general dislike of 'foreigners' in Orkney is also implied by the words "go home to [your] awin contrey" (Reoch Trial 64); this may have been something Elspeth had heard before.

New laws brought in by Bishop Law around the time of the rebellion made it increasingly difficult for foreigners like Elspeth, who was born in Caithness, to establish themselves in the islands and make a living. Acts were enforced against transporting, hiring, buying from, or giving charity to the "great repair of puir straingeris idle and vagabound persones that overlayis the cuntrey quha hes not bein borne nor brocht up within the cuntrey"[23] (*MCM* 185), in the hopes that "the saids persones and everie ane of thame may repair to thair awin cuntrey and parochines And that every parochin interteine supplie and sustein thair awin puir"[24] (186). It is plausible that Elspeth, as a result of these sanctions, may have turned to healing and selling prophecies in order to survive in the islands.

For people like Elspeth and Jonet, who, it seems, lived off the charity of others, supporting the rebellion would have been tempting. Andrew Martine, former servant to Patrick Stewart, and one of those hung in Edinburgh alongside Robert Stewart, declared while in ward: "I wold nevir have bene a nycht in [Robert's] companie, give I could have had meit and drink any uther way, as all the cuntrie knawis quhat necessitie and miserie I was reductit unto, be povertie"[25] (Pitcairn 301; vol. 3, no. 1). It seems that those who joined the rebellion were offered food and drink in return. This privilege, it appears, extended to those family members—women and children—

[23] Great repair of poor strangers, idle and vagabond persons that overlays the country, who have not been born nor brought up in the country.

[24] The said persons and every one of them may go back to their own country and parishes, and that every parish entertain, supply and sustain their own poor.

[25] I would never have been a knight in Robert's company, if I could have meat and drink any other way, as all the country knows what necessity and misery I was reduced unto, by poverty.

unable to take active part in the rebellion. Janet Whyte, whose husband, William Paterson, was inside Kirkwall Castle during the siege, and subsequently hung alongside Patrick Traill (Anderson 247), allegedly received fish from the rebels "as a necessity for herself and her child" (241-2).

Patrick, after failing in his first attempt at rebellion in 1612, knew the importance of gathering support from the Orkney people. Patrick Stewart's adviser, Patrick Halcro, warned him against starting up another rebellion without the "assuirance of the cuntrey people to stand be yow and assist yow" (Pitcairn 307; vol. 3, no. 1). The support of the people was obtained in various ways. The offer of food and drink was one. But Patrick also knew the extent to which the Orkney people hated the new tacksman John Finlayson. Patrick even attempted to use this information to absolve himself of treason. In Patrick's examination, he argued "that no thing proceiding form him had occasioned The Rebellion" (Pitcairn 320; vol. 3, no. 1). Rather, the people, prompted by "the extreame rigour used be Mr John Finlason to the cuntrie people, and the wrong intended by Mr John to the cuntriemen", desperately sought Robert's help in getting rid of him, persuading Robert "to assist thame aganis Mr John Finlason, and to be head to thame in thair interpryses" (320). Essentially, Patrick Stewart was saying he had nothing to do with the rebellion: that it was the will of the country people that forced his son Robert's hand, not his. The folk's animosity towards Finlayson would have given Robert Stewart ample means of persuading the people to join his cause. It was clear that some would go to great lengths to do away with the tacksman. The Earl of Caithness feared for Finlayson's life if he were to remain in Orkney, noting that the people "have myntit[26] twyse to kill him, since his comeing heir with me" (Pitcairn 289; vol. 3, no. 1), and that he "sall nevir, by all apparence, recover credit, authoritie, and regaird heir; yie,[27] iff he remane heir after me, he is in danger of his lyff, and some new broyl[28] may arryse" (292).

The extent of support for the rebellion seems to have been vast. The Earl of Caithness found it difficult to determine if *any* of the country people opposed the cause, claiming: "I find none bot the name of Sinclar in all this land bot hes bene in

[26] Attempted; aimed
[27] yea
[28] disorder

counsell of this Rebellioune, or eles airt and pairt" (Pitcairn 289; vol. 3, no. 1). Further, the earl complains in one of his letters:

> I cannot nor may not stop the Inhabitantes of this Toune from speiking with the Traitoures, geving of thame meit and drink, making thame advertissit quhat[29] I am doing, and making daylie and nightlie advertismentes of all that they can aither heir or sie … I protest to God I nevir, nor nevir sall, cum to ane cuntrie that may be compairitt in falsett[30] to this cuntrie people! I use thame both with lenitie and fair formes[31], as the Bischope will informe your lo.; and for all that I can do, they have thair secret moyen[32] and traffecke with the Traitores. (Pitcairn 289; vol. 3, no. 1)

Jonet offers another reason for rebellion: the resentment towards foreign rule in Orkney. In April 1615, two months after Patrick Stewart's execution, Jonet,

> being angrie wt the old alterationis of the estait of the countrey Schoe callit on the devell quha come to hir And tuik hir up to the head of the castle Quhair sho cryit thrie oyess About the glomeing of the nyt And desyrit him to put hir new reularis away That the kyndly countrey peiple micht rewle.[33] (Irving Trial 61)

The setting of Jonet's outcry is significant. Kirkwall Castle had become a symbol of the rebellion. The Privy Council in Edinburgh were frightened of the castle's potential to incite another uprising; both in its symbolism and the sheer strength of its walls. On October 22, 1614, the council ordered the demolition of Kirkwall Castle, for "the said house may be the occasioun of grite trouble and unquietnes in the cuntrey, insofar as wicked and insolent personis, upoun thair pretendit causis of discontentment, may have thair refudge within the said house and keepe the same as ane house of weare againis his Majestie, building thair hoipis and the succes and event of thair rebellioun upoun the strenthe of the said house" (RPC 276; vol. 10). This act illustrates the council's genuine concern that another rebellion would arise. The council saw the destruction of the stronghold as insurance against this.

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[29] what

[30] compared in falsehood

[31] with lenience and fair form.

[32] An arrangement, agreement or plot (*with* another, to effect something).

[33] Being angry with the old admission of the estate of the country, she called on the Devil, who came to her and took her up to the head of the castle, where she cried three 'oyes' about the gloaming of the night and desired him to put her new rulers away [so] that the kindly country people might rule.

Given the significance of the castle and its role in previous years, Jonet's outcries would have seemed particularly threatening to officials. Jonet calls upon the Devil to put Orkney's new rulers away so that the longstanding Orkney families might rule. This act from Jonet was a dangerous one: using the demolished castle, a symbol of rebellion and refuge, a place of safety, resistant to the king's cannon, as a stage to publicly denounce the current rulers.

Jonet's words would have had the potential to incite another uprising in Orkney and may have even been perceived as an open call to arms. It is probable that this evidence was drawn from witness accounts of Jonet's outcry and included in her document as further evidence of Jonet's relationship with the Devil and his willingness to facilitate acts of rebellion. Re-stating them in court may have had the effect of energising those who shared her opinion, encouraging action at a time when many had already begun to disobey their new rulers. However, the counter-statement given suggests a rationale for including Jonet's words. This statement, delivered in the form of an answer from the Devil, discourages the kind of action Jonet hints at. The Devil replies that he is unable to fulfil her wish and put the new rulers away, for "they wald byde sa lang as god waldin"[34] (Irving Trial 61). This statement is analogous to that given by Elspeth concerning the ministers, in that it directly pins the Devil against Orkney's officials, and once again reinforces that the outcome of any kind of rebellion against them would not be a favourable one. As with Elspeth's statement, it is impossible to tell whose mouth this came from. However, Orkney's new rulers would have benefited from this statement more than the court would have. This statement was not needed to secure a guilty sentence. What it *does* do, is reinforce the legitimacy of the new regime.

In *Daemonologie*, James promotes the idea that the Devil cannot act without God's permission; the Devil's powers, without God's acquiescence, can do no harm. Therefore, those who appear to be victims of the Devil's schemes must, according to this belief, be guilty of some wrongdoing, for God to have granted the Devil permission to injure them. In *Daemonologie*, Philomathes asks to what extent witches can wield their power against magistrates, to which Epistemon replies:

[34] 'Waldin', or 'would', is my estimation. I had difficulty deciphering this word in the original document.

> Lesse or greater, according as he deales with them. For if he be slouthfull towardes them, God is verie able to make them instrumentes to waken & punish his slouth. But if he be the contrarie, he according to the just law of God, and allowable law of all Nationes, will be diligent in examining and punishing of them: GOD will not permit their master to trouble or hinder so good a woorke. (James I 40)

Therefore, magistrates who are complacent in punishing witches, may find themselves without God's protection, and on the receiving end of a witch's malice; for where God is displeased with the work of negligent magistrates, he may make use of the Devil's power to both punish and awaken them to the danger of witches, thus inciting greater action against them. Alternatively, magistrates who are zealous in their punishment of witches will remain under God's protection, for He would never allow the Devil to hinder such good work. Thus, evidence of the Devil failing in his attempts on an individual can also be seen as proof of that individual's piety. *Newes from Scotland* is a record of the North Berwick witch trials, a series of cases instigated by James I. The pamphlet depicts King James as a powerful and devout ruler, appointed by God to vanquish the world of evil. In *Newes from Scotland*, the king himself is said to have interrogated Agnes Thomson, who confessed to being one of the North Berwick witches who conjured up a storm over the sea while the king was sailing back to Scotland from Denmark with his new wife, Anne of Denmark. The pamphlet notes that Agnes, during her interrogation, declared "that his Maiestie had never come safelye from the Sea, if his faith had not prevailed above their ententions" ("Newes" 17). In other words, if it were not for the king's superior faith, the witches would have succeeded in their attempts on his life. This statement is a plain attempt to demonstrate the king's religious vigour and God's unyielding endorsement of his rule. King James also had a hand in extracting Agnes Sampson's confession, which describes how the North Berwick witches marvelled "that all ther devellerie culd do na harm to the K. as it did till others dyvers"[35], to which "the devell answerit, 'Il est un home de Dieu'"[36] (Melville 396). In light of James's teachings, the very act of trying Jonet and Elspeth becomes a demonstration of the power and piety of Orkney's new rulers: of their immunity to demonic influence and their ability to triumph over it, with God's backing.

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[35] All their Devilry could do no harm to the king as it did to diverse others.

[36] The Devil answered, "He [the King] is a man of God".

The prophetic statements in Elspeth's and Jonet's trial documents, which note the inevitable failure of the rebellion, may also be read as proof of God's protection over the new rulers, and thus, his satisfaction with their administration. Both Jonet and Elspeth gain their access to the future through their relationship with the Devil. However, just as the Devil is unable to wreak havoc without God's permission, he is also unable to know the future without God's input. James notes that it is indisputable that the Devil has delivered prophetic information to his followers, "which the wit of woman could never have fore-spoken" (4). However, the Devil, unlike God, is not all-knowing, and he can only gain knowledge of the future in two ways: by his own deductions about what is to come, he "being worldlie wise, and taught by an continuall experience, ever since the creation, judges by likelie-hood of thinges to come, according to the like that hath passed before" (James I 3). Alternatively, he may know the future "by Gods employing of him in a turne" (3). Therefore, in accordance with James's teachings, the prophecies delivered by the Devil are only known to him because God gave him this information, or else by the Devil's own deductions. If it is the first case, this prophetic information has been delivered to the Devil by God himself, who consistently denies the possibility the rebellion will succeed. This, in light of the belief that the Devil could not triumph without God's permission, is further evidence of God's unwavering support of Orkney's new rulers. In the second instance, if the information was deduced by the Devil from his own experience, the Devil is exhibiting an awareness of his own inability to win against those protected by divine right. Thus, the prophecies outlined in the trials of Elspeth and Jonet reinforce that God is on the side of Orkney's new rulers. Therefore, to go against these rulers, is to go against God. To be, as Larner states, a witch, was ultimately to be "an enemy of God and of the godly society" (5).

Witchcraft was often likened to treason. William Perkins, discussing the adequate punishment for witches, argues that witchcraft is the ultimate form of treachery. In doing so, he draws from 1 Samuel 15:23: "for rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft"; a popular text amongst demonologists.[37] Perkins argues that witches should undergo the same punishment as "the traytor who is an enemie to the State, and rebelleth against his lawfull Prince" as "the most notorious traytor and rebell that can

[37] King James also refers to this in *Daemonologie* (54).

be, is the Witch. For she renounceth God himselfe, the King of kings, she leaves the societie of his Church and people, she bindeth her self in league with the devil" (651). Thus, acts of rebellion were closely associated with acts of witchcraft.

The names of several figures acquainted with the rebellion have already been discussed, but there is one more. Elspeth's fairy man introduces himself as 'John Stewart', a name he shares with Patrick Stewart Earl of Orkney's brother. The use of this name may be coincidental, but given the references to several other rebels in Elspeth's trial document, I would argue that this detail should not be disregarded but considered as evidence that John Stewart's name was provoked from Elspeth in some way, or at least mentioned, by her inquisitors.

The two brothers, John and Patrick, had a tumultuous relationship. On June 24, 1596, John Stewart was tried in Edinburgh for devising a plan with Alison Balfour, "ane knawin notorious Wich", to murder his brother, Patrick, using witchcraft (Pitcairn 374; vol. 1, no. 3). This consultation was said to have taken place inside Alison's house in Eyreland, Stenness. Alison confessed to these charges, but under horrific torture in Kirkwall Castle. Her confession was key evidence in the trial of John Stewart, but John carefully dismantled her every word by describing the methods by which they were drawn. John also provided the court with a record of the speech Alison made before her execution, in which she revoked her confession, claiming she was as "innocent of ony point of Wichcraft as ane barne new borne" (Pitcairn 376; vol. 1, no. 3). In this statement, Alison claims she was tortured "diverse and severall tymes in the Caschielawis[38], and sindrie tymis takin out of thame deid[39]" (377). When the torture proved ineffective, her family—a 91-year-old husband, a son, and, the youngest, a 7-year-old daughter—were tortured beside her. Her husband was put in the long irons, her son in the boots[40], and her daughter in the "Pilliewinkis"[41], "quhairwith [Alison] and thay wer swa vexit and tormentit, that pairtlie to eschew ane gretar torment and pwneischment, and upoun promeis of hir lyffe"[42], she falsely confessed (377). This

[38] An iron framework secured around the leg then put into a portable furnace or chafing dish, which heated the iron and roasted the victim's leg.

[39] Unconscious

[40] Or 'bootikins': a frame secured from the knee to ankle with gaps for wedges to be hammered into. Each stroke pushed the wedges further into the leg, pulverising the flesh and bone. The boy was made to endure 57 strokes (Pitcairn 219; vol. 3, no. 1).

[41] A torture similar to the thumbscrews (or 'thumbiekins'), used to crush the thumbs.

[42] Wherewith Alison and they were so vexed and tormented, that partly to avoid greater torment and punishment, and upon promise of her life, she falsely confessed.

declaration did not save Alison's life, but it threw enough doubt onto the case to save John Stewart's.

What the trial of John Stewart illustrates is that more than just the accused witch was able to be implicated in a witch trial case. Witches were frequently pressed to depose others, and one witch made talkative through torture could become a convenient means of incriminating several people in the community. The mention of John Stewart inside Elspeth's document suggests that he was introduced at some point by her inquisitors, making this the second witch trial, after Alison Balfour's, in which his name appears. As noted previously, the Privy Council was concerned about growing support for Patrick Stewart's brothers, rumoured to soon be restored to positions of power, but it was John Stewart that posed the most likely threat of heading another rebellion in Orkney (Anderson 261-2). Attempting, once again, to implicate John Stewart in a case of witchcraft may have served to eliminate this threat altogether. The foundation for his guilt had already been laid in the trial of Alison Balfour, and it would have been difficult for John Stewart to escape another guilty sentence in a second trial for consulting witches.

An accused witch could undergo questioning from several different inquisitors during their ward. These inquisitors may have had their own individual motives, subjects of interest, and lists of names they would like to press forth from the accused. This is illustrated in the examination of Barbara Boundie. People seemed to have been able to pass easily in and out of Barbara's ward: court officials, members of the Kirk session, and interested townsfolk. Every word shared between Barbara and her visitors was given high importance: nothing was ignored, and everything could be used against her. One official, John Aitken, was particularly interested in what Barbara might be able to tell him about a woman named Marjorie Paplay.[43] John visited Barbara in her ward, and said to her: "Tell mee about Marjorie Paplay what ane a [sic] woman she is, and thou shall never want thy Life"; and Barbara, "being feared for her Life, spake more then enough of the said Marjorie at that tyme, and of sundrie other honest women, such as Elspeth and Marion Paplayes, and Elspeth Baikie and the good wife of Elsinquoy" (Boundie Examination 255). Later, during Barbara's public examination, Barbara, echoing Alison Balfour, revoked these words, saying "she never knew no ill to these women", and only made this confession because of the promise that she would

[43] For more information about Barbara Boundie and Marjorie Paplay, see Willumsen (178-200).

not face execution (255-6). There seems to have been very little regulation around visitors while Barbara was in ward. It is mentioned that 'John Baikie's woman', came to Barbara, called her a "false comon thief", and warned her: "look that thou lie not upon honest women" (257). From this we can ascertain that it was common knowledge that witches were being probed to depose other witches, and that when someone was in ward, fear of execution extended to the outside world. It is noted that Barbara "had said unto persons of respect, that they should have a care to bid the officers keep away some folks from her, In respect, that offer had been made unto her by a ledder[44] of a tow[45] to hang her selfe, or of a knyfe to stick her selfe, quhilk[46] would be ane easier death for her, then to be burnt" (256-7). It may have been beneficial to those on the margins of Barbara's case to shorten her time in ward, perhaps fearing what Barbara might be induced to say, especially if put to torture.

What Barbara and Alison's trials demonstrate is the interest of interrogators in implicating specific members of the community: John Stewart in Alison's case, and Marjorie Paplay in Barbara's. In Barbara's trial, we see the name Marjorie Paplay crop up time and time again, usually inside a leading question. Further, we see from these two examples the strategies employed to prompt desired information from the accused: torture, false promises, and bribery.

In Barbara's trial, we also see the desire to link subjects of interest with the Devil. Barbara is asked whether "she had seen the Devil lie with Marjorie Paplay on the ball-ley?", to which Barbara "replied that she knew nothing of it" (Boundie Examination 255). This is a clear attempt to convict Marjorie Paplay for having a sexual relationship with the Devil. This reflects the desire to not only connect Marjorie with witchcraft practices, but with the diabolic. Similar questions may have been posed to Elspeth regarding John Stewart, whose identity seems to have morphed into the fairy man, perhaps through the delirium of torture. Alternatively, the name may have even been employed by Elspeth to silence her inquisitors.[47] Elspeth's trial document lists several houses in which she saw the Devil: one of them being the rebel Alexander Layng's house. This list of people and places Elspeth saw the Devil certainly suggests the question 'did you see the Devil with [name]?' was one that was repeated several

[44] Leather
[45] Rope
[46] Which
[47] Purkiss discusses the making and breaking of silence in "Sounds" (82-83).

times in her examination; at one point, perhaps, centring on the figure of John Stewart. Further, John Stewart had been known to visit witches in their homes and use their powers to further his own personal and political interests. It is possible that Elspeth may have been asked whether John Stewart had come to visit her to request magical assistance, as he was accused of doing with Alison Balfour. Implicating John Stewart in dealings with witchcraft and the Devil would have been beneficial to Orkney's new rulers, as it would have been a means of removing the threat of him leading another rebellion altogether.

King James himself used witchcraft as a means of associating his rule with divine providence in both the pamphlet, *Newes from Scotland* and his influential tract, *Daemonologie*. Stuart Clark observes that "both in genesis and in content the *Daemonologie* may be read as a statement about ideal monarchy" (156). This ideal monarchy is defined through an exploration of its lack, of a world in which the King does not rule, but the Devil: "for since the Devill is the verie contrarie opposite to God, there can be no better way to know God, then by the contrarie" (James I 43). James's methodology is clear: "by the falshood of the one to considder the trueth of the other, by the injustice of the one, to considder the Iustice of the other: And by the cruelty of the one, to considder the mercifulnesse of the other" (43). The alleged statements given by accused witches, as outlined in both texts, are similar to those given by Elspeth and Jonet. Agnes Thomson confessed to attending a Sabbath at the North Berwick Kirk, where she and the other women present were made to kiss the Devil's backside. After they had done so, the Devil "did greatlye enveighe against the King of Scotland", "at which time, the witches demaunded of the Divel why he did beare such hatred to the King, who answered, by reason the King is the greatest enemy he hath in the worlde" ("Newes" 15). This passage shows how the statements of accused women could be manipulated to fit a political agenda. Further, it echoes the words given to Elspeth by her Devil figure when he tells her to flee from the power of Orkney's ministers; as well as the words of Jonet's Devil when he tells her that the new rulers would remain as long as God did.

In both Elspeth's and Jonet's documents their words are manipulated to promote religious and court officials, defame those who took part in the rebellion, and eliminate any opposition to Orkney's new rulers. The proximity of Elspeth's and Jonet's trials,

and the similarity of information shared within them, suggests they both underwent a similar line of questioning. Both women were likely examined at the same time, by the same inquisitors. These inquisitors, it seems, due to the amount of information about Orkney's rebels in both trials, were particularly interested in what the women had to say about this subject, or rather, what they might be *induced* to say about it. This information has, at each point, been forced into the categories of either 'good' or 'evil', with no in-between. At several points the Devil and the ministers, the traitors and the Crown, and the witches and God, are pinned against each other, leaving no mistake which side Orkney's new rulers are on and which side the pious townsfolk should be on too.

The trials of both Elspeth Reoch and Jonet Irving, like *Newes from Scotland*, read as a kind of propaganda in which the intentions of the rebellion men are given a diabolical slant, and the new rulers are placed on a pedestal over which God presides; their cause is noble, and thus, will triumph over evil every time. Reinforcing this are Elspeth's and Jonet's prophecies, in which the rebels always lose. Witch trials were a public stage upon which officials could present themselves as enemies of the Devil, purging the world of his influence, and actively carrying out God's work. The successful trial and execution of both Elspeth and Jonet is in itself a postulation of the strength of the church and court officials: it was a battle won against the Devil, who was unable to save his loyal followers from the gallows. The picture of Elspeth and Jonet burning on the top of Gallow Ha' is the final expression of the church's and state's power: the ultimate illustration of what happens to those who go against the ministers, the Crown, and God.

And forder foir airt part useing hanting and conversing with the devell at diverse and sundrie tymes and at severall partes ffirst Caithnes efter she haid borne hir first bairne nixt in the Milleris house be the wyg in Cathnes Twyse in Edmond Callenderis hous in kirkwall ane tyme in gorne ane tyme in Archibald Dass hous there Ane tyme In Alexander Layngis And Last in Alexander Pottingeris hous Quhair she receaveit respons and diverse Infoirmatiouns at ilktyme of him And at mair Lenth is content in the saidis dittayis.

- ELSPETH'S TRIAL DOCUMENT,
  Sheriff Court Records of Orkney and Shetland, 12 March 1616.

And forder for airt part using hanting and conversing with the Devell at diverse and sindrie tymes and at severall partis &c &c as at mair lenth is contentit in the saidis dittayis.

- ELSPETH REOCH TRIED FOR WITCHCRAFT,
  Maitland Club Miscellany, vol. 2, 1840.

CHAPTER THREE

The Impression of a Life

> How do we know the past today? Through its discourses, through its texts—that is, through the traces of its historical events: the archival materials, the documents, the narratives of witness … and historians.
>
> – LINDA HUTCHEON,
> *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 1989.

Linda Hutcheon coined the term 'historiographic metafiction' to categorise works of postmodern fiction that, converse to traditional historical fiction, are "at once metafictional *and* historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past" ('Historiographic Metafiction' 3). Such novels are highly paradoxical in their simultaneous preservation of the past and questioning of it. As Hutcheon states, "historiographic metafiction manages to satisfy such a desire for 'worldly' grounding while at the same time querying the very basis of the authority of that grounding" ('Historiographic Metafiction' 5). This category of postmodern novel is intensely concerned with how we 'know' the past today; that is, through the textual traces that have been transmitted to us through the centuries, which are all fragmentary and subjective. Historiographic metafiction forces the reader "to acknowledge not only the inevitable textuality of our knowledge of the past, but also both the value and the limitation of that inescapably discursive form of knowledge" (Hutcheon 'Historiographic Metafiction' 8). It asserts that our access to the pasts' reality is mediated through written sources.

The novels *Alias Grace* (1996) by Margaret Atwood and *The Daylight Gate* (2012) by Jeanette Winterson both utilise the historiographic metafiction technique of intertextuality to call attention to the problems of their 'facts'. Both emphasise the subjective quality of the textual traces they are grounded in by inserting perspectives that are missing from the archive. The protagonists of these novels are what Hutcheon characterises as "anything but proper types: they are the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history" (*Poetics* 114). Their insertion disrupts the

grand narratives they exist within, calling into question *whose* history survives, and whose words we know it through.

Grace Marks, from *Alias Grace*, is a historical figure who, due to her gender, criminality, and supposed madness, is on the margins of her society, and thus, would typically be excluded from the historical record. Alice Nutter in *The Daylight Gate* is, through her self-made wealth, able to live independently, outside the usual confines imposed upon women in her society. This position grants her a power within her community, which other women have to scrounge for. However, it also ultimately results in her accusation for witchcraft. These figures persist in history because of their criminal status. Female histories reach us most often through dominant, male discourses, such as legal documents, and in many cases, the women we have access to today needed to be 'guilty' in order to persist in historical records. Thus, for authors wishing to reconstruct female histories, court records are a useful source upon which to draw, for they are one of the few places in which the words of illiterate, lower class women are recorded. However, the use of these sources prompts questions into whether recovering subjects from archival sources, and reconstructing their identities in a fictional work, is possible.

Alias Grace

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* is a fictionalised account of the historical figure Grace Marks. In the year 1843, at the age of sixteen, Grace Marks was convicted of the murder of her employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery, alongside James McDermott, a fellow-servant. Both Grace and McDermott were sentenced to death. However, a group of supporters convinced of Grace's innocence disputed her sentence, and saved Grace from the noose. McDermott was executed alone, and Grace's sentence was demoted to life in prison. Grace was to spend the rest of her life in the Provincial Penitentiary in Kingston. Her time was punctuated by a brief period in Toronto's Lunatic Asylum, and later, according to some accounts, visits to the Governor's house, where she worked as a servant. Support for Grace Marks continued long after her trial, and by 1872, she was granted a pardon and released from prison. Grace's youth and beauty, paired with the sensational details surrounding the case, made her a source of speculation for journalists and, later, a figure of interest for historians. The opinions surrounding Grace at the time of her trial were varied, and

they continued to be so in the body of literature produced about her throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.

Alias Grace challenges the authority of historical texts by drawing attention to the ways they have been constructed. The protagonist, Grace, claims not to remember the most crucial parts of the Kinnear-Montgomery murders: those parts which may either prove or disprove her guilt. Reverend Verringer, the head of a committee formed in support of Grace, hires Dr. Simon Jordan to investigate the cracks in Grace's memory, in the hopes of uncovering some missing information which may prove Grace's innocence and substantiate the committee's petitions for her release. The Reverend, at his first meeting with Dr. Jordan, sets him off on a quest for truth, remarking "the truth shall make you free" (Atwood 91). He hopes that Dr. Jordan will be able to "shed light on a puzzling obscurity" (89), and the reader has similar expectations. We anticipate that, by the end, we will be presented with the missing pieces to Grace's account, which will slot neatly into her history and transform it into a coherent whole.

Magali Cornier Michael, who analyses *Alias Grace* in "Rethinking History as Patchwork", discusses the similarities between historical narratives and legal narratives: both are preoccupied with uncovering the 'truth' (424). Dr. Jordan, in his pursuit of the 'truth', is like both judge and historian. As judge, he listens passively to Grace's personal testimony, his primary task being to determine Grace's guilt or innocence for the Reverend's report. Dr. Jordan's meetings with Grace, in which he employs psychoanalytical methods to try and recover Grace's lost memories, take place in the Governor's household. This is not a legal setting, though the implications are similar: the continuation of her life sentence, or freedom. Further, Dr. Jordan is intent on uncovering the missing pieces in Grace's tale. In this way, he is very much like the historian, who investigates the gaps in the historical record. Grace, in imparting her tale to Dr. Jordan, can be seen as articulating her own artefact. In giving the reader access to the ways Grace moulds and constructs her own story, Atwood draws our attention to the failures of archival documents and questions their capacity to deliver any kind of unified 'truth'.

The textual traces surrounding the historical figure Grace Marks form the scaffold of Atwood's novel; a scaffold that is both rigid and fragmentary, modelled after a patchwork quilt. Its pattern is strict, with fifteen sections, all framed by multiple epigraphs from nineteenth-century archival and literary texts. The use of epigraphs as

a framing device, is an example of a historiographic metafiction text 'using' and 'abusing' the structures associated with traditional history (Hutcheon *Poetics* 80). Epigraphs are a common convention in historical writing. In *Alias Grace*, they both perform their usual task, which is to situate the text in the 'real' and in 'fact', while also, through their volume and contradictions, questioning whether such terms can, and should, be used to categorise such documents. The epigraphs consist of both primary documents (court records, daybooks, journals, letters), secondary sources (historical publications), and seemingly unrelated texts (nineteenth-century poetry). As Michael notes, Atwood, by placing these texts alongside one another, forces them into a disjointed conversation. Each extract both agrees and contradicts with one another. Their meanings are constantly shifting with the addition of a new text, as the reader attempts to find a line of coherence running through the extracts. The reader, however, fails in doing so, as each document challenges the authority of that placed alongside it (Michael). Like the historian, the reader is forced to search for meaning in-between the epigraphs, in the gaps created by their incoherence.

The epigraphs are made up predominantly of 'authorised' historical texts. However, by placing 'factual' documents alongside Grace's fictional account, Atwood forces the reader to question how we determine what is 'true' and what is 'fictional'. As Michael argues, the sources assembled by Atwood, though first appearing to anchor the fictional text in the 'real' and 'factual', reveal themselves as only illusions of truth, undermining and contradicting one another to the point where it is impossible to determine which source is closest to 'what really happened' (430). As the novel progresses, the epigraphs serve to blur rather than distinguish between the fictional and the factual. The documents are in constant debate with one another and present a contradictory Grace at every point in her narrative. As a servant in the Kinnear household, Grace is described as both "of a lively disposition and pleasant manners" (Harrison qtd. in Atwood 213), and "insolent and saucy", with a "silent, sullen temper" (Moodie qtd. in Atwood 273). The *Chronicle and Gazette* describe Grace at her trial as "quite calm", exhibiting no "traces of broken rest and a guilty conscience" (qtd. in Atwood 403). Conversely, Grace allegedly confessed to Kenneth MacKenzie that she "should never again know a moment's peace"; that "[Nancy Montgomery's] terrible face and those horrible bloodshot eyes have never left [her] for a moment" (Moodie qtd. in Atwood 403). Further, in prison, Grace is described in *The Warden's Daybook* as "a dangerous creature"; "her boldness does not show that she is a sensitive person"

(qtd. in Atwood 483). Alternatively, William Harrison asserts that Grace's "exemplary conduct during the whole of her thirty years' incarceration in the penitentiary" proves that "she merited and deserved a pardon"; he then goes on to add that "there is room for grave doubts as to her having been the awful female demon incarnate, that McDermott tried to make the public believe she was" (qtd. in Atwood 483). The epigraphs demonstrate that all sources are subjective accounts. They challenge the notion of there being any one universal 'truth' that can be readily grasped from textual traces; rather, they assert that there are multiple truth*s*.

In problematising the status of these texts as 'factual', Atwood both contradicts the authority of these sources while validating other types of textual traces, which traditional history has previously dismissed (Michael). Drawing on the work of Dominick LaCapra, historiographic metafiction asserts the value of those sources which have been "discarded as non-fact material", while exposing the flaws of authorised historical texts (Hutcheon *Poetics* 122). LaCapra argues that "all artifacts and sources engage textual processes that render problematic their use as neutral evidence for the reconstruction of phenomena assumed to have a fully independent existence outside of them" (LaCapra 43). All historical documents are an organised reworking of actual events, through a subjective lens. Historical fiction author, Hilary Mantel, describes textual traces as "the plan of the positions taken, when we to [sic] stop the dance to note them down" (4). In *Alias Grace*, Grace considers the disconnect between the past, and the narrativization of that past:

> When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else. (345-6)

Grace, in articulating her story to Dr. Jordan, adopts a narrative form in order to make sense of events that did not make sense at the time. I previously argued that Grace, in articulating her story, is also articulating her own artefact. By allowing the reader to witness the self-reflexive process through which Grace assembles her own story, the reader is alerted to the process in which all textual traces are created. We recognise that Grace's story is a reworking of experienced events, not the experience itself. It is, like all historical documents, "no more 'the past' than a birth certificate is a birth"

(Mantel 4). As Hutcheon notes, "it is this very difference between events (which have no meaning in themselves) and facts (which are given meaning) that postmodernism obsessively foregrounds" (*Poetics* 122). The fissure between what happened and what is recorded is then joined by the gaps that the centuries have created: the gaps between sources where documents should exist, but no longer do.

The largest text in *Alias Grace*, is the one the protagonist, Grace, stitches together. As Hutcheon states, we can only know the past "through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are *texts*" (*Poetics* 16). Thus, our ability to access the past "is entirely conditioned by textuality" (16). Grace's narrative contains all those elements which we associate with truth. It is told in the form of personal testimony. The voice adopted by the narrator closely resembles the voice contained in Grace's court confessions, quoted in several epigraphs throughout the novel. Grace's confession reads: "[McDermott] asked me where was Nancy, I said she was dressing, and I said, are you going to kill her this morning. He said he would" (331). A similar scene plays out between Grace and McDermott in the fictional account: "'Where is Nancy, he said. 'She is dressing,' I said. 'Are you going to kill her this morning?' 'Yes, he said, damn her, I will take the axe now and go knock her on the head'" (367). The repetition of 'he said', 'she said' mimics the oral speech patterns within Grace's official confession, imbuing the fictional work with characteristics of a legal testimony, which we equate with 'truth'. Grace's account adopts many of the qualities historians associate with reliable accounts: it is given first-hand, voluntarily, at length, and with copious detail; as Dr. Jordan remarks, "every button and candle-end seems accounted for" (215). These characteristics, as Michael notes, are "apt to lull readers into a passive acceptance of the narrative as an accurate reflection of Grace's life" (435). Grace's account, unlike the 'factual' documents it is paired with, is a work of fiction, and yet, it is the one we look at to deliver some kind of truth. In doing so, Atwood questions the ways in which we discern reality from falsity, and truth from fiction, exposing how blurred these lines really are, and how easily we can mistake one for the other.

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood exposes the ways dominant discourses shape and define the female voice and questions our ability to uncover an authentic female experience from them. Fiona Tolan, in "*Alias Grace*: Narrating the Self" states: "moving within the dominant discourses that make up the official languages of law, church medicine, and

history, Grace's impotent voice can only be heard when it masquerades as power" (232). Grace's account is, seemingly, unmediated. However, it is still only through dominant discourses that Grace is allowed to speak, and it is only through satisfying these discourses that she is able to continue to do so. In order for Grace to continue to narrate her history, she must maintain the interest of the powerful figures who are listening: she must keep her audience captivated. She does so by catering her tale to tease each individual's desires. Her ability to do so hinges on whether or not she can discern correctly the needs and wants of her listener(s). When first meeting Dr. Jordan, Grace is hesitant to begin talking because she "did not know what he wanted [her] to say" (Atwood 77). Jordan replies that "it wasn't what he wanted [her] to say, but what [she] wanted to say [herself], that was of interest to him" (77), but Grace is aware that in order to have the opportunity to say what she wants to, a position she recognises is unavailable to her—"it was not my place to want to say anything" (77)—she must, in some ways, satisfy Dr. Jordan. Thus, she quickly discerns what kind of woman Dr. Jordan would like her to be and acts accordingly.

Grace begins to recognise Dr. Jordan's interest in her sexual history and teases him with suggestive details, but, when pushed, refuses to elaborate. Grace reflects on the "many dangerous things that may take place in a bed", including the act that "takes place between men and women" (186). When Dr. Jordan prompts Grace to speak more about the dangers of beds, she spurns him and silently vows to withhold further information: "I should not speak to him so freely and decide I will not, if that is the tone he is going to take" (186). Grace has complete control over what information she chooses to impart. She regularly draws attention to the ways she self-consciously shapes her own story with comments such as "what should I tell Dr. Jordan about this day?" (342). Grace and Dr. Jordan enter into a reciprocal relationship, in which Grace uses the giving and withholding of information to both punish Dr. Jordan's transgressions and reward his kindness; "because he was so thoughtful as to bring me this radish, I set to work willingly to tell my story, and to make it as interesting as I can, and rich in incident, as a sort of return gift to him; for I have always believed that one good turn deserves another" (286). Grace finds pleasure in Jordan's pleasure: "Dr. Jordan is writing eagerly, as if his hand can scarcely keep up, and I have never seen him so animated before. It does my heart good to feel I can bring a little pleasure into a fellow being's life" (328). Thus, there is gratification to be had for both audience and narrator. Dr. Jordan is compelled by the suggestive information given by Grace, which

in turn provides Grace with the captivated audience she craves and the opportunity to narrate her own history, be it 'truthful' or not.

However, Grace, through her careful control over her narrative, ensures that she never satisfies Dr. Jordan completely. Grace's lawyer, George MacKenzie's estimation of Grace is perhaps one of the most astute in the book. MacKenzie claims that Grace's "desired end" for her tale is no end: she wants "to keep the Sultan amused … to keep the blow from falling. To forestall your departure, and make you stay in the room with her as long as possible" (438). Just when it seems Grace might provide Dr. Jordan with the sexual details he desires, she diverts. Dr. Jordan becomes increasingly agitated by Grace's elusiveness. At one point, after Grace makes some suggestive comments about Mr Kinnear's behaviour towards her, Grace pretends not to comprehend Dr. Jordan when he asks, "had Mr. Kinnear ever made improper advances to you?" (358), until, eventually, "Simon lets his impatience get the better of him … 'Did he put his hands inside your clothing? he says. 'Were you lying down?'" (359). Tolan likens Grace's measured giving and withholding of information to "the perfect striptease, only ever revealing another layer to be removed in a perpetual postponement of the climactic moment of truth" (246). Dr. Jordan, though appearing to be a passive listener, influences Grace's tale hugely as she selects what information to include based on his desires and her own inclination to either energise or pacify him. Thus, Grace's history cannot be separated from its context, and Dr. Jordan's influence upon it cannot be measured or removed; but this does not render Grace's voice completely void. She does not passively supply Dr. Jordan with everything he wishes to hear. She teases the desires of others in order to fulfil her own. As long as she is being heard, she exists, and as long as she is speaking, she is in charge of what information she divulges and what information she does not.

A part of this balancing act is remaining neither guilty nor innocent. As long as Grace stays somewhere between innocent and guilty, she is visible. The doubt surrounding her case saves her from the noose, but, as Grace remarks, "people want a guilty person" (Atwood 104), and as long as Grace is in contention for this role, she is of interest and is preserved in various dominant discourses. Consequently, as Atwood notes in the afterword, as soon as Grace Marks is absolved and released from prison, "all trace of her vanishes" (539). In one of the novel's many dream sequences, Grace, "on the edge of sleep", ponders: "It's as if I never existed, because no trace of me remains, I have left no marks … It is almost the same as being innocent" (398). As

noted previously, because some of our only access to female histories are through dominant discourses, such as court books, in many cases women needed to be presumed 'guilty' in order to be preserved.

Grace is constantly adapting to the needs and wants of her audience in order to maintain their interest. In the Governor's household, in front of the Governor's daughter, Lydia, who thinks Grace "a romantic figure", Grace makes sure she never smiles or laughs for "it would spoil their romantic notion of [her]" (27). Conversely, inside the penitentiary, Grace considers transforming into the "wild beast" the newspapers say she is: "when they come with my dinner I will put the slop bucket over my head and hide behind the door, and that will give them a fright. If they want a monster so badly they ought to be provided with one" (36). Grace, at the start of the novel, reflects on "all the things that have been written about [her]", and asks, "how can I be all these things at once?" (25). The Grace we are presented with, however, *is* all these things at once and, simultaneously, none of these things. She skilfully weaves a fine balance between satisfying the dominant discourses that ensure her longevity, whilst also maintaining control over her story. In this, Grace is like most female subjects in the archive, whose selves have been both preserved and obscured by the dominant discourses they are represented in.

Tolan remarks that Grace, in appropriating the voices and personae available to her, takes control of them (232). In adopting these personas as a mask, Grace is reinforcing their superficiality, but also, is able to keep what we understand to be her essential self hidden. This is paradoxical in that, Grace, in gratifying her audience, is both perpetuating the roles that dominant discourses have given her, whilst also taking ownership of them. In adopting, for example, the persona of a 'wild beast' and using it to frighten the prison wardens, Grace becomes an active participant in the narrative that has been inflicted on her, transforming the people around her into a passive audience: the fools in Grace's game. Grace's greatest source of power is in what she chooses to reveal and what she does not. The information she withholds is unable to be interpreted by others, and thus, stays her own. The personas given to her, rather than stripping Grace of her identity, become the means through which she maintains control over it. Grace does not surrender to the roles given to her, she relishes in them, wielding these masks as a way to fool those who wish to define her and keep the essential parts of her self hidden.

Thus, our inability to reach Grace's autonomous self within the patchwork of texts she has become is her greatest source of power, and Dr. Jordan's greatest source of frustration. Dr. Jordan, despite being driven by the conviction that "sooner or later [he] will get to the bottom of it" (Atwood 372) and reach the 'real' Grace is, by the novel's conclusion, uncertain of anything. He ultimately fails in his task and is unable to pin Grace down onto paper, realising "he can't state anything with certainty and still tell the truth, because the truth eludes him. Or rather it's Grace herself who eludes him" (473).

Throughout the novel, mining for the 'real' Grace is frequently compared to butchering and dissection. When leaving the Governor's household after one of his sessions with Grace, Dr. Jordan "feels as if he's just come from an abattoir" (215). At another point, Dr. Jordan reflects on the effect he, as a doctor, has on women: "to be rendered unconscious; to lie exposed, without shame, at the mercy of others; to be touched, incised, plundered, remade – this is what they are thinking of when they look at him" (94). Further, Grace describes her exchanges with Dr. Jordan as "a feeling like being torn open" (79). Following Grace's unsatisfying and gaping account of the Kinnear-Montgomery murders, Dr. Jordan feverishly dreams of a body on a table, which he is required to dissect:

> He must lift off the sheet, then lift off her skin, whoever she is, or was, layer by layer. Strip back her rubbery flesh, peel her open, gut her like a haddock. He's shaking with terror. She will be cold, inflexible. They keep them on ice. But under the sheet there's another sheet, and under that another one. It looks like a white muslin curtain. Then there's a black veil, and then – can it be? – a petticoat. The woman must be down there somewhere; frantically he rummages. But no; the last sheet is a bedsheet, and there's nothing under it but a bed. That, and the form of someone who's been lying here. It's still warm. (408)

As previously noted, Dr. Jordan, in searching for the authentic Grace in the gaps of her memories, can be compared to a historian. The historian must also dissect the dead, pull them apart, and uncover their history layer by layer. However, in the end, all we have are layers—the textual traces that have been left behind—which we sift through in the hopes of uncovering a solid, once alive, being; but all we find is more and more material, upon which lies only the outline of a person, still warm: the impression of a life. The epigraphs placed throughout the novel appear to be a filter between us and

the ‘real’ Grace, but Atwood, in this passage, demonstrates that what they mask is only the illusion of truth; the idea of a real person. Atwood proposes that uncovering an authentic self from textual traces alone is impossible.

This reading of Dr. Jordan as the obsessed, frustrated historian, constantly looking for the missing pieces of information that will transform Grace into a conclusive whole, has been informed somewhat by my own experience of searching for Elspeth in the archives. All I have been left with, and all I, like Atwood, have been able to reconstruct, is the impression of a person.

The Daylight Gate

While Grace Marks is a widely publicised historical figure, with a large body of literature about her upon which Atwood could draw, the protagonist of Jeanette Winterson’s *The Daylight Gate*, Alice Nutter, is little more than a name in the historical record. In the introduction of *The Daylight Gate,* Winterson notes that the trial of the Lancashire witches in 1612 is the most famous case of witch persecution in England (vii). Winterson’s novel is a fictional account of these trials. The Alice Nutter of history was a gentlewoman who was implicated in this case alongside the families of Demdike and Chattox, who were below her in social standing (Winterson ix). The reason for Nutter’s accusation “remains a mystery” (ix). Winterson purposefully adopts this elusive figure as the protagonist of her novel, using the gaping holes in Nutter’s history as a space in which to disrupt received histories of the Lancashire witch trials.

The protagonist, Alice Nutter, who Winterson makes clear “is not the Alice Nutter of history” (viii-ix), is a self-made woman, who gained her fortune by inventing magenta dye. Her wealth permits her to live independently following her husband’s death. She does not answer to any male relatives or spouse. She has had multiple sexual relationships with both men and women, including the ‘head witch’ Old Demdike, previously known as Elizabeth Southern. Nutter poses a threat to her patriarchal society. She is the mirror of Roger Nowell:

> Roger Nowell was a widower. Alice Nutter was a widow. They were both rich. They could have been a match. Alice’s land abutted Read Hall. But they had not courted; they had gone to law. Roger Nowell claimed a parcel of land as his. Alice Nutter claimed it as hers. She had won the lawsuit.

> Roger Nowell had never lost anything before-except his wife. (Winterson 48-9)

At the beginning of this passage, Nutter and Robert are equal. However, Nutter is able, through her wealth, to refuse to comply with the marital expectations placed on her by her society and come away with part of Robert's assets, which would usually only be available to her through the marriage she chose to reject.

Winterson utilises archival material throughout the novel to frame some of its chapters. These extracts are taken from Thomas Potts's pamphlet *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster*, which "is supposedly an eye-witness verbatim account, though heavily dosed with Potts's own views on the matter" (Winterson vii). Potts's pamphlet is a work of propaganda, both anti-Catholic and anti-superstition. As Diane Purkiss notes in "Charming Witches", "for Potts … the search for witches and the search for Catholics were one and the same" (28). Potts's text is one of the only ways we can access the history of the Lancashire witch trials. However, this biased account heavily obscures the history of the women inside it. Purkiss notes that the "life stories" of the Pendle witches "are twice smothered in myth" ("Charming Witches" 14). Firstly, their narratives have been heavily shaped by the leading questions posed to them by their inquisitors, who were looking to mould their stories into ones of witchcraft (14). Secondly, their stories were "squeezed further by Potts, as he seeks to wring from [them] the meaning he seeks" (14). The history of the Pendle witches is, therefore, deeply flawed: formed from limiting questions and infected by Potts's bias. Leah McCormack, in "Reclaiming Silenced and Erased Histories", argues that historiographic metafiction,

> has the potential to be most effective and empowering … in cases where the history being contested is especially fraught: the histories of the ex-centric and the marginal whose pasts have been largely silenced, erased, and narrated from the hegemonic centre, or, in other words, misrepresented to serve the centre's own purposes at the expense of those in the margins. (39)

The Lancashire women exist within a text which aims to defame and demonise them for delving into Catholic and superstitious practices. In *The Daylight Gate*, Winterson rewrites the story of the Pendle witches, stretching the possibility of the gaps in their history to offer up an alternative narrative to Potts.

Winterson does not completely reject Potts's descriptions of the Lancashire witches. Potts describes the members of the accused as "the most dangerous, wicked, and damnable Witches in the County farre and neere" (C3). Old Demdike is a "damnable and malicious Witch" (B2) and Anne Whittle, alias Chattox, is an "old withered spent and decreped creature" (D2). Winterson makes use of these descriptions, moulding her characters into the formidable, unkempt, and repellent characters in Potts's account. However, it is clear that the characters have not become so by choice. Mouldheels "had flesh that fell off her as though it were cooked" (Winterson 28); but we are made to understand that her feet, "wrapped in rags already beginning to ooze", are only grotesque because of her need to constantly walk and beg (28). She is frightful only as a result of her reduced circumstances.

Both Winterson and her characters make use of what scant tools their meagre history has given to them. According to Potts, Elizabeth Device is a "barbarous and inhumane Monster, beyond example" (F2). Winterson's Elizabeth Device is also monstrous:

> Elizabeth Device was dirty and ugly. The strangeness of her eye deformity made people fear her. One eye looked up and the other looked down, and both eyes were set crooked in her face. Her hair was already white, although she was not yet forty, and her skin had shrunk tight and sallow over her bones. She had been married once, but she and her children had come back to Malkin Tower to live with Old Demdike. Sometime, perhaps nine years ago, she had been raped. The ragged child Jennet Device was the result of the rape. Elizabeth was fierce. Begging had never helped her. If she could not gain sympathy, she could provoke fear and dislike. (39-40)

We understand that Elizabeth has been made into the witch figure by the society that marginalises and abuses her. Unable to induce sympathy from the folk by begging, Elizabeth is forced to make use of the deformities which have been inflicted on her through poverty in order to grasp what little power she can through fear. As Nutter remarks: "they have no power in your world, so they must get what power they can in theirs" (55). By speculating on the gaps between Potts's words—the circumstances that might have driven Elizabeth to become an object of fear—Winterson is taking Potts's story and making it Elizabeth Device's.

The group that gathers inside Malkin Tower on Good Friday, the same group that is subsequently accused of witchcraft, are the reverse of their patriarchal society. Daniel Fischlin, in "Counterfeiting God", describes the witches' sabbath as an inversion of Godly and kingly society, posing a threat to established order. The meeting that takes place is exactly that. Malkin Tower "might have been a prison" (30) but is paradoxically one of the only places within which its inhabitants are free from the confines of their society. They do not serve a monarch, rather, they serve Old Demdike. The order and discipline valued in the world outside the tower are seemingly abandoned within its walls, but it is not completely without structure. The inhabitants rely on Old Demdike's rule, on the hierarchical structure that is a mirror of the patriarchal one outside; so much so, that they call on Nutter to take Old Demdike's place as head witch after Demdike's arrest. Those within the tower believe Nutter to be in possession of magical powers because of her unconventional wealth and status. However, Nutter, though an influential figure in the outside world, is rendered powerless inside Malkin Tower. Nutter, in denying the magical powers which give her status in the world she has entered into, becomes vulnerable. The group begins to recognise the influence they hold over Nutter inside their own haven: "they were drunk already and now they were intoxicating themselves with the thought of power" (35). They attack Nutter, and the only means through which she can regain her authority is to become what they wish her to be: a powerful witch. Nutter takes back control by ordering the group to get on their knees. Then, she carves a pentacle into Jem Device's chest, refers to herself as Jem's "mistress", and pledges that, if he does not obey her, "Satan will take [his] soul" (36). Nutter, by taking advantage of the group's fear and reverence towards her, is able to once again establish her power amongst this new society. Nutter's transformation is an illustration of the ways the inhabitants of Malkin Tower also gain influence in a world where they otherwise have none: by taking advantage of the fear and disgust directed towards them and performing the roles society has forced them into.

The Daylight Gate demonstrates how the patriarchal systems at work robbed the accused women of their humanity in life and also, inevitably, in death. Winterson writes, "only humans can know what it means to strip a human of being human" (94-5). In Potts's account of the trials, the terms 'barbarous', 'inhumane', and 'monster' are repeatedly used to describe the accused, leaving little to no trace of the human

beneath them. Similarly, the patriarchal systems that govern the lives of the accused witches in the novel slowly rob them of their humanness. Before their arrest, they were already more animal than human. In the meeting at Malkin Tower, the group is described collectively as "rats", "leeches", "bats" and "creatures" (Winterson 35-6). After their arrest, the conditions inside their prison, cultivated by those in power, strip them of what little humanity they had at the beginning. As Jessica Doble in "Two Sides of the Same Coin" writes, "the jailers ensured that [the accused] would lose their humanity by creating the conditions in which they suffered to the point of madness, rotting bodies, and death" (1). Their prison inside Lancaster Castle, called the Well Dungeon,

> measures twenty feet by twelve feet. It is sunk thirty feet below ground. It has no window and no natural light … The place stinks. Drainage is a channel cut into the earth under the straw. Their urine flows away, their faeces piles into a corner. Old Demdike squats over the mounting pile and generally loses her footing and slips into it. Her dress is smeared in excrement. (90-1)

This environment slowly reduces the women down to vacant forms. The women become almost indistinguishable from their repugnant surroundings: "the flare throws grotesque shadows on the black stone walls of the cell. No, it is not the shadows that are grotesque; the women are grotesque. Shrunken, stooped, huddled, crippled, hollow-faced, racked and rattling" (94). By the time Nutter is brought to the Well Dungeon, the women are but "a heap of bodies, continuous, undistinguishable, lying in heaps for warmth. Chattox, Nance Redfern, Jem Device, Elizabeth Device. Names that meant nothing. The occupants of those names had vacated them" (201). These names are made accessible due to Potts's account of the trials, yet the people beneath them are almost entirely absent. They have been reduced to names only: faceless beings onto which others can project their own fears and desires, and bodies to be used and disposed of in the name of religion.

In the trial scene, we are re-introduced to the characters once more: to the forms the judicial system has transformed them into, and the forms they will be executed in. Jem Device "can't walk" (213), Elizabeth Device "still has the energy to shout obscenities", Mouldheels "sits on the floor and pulls blisters from her pus-soaked feet" (214), and "Chattox is demented. She spits and raves. She curses. She wants to be what they say she is; a witch. What else is left for her to be?" (213-4). They are 'witches'

and little more. In the end, that is all they have; that is all that gave them power in life, and all that preserves their existence in death. Chattox, by adopting the role of the witch at her end, is able to keep hold of what scrap of power she held in the outside world. She is able to make a mockery of the systems of power—patriarchal, judicial—that put her there, by performing the part they have given her with vigour. The same goes for Elizabeth Device, who, despite her reduced state, still has the energy to "shout obscenities" and disrupt the court. She is able to speak freely in a way that, under other circumstances, was not viable for women of her time. Nutter too, in the end, becomes an object of fear and desire. No longer under the influence of her elixir of youth, she is:

> Gaunt. Lined. White hair. She was still beautiful, if there was something transparent about her, as if her skin were made of leaves that had lain in the sun. She was an old woman. (212)

Nutter, however, always with more resources at her disposal than the women she was accused alongside, is able to break free from her historical narrative somewhat. She takes control of her manner of death and ends her own life before the executioner has the chance to. She calls upon her falcon while standing on the scaffold, who "in one swift movement … severed her jugular vein" (222). This is one of many instances in *The Daylight Gate* in which Winterson has taken imaginative freedom with the gaps in the historical record. As discussed in my analysis of *Alias Grace*, the record of an event is not the event itself. As Mantel states, a birth certificate is not a birth (5). Similarly, a death sentence is not a death. We cannot know with any certainty how, when, and if, the sentences recorded in trial documents truly took place. In playing on this gap, Winterson is giving her character power over her story's end; she is rewriting her history and opening it up to possibility.

CONCLUSION

The Past in Process

> To retrieve history we need rigour, integrity, unsparing devotion and an impulse to scepticism. To retrieve the past, we require all those virtues – and something more. If we want added value – to imagine not just how the past was, but what it felt like, from the inside – we pick up a novel. The historian and the biographer follow a trail of evidence, usually a paper trail. The novelist does that too, and then performs another act – puts the past back into process, into action – frees the people from the archive and lets them run about, ignorant of their fates, with all their mistakes unmade.
>
> – HILARY MANTEL,
> 'The Day is for The Living,' BBC Reith Lectures, 2017.

The epigraphs throughout this exegesis, inspired by Atwood's use of epigraphs in *Alias Grace,* demonstrate that I am one of many who have attempted to retrieve and narrate Elspeth's past.

Elspeth's first narrators were, of course, her inquisitors, judge, and scribe, who encouraged, listened to, and transmuted her words onto paper. Just over two hundred years later, Dalyell uncovered Elspeth's trial document, publishing extracts from it, alongside other trials from Scotland. Five years later, the Maitland Club transcribed her document, and, for reasons unknown, took up the role of editor, and remove several lines. Subsequent to this, Elspeth caught the attention of historians. The authors of these epigraphs speak with their own distinct voice. They prioritise some information over others and, drawing on a variety of wider sources, have come to various conclusions about what lies beneath Elspeth's document. The voices sometimes speak in unison, sometimes interrupt and talk over one another, and at other times they hesitate, giving way to complete silence. Together they form a disjointed chorus, within which Elspeth's voice, it seems, is the quietest. I have inserted my words amongst theirs, and though I set out to amplify as much of Elspeth's voice as I could,

she remains, four-hundred years later, an impression on a page, narrated by a different hand, in more legible ink.

However, unlike the scholars before me, I have written Elspeth into fiction. My exploration of Elspeth was not limited to the words in her document, it stretched beyond and between them. I have imagined her life. Writing Elspeth into fiction helped me to see her as a flesh and blood being; a person that once existed, with a body, fears, desires, and thoughts. Hilary Mantel, in her first 2017 Reith Lecture, explains that her "chief concern" as an author "is with the interior drama of my characters' lives. From history, I know what they do, but I can't with any certainty know what they think or feel" (5). These unobtainable thoughts and feelings constitute a substantial gap in textual traces. Mantel notes that "these erasures and silences made me into a novelist" (5). It is in these gaps that Mantel gives herself permission to invent: "I would make up a man's inner torments, but not, for instance, the colour of his drawing room wallpaper"; "Thoughts can only be conjectured ... but the wallpaper – someone, somewhere, might know the pattern and colour" (5).

There are little known facts about Elspeth. She does not exist outside of her document, and indeed, barely exists within it. Like Mantel's, my fictional work is predominantly concerned with Elspeth's thoughts and feelings, which are absent from her document, but also, her body—another absence. We can gauge some of her words, but we do not know what psychological or physical state she was in when she delivered them. We do not know if she herself understood the experiences she was being forced to articulate. I was interested in the ways Elspeth's mental world may have influenced her tale. I wanted to explore how folklore may have allowed Elspeth to understand what she might have otherwise had scant means to: no medical knowledge or familial guidance.

The focus throughout my research has been on voices. There are two main voices in Elspeth's trial document: Elspeth's and her inquisitors', which are too deeply entwined to be separated neatly. I wanted the nature of this research, and the impossibility of extracting an authentic voice from Elspeth's document, to be reflected in my novel. My creative work also weaves together two voices: Elspeth's and her narrator's. It is unclear who is in charge of Elspeth's narrative: whether her actions are being dictated by the narrator, or herself. At some points, the narrator takes over, and Elspeth feels distant and unobtainable, at other times, the reader is so close to Elspeth

it feels as though they are reading a first-person narrative. As in her trial document, the fictional Elspeth's voice is never pure or unobstructed. Her words are always filtered through the narrator's, whose control is at times pronounced, and at others, deceptively absent.

In my novel, our ability to reach the 'truth' of Elspeth's experience is hindered by Elspeth's and her inquisitors' inability to find it themselves. How can we make sense of Elspeth's story, when it is possible that Elspeth could not make sense of it herself? At the time she articulated it, she was most likely in no state which facilitated the coherence historians crave. Her court officials may have also had little understanding of what she was attempting to communicate and no real desire to, as long as her words satisfied a demonological narrative, or could be twisted to do so. That is not to say Elspeth's words should be dismissed as products of delirium. Rather, I have explored what tools Elspeth may have had at her disposal to help her reach an understanding, and then communicate her experiences to officials: experiences that necessitated silence, in a setting that demanded speech.

In the novel's trial scene, Elspeth wishes to speak for herself; to have the opportunity to fill in the silences of her document, which she believes to be an inadequate account from which others are to reach a judgement about her. She does not want the jury to read her document; she knows that, though most of what is in there is more or less 'truthful', the facts have been twisted, and she, herself, is missing from it. She is in the court room, but she is being spoken for.

Elspeth, I hope, is somewhere in the room when you read my fictional account of her, but once again, she is being spoken for. Elspeth, during the writing of this thesis, was constantly shifting, changing with every text I read, eluding definition, and she will continue to do so after I have signed off on this project. I have written multiple versions of Elspeth's story, which are, frustratingly, no more incorrect or truthful than the next. Elspeth remains in the in-between state she was in whilst waiting at the loch-side: between non-existence and the real, between fact and fiction. However, it is in this in-between state that Elspeth remains of interest. As long as Elspeth defies definition, she will continue to demand the attention of readers and historians.

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APPENDIX

The Trial of Elspeth Reoch

Curia Justiciarie vicecomitatis de Orknay Tenta apud kirkwall in nova domo prope palatium de yeards ibidem per honorabilem virum henricum stewart de carlongie Justiciarium ac vicecomitem deputatum dicti vicecomitatus die duodecimo Martii 1616.[1]

Curia tenta et legitime affirmata[2]

Witch Reoch

The quhilk day anent the dittay crimminall given in and persewit at the instance of Robert Coltart procurator fiscall of the said sheriffdom Aganes Elspeth Reoch dochter to umquhill Donald Reoch sumtyme pyper to the Earle of Cathnes ffor certane poyntis of dittay of witchcraft underwritten That is to say In the first for airt part using committing and practising of the abominable and divilish cryme of Witchcraft in giveing ear and credite to the Illusiounes of the devell Quhairby scho fenyeit hirselff dumb And illudit and deceaveit his Majesties subjectis in maner underwritten Viz In the first for that sho confest that quhen shoe wes ane young lass of Tuelf yeiris of age or therby And haid wanderit out of Cathnes quhair she wes borne To Lochquhaber ye cam to Alleine Mckildowies wyfe quha wes your ant And haveing remaneit with hir be the space of aucht wickes quha duelt with hir husband in a Loch That she upon ane day being out of the Loch in the contrey And returning and being at the Loch syd awaiting quhen the boit sould fetch ~~yow~~ hir in That thair cam tua men to hir Ane cled in blak and the uther wt ane grein tartane plaid about him And that the man with the plaid said to hir she wes ane prettie And he wald Learne hir to ken and sie ony thing she wald desyre The uther man said she wald not keip counsell And forbaid him He ansuerit he wald warrand hir And she being desyrous to knaw said how could she ken that And he said Tak ane eg and rost it And tak the sweit of it thre Sondayis And with onwashin handis wash hir eyes quhairby she sould sie and knaw ony thing she desyris And to persuade hir he directit hir to ane aunttis hous of her awin quha wes ane widdow That haid ane oy that wes with child to

[1] The court justiciary sheriffdom of Orkney held at Kirkwall in the Palace of the Yards by the honourable Henry Stewart of Carlongie justiciary sheriff and deputy sheriff on the twelfth day of March 1616.

[2] Court held legitimately

ane uther wyffis husband on knawen to ony And quhen she cam she sould luik in hir face and tell hir she is with bairne to ane uther wyfes husband And sa within a short space therefter going to hir aunttis hous how sone she saw the young woman she said she wes with bairne as the man haid said to ~~yow~~ hir And shoe denying said to hir she wald repent it within a short space Thairefter the young woman considering that she knew hir estait desyrit sum cure at hir that she micht part with bairne quha ansuerit she could give hir nane Bot remembering that she wes cum in to Allane Mckildowies hous That day that the Tua men came to hir That he haveing speirit at hir quhat men thois wer that wer with hir at the loch syd and quhat they haid said to hir And she denying he forbaid yow to fear ffor they wer freindis of his quha wald do hir no hurt And that he knew quhat they said to hir So she remembring that Allane haid skill shoe said to the young woman that he wald help hir Quhair upoun she and she gaid togither to the Loch and spak with him quha refuseit to give hir ony thing to slay the bairne And therefter within tua yeir she bure hir first bairne quhilk wes gottin be ane James Mitchaell at the kirk of ~~Norlie~~ Murthlie upoun Spey within Balveny And being delyverit in hir sisderis hous The blak man cam to hir that first came to hir at Lochquhaber And callit him selff ane farie man Quha wes sumtyme hir kinsman callit Jone Stewart quha wes slane be Mcky at the doun going of the soone And therefor nather deid nor leiveing But wald ever go betwix the heaven and the earth Quha delt with yow tua nytis and wald never Lat hir sleip persuading hir to let him ly with her wald give yow a guidly fe And to be dum for haveing teachit hir to sie and ken ony thing she desyrit He said that gif she spak gentlemen wald trouble hir And gar hir give reassounes for hir doings Quhairupoun she mycht be challengeit and hurt And upoun the thrid nyt That he com to hir she being asleip And laid his hand upoun hir breist and walkint hir And therefter semeit to ly with hir And upoun the morrow she haid na power of hir toung nor could not speik Quhairthrow hir brother deing hir with ane branks quhill she bleid Becaus she wald not speik And pat ane bow string about hir heaid to gar hir speik And therefter tuik hir thrie severall tymes Sondayis to the kirk And prayit for hir ffra the qlk tyme she still continewit dumb going about and deceaveing the people Synding telling and foir shawing thame quhat they haid done and quhat they sould do And that be the secund sight grantit to hir in maner foirsaid she saw Robert Stewart sone naturall to umquhill Patrick sumtyme Earle of Orkney with Padrick Traill to quhom she wes with bairne and certeine utheris with towis about thair craigis In Edmond Callendaris hous At thair efternoones drink befoir the Earle of

Cathnes cuming to the countrey And that be pluking of the herb callit millefolle quhilk causis the nose bleid He haid taught hir to tell quhatsoever sould be speirit at hir Be sitting on hir ryt knie and pulling And pulling it betuix hir mid finger and thomb And saying of *In nomine patris filii et spiritus sancti* be vertue quhairof Shoe haillit ane bairne to Magnus Sinclair in Gorne At the desyre of of [sic] his wyf At qlk tyme on yule day she confest the Devell quhilk she calls the farie man Lay with hir At quhilk tyme he bade hir leave Orkney and go home to hir awin contrey Becaus this countrey wes Preistgone Qlk he exponit that there wes ower mony ministeris in it And gif she taryit she wald be hurt And forder foir airt part useing hanting and conversing with the devell at diverse and sundrie tymes and at severall partes ffirst caithnes efter she haid borne hir first bairne nixt in the Milleris house be the wyg in Cathnes Twyse in Edmond Callenderis hous in Kirkwall ane tyme in Gorne ane tyme in Archibald Dass hous there Ane tyme In Alexander Layngis And Last in Alexander Pottingeris hous Quhair she receaveit respons and diverse Infoirmatiouns at ilktyme of him And at mair Lenth is content in the saidis dittayis The said procurator fiscall being personalie present And the said defendar being lykwayis personalie present Quha enterit on pennell haveing no lawfull caus quhy she sould not pass to the knawledge of ane assyse Quhairupoun the procurator fiscall desyring the dittayis to be put to the knawledge of ane assyse and the pannall to be accussit thereupoun Efter accusatioun the said Elspeth confest the haill poyntis of dittay abonewritten And therefor the Judge remittit the dittayis to the knawledge of ane assyse quhom he ordeinit to be callit

Nomina assisa

Mr Robert Henderson of Holland
Mitchaell Balfour of Garth
James Hendersone
Thomas Knychtsone
David Moncreiff merchand
Patrick Vans merchand
Magnus Craigie merchand
Jone Sinclair merchand
Jerome Chalmeris skiper
William Carmichaell merchand

William Bannatyne of Gairsay
Robert Sinclair merchand
David Kir Kirknes cordiner
James Deldall merchand
Patrik Cromertie meriner

Quhilk persones of assyse being receaveit admittit and sworne But lawfull objectioun of the pannall and removeit out of Judgement Nominat and ellectit William Bannatyne of Gairsay In chancellar And efter dew deliberatioun haid anent the dittayis produceit and haill poyntis therof And reentering In Judgement agane the haill assyse be the mouth of the said chancellar fyllit the said Elspeth of the haill poyntis of dittay abonespecifeit And Remittit sentence to the Judge and dome to the dempster Quhilk deliberatioun the Judge than presentlie acceptit And decernit and ordanit the said Elspeth Reoch To be tane be the lockmane To the place of executioun betuix and thrie efternune And to be wirryet at ane staik quhill she be deid And therefter to be burnt in asshis Quhilk the dempster gave for dome.

APPENDIX

The Trial of Jonet Irving

Curia Justiciarie vicecomitatis de orknay et zetland Tenta apud urbem de kirkwall in Nova domo prope palatium de yeardis ibidem per honorabilem virum Henricum Stewart de carlongie vicecomitem deputatum dicdictiti vicecomitatus die quinto menthis Martii anno 1616.[3]

Curia tenta et legitime affirmata[4]

Witch Irwing

The Quhilk day anent the dittayis crimminall producit and persewit be Robert Coltart procurator fiscall of the said sherifdome Againes Jonet Irwing in Kirkwall ffor certane poyntis of dittayis for witchcraft underwritten That is to say In the first the said Jonet wes Indyttit and accusit for airt part using commiting and practising of the divilish and superstitious cryme of witchcraft And in hanting and conversing with the divell In maner following Viz In that she confest That she being seiking hir ministeris[5] xxxij[6] yeiris syne or therby That ane husband man abone the kirk of Harray pat yow to keip his kyne Quhair the divell come to the kyne in lyknes of ane bull and efter he haid swokkit upoun thame Came to ~~yow~~ hir And changeing him selfe in a man bade ~~yow~~ hir call home the kyne And he sould cum to ~~yow~~ hir and speik wt ~~yow~~ hir the morne Quha come and tuik ~~yow~~ hir under ane grein bra in to a hous quhair he gave ~~yow~~ hir fleshe to eat And as aperit ~~yow~~ hir lay wt ~~yow~~ hir Item in that she confest That Tua years therefter she being cuming to kirkwall wt corne a hir bak the devell came to hir betuix Harray and Rendall upoun the Cyllis Quhair he lay wt hir and gart hir milk the kyne quhilk he suppit als fast as she milkit At quhilk tyme he promeisit gif she wald serve him That he wald Let hir want nothing Quhilk she promeisit Quhairupoun the devell learneit hir that gif she buire ill [will] to ony bodie That she sould luik upoun thame with opin eyis And pray evill for thame in his name That she sould get hir heartis desyre Item that she confest that

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3 The court justiciary sheriffdom of Orkney and Shetland held at the town of Kirkwall in the Palace of Yards by the honourable Henry Stewart of Carlongie sheriff deputy sheriff on the fifth day of March in the year 1616.

4 Court held legitimately

5 May also be misteris (mistress)

6 32

the devell came to hir Upoun the ness of Quindnes in the Lyknes of ane blak doge quhen she wes going to the ebb At quhilk tyme he bade hir goe And that she wald get fishe anew As she gat In deid And therefter he come to hir quhen she wes going To put up hir peattis abone grund Quhair he Tauld hir That Robert Stewart haid gottin Birsay And wald get the castle and country But wald not keipit long And that he came to hir at everie Alhallowewin fra the secound tyme he aperit to hir quhairever she wes and lay with her as aperit hir Item for that she confest that she dreameit a dreame fyve yeiris syne or thereby about midsomer That she waiding in a watter And that ther came a voice to hir said That that meaneit seiknes And except she gaid to a watter And cust ane luifefull ower ilk shoulder and ovir hir head Schoe wald be seik And in saiving the seiknes wald fall on thame that shoe saw first And swa haveing sein David Buow Tailyer the seiknes fell upoun him And his wyfe and bairnes have continewit seik sen syne Item that she being dwelling in George Grahames hous And he removeing hir and calling hir witche and Carling quhair he met hir That she prayed evell for him as the devell haid Taught hir Quhairthrow he hes bein ever seik sen syne quhilk she confest Item for that she confest that in the moneth of Aprile last she being angrie wt the old alterationis of the estait of the countrey Schoe callit on the devell quha come to hir And tuik hir up to the head of the castle Quhair sho cryit thrie oyess About the glomeing of the nyt And desyrit him to put hir new reularis away That the kyndly countrey peiple micht rewle And the devell anserit hir That they wald byde sa lang as god waldin[7] Item for that William Scottie in Kirkwall haveing avowit to gar hir flitt hir kist That she be hir develrie and witchcraft causit him and uther fyve men and a woman that wes riding out of westray in Robert Sinclairis boit to perishe in Westray firth Item in that she confest ane yeir syne or therby Magnus Hammie haveing summondit hir to compeir befoir the kirk And having challengeit hir for putting fyre in hir wall That she gave him a drink with a peice bannock into it The meall quhereof Sche gat fra the devell Quha bad hir quhen she wald evill to ony bodie give it thame in a drink quhairby the said Magnus wes seik be the space of aught oulkis And generallie shoe wes Indyttit and accusit for airt part useing committing and practizeing of witchcraft conversing with the devell at all tymes and occasiounnes And sen she wes wairdit quhilk she confest And in casting of seiknes upoun diverse and sundrie utheris persones And speciallie upoun James Jackis wyfe And using and practizeing

[7] My best estimate of this word

of all uther sortis of sorceries superstitioun and witchcraft and sa reput and and halden as ane comoun rank witch As at mair lenth is content in the saidis dittayis The said procurator fiscall being personalie present And the said defendant being lykwayis personalie present quha enterit on pannall haveing no lawfull cause quhy she sould not pass to the knawledge of ane assyse wes content to abyde tryell Quhairupoun the said procurator fiscall askit actis of court desyring the dittayis to be put to the knawledge of ane assyse and the pannall to be acusit therupoun Efter accusation the said Jonet confest the haill poyntis of ditay abonewritten Except anent the perishing of Robert Sinclairis boit and people that wer therein And thairfor the Judge remittit the dittayis To the knawledge of ane assyse quhom he ordaneit to be callit

Assysa

David Kincaid of Yunsta
Thomas Knychtsone of Aith
David moncreif in Kirkwall
James Irwing in Veslabanks
William Irwing of Biekis
Patrick Vass merchand
George Traill of Westnes
Magnus Craigie merchand
Harie Spence in Scapa
David Kirknes cordiner

Johne Hendersone of Wesland
James Deldall merchand
Jerome Chalmeris skiper
Patrick Gardiner cordiner
Thomas Louttit of Hatstane

Quhilkis persones of assyse being receaveit sworne and admittit but Lawfull objectioun of the pannall And removeit out of Judgement Nominat and ellectit Jerome Chalmer to be chancler And efter dew deliberatioun haid anent the dittayis produceit as wes the said Jonet And haill Poyntis therof And enterand in Judgement Agane The haill assyse be the mouth of their said chanceller fyllit the said Jonet of the haill particular poyntis of dittay abonewrittin Except anent the perisheing of Robert Sinclair boit and people therin conteinit And fyllit hir of the generall poynt of dittay That she hes bein reput and haldin thru mony yeiris bygane ane Rank witch And remittit sentence to the Judge and dome to the dempster Quhilk determinatioun the judge than presentlie acceptit And determinit And Ordanit the said Jonet to be taine to the place

of executioun be the lokmane betuix and thrie efternune thair to be weirryet at ane staik quhill she be dead And therefter to be burnt in ashis Quhairupoun dome wes given be the dempster.

APPENDIX

Publications

The following is a list of the publications that have emerged out of this research project to-date. I would like to thank the reviewers and editors of these pieces; your insightful feedback and editorial suggestions helped shape this thesis.

Angus, Ashleigh. "The Orkney Rebellion and the Trials of Jonet Irving and Elspeth Reoch." *Commemorating the Victims of the Orkney Witchcraft Trials*, special edition of *New Orkney Antiquarian Journal*, vol. 9, Orkney Heritage Society, 2020, pp. 41-55.

---. "Their Father's Bagpipes." *Causeway/Cabhsair: A Magazine of Irish and Scottish Writing,* edited by Oliver Tong and Lily Greenall, vol. 9, no. 1, Aberdeen University Press, May 2018, pp. 8-10.

---. "Unknown, Unknown, death c. 1629." *The Grassic Gibbon Centre*, 2018, www.grassicgibbon.com/wp-content/uploads/Literary-Lights-2018-Winner.pdf.

---. "Unknown, Unknown, death c. 1629." *Pause: New Writing About Time and Change*, edited by Rachel Robertson et al., Curtin University Professional Writing and Publishing, 2019, pp. 1-8.

---. "'Walliman': Re-writing the trial of Jonet Rendall." *Uncanny Powers*, special issue of *Axon: Creative Explorations*, capsule 3, 2018, www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-c3/'walliman'.