

Richard Elman's

The Dancing Master's Diaries

The 1867-68 Notebooks of Robert Nelson Mount

Edited by

Schofield Blanch MA

The Dancing Master's Diaries

BOOK ONE



For hominy, for heavenly hominy...

Gaylord Lanier

*Give me now libidinous joys only,
...life coarse and rank...*

Walt Whitman, *Native Moments*

for Alice again and Tom Flanagan

A Brief Preface

Schofield Blanch MA

During the course of a routine insulation repair, the diaries of Robert Nelson Mount, 1806-1883, were recently discovered in the attic of my old frame house on Christian Avenue in Stony Brook, NY.

There was extensive raccoon damage, and, when it proved necessary to strip away certain old tarpaulins which the creatures had been gnawing at, a large portfolio of music sheets and a cache of schoolboy notebook 'diaries' were uncovered.

Though these Robert Nelson Mount 'commonplaces' run from 1846 through 1877, by far the most suggestive passages concern the final years of his painter brother, William Sidney Mount, and their older sibling, Shepherd, also a painter.

The fame of William Sidney Mount with genre scenes of the period and some landscapes which precurse American impressionism has survived to this day. His works are increasingly scarce to purchase and fetch large prices on the auction market on those rare occasions when they are put up for sale. By far the most extensive collection of Mount paintings is in the Stony Brook Museums, a gift from the millionaire Ward Melville.

Largely self-taught, Mount painted the then rural North Shore of Long Island. He painted scenes of work and country dances, portraits, fishing trips, and musicals. Perhaps his best known painting was of some Long Island locals learning the news of the discovery of gold in California, though he was also one of the first Americans to do sensitive portraits of African Americans, musicians, field hands, and layabouts. He was also an inventor of music stands and hollow-backed fiddles (for music was his hobby), and a composer of tunes for the fiddle and piano forte, and whereas he was very much of a musical amateur, he was explicitly the professional artist, exhibiting at the National Academy, and sending paintings abroad to be reproduced as inexpensive multiples for sale to connoisseurs.

Mount was a believer in parapsychology and attended séances; he never married. He lived his whole life in the vicinity of the present-day 'Three Villages' of Stony Brook, Setauket, and Poquott, and is buried in a modest plot beneath a small Greek Revival tomb in the churchyard of Setauket's Presbyterian Church.

Versatility of talents and professions was not uncommon then in America, but those which brother Robert Nelson Mount exhibited may appear to exceed belief. In knowledge he was an amateur botanist, a dancing master, musician, farmer, cardsharp, travelling salesman, teacher, poet and son writer, a beekeeper, veterinarian, scapegrace, and historian. He also dabbled in watercolors, was an accomplished sign painter and calligrapher. In short, he combined both Bouvard and Pecuchet in his own too-mortal person. In his last years Robert Nelson wrote infrequently with little panache; he seems to have devoted himself almost exclusively to farming, real estate speculations, auto-suggestion, and alcohol.

The accounts of the Mount family in Robert's diaries 'untrammelled by inhibition' are for nobody but himself and we moderns. 'The great drawback of being witty,' wrote Stendhal's alter ego Henri Brulard, 'is you have to keep your eyes fixed on the semi-fools around you, and steep yourself in their commonplace way of feeling.' A wit, and a failed poet, a rake, and a misfit, Robert sometimes behaved unwisely, but he was never a 'semi-fool.'

The occasional footnote and nota bene notwithstanding, I have done only the lightest editing for spelling and punctuation of Robert Nelson's diaries. These, apparently, were composed in great haste in a somewhat slipshod penmanship, and without thought of futurity. Robert Nelson's trove of words is not pure gold, and I have indicated certain excised passages with an ellipse...Such cullings from Robert's cahier and brother William's séance recordings validate for posterity only the feckless slanders of insensitive and heedless neighbors who are long dead...If I have not sought to tame the writer's natural loquaciousness that's because Robert Nelson Mount's style seems to typify, in his words, hoarding 'the ways I feel like Dresden cups,' when, during an age of table talk, punctilio demanded self-restraint.

Mount's manner of solitary reflection was still the entertainment of men and women of some intelligence, and refinement.

Stony Brook, N.Y. (1993)

Part One

3 December, 1867

In Georgia, some years before the Negro agitations and the national calamity that ensued, I was instructed in pleasure by a lively young widow on a small plantation some leagues from Lagrange where I had been summoned to teach the mazurka and the French quadrille.

It was late of an evening after the assembled company of backsliding Methodists and their consorts had all departed for their slumbers that Julia Copal Bedslow reproached me in no uncertain terms for my ‘Billy be damned fecklessness.’

Autumnal Georgia nights can chill you to the bone. With only embers left to smolder in the hearth, we were in a state of humid undress from our exertions on the waxed floors of the ballroom and elsewhere when this sunny-haired beauty, seeking to quench the natural thirsts which the evening had produced, brought to her bedside two silver jubilee cups of chilled spiced claret punch, and proposed a toast to the ‘steadfastness of the male species and the wondrous flightiness of woman.’

General Sherman himself had not marched through Fulton County with more abandon and alacrity than I had done with the lady so I was ill-prepared for what came next.

We drank and by candle glimmer—Selah!—our eyes once more took courage to delight in each other’s *déshabille*. Then she spoke with soft warmth, a waning altruistic intent...

‘Dear Mr. Mount, the South is a land blessed by providence with fertile soil and many beautiful and generous women. And we are not as shy to admit of our wants as you meddlesome Yankees sometimes seem to be. A woman here is truly served by her household servants and her lover. In neither case does enslavement to the female result eventually in a manumission. Do you catch my drift?’

‘Not quite, dear lady,’ I confessed, reaching for her beneath her shift again, though she drew back.

‘Well, great balls of fire,’ she exclaimed. ‘So then I must be blunt. We believe ladies always must pleasure themselves first,’ with a little smirk, ‘the gentleman holding his fire, as perforce a gentleman should and must, except in the inevitable matrimonial situations, the procreative function...’

With that she turned and blew out our sole remaining candle and reclined on her side of the bed in a pout until, I supposed, I should revive our duel at morning when, to my chagrin, I was served coffee and a plate of warmed-over grits in an empty bed by an Ethiopian servant, later a stalwart of the Freedman's colony on Cumberland, who also handed me a small purse for my labors before I was sent upon my way again.

Any man who states he understands his life should be confined to a madhouse. So, upon my ultimate return some months later to Long Island, I confided to my sibling William, the painter, for whose welfare I felt only brotherly concern, as he remains in the bachelor state with no known erotic companions at the time.

My advice *faut de mieux* was mistaken for a reproach.

Standing directly beneath the blinding rays of the skylight in his attic studio, grim-lipped William countered like the man in the iron mask: 'I'll fadge for myself Robert and gallant as I choose to...'

'There are places in New York City,' my brother went on, 'where the gentleman's needs perforce with ladies, or other gentlemen, are so to speak uppermost, and for a very modest consideration. Why bother me with Southern chivalrics, Bro? To impress whom? Mr. August Belmont?'

'Merely to avoid sorrow and damnation,' I pointed out, 'and eventual sadness and loneliness...'

'That,' he insisted, 'is my condition as artist...'

'And what I now tell you,' I replied, 'I have learned as a dancing master par excellence throughout Dixie...'

'Hardly what I would call a trade to be sure,' William replied, as he dismissed his older sibling's words as cant.

'Between illness and abandonment death is our stern preceptor.'

From a closet in that workshop he produced his fiddle, tucked it under his chin, and without checking to make sure it was in tune, began to scrape and screech to a jig tempo, crying out, 'O death, O damned indignity...'

I clapped my hands to my ears but he continued that damnable hellish noise, his eyes glazed, that sweet countenance I've known all my life pale and agitated, then flushed with sudden color, as though taken by fit.

'My life is my own to do with as I deem just,' he repeated. 'I've given you no cause for scandal, unlike some I know... So here's a scrape for you, and a scrape for me, and may we both live in peace as brothers.'

Can it be any amazement that I have taken more and more frequently to drink?

I was, after all, to the tavern born here on Paumonok, more or less, that being our later father's vocation, and that of the Hawkins family on our mother's side, but I once had artistical ambitions myself, though in the field of musical composition; and it was because William and I fiddled and fluted together and shared a love for jigs and chansons and sonatinas that I felt compelled to admonish him about his life as a man to no avail.

Having moved with my family from Major Hawkins' homestead to another family farm in Setauket I was used to feeling somewhat estranged from William, compared to the way he is with brother Shepherd and Henry's widow. William's distance from me at that moment was so unbridgeable that I felt tears come to my eyes. He looked like he'd been raised on mud shrimps and fiddler crabs. His face was gaunt; his genius bemused by such an eruption of folly and rage. In the vacuum of his protestations I saw an arid desert. Rather than stay celibate and splenetic for brotherly love I'd bathe in Philadelphia rotgut, all my debts and disablements having been honorably acquired in the service of Venus. A man that's never been in woman trouble has not ever truly lived, I say...

4 December

I sometimes wonder if Fate ever brought together two persons quite so fundamentally antipathetic as Mary and I.

'I could have been a painter too,' I told my wife over breakfast at the farm this morning. 'No doubt about it. Runs in the blood, just like William and Shepherd...'

'Like Shepherd or Henry perhaps in the Cherry Street sign painting *atelier*,' she admitted to me, pouring more strong tea, as she disembogued copiously. 'Not like William. He has his very own genius Robert...'

'You always know how to boost my spirits,' I said.

'Seems to me you have taken spirits sufficient to boost yourself at times,' she replied.

Though I ate very little of neighbor Marjory Simmons' excellent clam pie, I tried to maintain my cordiality toward the woman who is mother to my children by not sneering.

Without shame the women I have liked best delight in the male sex, with delicious candor; Mary is stern, acrid, large, undissuadable. To she and William, I remain Robert, whereas my familiars all call me Nelson and even Nelly.

Mary has always seemed in our relation polite as who should say otherwise, gentle at times, but underneath a cold and licit distance and ill regard...and I was always lightfooted and musical, though when I went abroad that first time so long ago it was to replenish family coffers. Below the line was work aplenty for a fit man who could fiddle like me and teach dance.

I had every reason to think Mary would remain by my side as helpmate. There were seasons when I sent home drafts for as much as \$900 to Mary and my daughter Sarah and the brat and this enabled them to help William and the rest of our clan when brother Henry expired, so that I had every reason to expect a warm welcome whenever I returned home, and was careful with my funds on the road, accepting cheap lodgings or menial quarters.

Gatelegged Nelly! Old Rosinfooted Rosinante...

But once, when I returned, I felt the arctic frostiness was general as though a frozen undersea mass was scarce hidden by the tactful iceberg brilliance of her stares...

I could not have known by then about William and Mary, but I probably should have known from their passing glances at family gatherings, and the occasional asides.

Stricken with dysentery from too much drink once, I lay abed and found her imposing loudly on herself, 'He can't afford a decent coat but Lot's wife must be virtuous.'

Another time I heard her telling Sarah: 'Your father means to be the man about the house though he is often quite distracted.'

Despite childbearing, Mary was still brown-haired and lovely as Poe's Helen in those days and had not yet put on so much weight her face looked glum, a frozen grimace, more or less. Neither had the children turned against me by then.

Then, too, my problems with strong drink of my own devising had all the family much concerned, as I well knew.

And they continue to this day.

At first William blamed Mary for always sending me to the store. But he soon relented when he saw how helpless I was to defend my own sobriety, and asked her to come and pose for him when she could.

Meanwhile, I slunk into that vat of despondency from which I have not yet escaped.

For example, a tavern keeper in Pocquott turned me out the other evening well after midnight, and I had to find my way home to the farm along the beachfront through cold fog, scuttled again on Kane's Lakeside wine, the last fatal pressing.

The spectacle I have made of myself had been observed by neighbors. Mary claimed I was a scandal to them all, and a shame on the name of Hawkins and Mount.

Mary is a Brewster and they are a most respectable pugnacious clan. Amateurs of Owen and Preissnitz and Hydropathy. Related to Thompsons and always with their noses stuck in other peoples' businesses. Mean as Quakers about money and pleasure.

Aside from an occasional tablespoon of 'nerve tonic,' as she calls her 'elixir,' which she always takes before singing in choir, she is a woman of sober habits.

It seems her God won't give her the sign, though she keeps looking for one. Keeps on wanting signs from above to justify our situations here on Earth.

Of my marriage to the lady I have written:

*When Mary and I were young and swiving
Mount mounted mate and called it wiving...*

I used to think the writing of poems in my commonplace book would be sign enough, my departure for the realms of gold. But now this new farm I manage for the family barely supports all our needs. I did well enough for a while on the old family homestead till it was deeded to Henry's wife, and Shepherd and his son Joshua. In Setauket we take lodgers and depend on brother William's charity and if there's another poor harvest and more farm animals to die, he may decide to withdraw his generosity and, like benighted Lycidas, I will throw myself into the Sound and drown.

I told Mary, 'You have hobbled me to our issue and this farm. Did you expect I might again seek escape?'

'I'd hoped you would be happy with us here,' she said, sadly.

The justice of her observation framed my face like a cat's skull. Millwheels turn and I am crushed beneath my own displeasure, whereas Mary upholds what she calls 'complex marriage' and practices 'labor for labor' as her family taught her.

Maybe I do imbibe a bit more than I should out of boredom, but I am not failing physically at present even so, whereas my sibling, the dauber, is costive and consumptive, with more worms in him than in a Stilton cheese. He spits blood, and administers syringes. Regularly swallows gold and mercury in suspensions of rape and flax seed oil.

I think he has poisoned himself with his paints by always licking at his brushes. When he lived with Tuthill in Port he took no care for his diet. His complexion is sallow, his spirits mean as burrstones, though when he stoops above his easel the results are usually so pleasing they give one and all excellent delight, whereas I am in a doldrum here, and have been ever since I retired and came away from my itinerancy...

Step and slide forward and back, and two steps left and spin, and we are nowhere, being only here again... 'One little pond, half full of water,' the old song says. 'Backside of Albany from Champlain to the Drowned Meadow...'

Our Mary puts it somewhat differently: 'You'll go no more a roving, Nelson...'

Quite right, Mary. Quite so.

*And like the stolid Switzer,
I tried to rub her tit, sir...*

Post Mortem on the day: There's only a wild hair of difference between acute pain and extraordinary pleasure. At dinner this evening pretty Jane Strong whose breasts are like peony buds just about to blossom tells a tale of a lost earring. She usually prefers to go about unadorned, but on this day in New York she'd chosen golden earrings, and lost one in the snow. It has her very upset as the bauble was of some value. She looked bewildered and lost, as though beset by a sudden blemish others had noticed, though not she.

Wishing to console the pretty lady I announce that I would bedeck her in jewels from head to foot from a mill chute of my invention, if given any encouragement.

Mary drums the table with her fingers.

'He tends to babble like that,' she says, 'after only one or two glasses of our local Scuppernong claret...'

'As I am a gentleman,' I say.

'Keep your thoughts to yourself,' Mary says.

And William, 'Let's proceed to pudding...'

God knows what he is about on his frequent forays by packet to the City.

Pudding-faced on Long Island was never the fate we imagined for ourselves. I shudder to recall those fleshpots near Uncle Micah's store on Catherine Street hard by Coenties Slip, the whores of Chatham Square. Those rouged faces on whom I squandered all of the \$100 in cash father left me in his will...At least I am managing nowadays to be disconcertingly discreet. Dreaming no more of Jamaica and the Indies...When a bit of quiff is in order I repair to a certain young squaw woman in Coram, and the rest of the time I am listless and endlessly bored...

6 December

It snowed all yesterday and we were housebound, the Sound freezing over in a solid opaque oysterish slab from here to Bridgeport across the way. A wind like a scimitar cutting across the harbor.

My senior brother Shepherd visited with his Rose of Sharon and told the children stories of the olden times, how near Riverhead Marsh some years back apples ripened and fell from the trees on Christmas eve, and we drank port wine together, and talked of miraculous vegetables, turnips transformed as pomegranates, cider pressings in the snow and a hard cider made from the sickle pear.

William also recalled a certain slant-eyed darky at the fishmarket near Uncle Micah's Oak Street store who shuffle-danced to 'Rutabagas, rutabagas heavy as molasses.'

Our cat had killed a jay for supper but the poor frozen corpse remained inedible and reclined stiffly in the snow beyond our doors, a cast-off.

'Ready or not here I come,' cried Sarah and Rose and the boy, playing hide and seek among the adults. We drew and sketched all the while and worked on his studio on wheels, hoping as he said that I would accompany him to Port Jefferson Harbor on the next fair day.

7 December

It never drizzles but it rains pokeweeds and dandelions eventually. William came to me today with a veritable proposition: If I would copy out all the jigs and reels I could collect of my own making, and Matthewson's and Uncle Micah's and others he would put me in charge of securing a new patent and copyrights (it seems he has one for an earlier version) for his invention of a 'Cradle of Harmony' hollow backed fiddle, and we would divide whatever profits came about from marketing 'right down the middle.'

He said he was no businessman and made it only for his recreation initially, but there was a profit to be secured if a manufacturer could be found. He called me 'frère' and 'friend,' as though I was his dog. Said we could expect a gross profit of better than \$7,000 on the instrument, if we were shrewd and provident, promised I was the only one he cared to share the 'Yankee fiddle' contrivance with, as only I in the family was 'truly musically inclined.'

William's new mania derives partly from avarice and partly from pride. He could do much better by us without demanding favors in return, for he has nobody else to care for him.

Well I said I would be glad to consider the matter, and then he, trembling with a considerable fever and ague, betook himself to bed where he remained all the day and night, consuming only broth for his supper.

After securing a small loan from William, brother Shepherd also departed.

Then the cat found his carrion again and Puss was enjoying herself with a greedy mouth and two ferocious front paws. By myself once more I recalled the mortal smell of privies in the alleys of Savannah and thought of one evening in a girl's college not too far from Mobile when I had the same Governess for my midnight repast and a couple of collegiate wenches at first light for breakfast.

Good quiff was always the powerful stimulant, raising a man in his own estimations from here to Claverack...

9 December

RIP Obadiah Strong, influenza. One less potatohead among the old bunch.

Winter here depresses ambition and releases wild recall. Such as that time Henry and I visited a house of ill fame in New York and were made to exit after the first bout for pecuniary defects. 'I do not extend credit,' the good woman said. 'Nor am I charitable.'

It is hard to imagine a duller place than this with kill frost upon us and the conversation of the locals listless, gray and numbing. I am set down among fools and ignoramuses and asked to behave like one of them. To amuse myself I imagine seductions of several of the local housewives. But they are all, or mostly all, potatoheads, too.

Wm. was once attracted to Lib, the Polish drover's yellow-haired daughter. Nothing came of that when push came to shove, as it were. He is attracted, at present, to the sheepish Ethiopian race in ways I am not. Drawn to their bucks, handsome well strung tillers of the fields.

In his big painting 'Nooning,' which recalls an incident from our childhoods in the Salt Meadow here in Stony Brook, the whole focus is on a certain houseman named Caleb, who served the Brewsters and Hawkins more than two generations and has now also passed to his rewards. He was, as I recall, even more brawny than Lib.

Will wears his hair long these days and has a cavalier's sideburns and mustaches which he does not bother to groom, believing his genius to be his sole charm. But how elegant this Caleb seems in his stark white blouse with his handsome ebony features imposed upon early summer's chartreuse landscape. William admires dark skins and craves dark flesh, I think. (The same fellow eavesdrops to the music in Wm's 'barn dance.')

Will was once a fervent Whig and never once supported Lincoln and his like. He supported old Buchanan whom Fremont vanquished 4 years previously, though he was not elected President...

But now that we have come through a great struggle to save the Union and liberate the black man from slavery, Wm. is infatuated with the infinite possibilities of black on white.

As though we occupied a village in Cathay, not these cloddish remote farmtowns on Long Island's North Shore.

10 December

I have given William my reply. I do not serve any master but myself. Mary, of course, is cross. And my brother coughs a lot and keeps to himself. I get drunk.

When I drink so much it's because my thirst is extreme. I drink and sit with my eyes closed and drink again, feeling as though my senses have taken leave of me. Then I'm all a wobble, wander about the house stumbling against things, tables, chairs.

It's because of the thirst that I drink so much. It's precisely because I cannot get enough to quench my thirst. The poison enters me and I am lost to sense, and drunk again.

It's the only way I can stop from standing guard over my emotions.

I have seen them together, and overheard them. 'The light in your eyes,' Will said. 'That green gray salmony light, as on the harbor just before dusk on January evenings. The sheening of it... Depend on it,' he said, 'as I do for life itself. "With every painting I have ever made that light was in my eyes.'

'O sweet Jesus,' she replied.

Once I even saw them embracing as brother to sister, yet there was something to it then I recognized, an affinity.

They broke apart and then he said something about her breath against his neck, and Mary said, 'Be careful what you say aloud, William,' and saw me gawking at them then and would say no more.

He is her Lord and Redeemer, no doubt about it, and she his Muse, I suppose.

Then who am I?

11 December

Rummaging through bygone romances the Montgomery (Ala.) jig is recalled:

*And when starlight turned to morning
He and she were fondly yawning
While flap went the awning
Of that galloping two horse Irish rig...*

12 December

I must find a way to make it up to William and Mary as he is looking wane, and she and he thick together. They are so sincerely bent to each other, she calling her representations with my brother a 'free union of affections,' no mere marriage.

Is it Mary's fault that I'm so often *hors de combat*? Was it mine? The dray at fault for seeking to throw off his nasty old shoe?

Truth is what did I expect from Mary? She here and me there, and wouldn't come with me down there for pie – distance doth not very often breed fondness, but inspissated randyness and melancholy, I'll allow, and William available as louse warts on a summer afternoon.

In the middle of the night out of sleep Mary climbs aboard my lap and dispatches me with a burst toward pleasurable oblivion. Then she is no longer in need of me, as though she ever were, playing the whore to distract me from inquiring about her relations with W before the light in her eyes fades out. So now they remain close as hairs and fearful of my indulgences with spirits. And I am beholding to William for whatever sustenance we have...Even at the Leggett's Hotel he was mean with himself, eats little meat and dines on cider and stale bread. Also a 'geyser water' strongly flavored with lemon extract and lithium.

Yesterday he showed me certificates from the patent office that must be revised. He's also most anxious to get me to attend one of his table thumpings as he believes the departed spirits of Mother and Father and even young Obadiah will return to reproach me for my loose behavior as handily as catching crabs in Conscience Bay.

When I dare to deny the possibility of spirits persevering beyond their corporeal forms Sarah says, 'Daddy is thinking negative again.'

Then Mary is vexed with me. 'Denying as you do,' she told me yesterday, 'is prideful arrogance, the ignorance of the soul...'

'Or the sot,' I put in.

'Let him be,' plain Marjory Simmons said. 'When the trapdoor opens and he falls screaming into hell he'll deny no longer...'

Recall again and again a different trapdoor that admitted me once to the boudoir of a certain Carolina 'Kat'—for Catherine. She it was called me 'Hoss' and 'Nelly,' with an undulant belly flexed like gutta-percha, and used to shout 'Woe Nelly woe,' as she put me through my paces. I would ask poor Mary, 'Was the jay immortal carrion? And the cat?'

'You are such a cynic!' she declared.

My cynicism recalls I could have stayed forever in Montevalle and managed sweet Kat's estate, save for her brother, a fearsome Simon Legree of a lout who hated Yankees...

My Carolina lady is probably a fat old widow, and our son the grieving namby-pamby to his corpulent dam. And I who once chased crayfish in spring freshets with my lady, and made a crab boil memorable with pickling spice and brandy into a feast, recall in truth, that the old South I knew was, in the main, no cup of treacle, but as hard bitten and poor as we are here even now. A few were privileged and wealthy like our Emmetts and Strongs, but the majority of white folks lacked substance altogether and worried about sustaining themselves, the men shoeless, the women often without stockings even when they danced to my instruction, like Fat Lib who came to me yesterday to ask again about brother.

He'd been behaving queerly about town of late. Goes to town without his teeth. But she would not specify what else...

I think I have tried to forget the sour smells of dingy lodging houses, muddy streets of small towns in Western Georgia and the spavined cattle. Boarding as I did, I ate better than most, though it was mostly greens and greasy fatback, or game. Below the Mason-Dixon line digestions faltered, as mine does even now at 61.

2 January

A new year. And bitter cold. Spent much of Christmas drunk. Our Savior's birthday like an act of Catholic contrition as we ate greedily fish and turnip stew with sprouts.

Woke to the New Year with a resolution. I will endeavor to assist my brother and my good wife, in any way I can.

Few gifts for anybody this season. As I usually do gave Mary scent. She gave William a Brewster family heirloom in brass by which to navigate the stars. At least I was not sent packing.

Drove the poor fellow by sled to Miller Place this very morning to the wake of poor Mrs. Stoddard. Erysipelas, the face of which he will have to blanch with flower base to offset some of the rouging to the cheeks such a disease brings about.

Pallor of death indeed. They will have her most lifelike, as life, William puts it. His fee -- \$200 and lodgings.

It's been many years since he felt called upon to paint the dead for wages, but the times are difficult for all of us, and William is extending himself. He even colors photographic plates for a price at \$1 the plate.

And we packed a lunch and ate supper with the other mourners at a common table.

During the wake today I assisted in positioning the corpse with Wesley Overton, in a sugarloaf hat, on her bed of ice, and my nostrils are even now stuffed with putrefaction.

On the way back William suggested he was hopeful that with her eyes closed Lucy Stoddard's soul shone forth, he averred, in his painting and we spoke of astral projections and then perversely I recalled a little poem we schoolboys wrote to poor L.S. so long ago:

*Near the summer compost heap
Lucy Stoddard fell asleep...*

No longer pensive, Will called forth a funereal quatrain entitled 'Mrs. Stoddard's Wake.'

*Never a mourner to a fault
Let's place Lucy in her vault*

*Then lightly turn a somersault
Of spirits intermixed with malt...*

If my brother was momentarily beguiled he was also feeling rather more than his usual poorly with a stone imbedded in his gut. Twice we had to stop the sleigh along the turnpike so he could micturate bloody urine in the snow.

3 January

The Chinese year of the Cock, they tell me, and Wm. has a little guinea hen or bantam rooster he employs about the house on errands patched with gaudy colors here and there like an erythema. He has trained the creature to bring him the Long Island Star when it arrives forthwith on our door step, and he plucks a feather now and then to paint deciduous shrubs and bushes. Calls it 'my cock.'

The fellow obviously is not destined for our roasting pan. He struts about the premises like a reproachful fable of La Fontaine's.

At Wm's today to assist in the mitering of frames he tells me the bluffs above the harbor are his best source of kaolite and ocher. 'There's nothing the palette demands one cannot fabricate hereabouts with knowledge.'

The Roman ancients, he insisted, confected purple from the periwinkle snail, and burnt sienna out of ferrous hematite.

W also says Rembrandt is his only master when I ask if he has seen the drawings of the Frenchman, Delacroix.

His table talk is equally taken up with the hue of Naples yellow for sun on foggy days and hepatic remedies and the fate of the Republic. He's cross on the subject of Grant and the Capitalists.

'When Lincoln was alive I did not wish him well,' he says, 'nor any man in high silk, but now I wish for his return like a dream that hurts my head between the eyes...'

'Burke,' he says, 'was a turncoat Irishman and Papist who became Protestant to his bones in insisting a public life should be virtuous. Lincoln thought all virtue was a matter for humor...'

'And so it is,' say I.

'So all good men are clowns?' my brother demands. He is just full of his own opinionating lately. His old friend W., formerly of Huntington, according to Will, is a 'companero first and foremost and a bonnyroo mate to quaff with in any Bowery oyster bar.'

William says little about brother Shepherd's new paintings. They are wary of each other of late, like old mates who have fallen out. Not hard to know why. William has turned a number of small commissions his way and Shepherd never

fails to muck them up so that the family loses custom. He did a group sitting in Brookhaven for some Suffolk war veterans' reunion and made them all look like a congregation of Sanhedrin.

Will prefers our niece Evangeline's daubings, though they are tentative at best...

No doubt about it. Brother Shepherd should also have abided with sign painting like our late brother Henry.

'There's only one Will in the family,' says my Mary.

When she wishes to be kind to me of late I cringe. I know I shall betray her at the first opportunity for with the change she's grown so plain to my eyes.

'Mary,' I say, 'we are eternal to each other...'

'I too feel that way sometimes,' she replies, with a wet glance my way as she downs a spoonful of elixir to fortify her against grim February and March.

In my present state of disarray it's hard to keep track of my mind, or to argue my own case with a wife so full of guilt she still will not drive me from the house. I flail away at tenderness and fail on all accounts that can be spoken of by decent folk. Such artistry between the legs of certain town dwelling milliners and seamstresses in the old Arbutus Vail are best relegated to the oblivion of sea chests; they are fading memories, like potpourri, or the leavings in my chamber pot...

One man takes laudanum, another strong drink. Such habits of intoxication prove nothing.

30 January

When I am unmanned by whiskey it's the lack of sympathy I feel at home and like a baby when I mount my wife I feel only the need to void my bladder. M then recommends me to Ginseng root and paregoric and the wart of a Sumack branch, as though the fault could have nothing to do with her and her response to her surmounter.

I hold any man a fool who does not heed the advice of women in lovemaking.

Quo amas fatum, or words to that effect.

Post Mortem: I am Nostradamus. William's rooster felled beneath a wagon wheel just as I'd predicted. He cries for the dead bird and then paints a still life with the corpse serving as centerpiece.

A cholera from Brooklyn has been in the neighborhood, people are frightened for themselves and for their children.

Dysentery general, abounding with brain fevers, and bloody stools.

3 February

Everywhere I stumble on icy rocks and boulders in our yard, and they say, 'He's drunk again.'

4 February

*What do I call your little gray mouse?
Run pussy run the day is done...*

6 February

William is much taken up with outhouse musings on 'rusticity and refinement.' He says he would prefer a life in the City but cannot work quite so well in such circumstances. Far too many distractions. The flesh is weak, he admits as much. He detests what he calls 'luxury.' He lives a small life. He is also much taken up, of late, with his French dealer, Goupil, for whom he arranges shipments via packet to New York, and I tease, 'Do be sure to request a French letter from the folks in Paris, Brother.'

W says vermilion is the color of rage and gentian of intoxication.

7 February

*When Mary and I were young and swiving
Mount mounted mate and called it wiving,
But now no passion is surviving
And like the stolid Switzer
I vainly try to rub her tit, sir.*

Nota Bene: According to Edward Buffet, who occupied and restored the original Hawkins Mount house in Stony Brook on the death of the last family member, these poetic effusions by Robert Nelson were rumored during his life though not available to other members of the family. The diaries abound with examples of a developing craft and a feel for bawdry.

S.B.

The Dancing Master's Diaries

Book Two

Part Two

9 February

I spent all yesterday in reverie with a flask near Flax Pond. ‘Who so lists to hunt...’ The red foxes were out and about, and I was thinking about the draft riots of some years back in New York. I had gone to the City on family business and was trapped among burning buildings and rioters. Corpses aloft and stiff on lampposts. The sun black from fires and black men hunted down by Hibernian mobs. I survived in a cellar below Uncle Micah’s store, and when I emerged it was to the smell of roasting meat, actually corpses, torched for sanitary reasons. The late Judge Thompson called this ‘the disgrace to our cause,’ meaning those who wished to preserve our Great Union, and not simply ‘abolitionism.’

PM: A day skipped in this diary means a day spent emptied by repentances, as when a man hires a whore and discovers to his dismay after much grog when it’s time to settle accounts that he lacks spunk for she has already picked his pockets.

Yours truly,
Robert Nelson Mount
The Juba man

1 March

Saw pussywillows budding on the branch beside the mill creek this morning so Spring is surely on the way.

Have I made some dreadful mistake, misperceived, or worse suspected that wrong person? Was Miller her man all along? And had I thought poor brother was her demon? But it all makes such perfect sense. This man and she had access to each other. Her going to choir rehearsals in the afternoon. The trip to Castle Garden for the Scotch Irish maid. The man in the shirt factory near Green Street and the time she saw me departing "The Garden of Eden." Distance between lover and beloved. Miller...Why not Miller even so.

2 March

A small whale has beached itself along the West Meadow spit in Stony Brook Harbor. The stink is so powerful we have to pinch our noses to go about our business. It will have to be sawed in pieces by the townsfolk and buried in a sump.

Old Captain Hawkins who once plied the whaling trade says this carcass is very old, and has been harpooned more than once.

‘No use in salvaging anything except for some bone,’ he says. ‘The oil will be rancid and the meat overrun with maggots...’

School children are taken from classes to see the damn thing, but they run from the foul smell when they are fifty yards away.

I asked the old man why this leviathan had come to beach itself on our shores.

‘Who knows why certain creatures do anything?’ he shrugged. ‘The creatures of the sea are a great mystery to me, as, indeed, they should be to Mr. Darwin and others like him...’

Post Mortem: A large terrapin has emerged from hibernation in the rushes below the house just in time for Mary's stockpot.

3 March

Morels in a hollow beside the wagon tracks are swirled with fleshy silence. I pick enough to make a meal for all of us, but Mary is untrusting, and declines to taste these intricate delicious fungi.

The mealies have attacked my potato cuttings, and they are all lost. Don't know where I'll find more.

William on the end of the world: 'It will come about gradually as a disappointment to some, such as birds and flowering shrubs. The rest of us have always had the dimmest expectations...'

I ask my brother if he believes in the Resurrection?

Says he, 'My beliefs are simple: rose madder, and Naples yellow, a touch of indigo, and there you have it all, I suppose. The rest is supposition on my part...'

4 March

‘Enter Spirit! Are you friend or foe? Who were you in life?
‘I am he who was thy mother?’
‘He or she?’
‘Don’t quibble with me, varmint, or I’ll go back down to where I came
from...’

From William’s discarded manuscript of his magic circle (séance) correspondence with the painter, Rembrandt (undated).

“...Light begets light...
by your examination of my works...
perceive that I reveled, as it were, in
rich brown tints...had numerous imitators
since my exit from your Earth...
judicious employment of white, light-red,
and black, mixed to a warm pearly hue...
deep shadows of white, burnt umber and black...
brightness of effect does not depend
on brightness of color...in the judicious
treatment of accessories no less judiciously
introduced...Prussian or Antwerp blue – the
last two colors mixed with a small quantity
of yellow ochre...(produce) the peculiar green
that which many of my admirers are pleased to
laud...”

The departed Amsterdammer had much wisdom to impart in the dark about impasto effects and cross hatching: “...thus I worked my way along introducing, whenever opportunity offered – broad masses of pure browns and transparent shadow with a third sized hog tool – whose properties were flat and elastic, and by the judicious employment of which I was enabled to produce a sort of grain, or cross-hatching on the canvass in certain places...”

Here's the spiritual testimony of R's letters but no reply from Wm. attached. The poor fool talking only to himself with pigmented oily painter's lingo, as the great Dutchman confesses the wisdom of hand to eye: "Whenever accidental beauty developed I was careful to cherish it with greater jealousy than my own drawing..."

So was it with he and Mary so long ago?

"...I painted Nature as I beheld through a certain medium of my own creation..."

6 March

At William's behest I am turning over the soil early this year, even though there might still be another frost. He says I should also consider the Belgian lettuce and Spanish lechuga because they are so rich in antimonies.

7 March

Lucy Stoddard was finally put to rest today in Baiting Hollow, having been kept above ground for so long in the family spring house, the soil being frozen and no thaw imminent.

A page in Mary's hand but whether
Confession or abrupt secession from the
Married state confuses me. Found in
The mouse hole where it had been stuffed
With some rags and other things.

Raw March (Heartache?)

When the lie gets caught
In my throat
 choke it off,
 emote the rage
 that pounds at the back of your head,
 the wish you have to see me
 dead.

Wishing made me lightheaded,
Dizzy, and feckless
 to Nelson,
 a tease and a tizzy,
with every willed caress
befouled by his touch

Marriage for life?
Lying in our bed with eyes agape
and legs spread
 I am that virago
 who oversees her own rape.
This sentence pronounced, when he and she
disaffectionate, with disharmony,

cry out in the night to the Moon
overhead:

God save us from ourselves,
And in the Life to come.

9 March

At Mary's urging (as his guardian) went with William by packet boat filled with cord woods to Manhattan. A storm, and heavy seas, and we were tossed like leaves in the wind and arrived at Fulton Street wet and weary.

William suggested we repair to our widowed aunt's house and dry our clothing which we did. Then he went off to meet a customer and I was to join him later at the Café Nikolai in the Bowery.

A vast tableau of the headwaters of the Mississippi abounding with deer and red Indians by the artist Nachtabel is attracting visitors for a price near the old Castle Garden site. After waiting some time by myself on a quay to view the exhibition with our aunt I recalled some of my brother's wisdom that size should not be confused with genius and we settled for a carriage ride back to Oak Street and I promised we should make another excursion before our departure from the City.

At the café a number of Will's artistical friends were on hand, including Mr. Thompson of the National Academy, and we shared a sturgeon and a roasted joint and much good beer.

I was reminded of the parable of the loaves and fishes. Seated in the center of all this company Will produced the fare from his own pocketbook.

The conversation was in equal parts about painting and opera. Will told of his apprenticeship to Brother Henry and how he came to make his first paintings in the manner of the Frenchmen Gericault and David while always deferring to the brother by his side when music came to the fore.

The Webers, greenhorn painter's father and son from Philadelphia, were on hand, and they spoke Deutsch but little English. I felt like an alien. Asked for my profession I told Thompson I was a farmer. William corrected me. 'My brother raises calves and, in fact, he has turned many a slender calf to his purposes as dancing master,' he declared.

I was urged to sing and recite, but lacked the courage to do more than mutter to myself.

Spent the night at our aunt's and in the morning ate buckwheat porridge and visited a picture exhibition and a paint shop, and ate spaghettis at an Italian restaurant off Irving Place (Musto's) before returning on the new railroad as far as Halesite where we were met.

We never did see the Nachtabel tableau. When I asked my brother for his opinion of such large scale undertakings, he repeated his apothegm about bigness and genius, then added, 'I would not venture the costs of gigantism unless it were to represent the Last Judgment and the Resurrection which Rembrandt did quite small in pen and ink for all Eternity.'

10 March

A handsome but pale young woman with a bundle tucked inside a blanket came to our door this morning to ask to see the painter Mount. Such a sad look to her face, eyes like drowned violets.

We told her Will had lodgings elsewhere, and directed her to them. Later in the afternoon William himself came around to tell us of his new commission. He painted an infant in death to resemble the lifelike apparition, a bargain at \$20, and the woman said she would return tomorrow for the finished sketch, and left with her bundle.

I asked how had the child perished. 'Her milk would not come,' William said.

He plans to decorate the dead child in a bonnet on a divan, the face highlighted by flames from a warm fire.

But he is not very forthcoming about much else: Whose child? The father's name? Garibaldi? A newcomer to these parts. She answers to the name of Iris.

11 March

A derailling just beyond Hempstead. Some dead, and others gravely injured.

In a rage Mary lashes out at me for my behavior. 'You are so full of self-regard,' she says, 'and self-pity...'

'I have been too much in my cups again,' I mumble.

'The way you exculpate yourself,' she says, 'is to accept blame for small vices. But you are much worse than you allow, I guarantee...'

12 March

*This long night settles on the hearth
And we are as we said we were
And what we painfully thought we were
Can never in the day endure...
Never to touch while the night listens,
or lie together, sharing heat,
while, on the mantle, the clock glistens:
You stare, I stare, and we are not.
Be with me now. Morning will come,
pause in its quiet light and note
the hand that moves to write this poem
and slash illusion by the throat...*

13 March

Brother Shepherd has been taken ill and William and Mary go to him at the old homestead to offer succor. They will be staying overnight with my ingenious sister-in-law, Mrs. S.A. Mount as chaperone.

William borrows my woolen combination to make sleeping on S's summer porch possible. No word after twenty four hours, and no telling how long they'll be away.

I could go to them on horse, and it may even be I would be welcome.

As plague...

14 March

Mary returns but William stays on. Shepherd much improved after leaching and cold compresses. Her rancor continues toward me. She asks me how I've occupied myself in her absence.

'A little bit at a time,' I say.

'Just as I thought,' Mary says, sniffing the air for malt or spirits.

I turned over five acres of soil today and then it rained.

There was no food in the house so Mary sent me to the store on horseback.

In the harbor I got fresh flounder and some pickled okras and carrots and parsnips off a boat just arrived from the Bay Islands as well as a nip or two of good West Indies rum.

Upon my return Mary announces she will be sleeping by herself in the outer room.

'Saving your favors?' I tease.

'I am not to be talked to that way,' she declares, and goes out the door and slams it shut in my face.

PM: Like Squire Allworthy I am only so virtuous as I can be sclerotic, morbid, self-righteous. A man has never lived, I say, who has not heard his neighbors snickering behind his back. No nor woman neither....

Mary's secret life the delight of half the neighboring females.

Life as tornament, as torment.

Willful discharges of base matter.

16 March

I have been reading in Mr. Browning. At monologue he is a demanding poet and elegant, with a great deal of noise for so little sense.

I made myself a potion of herbs and slippery bark from a Fort Salonga herbalist for my bronchial miseries, and the result is a dash for the privy almost every hour.

Mary says I am evacuating all my evils.

Probably I have not done so even now...like the late King Gustave of Sweden I might have been assassinated many times by irate husbands and paramours at some masked ball if not for my profession. I danced as I was wont to with flirts and tarts and the world thought this was pedagogy.

17 March

After Wesley Overton's obsequies the call of Nature sends me under the chestnut in the church yard. William is watering a nearby lilac bush and he says he expects to see W.O. again in the not-too-distant future, at very least to converse with him on this and that as we are even now.

I mention that the poor man died so threadbare there was no money for the funeral and his widow contemplated selling his body to a medical school to pay for such obsequies as there were, except that neighbors like William and I intervened.

Then he takes me aside to complain of the widow's stinginess and Mary's complaints to him about her spouse.

'No one of us is quite free to do as he pleases,' he assures me, 'not you, nor I, nor brother Shep...'

I confessed I felt thoroughly exculpated.

'That's hardly my point,' said William. 'Your behavior is most unchristian, and tantamount to cruelty with Mary...'

'Tantamount,' I tease, 'was once our German aunt by marriage...'

He walks away and shakes his head grimly.

At home I find a note Mary has left for herself in the cupboard:

*Sexual relations exist in heaven as on Earth, and
We are guided only by our free affections there...*

19 March

It appears we definitely shall have Spring early. The frail emergence of crocuses...delicate tints blown out by robust winds.

20 March

The fatted glory of dawn in orange light. From across the Sound the mists retiring rapidly. The new grass, and soft wet turf, a pony thickened with his winter coat, warbling bird song...

21 March

Spring now at last! William off to the City, Shepherd ailing, Mary feeling poorly. I go down to the water's edge and bathe my gouty feet in the tides.

22 March

My old dog Tyrone chews on books, their bindings foxed with age. We keep the family bible out of reach, so he devours Bunyan, and Washington Irving. An avid bibliophile. I feed him turpentine for worms, and he howls and carries on, leaving a trail of wet black turds across the yard as though he'd been tonicked with a dose of Acid Iron Earth.

24 March

*In springtime
In springtime
The only golden ring time!*

When I meet that certain young lady, Iris, again today on my walk into town, she seems most recovered from her loss of the child, tells me she is not native to the island, but freshly arrived in these parts. By her glances she promises to regard me in a manner distinct from the way one regards strangers, or I am treated at home.

It appears she owes my brother \$10, and will not be able to retrieve her miniature until she has paid in full.

‘My wages are meager,’ she says, ‘but I am honorably inclined...’

I consider offering her a loan but know she would protest: ‘O no sir!’ But how I should like her on some incline. How lovely she is, tall and thin, and not at all bashful, demure. The thinness of youth, her expression serious, at times charmingly melancholic. She has taken lodgings with our neighbors, the Wallenberghs, out from town, to recuperate from a pneumonia, and what I know to be childbirth. Does she remember me as the man at the front door from that time? It appears she does and then does not... I tell her I shall be happy in warmer days to come to show her such sights by sailing ketch or dory as there are here now that she’s up and about.

She seems much taken with my offer and pleased by it withal. Doesn’t even ask if I am married.

‘I am not in great repute around here,’ she says, ‘possibly you may wish to walk out with some other...’

‘Possibly not,’ I tell her. ‘But I play the fiddle and write poems, and have a wife...’

‘So you do as I’m sure,’ she tells me.

She remains without a surname, at present, just Iris, and she has such grace I blush to recall my stammer when she first came to our door with her dead bundle and, later, consented to speak to me.

We are to meet again tomorrow, to discuss what? Surely not the weather.

‘It’s pleasant for a visitor to have company for any duration,’ she told me.

‘With your good looks you should have a host,’ I said.

'Just company suffices quite,' she said.

Returning home with swollen feet from the damp of late I go to the cupboard and reread Mary's *aide memoire* for the war between us two. Suddenly she has entered the room.

'What are you staring at?' she demands.

'You seem to have written some memorandum to yourself on the hereafter,' I reply.

'I leave notes for myself everywhere about the house whenever I am late,' she says.

'Late for what?' ask I.

'Lunch, supper, as you like,' she says. 'As I practice individual sovereignty love alone justifies commerce between our sexes...'

A pileated woodpecker stabbing away at the shingles to the rear of this old house threatens untold mayhem to the roof.

'It's your affair Mary,' I point out.

'If you mean your brother again,' she sputters.

'Not I,' I say, 'I don't mean any such thing,' as I drop the note on the counter and walk out the kitchen door.

'I shan't be alone forever. You wait and see...'

She's crying by herself in the summer pantry and the sound she makes echoing out of the shed damn near breaks my heart.

26 March

Balm of Gilead. The sleeping soul awakens to smooth and temperate weather. The fields wake and the tiny furred leaves overtake the boughs of trees. Small animals appear after winter hibernation, and the old Adam pounds his chest and steps lightly through the mud in search of prey.

I have been to the fields beyond Thompson's Hay Path with a fresh young woman such as I have never known in all my life to date. Such appetite for tenderness. We barely touch and she remains pleased with me. It so happens I am, by accident, disabled by a chronic complaint of back pain, and neuralgia to my sacroiliac, but I could – if she allowed it – manage to give her pleasure with my tongue. Such an adventure of which the less said the better (and may have caused the problem to begin with). 'You are too much preoccupied with pleasing me,' she says. 'You will do so in the course of things...'

'Such as?' I inquired.

'As man to woman,' she replied, 'in due course.'

I took my wife with me to town later this afternoon and we bought seeds and a new frock for my lady, and a pair of Wellingtons for her swain Nelly. The rain fell in buckets on the way back, though I was fearful all the while I would encounter the selfsame person I reigned in my steeds of woe with pleasant memories.

What do I fear exactly? It is Mary who passes off excuses and explanations for her sudden absences as readily as hankies are given to a grieving widow.

We are, at very least, alike in trespasses. She has gone to market and five hours pass and I am not to ask where she has been. Or I am suddenly aware when I come in from the fields she has gone off again and her note to me says only she 'was called away.' I am not to ask where, or why, or she turns peevish and cranky. Or else she tries to put me in my place by not responding except by recalling one of my long ago peccadillos.

It's only one of the reasons why in order to right the score I prefer to remain chaste for the moment with Iris...

27 March

I am summoned South to Alabama to instruct some gentlemen – old clients – on the latest terpsichorean fashions. Must I beg off? This family kept their fortunes in gold, not Confederate paper, and much of it remains intact. I tell those hereabouts that I shall have silver galore on my return, but they are in agreement that I shall take no leave, am needed on the farm – and, furthermore, I am no longer well-informed on such matters as the Viennese Waltz and the Czardas.

29 March

The sleeping sickness took me. I must have lost two whole days to Morpheus...or grog...or both.

30 March

There is much speculation inland about St. James and Head of the Harbor. The rumor is we can expect an inundation of city dwellers. Hard by the spring house on the road to Long Beach in Nissequogue a great house is going up... The Huntingtons are said to be involved...

Mary once again at choir rehearsal. Wm. in a note enclosing a few greenbacks: 'Should something unforeseen overtake me, such as dying, how do you propose to get by?'

30 March

My spirits are leaden. Iris has gone off to the East End to visit with relatives. Mary tells me I have lost affection. What have I done? She will say no more, and leaves the house again on one of her mysterious errands. Mrs. Brewster surprises me outside Carleton's with my morning dram. 'What a pity a cultivated man like you can't find other occupation...'

'I have a farm.'

'And I still have a womb,' she replies, 'though neither one is that productive...'

The Dancing Master's Diaries

Book Three

Part Three

1 April

That most men are afraid of their wives, that most men are afraid of women in general except as plasmic emanations, astral figurations – goes without saying.

William's skittishness and chariness toward all women save my wife entirely comprehensible. He spots the prey easily enough, then senses there is danger lurking... Intemperate men like me are easily bamboozled and the women we believe are our bamboozlers. They are smarter than we, more ruthless. We act immorally, but they act without any moral sense at all, *pace* poor Iris, seized by the immediacy of their needs, their wits, their superior imaginations. I sometimes make all women out to be vain and hateful with little or no regard for anyone but themselves because I am afraid of them. When I have tried to dominate them I have almost always failed.

I took a steamer once on the Savannah River inland for quite some miles and there encountered a lively 'high yaller' from Folly Beach named Jane. (She would not confide her last name, but she was indeed lively.)

Well, I arranged with a steward for a private accommodation for quite some hours and we were at it fast like Johnny-come-to-mark-with-me when the steamer hit a shoal and lurched and huggermugger the lady was irate, accusing me of her debacle. She claimed that in the ensuing calamity I had surely gotten her *enceinte* and no matter what I said to soften the pill she was bitter.

I had pitchers of warm water brought to our quarters and a basin so that she might cleanse herself internally, but no matter. She was convinced her disgrace was imminent and began to shout so loudly and curse at me that I gave her three ten-dollar gold pieces, half my purse, so that she would disembark in Savannah and that would be the end of the affair. A certain Juba woman in a back alley, this Jane claimed, could relieve her of the fruits of our sweet labors together for such and such a sum, and I was glad to part withal and be done with the matter, knowing how flesh is flesh and dust is dust, and life is but the prologue to eternal terrors. Call me cynic, but I am not and never will be a cad.

So I live now in equal fear of Mary and Iris of their displeasures, of their good opinions and their bad. With my back much the better Iris could have taken my measure more than once, and by all accounts she's kept I still have not failed her. All of which would displease Mary if she ever discovered the cause of my good spirits of late.

Yet Iris says she wants nothing of me beyond the moment. She calls me 'kind.' 'That's as able as any man can be,' she adds.

Today my wife asks me, bent before the stove, to 'fetch some kindling.'

I feel schoolmarm'd and I tell her to fetch what she wants for herself, or find some other scuzz to do her bidding.

She straightens herself and peers at me with dimly disguised displeasure.

'It's not sufficient that you've reduced us to the state of beggardom,' she says, brushing a wisp of hair off her eyes with the back of her wrist. 'But now I must experience the terrible stubbornness of your false pride. This I refuse to accept. I'm leaving now and you'll light your own stove when you choose to and warm your own supper.'

She threw a heavy gray woolen shawl across her shoulders and was out the door.

I felt bereft almost immediately but also bemused and startled by what I had provoked. Mary's dropsy has worsened lately, with fluid collecting in her limbs and bosoms that makes her uncomfortable even at rest. So I felt some remorse for my selfishness and when I thought of following her down the path she'd taken, I held back again so as not to seem abject, and then she returned some hours later and I was deep in the pretense of a favorite book, Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, with the smell of coal oil general.

'At least,' Mary announced, 'he's not drunk as a Lord...'

'At very least,' I said, 'my dear...'

'Listen to this,' she announced. 'Will says you are to do as I say from now on or there'll be nothing for the table and nothing further between us...'

'I had hoped we could remove to warmer climes for a little while,' I observed, 'the Sea Islands perhaps...for your condition my dear...'

'Just kindling when required will suffice,' she said.

'When it pleases me,' I reminded her, thinking of Iris again.

'You are in a tawdry state,' she remarked then, 'and over the mother of a dead bastard?'

'My state is no concern of yours. Be concerned, Mrs. Mount, about the vicious state of your own linens...'

She returned a look so hateful of me that I had to glance away, and then she stalked up the stairs to our rooms again, and slammed the door, once more, for the night.

2 April

A night of responsive love-talk with Iris in our secret place, though afterwards uncertain if the wordy caresses I received were intended for me, or for some other emanation. Nevertheless in all of Suffolk County there can be no happier man...

Mary much bemused on my return.

3 April

In the morning the misty air still gray. My wife talks to a clutch of pillows hiding her face.

‘Don’t please. You’ll overhear. He mustn’t, please... O say no, please...’

Nota Bene: A gap of some 10 days follows. It is possible Nelson may have spent some of that time with Iris or visiting with relatives in New York.

13 April

Today Mary informed me she was concerned about my dear brother's health.

'He's so pallid, and fainted in his studio the other day...'

'How do you know of that?'

'I brought him soup,' she said. 'You recall? That fish head chowder? You commended me for it...'

'What a chowderhead I was to do any such thing...'

'If anything should happen to William,' she replies, 'you and I would be in terrible despair...'

'And is that the only reason why you are so concerned?'

She turns away from me. 'You mistake me, Mister Mount. I fear he could be moribund someday.'

'Do I now?'

'You and your negative thinking, Mr. Mount.'

She leaves the room.

Lately I am always being accused of 'too much self-love' and 'negative thinking' toward all others by these ecstatic theosophists. What a pity I cannot answer back. But she flees my words, leaves me to an empty room.

I wrote some verses this morning about my current plight with Mary.

*I horde the ways I feel like Dresden cups
so that I feel each posture of affection,
then, adding scalding pride for your inspection,
I touch each one and tip it to my lips...*

14 April

Mary says 'male continence' as practiced by the Oneidas was never her desire nor William's, but as to prolongation of the act one should imitate certain Bengali swamis who are as slow to pour out of themselves as crystallizing honey from a jar.

A queer Hebrew inscription on the stone of a consort in Strong's Neck. I copy out the letters and ask the local pastor, a Yale Divine, to translate.

'God full of misery,' he says, and then corrects himself. 'Full of mercy...'

From a book about a British expedition to cross Hudson's Bay by bark in hopes of transacting a Northwest Passage I learn 'the flesh of penguins is almost indigestible because of such large quantities of body fat...'

16 April

Went with William to Huntington to see a surgeon.
The anticipated procedure canceled.
An oyster the size of a politician's head has been dredged from the harbor.

*...Thus if I come to you as if I wander
Past miscellaneous objects while you sit,
Remember I am careful not to squander
Your anguish in defiance of my wit...'
Thus if I come to you and you are sure
that pardon puts me ever in your debt,
remember how you pledged me to endure
the measure of your tears without regret...
Remember too that pride can cool as sweet,
Less delicate, thus richer than deceit.*

17 April

Forty winters have diminished Mary's attractions in my eyes. The finest of women, nevertheless, could be my boon companion in my doldrums, if she chose to do so. She is otherwise occupied with the next world and other affairs.

Another admirer?

19 April

William always was the favorite. 'Raphael,' our sainted mother called him. Stout fellow, I...

20 April

Nerves are upset by prolongation as a waif feels when the stew cooks beyond the café ventilator, and he has not eaten in quite some days. The savor and the weariness.

A rainbow over the harbor from St. James' wood and the headlands all the way across to Old Field Point.

I shall fetch your kindling for you, Mary.

21 April

Barney Hawkins setting sail from New Bedford to the Outer Banks, and we purchase from C&C a flask of the best West Indies rum to keep him warm in Labrador. Mary says, as though being cautionary, 'I understand a drinking man at sea. Even to such as cross the Equatorial latitudes on the high seas this comfort is a necessity...' In my case sobriety demanded.

Today killed hogs, messy business. Blood all over the back yard.

At the store I bargained with the old man and managed to acquire sufficient margin that I could purchase a flask for Barney and a little pint of the same oleum for my labors in the field. The bottle stashed beyond our compost in a cove for morning dram.

22 April

Sunset reflections: The blood of the slaughtered sun streaming in the firmament.

The house all still.

One can hear the distant thunder.

Before going to bathe Mary asked, 'What do they call the serving lass who lost her child?'

'They call her Iris,' I said.

'And soon we shall have them aplenty in our front yard,' she said.

'Even so Mary...'

'Unless it has been done by you already,' she added.

'Why what is that Mary?'

'Having Iris,' she said, 'already...'

I could see the orbs of her eyes abulge with twilight gleams.

'Not I,' I told her. 'Surely not...'

'Having or not having is much the same,' she said. 'I measure the matter by your swagger. Having or not having is the look we put on the thing to disquiet prying eyes... You've had her...'

'Not by half,' I repeat.

'Men lie,' Mary said. 'Women easily dissemble,' going easily up the stairs. From the top of the landing Mary declaimed at me, like an actress.

'What do I call your little grey mouse? Run pussy run, the day is done...'

23 April

One of the most beautiful days of my recollection. I often wonder why the Christ was not born on such a splendid April morning.

24 April

When Macbeth writes of night sounds in the 'rooky wood' he could be speaking of this isle Paumonok also. The crows are everywhere pecking at the roadside carrion and the droppings of farm animals. They abound as red tailed thrushes and other migratory birds do not except in high summer. But just today at the West Meadow a great winged black fellow was munching on a fallen crane. That blackness against so much snowy whiteness. So much to be said for the absolute fastidiousness of all these dumb brute creatures...

26 April

William has had another attack and we were up with him most of the night before. Mary wants to remove him to this place, he protests, wishing to remain hard by his paints and canvasses.

He says, 'A sailor needs a lot of ocean or else he's no sailor at all, but a landlubber with sea legs...

27 April

*My little yawl at sea
rides softly under me
and cowlike floats
its prow, chewing salt hay,
oats, and other wet
debris. Once I gave her
hard rudder
and then she offered me
her udder...*

30 April

Ding Dong Dell
Women often smell...

'It's just a little doggerel, deary,' when I am interrupted in my composition by our Mary.

'Horrible!' is her comment.

Wishing I were elsewhere with Iris I declare as crudely as I can. 'It was intended as a private drollery. When you peeked across my shoulder I grew dogged in my ways, as it were, doggy fashion...'

Book Four

1 May

A freak ice storm overnight from across the Sound has glazed every flowering bush so that they resemble immense candied violets. The trees hung with stalactites of glassy ice until mid-morning when they melted into little pools soaking through the roots.

The air cooler than it was and my plantings of lettuce and radishes badly frayed. Animals sought shelter indoors but now they are bellowing and baying to be released.

I have only to report that Mary has accompanied William to the City to consult a specialist. They will be staying with our family beside the Slip.

When I protested mildly about this peculiar arrangement, I was told a mess of 'wawa!' No more than that.

(A neighbor women, the mother of seven children and a widow, has brought suit against a dentist surnamed Smith according to the Star, for 'tampering with her while she was under laudanum.)

A porpoise lolloping in the harbor for my entertainment. Late afternoon sultry, tomorrow they say will be blinding hot.

The Indian wars continue out West, wars they did not start but will not end except they be destroyed by brave murderous cavalry fellows.

2 May

Forward and back and slip and slide left, and we are nowhere again in buckled slippers, like slowly turning buhrs.

Soft wet rain mists the green fields hereabouts, and warms to intermittent bursts of sun.

Rabbits poke about, and scamper. William returns much distressed. He will say nothing about his condition. Mary equally silent. Word that brother Shepherd has taken to his bed again.

PM: A secret imparted by William who claims to have learned it from the barman at Pfaff's: a whole clove of garlic before a night of debauchery leads one to debouch liberally the next morning, sans calcification.

One can even fill a decanter with distilled water and the bruised garlic clove to good effect.

And, he added, 'In that way a man can truly feel easement...'

Will also swore a dollop of olive or fish oil helps bring about elimination by releasing fundament constricted, as it were, with narcotic remedies.

Grateful for such a piece of advice, I asked our learned Vesalius what other restoratives he might recommend. Will said he had no personal knowledge whereof but has been given this simple by a New York woman some years back that 'when a member of the fair sex is delinquent in her menses she may benefit from vigorous love-making such that the uterus inundates through amorous cataclysms.'

'By fucking?' I asked.

'You may use such profane language if you choose to,' William said. 'I prefer to say an act of love.'

He is very gravely taken with his illness. I have no doubts to hear him expound in such a latinate manner.

3 May

A friend in Sag Harbor writes: 'Fish and lobster abound this Spring, if only we can leave the harbor to procure them. I have the good sense to abstain from eating flesh, and there are no fresh vegetables available...'

4 May

'Voluptua' the name of copperplate from Paris sent William as a gift by Messrs. Goupil.

6 May

I have been asked to do a little school mastering in my spare time as Trace, the regular fellow, has taken leave until the end of term for a family problem.

The little devils are not hard to like, though not easy to instruct. They know nothing of grammar, little of the great world beyond this island. A typical colloquy today on the subject of the colored races.

Myself: 'Much of the world is more like them than they are like us...'

Student: 'We, sir...'

'You make my point exactly. We are also ignorant of grammar, some of us...'

'As sir, you exaggerate...'

'I do nothing of the sort.'

'May we work on sums now, Mr. Mount?'

They are of the sort who, unless edified, will end their days speaking of naught but venery, business and the weather.

7 May

Of times my elation vanishes, and I am sunk so deep for Iris who seems to have fled these parts for good.

Today Mary informs me I am 'so jealous' she 'doesn't want to hear this jealous talk anymore.'

We are gossiping about the new phaeton purchased by her friend, Becky Strong. This newly arrived sleek black lacquered thing with a Moroccan leather fold-up top and gold stampings is more citified than suited to our country air. So much fancier than the lumbering Studebaker-type wagons we usually see about these parts. 'She goes to such lengths,' I say, 'because she's plain and wishes to be envied in some respect, don't you know?'

'I don't want to hear that from you,' M shouts.

'Hear what from me?' Befuddled by her sudden vehemence.

Her eyes igneous. She says, 'I know what you think of Becky and I don't care. You're simply jealous...'

'Not I, Mrs. Mount...'

'O but you are. You wish you had her means...'

'Not I,' repeated.

'Liar. You're jealous and it's boring. It makes me just plain sick...'

She looked my very worst enemy in the world and I had to leave the room or I might have struck her for being so callous impudent.

But, later, she came to me in the shed to tell me, sweet-voiced, again, we are going to have a house guest from Philadelphia, a friend of the artist. She says, 'His visit honors William. He wishes to have his portrait painted save that he has an impetigo which must be overlooked...'

'I hope you don't fatten him beyond recognition, 'I tell Mary.

As far as she's concerned that's all she cares to communicate. I am angered again by this too, and ask if she confides in Becky about William.

'You are jealous!'

Later, himself comes by to assure us he will cover all costs of the impending visitation and we are to keep our guest liberally supplied with strong beverages. Whatever we can manage.

When he senses he has walked in on a dispute he asks me, 'Have you been drinking again, Nelson?'

I reply with all sobriety, 'Mary doesn't fancy spirits about the house...'

They share a glance together. 'You are on your honor to provide for our guest,' Will points out, 'not for yourself...'

9 May

You ho ho and a bottle of rum...

At school today a sopping spit ball collides with my forehead, and I was loathe to find the culprit, though I cross-examined every male and a number of the young females.

10 May

A certain Levantine peddler, said by some to be of Turkish origins, though in fact a Hebrew from the great *souk* at Aleppo, has appeared in the neighborhood, peddling notions of all sorts, including yard goods. Mary purchases a set of German knives for the kitchen, and displays their cutting edges, with cautionary acumen.

The fellow has an indecipherable accent and a strong and pungent body odor.

When Mary asks if his travels have taken him to the Holy Land, he replies, with a shrug, 'I'm not so religious. Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, but not Jerusalem, or Mecca.'

'After all, Madame,' he adds, 'I'm a merchant, not a pilgrim.'

11 May

One of my best students, the son of a leading family, is definitely an 'urning' or potentially so. He does not play games with the other boys and has hips like a young woman. I feel sorry for the lad as his propensities are no secret to all the others.

13 May

Somewhat akin to dying is the feeling I have had, of late, that I am very much alone, and quite cut off from others, despite our close quarters here.

Our house guest came and went again, a jolly portly fellow who purchased an 'oil' from William, and some theatre sketches. Did I behave myself? Of course. Was I rewarded? Not at all...

William purchased a small needlepoint hassock for Mary, and for me he sent word he had enjoyed the season's first peas.

Now I am alone again. She goes off to Port on some unmentionable errand and I am all suspicions. If only I were the same young buck I once was, carousing as I pleased, but I am all ploughed under, all flesh being grass, and I presently am turning over all the acreage beyond the barn to plant sweet corn and also some for the animals.

Nevertheless, a little doggerel jingle wanders aimlessly about inside my head which reminds me of some folderol from schooldays, but whenever I try to summon it to my lips it vanishes, evaporating as the air. 'He had with him a dingo for a mate' is all I can recall, something about a kangaroo with blue eyes.

In class today Willie, whose father farms pigs in Setauket, greets me with a 'Sooney!' and the other children squeal and join in.

I assign detention and a theme on 'respect for elders.'

14 May

‘To buggery no sanction’ says Will, in mock paraphrase of Washington or Lincoln, to which I reply with no irony intended, ‘or even East Setauket!’

Mount the cultivator surmounted with every encounter.

16 May

I am happy to say my dear wife and dear brother seem to have had a falling out. When I mention W by name and suggest we invite him for Sunday lunch the dear woman begs off. He won't wish to be disturbed, his painting time being much too valued. Whereas previously she needed little encouragement from me now I must coax and cajole.

‘You know how Willie can sometimes be,’ she says. ‘He gets distracted and forgets the time of day and we'll both starve waiting for him...’

I suggest she serve us warm and he shall have our cold leavings, but again she is skittish and adamant.

‘We see enough of Will,’ says she.

‘It's our meal to do with as we like and not for him to intervene.’

She becomes, momentarily, flirtatious: ‘You don't find my company quite satisfying? Perhaps I'll have to find a way to entertain you...’

And when I persist she grows cross:

‘I'm sure one of your doxies would know your heart's desires much better than I ever could...’

17 May

Today Mary relents and suggests W should come to lunch after all. We had completed a night of feigned self-prolongation and were drinking tea when Mary said, 'its best we can keep an eye on Will. He has been acting queerly lately...'

'Has he?'

'Indeed, and it was for that very reason that I thought to belittle your inviting him to share our Sunday, but in the long run it's best we keep a keen eye on him or he'll hurt himself, or worse, disgrace us all just like his brother...'

19 May

I must admit I now do not much like my wife anymore and I know it's wrong of me to feel this way because she has stuck by me through very bad times, but I cannot remember any good times with her since the earliest days of our marriage, and yet were I to seek a way out of this bondage she and my brother inflict on me I would be considered an even bigger lout than I already am in their eyes and I would be made to suffer unbearably.

Strange how our affairs have worked themselves out to date: I have complained too oft of her inattentions and lack of affection, her steadfastness being more stubbornness than anything else, when, in truth, I have given her cause all along by not caring much for her as a woman. If truth were told uncynically the flightiest upstairs maid in Savannah with her skirts hiked would be more to my liking than this sobering judge of my character, this drudge reserving her sweetest moments always for my brother, and perhaps has ever since I can remember...

What to do about it before death and dissolution overcomes us both? *Das ist die Frage!* What the Germans call *Wissenschaft*, I think.

Nota Bene: The diary once again here breaks off for a fortnight and when it picks up again undated the entries are telegraphic and brief, at times as though by another hand.

S.B.

Part Five

5 June

June night late and hot cobwebs in my head. Mary entering my room as though from a dream (hers? mine?) to speak of ‘missing seeds.’

The musk melon seeds she ordered from upstate have never yet been planted, so it seems.

‘Where did you put our Cambridge seeds, Nelly?’

Moths bang against the sills.

We’ve been sleeping apart for quite some time and now this when I am still half in the bag.

I ask her what she means. ‘The upstate seeds Nelly, our seeds, yours and mine...those little particles of imminent life...’

She makes me rise from bed and look for them with her and only then I realize she is still asleep, somnambulating, and take her gently by the hand and lead her to our bed again. In the morning will she remember?

12 June

Persistent heat, humidity, and Wardell Barry on the road between her and Port hawking strawberries by the peck the size of syphilitic chancres...

13 June

She has told the children how I deserted her time and again for sexual favors and/or filthy lucre.

Dubious, Sarah remains distant, unfriendly. Mary reading a memoir of Auguste Comte and his virgin mistress, Clothilde.

Once I might have welcomed that myself when in Savannah, after my bout with Dusky Jane, and three days later a green discharge compelled me to seek medication.

But with Iris I have not for one moment known such fears.

14 June

'Who are you anyway?' asks Mary, at breakfast. 'Was I truly yours forever?'

Alas, I say, Alas...

'But I am nobody's property.'

I ask, 'Then as a free woman do you practice free love?'

'I am free and a woman of affectionate nature, your gatherer of seeds,' she adds.

16 June

‘Salt pork has the taste of quiff,’ my brother Shepherd observes as we mitre together.

‘Only after sea bathing,’ I reply.

17 June

And was he once a virgin in my Mary's arms? And then was she the first?
Had he whored in Babylon?

'From too much attraction,' Mary says, 'We must all satiate.'

'As when chewing salsify?'

19 June

If this heat continues I shall kill a woodchuck. Any woodchuck or possum will do.

Poor Shepherd has little white nodes on this throat and seeks the doctor again.

20 June

I question Will short today. Not that I care to interfere but that I am peeved he would deceive an elder brother with his amatory prowls. He responds: 'Brother I do not want the care and trouble of anything outside my painting.'

From the Rembrandt correspondence:

“Desponding artists...cinnerbar...bistre...
chiaro scura...no confidence in work...
dead as lead...choose from ferrous and
cobalt...Iodides sounds like Gluck...
the opprobrium of India
red light on Fall nights, the Sound
jelling before freeze...Frisian women
with bulky bosoms and bodies such that I
have never seen except like cumulous
clouds before a storm...”

Then: “To purge the system and/or
cure a boil tried capsicum from
Mexico peppers in a dilution of five to one
(the former) and three to one(the
latter)...”

Ja! Das hat er!

4 July

A day filled with music and drunken revelries, pirouettes and pis allers, parades and pipsqueaks with cherry bombs and Roman candles...

*His beard is full of butterflies
and his brays are bonny
I'll take you behind the woodpile
and poke you in the cunny...*

So much for flapdoodle and malarkey! Batter cookies and butternut pies, and preserves, sausages and sauerkraut, and fried chicken, and flounder. The Fire Brigade watering the fields where barn fires burn old spuds and rubber babies make a colossal stink. Rubber bubba bunting, and clotted cream tarts. I hear the shrilling of tin whistles, and out by the Lake Grove Dauphine Blanche and others go traipsing in the state of nature, so I'm told...

5 July

A head big as all Saskatchewan from spirits. Recalling my Sea Island days I talk the Gullah talk to Hiram, my horse. 'Dere budder you is blanche and gris but is you wort die brass?' Say, "Budder if you is OK kindly hab die motherwit to show it...'

6 July

Marmalade on Mary's face. I think of poxy women in New Orleans.

7 July

Pissants take notice: The writer of this diary believes in gold and silver here and in the next world and is prepared to greet doxey with dingus and a good piss being worth more than dinner at the Brooklyn Hotel with shad roe and buttered peas.

9 July

Now I can relate the strange events that have occurred within this household. Mary served our supper with heavy damascene wine and to both of us she requested that we wear clean linen and then she cajoled the fire in the stove until it was properly banked and summoned us to her bedside...

It's really not clear to me even now what my suit was to be in the pantomime that ensued. Was it at M's urging or William's? He kept announcing how ill-fitted he was to such 'foolishness,' as he called this, the while cajoling Mary with every flattery of her person through dinner – and every heeding glass – to the upstairs room where I followed, heavy-lidded.

'You are to make me more content withal?' he asked of her, and she repeated his sentiments, adding that we were not to worry about consequences but to 'remove the darkness' from her soul.

Will was much wrought up by her word 'darkness' and, even in a state of immodesty, protested her implication.

'I shall be love's slave,' she said. 'Or, rather, you shall...'

She blew out all the candles. The rosy wallpaper glowed velvety dark splotches against my eyes, as Will protested he would be more at ease with conte crayon and sketch pad simulating such loves which allowed no privacies, and Mary laughed at his cool pretense of disinterest. Then she said, as though to chastise the moment surrounding us. 'No secret is safe from Nelson. He has a nose for these things...'

'And I have beheld you both,' I added, when more laughter ensued, and who I beheld and who fondled who leaves me breathless to recall. The male body resists affection. Such veneries as I allowed were hard to accomplish. In our throes certain names were evoked, including one Dr. Stewart of whom I know naught, and she asked if darling Iris served me quite so well. Denying all, I would not allow that beloved name to be mentioned again in such a company.

The lovers were embarked upon each other and somehow, at the last, the serving girl was also in need of fondling but resisted joining with us direct, Mary interrupted herself and then departed with her from the room, the pair returning in white cotton gowns like ghost brides, and then the bed creaked beneath our various exertions. I know certain persons groaned and took delight, but where was I?

So groggy is my recall I thought this was a dream in the half light of morning except for my unease with indolence and easiness (the echoes of release), and then as I rose to commence the chores of nature Will, who lay awake on the floor beside us, again said how he wished he had candlelight and paper, and graphite for contrasting, in order to sketch all of us as we were.

In the ordinary course of the morning I thought of Iris again but kept my thoughts quite private.

Said Mary, 'It must be we resembled the primal snake Laocoon,' but by mid-morning she had sobered quite, asked if I would dress as a female in skirts and tunic, and could I show my 'anima' to her privately? No more speaking though in tongues about the life to come (the great Thunk and Wawa) except to wish me 'Blefizzadunk.' The previous night seemed so far away, distant as a dream, and Mary strangely sober, even when I refused the dress and corset stays. Remote, when walking by me at the sink she chucked me softly under the chin as one does with schoolboys.

But where was William?

'Taken to his own bed again, sire,' according to that girl we call Bridgett.

This evening again it was 'Blefizz' and banshee shriekings, a hecctish in her blood, and we were summoned, though only I appeared. 'Dost fly? Dost make water in the cooking pots?' ...

Mary's demon was unrelenting, and again scolded me for being without more children.

'What did you do with all those seeds?'

'The little melons, Mrs. Mount?'

'All of them quite, Mr. Mount. And where have you stowed our poor William?'

He was nowhere to be found again, and if, in his studio once more, the doors were locked behind him, so it went three nights in succession and the question of how I should dress and what I should call myself to her always in question until I humbled myself before her and begged 'our playing should conclude' and then she called me 'coward' and the like.

I think perhaps she is losing her mind.

Mental partialities often make people hear the rumble for the cart.

Throughout our carryings on I was aware I was only half a man partaking of the festive board. The other with embarrassment said degenerate words and worried for the morrow.

20 July

A leaf from Satan's book: Mary quite overwhelmed and for the first time in many years sweet to me with her mouth. Do I know why?

She talks in tongues, calls me upstart, and callous youth. Will no more enter our kitchen so that I am forced to prepare all the evening meals, and I flee the house and go for long walks beside the Sound.

21 July

Iris has reappeared in my life after long absence and is so friendly and concerned for my wellbeing that I need say very little to her about what has transpired during her absence, but tonight in solitude I composed a poem for Iris of which I am truly proud.

That Tantalus

*Long after I stopped believing in
Romance and hard currencies like the dollar, I
continue to believe in happenstance, your
appearance on weekday mornings on the local green,
wonderful guesswork coincidences of loss,
backaches, the bad habit of snuff. After a glance
at the mess we're stuck with in the news
dispatches from abroad these reassurances seemed
unexpected, not exactly plausible, they made me
easy when reality knotted my fingers...*

*I missed being with you this morning again
just as much as if we had ever touched...'*

Robert Nelson Mount

Iris: If the blank versification is a little flat compared to Cullen Bryant or Shakespeare, the sentiments are sincerely intended.

22 July

I feel much like a schoolboy again. Iris has responded with a note of her own, her first to me.

‘Dear Nelson, you have a touch of the poet for sure. Moved by your verses about our friendship I want you to know how they are reciprocated.

‘My loss of the child is still hard to keep from sight. I deplore my conduct at times when you with your kind tolerance bring me back to my senses. You should know there is nothing I withhold from you except to continue as your loving friend, and if we were living different lives we would have other consolations of the senses...’

I have left a note for her suggesting we meet tonight in our usual place. Mary and William will not deter me with their crazy antics, and cataleptic fits. The force of desire...

23 July

She said to me, 'It's been more than a year since I was with a man....'

'You need not blame yourself.'

'Nor do I wish to have to again.'

The night was very dark when we touched and when we kissed the glow of her dark orbs were liquid, compelling.

I am loved again.

It is a wonder.

The miracle of what we did together cannot be described and I do not wish to try.

Afterwards, she set me on the course again of prudence. "We must make adequate preparations, precautions...

'I held back,' I told her, 'through prolongation and withdrew...'

'Just the same,' she said, 'it's better to err on the side of caution.

Witness...'

I have given Iris a small sum of money to be fitted with a device in New York City upon her return there Friday... She will be only staying a few days as she fully intends to return to a country life in the service of the family with whom she has been boarding.

When we parted at daybreak, I returned to a sleeping household. Mary none the wiser I do trust...

But toward morning she talked about childbearing as elation and pain.

'Having Sarah,' she said, 'was the fulfillment of pain... Do you suppose men feel that on the battlefield?'

'Only pain and fear,' I replied.

'There was joy enough,' she said, 'and then the pain lessened...'

24 July

Never had I been so happy to recall my veneries. And also quite miserable when I consider our prospects together. Shepherd ailing again, and William off gathering lucre in New York. Mary quite desperate to be my confidant, we cannot speak. All the times she has misjudged me and I her. I write to Iris, 'I have no cautionary wisdom to dispense. A way will be found...'

Do I believe it? Many people pretend to make a life for themselves and really they are only play-acting, and then the miracle of being alive, for however long, occurs and they are frightened. I shall not be a coward. But how? It's two days since we were last together. Sarah asks how I've been occupying myself with weeds growing high among the corn rows.

In the village today the Sugars stop me to ask of M's health.

'She's none the worse for summer,' I joke. Mrs. B hands me garden herbs which she says make an excellent 'summer tonic.'

I take them home and boil them for myself and, in truth, I'm feeling much less costive by morning, and with energies I thought I lacked. To occupy myself I do chores and wait for word from I.

Later I am taken to bed again with extreme melancholy. Mary has waited up for me. 'You are a different man,' she tells me. 'So pensive...'

'I've not been drinking,' I reply.

'No doubt,' she whispers, 'as though, at last, there were hope.'

'I remain obliged to you,' I say. 'I always will...'

'That's not the same,' she says. 'That's different.'

'We are both different people now,' I say.

She's sleeping, and cannot hear my words. The evening is thick as paraffin with her dark breathing, and mutterings.

She keeps crying day, night, for help. Jealous of me she begs God for help. The worst of it is that she knows she is losing her mind and says so. She says, 'I know I am going crazy. So were you once. Help me...'

I try to talk to her waking self, but she cries and cries, begging me to help her, says 'William is going to die and nothing can be done.' Many are the tears I shed, then think of Iris and calm myself again.

'William, I am going to die,' she told me before sleep took her again. 'Shepherd knows. These deaths can't be helped...'

She's losing her mind. Sarah cooks and cleans with me but nothing can be done to ease M's suffering.

I stay away as much as possible but do not dare to see Iris right now, even if I could.

26 July

If all the new kittens are drowned, as Mary and her daughter recommend, who will lap our spare cream?

I can't leave Mary's side to go to Iris who has returned. If I go from one room to another she screams. Believes I am going to leave her or put her into a hospital. William absent all the while. We must expect more sickness, not better than any other family...

27 July

A strange conversation with S, who asks if I now have a young woman almost as young as she...

I cannot lie. 'Being in the world ages some of us,' I say. 'The woman is much older than her calendar years.' She seems satisfied with my reply and asks me no more questions.

29 July

From Iris after silence: 'I must see you again and soon. It is not possible to endure such an absence...'

I go to her without offering the others any explanations.

Our meeting is tender but we do not make love. Tonight for the first time Iris tells me about the young sailor with whom she fell in love during the boat trip across from Ireland.

I had not even guessed she was newly come to these shores. She said he was British and married to a woman from Ely. They stayed a week together in lodgings in the City and then he left her and she went to relatives who helped her find work. But she was carrying the man's child. She said she loved him withal, but could not have imagined a life with a sailor husband. When they parted she hoped it would be forever, but he came back some weeks ago when she was summoned to town by her relatives and he promised he would leave the sea and marry her, if she liked, his wife having found herself another in his absences.

By then she and I were talking out together and she decided it was best to let the matter rest.

She said he was very much wrought up with her on account of his wife's unfaithfulness and called her 'whore,' said that she never told him about their dead child.

'He behaved like a boy with me,' she said, 'most dishonorably,' so that was the first time I ever heard the brogue in her voice and then she told me about Cork, where she was born, and Galway from whence she departed for the States, and said, 'I am not sorry withal. I shall never be sorry for meeting you Nelson.'

'Nor I,' I told her.

She said she was mine now forever if I still wanted her.

I explained about my advancing age and about my situation and we fell into each other's arms and promised to meet again tomorrow night along the West Meadow spit, and parted then.

From Bayley and Brummel of Greenwich, N.Y. an offering of real property near the well-known Saratoga Spa has Mary earnestly elated as she has reason to believe the location is more propitious for 'astral visitations' and other 'psychic illuminisms,' however, I remind her of our precarious financial state.

29 July

She has not attended to that which I gave her money to attend to, but insists I take precautions, use 'protection,' as it's against the religion of her Catholic Ireland that she do so...

30 July

My wife sits for hours in the sun, seeking to darken her face for William. I recommend burnt cork such as the minstrels use; she is not amused.

PM: Will later came, and regaled us with stories of his friend, W.W., at Pfaff's in New York New York.

He says his old friend has been reading a translation of the German poet, Heine. 'Mouths stuffed with dirt,' he protested, according to Walt, 'is not the way I prefer to think of our aftermath on this planet but as fields of alfalfa or winter wheat, and in place of a 'fiacre at the barrier gate' allow me to suggest a big Percheron pulling a four-wheeled manure cart...'

'Not quite so elegant,' I put in, 'or louche...'

'Those are European traits,' Will said.

His friend, W.W., he claimed, was all for 'fecund productive democratic vistas...'

'Such as?' Mary demanded.

'The journeyman's wage and the journeyman's clyster,' Will added. 'And oysters on the half shell at Pfaff's with May wine and strawberries...'

31 July

Mary told me the following story over breakfast today.

Before we were ever betrothed she was in love with a certain young woman of hereabouts; she would not mention the name.

The person in question returned her affections but they neither acted on their feelings. Mary said she was squeamish to be with another of the same sex, and the woman was engaged to marry a well-to-do farmer from Calverton.

The time passed and their feelings did not diminish. Then the woman took sick, and perished, and William was summoned to paint her as in life. Mary was sitting up with the corpse and she felt her feelings pass out of body from the inanimate flesh of her friend to this young painter.

He seemed so devout in his attempt to make her friend animate again, and he was fresh-faced and kind to her, 'handsome' was the word she used.

It was some time later that we met when she was still grieving her friend's loss, but she thought me kind and devout, 'projective' like my brother, and there was the fact that our two families were connected.

Mary said, 'I wished to please you in material union for my friend's sake, as if you were William, though that is only shadow to being drawn out of oneself by another...'

'Which I am certainly not.'

'Nor ever were.' She looked directly at me as she spoke and for the first time in many days seemed lucid.

I took her hand, 'Mary I am so sorry to have disappointed you.'

'I was out of my mind,' said she, 'for I was determined to make you a man deserving of a good wife...'

'And all the while would you still pine for brother?'

'In my own space,' she declared, and then she got up and went about her chores, leaving me with as much mystery as before, or very nearly so.

But, later she came back to show me certain capital bonds of the French railways entrusted to her before his death by her late father. A considerable tidy.

'They are of the utmost longevity,' she said, but would explain no more, and withdrew them from me when I offered to hold them for her in safekeeping.

Was this a bribe?

Most earnestly do I wonder.

1 August

'Her milk would not come, and you would have her for a wife?' asks Mary.

'I want no such thing. It's not true,' I protest. 'I never said any such thing. I want no other for wife...'

'What you say and what you do, sneaking out from us behind doors, are quite apart.'

I answer, 'Was I the first to sneak?'

'Her milk would not come,' my wife repeats. 'She is bone dry like milled flour...'

We are standing together beside a pile of cordwood I have newly chopped with my axe, and I still hold the axe in one hand, can feel my grip tighten about it.

'You really don't know what you're saying, Mrs. Mount.'

'Do I vex you,' she asks, 'with my words?'

I stare at the pinpoints of her glance and let the axe fall to the ground.

Mary turns from me to walk away.

'I have not wished to hurt you, Mrs...'

M stops in mid-course, but doesn't turn to face me again.

The words tumble out of my mouth: 'She's a decent young woman and she's fond of me. I feel young being with her...'

'As I'm sure.'

She breathes out jaggedly. I tell her, 'I never would deny you friendship with William or anybody else...'

'Because you never really knew,' she said. 'Nor could you prove it, except for that one time.'

I say nothing beyond what I have said, and Mary – she shrugs her shoulders and starts to walk away again.

Then stops herself again and tells another of her 'stories' about a Mary I have never known. How before her life with me and the young woman and William there was a certain fellow from the Argentine who shipped aboard one of her uncle's whalers out of Cold Spring Harbor. His name was Eugenio and he had an eye for her, Mary said, that set her trembling.

Their love remained 'unconsummated,' in her words. 'The fellow was just too large. He discommoded me. The size of him and all...'

'What do you mean?'

Her face was flushed. 'You know very well what I mean,' she said. 'I was a pure young girl and he was very, very large. I could not permit him entrance then...'

She stamped her foot and turned away again.

'Mary,' I call out to her, 'let's not quarrel anymore, for the child's sake...'

She does not heed me anymore, enters the house and then lets the door slam. Now I am alone, and she does not reply. The source of light has fled.

2 August

Dear Robert,

Though you may be my blood relation and brother, I am not unaware of the acrimony you've loosed in your own household and will hold you personally responsible for any harm that befalls Mary and the children, at least one of whom who may be more closely connected with me than the uncle relation would suggest...'

Such a direct slap from William alarms me. He has convinced himself of more than his due with Mary. I am both my children's father, if not much more than that.

I truly think W is losing his mind along with Mary and that we must be discreet or they will believe their own jabber and do themselves more harm. Meantime how I ache to see my Iris again.

3 August

Whoever has self-love loves an antagonist worthy of others. The woman I adore strips me of self-regard. I wish the same for Will and my wife, a state of entirely unself-seeing bliss. Nothing more than all I have, a woman's love.

Part Six

7 August

Stocks and bonds traded as people?

My brother Shepherd taken to his bed again. 'A slight indisposition,' he alleges; can we expect to see him hale? His children and wife grieve. They anticipate the worst. William: 'His life was blameless. But he lacked art.'

Hardly what one would chisel onto a gravestone. When they lived together above the old Hawkins house they were at each other constantly. Wm. painted in the attic and Shepherd felt abused. He was our late mother's executor. His wife was also cross with Wm. for showing so little respect toward his bro'. She put the children in an alcove beneath his studio.

Shepherd is less than two years my senior. The illness of my older brother occasions no sadness in me. I have taken myself out of his life. When Iris tells me, 'it is well known your brother Shepherd looked the other way,' she means what exactly? W and M?

When I recall the poverty of our boyhoods, the closeness I felt with William was never the same as what little I felt with Shepherd. A certain distress was always preeminent.

When I visited with him yesterday in his sickbed conversation turned to William's painting. Shepherd looked wane and weak, and spoke softly.

'Being second best,' he said, 'I could not resist the temptation to compete with William, but it seems I have finally bested him at something.'

'And what would that be?' I inquired.

'Plainly I have won,' he said, 'in the race to our respective graves.'

I pretended to be dim.

'Not to put too fine a point on it, but I shall be William's champion in Purgatory, should he find the need for one.'

PM: His end came abruptly enough, seated on the commode, placed there by his nurses, and after so much discomfort during the proceeding weeks he was heard to remark, 'It's been such a long time since I have enjoyed an evacuation.'

And then, they say, they saw his eyes go dull, and he was gone from them.

17 September

*I witnessed thee in mother's eyes,
on father's lips I learned thy name,
but never intimate to thy cries
I cannot comprehend thy pain...*

RIP Shepherd Alonso

Nota bene: The death of Shepherd Alonso Mount from 'cholera morbus' on September 17, 1876, is noted in Robert Nelson's diaries in the quatrain and lines above, presumably composed some days afterwards. Much of the remaining diaries ruminate without intentional coherence.

S.B.

Part Seven

2 October

Give us all a sign! Does it seem remotely within reason? Can we deny reason and uphold Justice? How shall I play the gambit if the pieces are so scattered? Is there any basis for a belief in an afterlife I have not yet considered? Should one have faith in Gideon or the Midianites?

Mary's childhood friend Ida visiting. She has been living with some Woodhullites along the southern Tier. Said they were all ferocious liars and exhibitionists. If a woman acquired a venereal infection she was quarantined three months from the others, not so a man, and the women's mouths were used by the men before any other orifice to avoid such infections. Her own son had gone away and serving with the dog Soldiers in the Arizona Territory.

When they are together, Mary and Ida, there's this queer light in their eyes. It makes me blink and shudder, turn red in the face, stammer. Intent upon each other, they pay me no heed. How different from M and W. They mean to disregard but cannot, in all good conscience, whereas Mary and her female friend woo each other with tales and anecdotes and female woes and leave me out entire, as though playing widows or abandoned women.

3 October

The days shorten with the only relief from Indian summer head coming at nightfall.

Ida departs.

Because of recent events William has moved in with us as permanent lodger so Mary can nurse him, if need be, but he still paints in Hawkins house. How do I feel about such an arrangement? Nothing to palaver her about. Our ancestor Deliverance Hawkins who kept 3 slaves once told the late Dr. Samuel Thompson, or so it's reported, 'a freedman has no advantages over such chattel just so long as they are well-treated.' I am well-treated here, in the main, in the manner of a slave, whereas William is fretted over and pampered, the goose that laid the gold egg.

He says he grieves for Shepherd and writes graceful letters to those who call on us, or send condolences. All this I find hard to credit. William always felt superior to Shepherd as an artist and an intellect.

6 October

Our sister, Mrs. Seabury, will not visit just so long as we hold William 'captive.' She also mentions the cholera which is still to be found in the vicinity.

Will was just a lad when our father died and for a while with our mother was her 'farmer's boy.' Then he was sent to brother Henry in New York and later he and Shepherd labored together.

I was much away at the time, and when I returned William was master of our premises, and consummate artist, though Mary might put it otherwise in his gay company.

I still recall William's exhibition in Brooklyn. So many other artists came and some were rowdies, others fey. I was obliged to attend, too, though I should have gone willingly. I had only just returned from Georgia. Mother bade me look after my little brother. Where was Shepherd? I can't quite recall. But suddenly we were all exceeding shy, and when the important people were greeting Will, I shrank into the wallpaper.

Here's an oddity. Mary asked we bring her dimity from the City and a yard or two of French lace 'such as Catholic ladies wear in abundance to hide their bosoms.' (It was when Shepherd was still in the coach-making craft, I think.)

Ida brought her Onondaga dinner plates and a false marten stole, trimmed with *marocain* and real marmot.

Substantial gifts from a well-to-do friend.

7 October

When we stop caring the silence falls between us like a heavy curtain. Iris gone again, and me not sure I wish her to come back. I must seek to try to make things right with Mary again, and there's this pest about the house. This calamity.

The sole artist of our mischief is my brother... Even now his failing glance lights pools of flames in Mary's eyes.

8 October

These lists we keep of people we never liked and jobs we hated are an odd form of sustenance to the despairing, reminding us how we are equal to the tasks of life only if we choose to do so.

Today my wife asked if I was sending out letters for a position.

I had been to the post office to mail a letter to Iris.

'You are surely more qualified than most,' she assured me.

'I envy you that assurance,' I told Mary. 'I find myself weak in the spleen and overly coy...'

'I will not comment on your character,' she said.

Sometime later, when I was raking oak leaves drifted onto our kitchen garden, Mary again expressed the opinion that I was a person of some competence.

'Have you thought of publishing?' she asked me. She claimed, Mertons, a school friend in Ronkonkoma was printing handbills, and small hymnals, etc., with full leather bindings, and might have need of an 'editorial eye.' I could take the work home with me to do whenever the seasons permitted.

I told Mary that though I was not a Catholic I would never drink 'the Englishman's soup.' 'It suffices to farm and rake leaves,' I said, 'and watch over you and William...'

'Have you no other occupations?' she asked.

'Have you?' I countered.

'What a sly man you are,' she said, departing from me again.

'COY,' I repeated. 'I TOLD YOU SO MARY DID I NOT?'

PM: Lines and furrows in the new snow frozen into place, the constant sawing of ice all evening long in the pond next door ratcheting my brain, and, in a dream, I witness myself transfigured by immersion in the frozen pond, and William fetched to paint my portrait, as he rarely chose to do in life, before I might thaw.

In certain hasty drawings he has me slunk into my chest, reprobate and dour. Just the fit figure for his badinage. Mount dismounted, perforce, and full of his own balderdash.

Glib as I am what should be my riposte to dream visions? I go down to the frog pond and shout down into the hole. 'I shall never never do myself in. I shall be long-lived and vivid beyond this persiflage so you and Mary must remain apart.'

Then William saunters past wrapped inside a heavy woolen scarf, his nose very red and apt. 'A dram will put you right again Nelly surely.'

Again and again I am locked inside the same dream of saws working the ice, frozen lips, and strange black ducks. All the same grim tableau vivant --- the pond, the saw, the shout into the hole, William sauntering past to offer me the fatal dram.

'Wake up laddy,' Father says, in the dream from which I cannot seem to escape, and finally I do and my face is pluvial with tears at sight of the old fellow's body crushed inside the ice as inside layers of thick green quartz. But was I only dreaming again? How I demean myself...

9 October

A few months before Fort Sumter, when I was fifty-four and William fifty-three (both well beyond the reach in years of the recruiting sergeant) I had the queer idea of taking to sea with seaman's papers, to the islands of the far Pacific, and that William should accompany me on such an expedition and paint and draw the lush extravagance of those antipodes.

Such scenes of a life among savage climes, a landscape so opposite to our own glacial moraine, would be celebrated far and wide, I was convinced, and I believed I could manage passage for both of us as a mate and by making myself the tutor to the master's family.

All this I was willing to do as a sacrifice for my brother and his art if he would be agreeable to the proposal, and he, a bachelor, unlike me, what had he to forfeit?

William saw the matter different. He hung back, declined. His face which had borne the stamp of great good humor changed immediately to a dark, penetrating, thoughtful scowl. He asked, 'Who should say what's the proper subject for an artist?'

I know now his indifference was on M's behalf, I doubt I truly knew that then. Then I thought of pressing my case with him to no avail.

William grew even more irate.

'You are a husband and father,' he said, alternating a kindness of expression with his fierce tone of voice, as though pleading with me as well as scolding me, 'and you are needed about the farm. You have responsibilities. How dare you suggest we run off huggermugger to the Cook Islands?'

'The islands of Jakarta,' I replied, considerably downcast after such a reproach and it is from that time more than any other, or anything else he might have done with my wife, that the present stony silence between us persists.

I thought I was offering him a fellowship in art, a life such as few would ever gainsay, but he clung on to M's apron strings and spurned my gift as if it was so much foul wind.

'I will get the sheriff's bailiffs after you,' Will threatened, and we stayed, and were silent together, colluding in his affair with my wife more and more.

It's better to be vile than vile esteemed, wrote the Bard.

10 October

After sunset these Indian summer evenings the cicadas click up such a racket I am reminded of Georgia ladies at vespers with their fans.

Had bluefish fried to a turn at supper tonight and inside the jaws of Mary's fish she found a copper penny.

Some local blades are going to race horses tomorrow in Yaphank. Our young Sarah has been invited. Mary wonders if she will wilt in so much unseasonable heat. I worry for the horses.

Quoth William, 'But for her modesty I would paint our Sarah child in nature, that I could live to see her.'

11 October

Surprised by myself at dawn with memory scoured of dreams, my fingers tingling as I awake to the realization I slept alone. Usually Mary tries to appear cool about her other relation, but last night fear for him drove her to his side in his room.

Leave me O love that leadeth but to dust...

Sweet smell of last fading honeysuckle blooms in the house. The rooms well-aired. Mary all night long beside William, whose sleeping breaths are labored. I walk about the quiet rooms with coffee, as though afraid to wake the dead, and when dawn is bright I go outside on the front lawn in the warm air and sit and smoke a pipe and read yesterday's *Star*.

After a while Mary joins me in her sleeping garments and a robe.

'It seemed he would not last the night,' she says, 'but by morning he'd recovered and demanded porridge and fruit, and a pot of strong black tea.'

We smile at each other, as though cheered by the progress of our patient.

After a while I dress and go out in search of Iris.

She has been waiting for me at our usual place and when I come to her she is alarmed.

'You've decided to make it up with your wife. I can see it in your eyes. They're so shrunken and tight...'

I explain about my brother's illness and that he is lying abed with us now.

'But it's your wife. She has you back again... you and he...'

'William may not last beyond the New Year,' I point out.

'What then?' Her shoulders tremble.

We walk together in silence. I want to hold her close to me but I'm afraid. Something is holding me back. Mary...

We walk behind a certain barn above the old mill and kiss.

Iris asks, 'Should I be thinking of leaving this place?'

'No don't. Give me time...'

'You know you never can change,' she says. Her azure eyes are very bright.

'Give me time, Iris. I must have more time...'

'It's time you'll be having with her surely...'

By all love's soft and mighty powers I protest that isn't so.

11 October

First frost, an abrupt shifting of weather chills the house as though death had entered these premises on frozen leaden feet. William speaks of the wonders of lead in preserving bodies from decomposition, though they tend to blacken, he says, in time.

On a visit to Boston some years back I had the satisfaction of examining a small and extremely interesting collection of mummified bodies from Peruvian tombs in the possession of Mr. John H. Blake, and these, as I recalled, had been placed in ceramic containers and kept in dry places.

I mentioned this likelihood to William and inquired if he was interested to investigate ceramic burial.

'On Long Island?' he demanded. 'Is there any part of this fishtail that isn't humid?'

12 October

A note from Iris in our usual place: 'You have a wife and children and a place in the community, and if, as you say, you have been billygoated by your brother that, too, will pass eventually whereas I am without and will be forever now that I am leaving this place for the City where I hope you shall not find me ever again...'

14 October

Took the train into town yesterday to search for Iris. Told Mary and William I had business of a sort in Brooklyn with lawyers about our late brother Shepherd's estate. She had spoken of certain Irish relations on King Street, the O'Mara's.

They are obviously well-to-do and well-set-up, a townhouse with a marble stoop.

The servant who came to the door said Miss Iris had gone out with the lady of the house and would not be returning much before supper.

I waited in a tavern across the way, drinking only small beer, with my glance directed on that stoop.

After some time Iris appeared with a handsome older woman in a gray outer garment and shawl.

I paid up and crossed the street to intercept.

When Iris saw me she looked alarmed. The other woman held her ground. They seemed to wish to fend me off.

I told Mrs. O'Mara I meant no disrespect but Iris and I were friends and I needed to chat with her in private.

She looked to Iris for confirmation of my words and when that was forthcoming she went on her way to enter the house.

Then we were alone on the quiet city street.

She spoke first. 'I had hoped to discourage you from such a visitation. Our situation is hopeless and it cannot be that you have found a solution.'

'I am so unhappy,' was all I said.

'As if that should surprise folks in our situation...'

A bluster from the river lifted a wisp of hair from off her forehead and she shuddered.

'Iris, I could speak to Mary. We need help about the place with William ailing. Perhaps you could stay with us...'

'And wouldn't that just be Jim Dandy,' she exclaimed. 'The four of us sharing one communion wafer...'

'I want you back with me,' I said.

'You'll have to think of some other way,' she said, 'or else leave me be.'

She turned for the house and I realized I had no power to stop her.

When I returned this morning, after staying overnight in a common lodging house, my daughter Sarah greeted me. She asked that I not be about the house when her friends came to call, or, if I was, that I not try to engage them in conversations. It seems I am an embarrassment to Sarah being so much older than all the other parents she has met, and with so little in common with my child and her acquaintanceship.

'I like you just the way you are,' she said, as though seeking to appease me at the same time as she delivered her insults.

'But the other young women do find you strange, an effrontery of sorts...'
Of course I acquiesced in her request, but with a heavy heart.

Both William and Mary were taking lunch together when I entered the dining room. He is now his own physician, he claims, in the prolonged absence of our Dr. Derring, and seems to be treating himself with hot water and stale bread.

Nothing was said, at first, about my excursion. They seemed to know the true intent of my errand to the City but were determined to behave toward me with polite discretion.

Said William, 'It appears your case with the attorneys was no more fruitful in its outcome than such things usually are...'

Mary silent, her expression wry, as though amused. But, later, after supper, she takes me aside, and speaks to me almost as though I was just another one of the children.

'You seem distraught, Robert. You mustn't be. A domestic arrangement such as marriage based exclusively on the passions is truly unstable. It always will be. Such relations cannot last...'

I thank her for such advice, not without sarcasm, but she doesn't seem to notice my tone of voice. She again recommended 'complex marriage' – he, she, you, I, they, freely forming attractions in a household of love and labor, a spiritual domesticity.

'You are needed here by us,' she said. 'We all depend on each other. William is very ill. He may not last. You and I, we can be husband and wife again with others.'

'We can be so many things,' I say, 'it makes my head spin thinking of all of them...'

'Try to be patient. I speak for myself as well as you. I wronged you unintentionally and now that must change...'

'You are being very kind,' I reply, as I leave her there, and go out to the barn to see about the animals.

A footnote: In the *Tribune* on the way home today read of a simple method for enhancing the rapid action of dry plate photography so that it's instantaneous.

'Light,' the writer pointed out, 'deposits images on such a plate as residue, being not so much chemically induced as enhanced...'

The action of a caress on human flesh is similar.

Mary speaking of 'self-sovereignty' for both of us in the marriage relation, a 'renewable bond.'

After

The last drops of wine taste sweetest,
Russians say, as fall flowers
brighten the oncoming chill.
In middle age he'd chosen well.
the honey of your mouth,
sweet aftertaste.

16 October

William is about and painting again and Mary's spirits much restored. Only I seem misrepresented in the *dramatis personae*. The chores about this farm are my penance. Do I truly want M's forgiveness? Remission is an empty feeling about the house. Something has been left unsaid. I am emptied out. Tonight certain neighbors are coming by with a lady said to be gifted with sight. We shall be speaking to the spirits.

16 October

We were made to form a circle around a table, William, Mary and I, a Mrs. Gardener, and the medium, a certain Dr. Stove, a dark man with a full beard.

The candles were snuffed and a smell like cinnamon or nutmeg and there were rappings from time to time heard from somewhere in the room in between long intervals of silence, and I felt my ankle touched and grasped more than once.

William was seeking to recall the spirit of the painter, Titian, though he allowed he knew no Italian. Some years back he had summoned Rembrandt to convey his painting secrets, and there had been a 'correspondence' between the two in William's hand, or so my brother alleged. But Titian was not so easily forthcoming. There was now a smell of burning from the coal oil lamp and ash in the nostrils from the room at large as the medium declared he could not locate Titian's realm or 'circle' quite so quickly.

'Others are willing to speak,' Mr. Stove said. 'Would you talk with Gainsborough or Mr. Reynolds?'

William was determined it be Titian, or again Rembrandt, though he had not cared to cause more bother to the great Dutch painter if all his painterly secrets already had been revealed.

There ensued some mutterings in a high pitched voice from Mr. Stove and again profound silence, then more rappings on the wooden table, and the medium alleged the moment was not 'propitious for professional consultations.'

'It could be some sort of distancing maneuver,' he added, 'as the spirits of the long deceased are loath to be summoned for pecuniary advantage.'

'No such thing,' William said, who then asked to communicate with our dead brother, Henry, and again there were rappings, and the medium spoke in a scumbly nasal intonation not unlike Henry's, but all he said (that word again) was, 'Bleffizzadunk, avoid future thoughts. Your day has not yet come. Nor will it in the course of things...'

'There,' my brother said to Mary, 'a wise spirit, a truth-teller...'

'A worthwhile thought,' she countered.

When it was consummated she (M) lit the candles again, and William seemed much cheered by such a message from beyond the grave, and he and Mary consulted one another and made an appointment with the medium to return in late November when the astral atmosphere might be somewhat more propitious for such collaborations. Then she (M) fortified our guests with port and they departed.

Afterwards, still considerably shaken, Will inquired what I had made of the proceedings.

‘Astonishing,’ I said, but he seemed unsatisfied with my remarks, and went up to his room, and left me there to sulk.

I do not know if I have witnessed an entire hoax. I know I was touched by a human hand.

Mary spoke to me softly: ‘It may be your time will come before William’s if only you allow yourself to believe.’

‘A quarter turn to the right,’ I told her.

‘As you wish.’ She bade me good night and went to her bed.

I stayed below with another glass of port.

I do not doubt there are mysteries, doubt only that they regularly visit our dining table.

When I am as drunk as I am now I also believe in miracles and strange visitations from beyond the grave, and, presto, in the morning I have only my aching head to bear witness.

17 October

William much embroiled in Democratic politics here and in the City. He makes plans to visit the Bogles and other city friends, and he probably will not make the excursion. His illness has been officially diagnosed today by Doctor D. as a 'pneumonia which should not be fatal,' he told Mary, 'though it can be quite enduring.' Meantime, often feverish, he lacks his usual birdlike energy.

17 October

*A buckwheat flummery
A blacksheep mummer
The nursery nunnery
And tumult in the alien corn
Before we are born
We are set to die
Words written in the snow
and in the ground
but not the sky.*

19 October

I am looking at the Catherwood drawings of temples in the jungles of Guatemala and Honduras. He worked with *camera lucida* as well as Daguerrotype to make fairly exact reproduction not unlike photographs. Once I recommended this to William for his portraits of the dead but he informed me curtly the apparatus was much too cumbersome. Yet this Englishman Catherwood went with such a device into the jungles of a strange land infested with fevers and crocodiles. It just goes to show the contempt W bears me and mine.

He has taken to his bed again for the day and Mary is nursing him with fish broths, and puddings of milk curds. I had the thought today that of all mankind's inventions great art is least demanding of priorities unless they be such temples in the jungle, or the Egyptian sphinx etc., projects requiring large scale cooperation by laboring artisans, usually captives and slaves. These testify to the immense energies of our human community. They are also monstrosities of disproportion in that they were envired by straw and thatch decrepitudes.

One could say that the measure of Egypt's magnificence was not to be found in pyramids but in privies, the ordinary efforts of ordinary men. But slavery persisted then as now. It's some measure of the South's decadence that, in the main, that slavery produced great private mansions but few public buildings of note on the order of our crystal palaces and legislative capital in Washington. I'm sure my brother would disagree.

The slavery of Egypt and Mesoamerica was infinitely more productive than our homegrown variety in that great structures were produced on immediate pain of death, whereas our niggers were made to labor long and hard at healthful and invigorating field work and now threaten to overpopulate the South and even some Northern cities where they do abide.

20 October

I doubt any man could be as he once was: To deny the possibility of Paradise in the arms of his beloved.

Mr. Bogle of New York's visitation: about fifty, tall and thin, with a fine intellectual face.

He has come to take his personal measure of William's illness and to discern if he can yet be entrusted with a 'commission.'

What will that be? A portrait of his grandfather and another of himself from a Daguerrotype; enlarged on canvas Bogle senior might resemble a Hapsburg potentate, or, perhaps, some American minister to one of the courts of Europe.

'His wife wishes to divorce him,' William remarks about our visitor, 'after thirty unhappy years together, this picture is to show him in a flattering light. One can expect the poor woman to raise an alarm at sight of so much flesh. Enough is enough, she will cry out. When Bogle says as in life he wishes me to render a stout mule's hindquarters as Don Juan Tenorio.'

21 October

A wonderful fall. The maple leaves turn strawberry every cold bright new day, such air gaudying trees, yellows hiding under sprinklings of green that will soon vanish utterly.

From the harbor concussions of shot resound as men in blinds aim at migratory ducks and geese above Little Africa and The Oldfield Point.

William complains the noise interferes with his painting, and when he tries to stay abed late (at Dr. D's urging) he is roused by the noise of carnage over the water.

Mary fashions a pair of earplugs for him out of cotton wool and cork, but he declines the offer, arguing they will cause further infections to his cranial canals.

Later, as she prepares rabbit stew, M tells me I am mistaken to assume she prefers William's company to mine. She has arrived at a time of life, she tells me, when she must secure our interests and, moreover, my distracted behavior in past years was the first cause of her turning away from me to minister to my brother's needs.

22 October

He is in bed when I enter with his tray and before I can set it down he rises from sleep and begins to cough loudly, with a rawness I had not before this noticed, his pale face all in a sweat, and he barely able to catch his breath, until I must set the tray down anywhere, and go to him with water and hold him in my arms while he drinks to make the paroxysms cease.

He's feverish, I note, and his bed garment is damp from the effusions of his fevered body, and when he has ceased he falls weakly back against the pillows and will not take any other refreshment nor nutrition for quite some time, simply lies abed with his eyes closed, and his breathing soft and steady. No words spoken. He seemed becalmed. 'So like Shepherd,' I thought to myself, but as though sensing my mood he asked me would I leave him then, and as I departed with my back to his bed I heard a sound like weeping.

In the morning he is bright and crisp again and will take no nourishment until he has painted a small landscape of the strand in fog with a rinse of gamboges yellow light about the dull obscurity of sun and a figure wandering aimlessly with his back to the viewer, almost shrouded by the same wispy fog.

23 October

A letter from Iris. She begs pardon. It was not for lack of true affection. She would see me again if I came to town.

I hesitate. Go to the mirror, survey a countenance graven with age, the gaps between my teeth, my sunken eyes.

It's hard for me to believe that I am loved as I yearn to be, though I know I have been as virile with her by and by as any woman can expect, and even playful at times.

Proof that the woman wants me?

24 October

With so little hope as would compromise the greatest sinners, and without cavil, once more travelled into the great city today to meet Iris beside the boats on Fulton Street.

An accommodation at a small seafarer's hotel was sought out by us in tandem, and we went upstairs without assurances as to what might ensue. As the room was paid for we proceeded to undress almost like an old married couple.

Once in bed passions flared and subsided. It was a task to turn away from her as she spoke.

She'd been proposed to by a comfortable family friend of the O'Mara's, 'a decent gentleman of means,' she put it, and as this was an opportunity to have a life beyond her battered expectations, she was holding the man and his intermediaries at bay while demanding of me whether I truly thought I might extricate myself from all my present domestic cares.

I turned and held her close again and whispered to her of my dismay. I could not promise more than lifetime affection.

Then she admonished me I was old enough to be somewhat fearful of the life to come, so she thought she might yet make such an alliance with her 'Mr. Pruyne' and still be available to me whenever I chose to travel into town. In other words, she was offering to remain my mistress even after her marriage to this other fellow, and she said she believed she would have sufficient means to subsidize our lusty encounters, if I so chose to allow her to.

I was in equal parts dismayed and enthused. I had never wished her to play the whore for me, but Iris swore it was not the case. Though she risked being an adulteress, she knew she could hardly live without my effusions. The other relation would provide her with certain comforts, along with childbearing, but would show every aspect of the European *marriage blanc*.

I could not refuse the woman then, and we made passionate show of the most intimate affections, and when that was concluded she got up and saw to her hygienic needs, and departed from me.

We are set to meet again in a month's time when she believes it is most propitious to her infertility, and she said I was to take no heed of visitations, or rumors, I might hear from neighbors about her forthcoming exchange of vows. And then she fled me with all too sudden haste.

I have stayed on to write this recollection of our most memorable day of dalliance but must shortly make plans for my return to the North Shore. And what will next occur has me most puzzled and befuddled. I do not believe I can survive without Iris. Whether I can with her in such an arrangement beside the excellent Mr. Pruyn, who is a manufacturer of paper hats and party favors, by the way, is something beyond what I can presently foretell.

Post Mortem: Upon my return Mary was in the house by herself, William in the barn intent upon his studio wagon, and not a word said. She preserving green tomatoes and cucumbers in a dill vinegar, and he looking the worse for his illness but sober and industrious with the greasing of axles etc.

I crept up the stairs and bathed with a wet cloth and sprinkled cologne on my bare chest before all else.

26 October

Two days since my encounter with my beloved. I wander about the farm pretending to labor while my heart is close to bursting from the generosity of her proposal.

I was at breakfast when, just as she had predicted, word by telegraph came to me from Mrs. W. of 'the betrothal of your little Irish colleen.'

Thanked be fortune I was alone at the time, or my emotions might have truly gotten the better of me.

Somewhat later William and Mary return home from a trip by wagon to his studio to fetch certain materials he claims to need for his work.

Upon spying me seated at the kitchen table with my head between my hands W mutters something quite unintelligible and goes up the stairs to bed. (He takes frequent naps nowadays between his bouts of painting as he's been instructed to do by Dr. D.)

M sits opposite to me and removes her heavy woolen shawl.

'The look on your face,' she says. 'Has something bad happened?'

'My thoughts are very heavy of late,' I reported to her.

'William is very pleased with your kindness to him.'

'He's our brother,' I reminded her.

'He means to reward you in some manner eventually.'

'I don't think that will be necessary,' I said, and got up and went out into the yard.

A cold wind was blowing off the Harbor and suddenly I was in tears. I cried for Iris and myself, and for W and M too. We are none of us meant to live such deprived lives. We are driven to it by the brevity of our existence on this planet and the certainty of despair and dissolution. We all need to be adored and adore in return. It is the only decent substitute for religious observance.

27 October

William so ill today his counterpane nearest to his chin spotted with blood when I fetch a tray of tea to him in the morning, and Mary has me summon the doctor and launders his bedclothes, giving him an old blanket of Mrs. Mount until they are dry again.

29 October

Two sleepless nights with William and daylight weak and full of fog against our eyes.

Last night Mary returned to my bed and wept and we made affectionate gestures, and slept fitfully.

I had been thinking of when I first courted Mary. She was very comely then and we seemed to be of one mind about our lives and fortunes. Had I then known of her involvements with others might I have been swayed otherwise?

I was simple enough to think in those days a man could escape from marriage through his occupation but a woman must be steadfast.

Had I known of that woman who died, of William, of the oversize sailor boy—would I not have chosen to keep to my bachelorhood?

The summer we met I was full of myself, could scythe 3 acres of tall grass in a single morning and still manage to dance and carouse the night through.

And Mary never complained about my attentions to her as a woman. That she hid from me. That she may have hidden even from herself until such time as I went South. Perhaps not. How do I know she was not always faithless with me? With William? With others? And who are the fathers of my children?

It does no good for me to think like this. It's rather as though I was worshipping Blessfizzadunk again—or however he calls himself...

When I first chose to teach social dancing it was for the lucre I could expect, to be sure, and to make my way in the world, but also because I had always liked the pretty ladies, flirting with them, and so on, and nothing more. I fancied the dark and dainty courtesies of dance, the grace of exertions, and so on, and so forth. But the act of being a man with a woman in the physical sense was fearful to me. Women, I found, were easily excitable and then God help the man who could not please them or was fearful of them. I found myself avoiding the women I had so easily seduced. My forays were more and more tentative, and I was forever faltering before the alcove of female affection. As though incapable of pleasing — as I'd once thought myself capable — these viragos with their drunken and impotent husbands, the legend of my failures grew and my custom withered. A dancing master who can only dance (except in certain unforeseen circumstances or, later, with my darling Iris) was hardly to be desired. I fled back home to farming again.

When a man can no longer pretend he is the virile swain of womanhood what choice has he but to behave like a sturdy farmyard ox?

30 October

William does nothing but lie abed and wanly diddle with his nurse.

Or else he plays a jig tune on the fiddle that he extricated from his studio that day he went with Mary in the wagon...

Last night he scraped at the ancient 'Billy Owen' twenty or thirty times (I lost count), as a dance, as a march, and finally a dirge, and followed this with a farrago of hymns: 'The Garden,' 'Shall we Gather by the River?'

His melodic dismantlings of sound are driving me out of my mind, but I dare not complain as Mary insists the convalescent is recreating himself and we must all bear patient witness.

Finally I left the house on horse and drove off to a tavern.

How I should like to preach a sermon on the mount of brotherhood and toleration to my reprobate sibling. Mary will not have it. We are to cater to him, indulge every spark of life yet within the invalid, and pray for a full recovery of his powers.

31 October

Even should my competition come to a bad end I do not wish to live out my life with this ice queen.

It's a sentence of death.

Man's life on earth is precisely that, to be sure, but I still wish more for myself while I have breath.

And I am no longer chary of all women, the sex in general, and their behavior during love.

1 November

*“But hark! my pulse, like a soft drum,
Beats my approach, tells thee I come,
And slow however my marches be,
I shall at last lie down by thee.”*

2 November

Again to the City, again with Iris, newly returned from her honeymoon days in the Parker House, Boston. Their nuptial feastings did coldly set forth our observances.

Iris seemed no less avid for me, despite the recent attentions of her spouse, but she made fairly brief work of our intercourse, as she was expected to return to the new flat to attend to decorators and the arrival of Mr. Pruyn's ailing mother by trains from Cahoes.

There was a poignancy to our encounter this time. When I was so bold as to ask about her domestic relations with the estimable gentleman she was pleased to call her husband, she protested it was anything but the *marriage blanc* I had expected it to be, but even so a debacle of the male and female affections had taken place, and now Mr. Pruyn, fairly proud of what he considered to be his accomplishments, was expecting someday that she produce him heirs.

Nevertheless, she said, calmly, a moment or two later, she would not herself be surprised if she should prove fruitful enough to please him by and by, through 'one sire or another,' as she set this forth, adding *sire*, then, with a mocking smile, took leave of me again until our next encounter.

All in good cheer and exceeding bad faith, it seems to me, who am no advocate for the male sex in these affairs. She'd prepared a picnic lunch for the two of us of certain sliced meats and breads and a bottle of stout, but was tardy about her dawdling and yet so eager to depart when she had to that I was required to eat all that she had prepared for the two of us by myself after her goodbyes, and this I did most ravenously, and with pleasure, while sitting up naked in the bed and depositing crumbs across my chest.

3 November

There was talk of ghosts about the house on my return. Both William and Mary claim poor Henry came to them where they were separately bedded, and in a shimmer of ectoplasm peered down from the lowering darkness and went on his way again.

'His lips moved as though speaking,' Mary averred, 'but I could detect no sound.'

While affirming that spectral visitation Wm. was less sure of such behavior.

And both were so taken up with the occurrence that they made no comment about my absence. Nor whither I had gone. It was as though they had not even noticed my not being there until they hurried to report to me on my return.

I am convinced that the ills of the next world are as nothing compared to what we can expect together in the few years we have left.

(William, by the way, now goes about the house in a long skirt somewhat like an oriental sarong, and a blouse of homespun of the order of linsey Woolsey, and he is to be addressed at all times as 'Elizabeth,' he insists, though I cannot, even when trying to do the agreeable thing.)

(Mary says he is more comfortable in such attire, considering his condition, and much less subject to drafts. She also told me yesterday that from a reincarnationist point of view it seems highly probable that William will reappear in another life as a female, considering the delicacy of his palette and his color sense.)

(He has taken on an unnatural falsetto to speak with Mary, but in my presence he flounces in a woman's garb and discourses in his normal baritone.)

4 November

If a man were to tell me my brother was of the 'urning' bent I would have to cry out calumny.

But to watch this bewigged creature in long skirts traipse about the house racked with coughs, and occasionally spitting blood, has me convinced I never really knew my own flesh and blood.

Mary says in recent days his true nature was coming to the fore.

I am not to intrude, nor make untoward comment.

He set me a riddle today. Quoth he: 'Why was Jesus called a fisherman?'

'Because,' said he, when I was unable to provide a proper reply, 'into Mary's spawn God stuck his prawn, and netted us all our Salvations.'

6 November

As I enter the barn where William has set up a temporary painting studio my nostrils are seized with the strong effluvial aromas of linseed oil and turpentine.

William wearing bloomers and an ancient military tunic stands before an easel contemplating a wash of misty colors across a small framed canvas. There is just soft pink light and, in the middle distance, the landscape is brushed up sepia to form a point about a cove. There's no figures, and nothing else definite to be seen except for what appears to be the mast of a sunken sailing ship in the water.

'My work is almost complete,' says he.

'Rather effective, I suppose,' I comment.

'It's radical. Transformative... I don't know whether I shall market this just yet, though there are bound to be buyers.'

He moves the flat of one hand across the landscape portion so that it spreads into the water.

'It's all play, Robert.' He displays his palm blackened with paint, and pats his cheek with it, leaving a mark.

'May I get you something, Brother?' I ask.

'Sister,' he reminds me.

A barn swallow rustles out of a nest in the rafters and settles on the crown of his head.

'We are close to nature and nature's state. Truly I am at peace here with you and our sister Mary...'

'My wife?'

'Sister and wife,' he says, 'and household spirit,' turning with brush in hand to his painting again. 'A boat, I need a boat,' he added, 'to take this across the water,' smearing in more color with his fingertips even as I behold.

10 November

For the past three days I have been observing William cease to be.

He lies abed very silent, he barely moves his lips to breath, not speaks.

Now all that madness may have fled. This morning he asked in a whisper to be shaved and before I could be at him with the razor Mary was lathering his face.

Iris has summoned me and, for this once, I've made my excuses.

But yesterday of a sudden he cursed all the Jews for their moneylending and fell into a deep sleep.

He has brought my wife to tears more than once with his state, and once he invoked Leviticus: 'Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother's wife,' and wept copious silent tears.

I know of no other passing like this. He seems to wish to take the world with him.

Just now a bubble of bloody spittle formed on his lips and he wiped it clean with his tongue, and subsided again.

But yesterday he opined to Mary it was a pity blood did not dry true but darkened, else he might have painted a final sunset with his own substance.

At Will's request Mr. Stove has once again been summoned.

11 November

To escape apprehension as a confidence man and a thorough going rogue, Mr. Stove has fled these parts for the Western territories.

Mary puzzled.

At my urging the ancient Jedediah Hawkins is summoned. He and my brother played together as children without regard for the different hues of their complexions, the one almost sable and William then quite fair, but now he is an ancient like my brother, though still hale enough, save for the fact that he lacks teeth.

I could tell as he stooped above the bed that he was deeply moved by my brother's state.

'Marsta Will,' he called him

'You may call me that,' my brother said, 'though some prefer Elizabeth, or Beth, as you once did when we were young...'

'O sir...'

'Or madame, as you like,' Will said.

'Sir,' he insisted, 'you must listen to them doctors and recarcerate...'

'He means to say recuperate,' I put in.

'That's the word for it,' Jeddy said.

'We used to have such fine times together. You remember Marsta Will. That time we went out lobstering and stole some Brewster pots and you had me stay with my head under water...'

'And you almost drowned,' William said.

'But I was safe and you was scolded. I was sure grateful for that...'

'I appreciate gratitude less and less,' William said. 'You were always a favorite, in my arms or not,' and waved the poor old trembling black man from the room to wait on me while I was given further instructions.

William bade me come close and bend low over his bed. Then he told me to take Jedediah into the barn and he was to be given his recent painting of the water, if it was now dry.

When I protested against such a show of meaningless generosity, he said, 'Do as I say. It's mine to give, brother...'

And with that he closed his eyes again and seemed to sleep immediately.

Needless to say the old black fellow did not quite know what to make of such a gift. He protested at first that nothing 'unproper' had ever transpired between him and my brother when they were young. 'I'm sure,' I said to appease him.

Even then, Jedediah did not show any great appreciation of art. When he backed out of the yard, bowing and scraping and with many a 'thank you sir and you tell Marsta Will he be thanked too, and I'll be sure to remember him in my prayers,' he seemed to me somewhat embarrassed for himself and for his old friend, though that's fairly hard to ascertain among people of his complexion.

12 November

I cook soft meals for myself, stroll about and nothing opposes me here, waiting.

The shutters bank and the old back door squeals against its hinge, Mary's wash flaps on the line, and there is nothing here to serve as opposition to my drawn face in the mirror, waiting for his end, thinking of you so far removed in the City in the arms of a man whom you do not allow to know you as I do...

*Nothing opposes me as I wait. The inevitable
will come, or it will not.
Waiting among the last chrysanthemums...*

13 November

Sometimes we are surprised by the sturdiness of spirit and of flesh.

William is up and about again, and he is William, the old cussed fellow, my brother, not Elizabeth.

Immediately he asks for paper and pencil to draw, but we forestall him, feed him broth, and wrap him in a shawl in a comfortable old chair while Mary plays tunes on the piano forte for his pleasure: 'Für Elise,' a Schubert song or two.

I make plans for another excursion to New York as her absence from my arms at his moment is more than I can bear.

14 November

My beloved has greeted me with news so singular and celebratory that I am filled with joy and, at one and the same time, self-loathing. She is in a certain condition and I am to be the father, though I shall not be expected to act *in loco parentis*, that is exclusively to be husband Pruyn's responsibility. Under the circumstances, we do not make love but stare blindly at one another, tears filling our eyes, hearts melting at the prospect of this new cause for separation even as we acknowledge we have forged a durable bond between us.

I have come to deplore hypocrisy at the same time as I am aware of the fragility of the love relation upon childbearing. I am almost cynical enough to believe that in departing again from Iris I have endowed our love with a vivid souvenir.

Words fail.

I am leaving the city of hope and pain to attend my brother.

16 November

William's remission shortlived. He is in our bed again, and barely conscious. His poor ruined lungs are filled with fluid.

I think of my son in the womb of love.

No time for celebration, or even sorrow.

Once more I am obliged to be continent as my heart fills with dread.

17 November

So much for discretion.

In the flood of Mary's tears over my brother I blurted out, 'There will be new life.'

Fortunately her upset was such she misinterpreted my words as a prophecy about the immortality of souls. Or some such.

If he should pass tonight, what then? What now?

19 November

All the troubles I have known are as nothing compared to the end of a life on this Earth. If it comes when it comes so much the easier will it be for the sufferer, so much harder for those surrounding. A flutter of pulse between here and Eternity.

PM: Staring into a jug of marmite, I imagine the bitter taste, another little death. What of the great Beyond? It is as though all I see and perceive remains semi-opaque, clouded-over.

Beyond the gate the portico,
her Venus Mount, the Mount of Heaven:
Mary and I were young and thriving
when love was wagered on surviving...

22 November

I am deathly sorry Lord if I have offended thee.

I pray for grief, for pain, to cancel out the numbness that has come over me for three days since it happened.

Mary is a madwoman again, only silent, as death itself. My heart goes out to her in her grief, but she will have none of it. She wants me by her side even now, but silent, like two stones. I cannot leave her like this to herself, and I am fearful of staying on when we might say things so hurtful as would brand us enemies forever. But now she takes my hand in hers and we sit silent, and I have to dream up chores about the farm to excuse myself from her company.

She is silent; she is taking on the very pall of his demise.

The younger Mounts weep for their uncle. Marjory Simmons and others have brought food to the house of mourning and we chew slowly and without savor.

Mary says, 'You are free to dispose of me as you like.'

'Please, Mrs. Mount,' I interrupt. 'You do misjudge me...'

'And your young woman?' she asks.

'Have I also misjudged her?'

'She married and will shortly bear a child.'

'How fortunate for both of you,' says Mary.

At my own urging I have written to Iris at the O'Mara's: 'We are in equal parts obliged to others. This cannot go on now that others' needs are so much greater than our own. I shall always think of you with love and, if we continue to see each other on rare occasions, I will do nothing to cause trouble for you. I make this decision with a clear conscience and a free mind.'

For two days now I have been writing, when I could take leave of Mary, a recollection of Will's obsequies.

26 November

*The stranger silent in a room
where quiet mourners chastised breath
I watched my crying wife resume
the pale decorum of his death.
I saw her turn back threadbare hems,
twist some soft hair and softly swallow,
Bent over, M declined the shams
white lilies wreathed against her sorrow.
And I could hear dark fabrics give
as she leaned fleshy in despair
that he was gone and she must live
proved this was nothing they could share.
Her laugh of sudden was exasperation
that all his death had left her cold
who lay so still that plain contrition
knit ignominy like a shroud.*

RIP,
19 November 1868

27 November

Our beloved brother William died intestate, leaving the family his cash and some paintings. Little enough. That I am to receive my share is only equitable. I loved and admired him so much I endowed him with my wife. 'He was always good to me,' she says, glumly, as though unaware of my feelings. 'He held me in his arms and comforted me.'

'You must have loved him very much.'

'He was a man of genius,' Mary says, 'and so gentle...'

'Toward the woman I still call my wife,' I add. Neither agreeing nor disagreeing, as though to give assent to a common sorrow to which I can only pretend as 'Farmer Mount,' Mary bows her head.

And in grief with her I let the sorry drench the room and suppurate from our pores as, with so much feigning and not a little sincerity, she reaches out for my hand again and we continue to declare our union indissoluble.

We shall live on here to suffer for his sins. William was not a great man, but petty and cross in many ways. He was mean enough to have an exacting eye. In his paintings recall is perfect: The harbor aglow with light; meadows drenched with sun. Glancing at their surfaces without tears some days after his demise I am lost again in the bygone weather of our lives.

Three nights after William's passing he appeared to me again, in spattered painter's smock, his face in ghastly tatters, and a stink was in the rooms.

I was alone in the house, and thought I'd concocted such an apparition from the bottle. But he was stout with me.

'Why do you rot like this?' he demanded. 'There's so little time.'

'Time for what?' I asked.

'For all of us, a smart fellow like you. You're no longer twenty-one. Hasten, as you must. The husband is always the last to know and you're no longer twenty-one.'

'Go straight to hell, brother,' I shouted back to him, 'and leave us to our lives!'

And then he fled like candle flame, leaving me in the darkness again to sober thoughts.

At twenty-one I fell in love with a beautiful slattern, a rollover named Mary Brewster. She told me nature was inviolable and equally her virtue.

When I left her that first time I'd quite forgotten I had wed a very ordinary woman, and she reminded me, in her ways, to my pain.

All that life affords us are these recondite pleasures of the bedchamber, the fresh breeze coming through the ventilator on warm August nights when Venus and Mercury blaze forth among the clustering stars, touch of slender female bodies, the insignificant rest that comes between sleep and dreams.

Puny little men such as me live on while those who overstep the world are vanquished.

What should intemperate fellows like me do now walking between Earth and Heaven?

Afterword

Schofield Blanch MA

In making these diaries available to the public for the first time I am aware I have violated every possible scruple of privacy.

In my own defense may I simply point out that my grandfather was Nelson Pruyn, the natural son of Mrs. Iris Pruyn and Robert Nelson Mount.

When Nelson Pruyn and his mother moved to St. James shortly after the death of the late Mr. Pruyn in New York City, Robert Nelson was old and sick.

He lasted less than a year. My grandfather was sent to Andover and then to Harvard. He became a lawyer and eventually married Eliza Bowen. They had one daughter, Irita, who was my mother. She married Bertrand Blanch of Montreal, Canada, and I am their sole offspring.

Thus, Robert Nelson Mount's domestic turmoil was the first cause of my own personal history, as it were.

Stony Brook, New York
Spring 1993