

# Swift River



R.C. Binstock

for Mahalia, my daughter

and for the discontinued everywhere

*It does not appear to us to be a very important objection to our plan that certain mill sites will be 80 feet below the surface of the basin, nor that the homes of many industrious people dependent upon these mills for their living will also be submerged, because all these can be paid for, and an equivalent will be given...*

— Massachusetts Board of Health  
on its Nashua River reservoir proposal  
1895



*You don't impound water where people live anymore.*

— Ray Raposa  
director, New England Water Works Association  
1994



*We are the victims of an unfortunate necessity.*

— J.H. Johnson  
selectman of Dana, Massachusetts  
1927

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'J.H. Johnson', written in a cursive style.

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# the last

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I keep thinking about the dog. The one who disappeared just before we heard the news. For a while I figured he was killed by an automobile, then I decided he left us to stay with someone he liked better. But even later, after that, I wondered if he knew. Somehow knew what was coming. And maybe got clear away—you know I raised him, not them—out of the valley to someplace safe.

But he was an old dog even then and not the smartest, if I'm honest. Stuck close to home for protection, more likely, as any simple beast would.

Still I keep thinking about him. If it trapped him in the end. It's so damn unlikely—odds are he was either long dead or long gone by the time they closed the gate—but I keep wondering. I can see him, that dumb old dog, all dirty feet and burrs in his hair, poking around in some forsaken cellar hole that still smelt of horned pout from the summer before, too caught up in his nose to see what was happening. I see him jerk his head up in surprise.

The truth may be that my ma ran him off. And wouldn't ever admit it. Which was peculiar. Because I loved that stupid dog. He was a bad dog but I loved him. I've had a lot of dogs since then; I've worked hard to forget him. They're all just dogs to me now.

I keep thinking about him, though. The last one, maybe. It could be. The last one in the valley.

# Part I

*What in God's name can we do to get water for the  
Metropolitan District?*

— Leslie Haskins  
state representative for Dana and Athol, Massachusetts  
1926

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be the name 'Leslie Haskins', written in a cursive style.

(1925)

Last night it snowed, good and hard. First time this winter. Most folks won't make it to church at all. What can you do, says Papa. Not much. It's the Lord who chooses the weather.

There is snow all over the whole white world. Right now I'm looking out my window. It's Sunday and there are no foot tracks but for Cal's, no smoke from the mills, no automobiles or trucks or wagons trying to use the road. The Rabbit has already missed a run. The stock are all in. Early last week the river froze solid over, now you can't tell it from the bank.

The snow is everywhere, everywhere, everywhere. Everything I look at has snow on it. Mama likes to say it covers up our sins but even I know a snowstorm can't change a thing.

(1926)

In the first week of December Ma took me to Springfield to do the Christmas shopping. She said I wasn't to tell Papa because she wanted to surprise him — she had some money to spend for once — but we stayed a long time, longer than she meant to, and we barely beat him home. Mrs. Pearson gave us a ride (I love to watch a lady drive!) and we saw Pa's train heading towards the station as we came past Mount Lizzie. Ma said, Do hurry, Charlotte! but Mrs. Pearson only laughed.

Before she picked us up we went to visit at the Hornigs. They used to live in the Plains; all their children are grown now. I had an awful lot of cake. We were on our way out when Mama said, Just a minute and went back through their heavy black door for some reason. It was closer to five and while I waited I walked up to the corner. It wasn't so very cold. It had started to snow a little and the street was very quiet, especially quiet, the whole neighborhood, as if no one really lived there. As if they'd all gone away. It was twilight and I could still see everything — the doorknobs and the mail slots and the fences and hedges and the round metal plate in the sidewalk with SMWD on it, when I cleared it with my foot — but it was all fading fast, everything turning purple and dark, and I could hear the snowflakes falling. The street lamps hadn't been lit.

I looked at this big yellow house on the corner, a nice house with a wide garden, watched it steadily disappear except for the lighted windows, and then I heard a bird's call. It made no sense but it was true. I looked all around. When I finally stepped closer and peeked through the curtains I saw a cage in the parlor. There were two of them there. Canaries or lovebirds, I'm not sure which, but they were singing. On and on. I could hear them through the glass.

January 2, 1927

So here's Polly McPhee. Eleven and two-thirds years old. New diary, straight hair, pale eyes, weak smile. Too smart for her own good, too big for her britches. Reads more than she should. Got a wristwatch for Christmas exactly like she asked for, on condition of wearing it only to church until she's thirteen. Wants to have more friends but doesn't know how to do it. Wants to not be called names. Sleeps with a big orange cat older than she is, feeds and brushes the dog. Treats her brother real nice most of the time. Washes her face and says her prayers every night without fail.

I suppose it doesn't matter how I got here. Everybody gets somewhere somehow. Sometimes I'm surprised my parents had me but then sometimes they are too. I know I catch them looking from me to Caleb, both of them, wondering what was the difference. But you can't expect life to give you reasons, Pa tells us whenever he gets a chance. Events happen now and then that make no sense at all.

January 22

Our schoolhouse in the village is almost full up these days. Makes it seem even smaller. We're as jammed as could be.

In a really big school each grade would have its own room. I think that would suit me better. As it is the big ones are mad at me for being caught up with them, the ones my age for being ahead.

I'm not so fond of Miss Thomas. The grownups favor her because she comes from the valley but I'd just as soon we had someone foreign like Miss Miller again, someone from Orange or Pittsfield at least. Miss Thomas is as stirred up as anyone. I see her looking at the clock and I think she's like a woman who means to catch the last train. Wondering if she should take the next-to-last, just to be safe.

January 27

Our town is Greenwich, Massachusetts. Only a name but it's ours. Just say it like the color: *green witch*.

We have lots of ponds and lakes in our town, and river branches running through. Farms and orchards and mills. Make all sorts of things in this valley, most anything you care to have. Not so much anymore but they used to, Ma says. Musical instruments. Panama hats. Shoes, buttons, brushes and brooms. Bricks and whetstones and matches too. Most of the factories are on the lower center branch, down in Enfield or up in North Dana, but Greenwich still has its share. We make good pitchforks in this town, for example, and scythes.

And we grow all kinds of food. Here on our farm there are chickens and cows and maple candy that we make. Vegetables and berries and some honey. Use most of the eggs and milk ourselves but Ma takes a few gallons to the cheese maker now and then and we've been known to trade in the village. Mostly we sell berries and honey, though, and the candy. How much of those things can the four of us eat?

And I suppose I should mention the ice. "Ice capital of America" — that's what they call us. Every winter the strongmen of Greenwich cut it up and ship it out. Some of it goes as far as South America. A funny idea. But as long as they're willing to pay.



January 31

I wish Maisie liked me. I'd do anything if she would. I don't know what she has against me. She showed us a pretty new doll this afternoon—she left it hidden in her coat sleeve in the hallway all day—but she wouldn't let me hold it. She let everyone else.

February 11

I don't much mind the chores in winter. Caleb hates them, or claims to; says he can't stand to rise from his soft warm bed and go down to light the stove and then out in the cold and dark to milk the cows and pitch down hay. I can't say I agree. I expect I don't like getting up any more than he does but for a start I keep fresh socks by me while I sleep, under the covers, so they're warm when I put them on. And leave my slippers next the bed—he runs down barefoot to get his shoes. I've told him a million times he ought to dress himself better when he goes out, but he won't. But mostly it's his attitude. Of course there are days when I'd as soon stay in bed, or just have breakfast and go to school, but the trick as I see it is to not mind so much.

So while he grumbles and complains I have a special time. I could do without the cold but I like crossing the yard to the hen-house, just before dawn, to find them all huddled and drowsy. I like reaching under a warm hen to pull out an egg. The way the pump works even during the worst freeze. Because there's less to do in winter I can go a little slower. I especially like when the old moon is failing and rises an hour or two before the sun. I say goodbye to the fading stars. And Mama waiting in the kitchen, breakfast all made, the smells of Pa's coffee and of butter and eggs drifting around in the air. I like walking slowly with my pail towards the window and seeing Ma's backside through it, or the top of the stove if she's not in the way, or Pa's shoulder as he sits down.

February 20

They say this is the year. It's hard to believe but that's what they say. Most think it was settled a long time ago, though some still say we have a chance. Mr. Partridge scoffs at that. How do we stand up in Boston today, Mr. McPhee? he asked my daddy last week when we were getting us some nails. How do you think they like us up there on Beacon Hill? After we left my father explained that at the meeting in Enfield he and Mr. Partridge had had words. Mr. Partridge wanted to give up, he told me, and try to work the best deal, but he wasn't ready for that yet. Didn't matter whether there was a real good chance of winning, he said; everyone would feel better if we fought it as long as we could.

There's no question that most folks have come to believe it. It has certainly changed the town. A few families we know of have already left. Businesses closed up. It's a long way off if it happens at all but some people act fast.

I suppose facts are facts. They filed the bill last month and it'll pass, everyone says, just like the one before it. I heard they already bought some land.

March 9

Roy Ralston. What a name. Bad enough they're still sending state boys here. But with a name like that on top of it! I doubt they'll ever let up on him. Not that he doesn't seem able to take it. And I guess this must be better than where he was before.

In only two months I'll be twelve.

March 15

Now I'm reading "Treasure Island" by Robert Louis Stevenson. I got it from the library. Mama saw me with it and started to speak but Pa jumped right in. If she can manage it good for her. It's a boy's book, isn't it? No such thing, Pa said. So I took it out of the room.

March 19

Last night we saw a man from the Commission. He was small and harmless-looking but Pa says he's the main engineer. We were coming out of the Inn and he walked right past us on the sidewalk, followed by a whole mob as if he were President or something. That bastard used to fish here, Pa said after they'd gone by. He used to eat our goddamn trout.

Then he apologized for his language. You'd think he'd be more careful. As it is I'm tempted to cross out those words, now that I've written them down.

March 27

One last good snowfall yesterday. We figured it would probably be gone by Tuesday so we all grabbed our sleds and headed out for the hills, just as soon as it slacked off. It looked like the entire south end of town was out there. Lots of older ones too.

It started out pretty cloudy but later on got very clear. I could see the whole valley, getting ready to be spring. And I could see Mount Monadnock, plain as anything, from the top of the hill. The

summit was all snow and probably very windy too but I wondered if there was anyone up there, facing south, looking at me.

April 6

Bad dreams last night. Spooky and awful with a pain in my stomach. Had to sleep with my parents. I haven't done that in years but I wasn't going back to our room, Cal or no.

It was dreams of a fan, or a giant hand. And of acres and acres of ice.

April 12

Roy Ralston fell asleep in school today. With these quiet little snores. At first I wanted to laugh but when Miss Thomas noticed I felt bad. She worked him over something awful. She wouldn't do like that if he had parents, that's certain. When he tried to explain she wouldn't let him talk at all, then once she'd made a fool of him and his face was all red she told him to state his excuses. He said he stayed up too late reading and got up early for chores and just didn't sleep enough. She asked And what, pray tell us, were you reading? He said The story you gave us last week about the railroad. She said You were to have finished that already. I did, he said, but I wanted to read it again. And I read kind of slow. My brother's buddy Augie snickered but Miss Thomas paid him no mind. She wasn't near through with Roy.

Master Ralston, she said, real sharp, I don't know what your habits were before you came here to Greenwich from wherever it was, and I don't care why you stayed up late, but from now on you will not sleep in my class. If I catch you again I will wear you out. Do you understand? He nodded and she got pretty upset. You open your mouth and speak to me, Roy, she said. You say yes ma'am. Yes ma'am, I do understand, he said. It won't happen again.

It had better not, said Miss Thomas.

After school I wanted to talk to him but he hurried away. What makes her so hard? All he did was doze off, even I have done that.

April 16

Can't find the dog. I've looked everywhere. My heart is broken. Caleb seems to care for once and has tried to give me comfort. He claims the dog will come back but it's three whole days now and I'm starting to not believe it. He isn't the sort who goes away for long stretches. In fact he comes in every night. He prefers to stay by me.

I know Ma is glad though she pretends not to be. She never liked him for some reason, nor he her. They just never got along. She tells me we'll get another but I really dislike for her to give up on him like that. *And I want my old dog back.*

She has never said a bad word about that dog. Not a one. Just gone on hating him, is all.

I went out looking today. Of course it did me no good. I can't stand to think about what might have happened to him. So I'll assume he's coming back.

April 19

Another school year soon to end. Another year of too much by myself. Today Edna asked me to come to her house and I got real excited until I remembered promising Ma I would help her with the planting. I didn't know what to do. I thought if I didn't she'd never ask me again but I couldn't break my word to my mama that way. And Edna lives in the village, in a big house near the church, and hasn't any chores at all.

At last I asked could I come another time? She said, Well we'll see Polly. If you have better things to do I wouldn't bother you again. I almost started crying but was able to hold it back. You don't understand, I told her, it's my mama. I just have to go home,

you must know what that's like. It isn't better, I just have to. She looked a little less mean.

And I so want to see your house, I said. I hear it's just beautiful inside. And everyone knows your mother's so pretty. Well why don't you come over tomorrow instead, she said, you can meet her then and maybe she'll bake us cookies. Then I could smile.

April 22

The dog is gone. There isn't any question. If he were alive and within five miles he would have found his way back. I know he loves me. So he must be dead.

April 27

Ma says they finally decided. The bill was passed and the Governor signed. Pa is out in the yard kicking dirt. Ma says we have to leave our homes, every one of us. It's finally true.

"Listen to this! Listen to this!"

"All right then, dearie, read me the rest."

"So life goes on, tragedy mastered, grief controlled and disciplined, but underneath the calm face lies the aching heart and wounded soul."

"You stop now! Just stop it! You're killing me!"

"Step by step this drama moves towards its close; a pageant of many moods, but one theme—the eternal conflict between the old and the new, the struggle between the needs of the many and the rights of the few, the endless enigma of human existence."

"That's her *essay*?"

"A swell one, huh?"

"Her *yearbook* essay?"

"Look right here. See it right here."

"Oh that Maddie! Oh that girl!"

"When I first read it I thought I'd die."

"I'll bet she's so proud of it."

"Mister Chronister thinks she's God."

"He might think I was too if I fed him stuff like that."

"The thing is it's in the 'Echo'. It'll be there forever."

"That's just exactly what she wanted, isn't it?"

"Fran? What's an enigma?"

"Like a riddle."

"Oh."

"Give me the city part again."

"OK. Here we go. 'But a need has arisen, a necessity to satisfy the growing demands of a great city, and this beautiful river, the nestling ponds, the long established homes, the cherished cities of the dead, all that American culture, ideals and civilization cherish and nurture must be laid waste, be uprooted, be destroyed and be utterly removed...'"

"Oh Maddie! You kid! I'll uproot *her*."

"I could never write like this."

"You wouldn't want to, 'retta honey. 'Cities of the dead!'"

"I guess she's all shaken up about it, huh?"

"I guess she is."

"Aren't you?"

"Who, me?"

"Not a little? Not at all?"

"Why? Because we have to go somewhere real? Somewhere with tar on the roads and lights and toilets in the houses and no more stinking pigs and chickens? Fat chance!"

"Still, Fran."

"Still nothing. The sooner the better. And you can tell Mister Chronister I said so."

My mother's fingers were long. I will never forget them. She was not a tall woman and grew stocky as she aged but her fingers were elegant, long lovely and slender, the fingers of a queen. No matter how dry and callused, how work-worn they became. They were long and I admired them. I much preferred them to my own.

To watch her play the piano was to see her secret guise. At other times her fingers were the part that didn't match but on the keyboard they ruled and the rest of her faded. Those fingers. Those fingers. My mother the queen. Mama's fingers playing gently, playing sadly in our parlor.

I thought they would be with me forever, those fingers. That's what I honestly believed.

July 7, 1927

It's a very strange thing. The more it sinks in—about the project, I mean—the less I'm surprised. As each day goes by I understand a little better that it had to end this way. Once the proposal was made.

It's been my whole life, you know, and sometimes it makes me angry. But I could just as well be angry that I'm not a millionaire with Chinese carpets in my house.

July 18

All these high-horse engineers, with their surveys and their drilling. With their cars and Boston clothes. Always polite to our faces but from a distance you can tell they're having fun.

July 24

Roy Ralston is quite an athlete. He can really play baseball. I was watching some little kids play—Fox and Geese, I think it was, and one of the girls had a hoop—and it looked like such fun I wanted to join in, but of course I'm much too old. So I went looking for something to do.

They were having a game out in Peterson's pasture. When I got there Roy was pitching. He throws hard, very hard. Only the two oldest, Jamie Hancock and Amos Carter, could even get wood on the ball. And Roy can hit too—he whaled it—and he runs like

the wind. He wasn't so good at catching but the glove he was using was an old chewed piece of nothing barely holding together. I think he had it tied to his hand with a cord. Must have been a cast-off from a boy who had better; Roy naturally wouldn't have a glove of his own. He probably came to town with just the shirt on his back. If that.

Most of the others refused to like him or be his friend. No matter how good he was. And it's not that he's a state boy—Frankie Duncan was there too and they treated him just fine.

As an example, they were all kidding with each other, calling each other by ballplayers' names. You know, good ones for their own team and poor ones for the other. They were calling Jamie 'Hornsby' and Augie Roberts 'Cobb.' And Caleb 'Handy Andy' when he dropped an easy throw. But Roy was just 'Ralston' or 'he' or 'him' no matter who it was talking. Even after he struck out the side.

It was a beautiful beautiful day. The kind you always think of when it's deep dark cold in winter. They hardly noticed me sitting on the fence in the sun and after a while I got so sleepy I fell right off. They noticed me then. They all laughed but Cal came over to see if I was OK. I told him I was but my ankle hurt lots. I couldn't walk at that moment so I got back on the fence and pretended to like the laughing. To be a good sport.

The game was tied at two when Roy said he was leaving. They all yelled and even cursed but he just said he had chores and walked away. Augie threw a glove at him that hit him in the back but he never even turned.

July 27

Since I'm twelve I made up my mind that I have got to be more helpful. It isn't right that Caleb and Pa and Ma work so hard and I still live like a child. I asked Mama to give me some new chores. She acted surprised (don't know why) and said she would think about it.

This getting older is kind of funny. Sooner or later I'll be grown and there are times when I can plainly see it coming. I stood at the mirror with no clothes on today, when everyone was out. I know my flesh is supposed to change and there it was right on schedule. Maybe even a little early. I hadn't studied it so carefully in a very long time. Don't think I'll ever be buxom like Mama but not a skinny pole like that Estelle either. My breasts (Cal calls them teats) are standing out from my chest and the nipples are all sore. And I'm starting to have a waist.

August 3

Several men here in Greenwich have taken work with the Commission. It's a little surprising. I'm sure some people need the money—since the mills started closing good jobs are getting scarce, and they're not paying too high for farmland—but even so.

Town people don't care so much, Papa says. It's the farmers who love this land; to the mill hands it's just rocks and mud. And they're collecting OK on their houses. Stands to reason they're just as glad.

He talks about it all the time.

Actually folks are all mixed up. Like if you had a hundred diaries they would all say different things. Some seem to be so glad to know for sure, one way or the other, that the actual fact of it doesn't bother them at all. Some seem to think we're being punished. A few are walking around mad. And some others have no real intention of leaving, not even of making plans.

But most of all we're just waiting. What do they say?—sitting on our hands. Years and years to go. That tunnel, for instance, won't even be started until I'm at least fifteen. Who knows when it'll go through, straight from here to West Boylston? I could be married by then. I could be in another state.

When they finally get around to it the intake shaft will be right here in Greenwich, not that far from our farm. A big hole in the land for anyone who comes looking. And they'll take down our

house, probably, along with the fences and the trees and every other thing nearby.

Last night in getting off to sleep I tried to imagine diving in and swimming all the way to Coldbrook through the tunnel, my eyes closed in the dark. I got a very little way but then it turned horrible. Dark horrible and endless. I was trapped in all that water and I couldn't make it back.

August 11

Saw Edna at the pond today. She waved at me in a friendly way, then left the boys she was talking to and walked over to say hello. I admit it made me nervous. They all watched me as she came. But when she got real close she said for goodness sake, Polly, can't you do better than that dress? Don't you want to look pretty? She was wearing a fancy bathing outfit with bows on it but I don't think she had any plans to go in the water. She's already thirteen but in my view she's kind of ahead of herself. If you think well of a particular boy it's one thing but who wants them crowding all around you like that? Especially the older ones. They just get out of hand and push you over into the hay or the snow, and then run. I know that makes Maisie giggle but I don't believe I'd like it. I don't even want to try.

Where's your bathing suit? asked Edna.

At home, I said. Hanging up on a hook.

She looked at me as if I'd spilt milk on my shoes.

But then she asked me to come over in the evening and work with her and her sister and Maisie, cutting up the fruit and melons for her mother's big social tomorrow. I couldn't help but say yes.

She had one of those paper fans they were giving out at the store up in Dana last month. With the fancy lady on it. In the big drooping hat. I never got one because I heard about them late. Anyway you had to buy Coca-Colas to get it and I have better things to do with my nickels. But it's a really nice fan. Edna kept waving it back and forth but not enough to stir a breeze. Just to show me.

August 20

Hot. Hot hot hot. You'd think it'd be cooling off by now. Worked in the garden this morning—like to faint from the sun—then spent the afternoon at the pond with all the other kids, but before going home I went walking in the woods. Needed to get away from that sun, I suppose. Just for a little while. You can't feel as if you're dying in the desert like some Arab when you're under the maples and pines.

As I walked the path I pictured a very, very cold place—so white, so still that it was like frosted glass. The South Pole, I thought. Or the North Pole. Or the South. But somewhere cold, somewhere icy. Far away from this sun furnace. Somewhere other than this town.

Then I found an old leg bone. From an animal, I guess. I wonder how long it was there.

August 29

Disputed with my ma about the dog yesterday. In the beginning it was just chatting. I asked her where she thought he was and she said she hoped he was with some nice people. I asked if she thought he was dead and she pretended to be annoyed but then allowed it might be so. I asked if she sent him away and then she was angry. What put a thought like that into your head, she said, I don't honestly know. Where do you come up with these ideas? If not one thing it's another. And so on in that way, with her voice all raised and tight. As if it was the most terrible thing in the world for me to tell her my mind. As if she didn't already suspect me of thinking it.

I know you didn't like him, so I was wondering, I said. Polly, she shouted—and I want to put this down just in our own exact words—that is the silliest and most rude of all the silly rude things you've ever said to me. I haven't raised my hand to you in years but I'm tempted to do it now. Go ahead, I told her. I will keep silent from this day on.

She sat down in a chair then, and put her head on her hand. It was all of a sudden quiet. I felt awful for what I said.

Later on—I was feeding some scraps to the cat—I heard her playing the piano. Generally she waits until evening but this time she held up her chores. First she played a song I didn't know—it sounded like an old one, maybe one they danced to—and then she played one of her favorites, called a sonata I think, that she plays very seldom. It was so beautiful, even on our lousy old piano. Just beautiful. It made me want to go in to her and tell her how sorry I was, simply throw myself at her feet. After she finished she sat there for a long time, a very long time, and then I heard the piano bench creaking as she got up and went back to the kitchen to start the washing again.

September 6

First day of school. I'm so glad to have lessons. All the other kids complained but that was just talk, I think. Summer gets sort of worn out by its end.

Roy Ralston was there. I was so happy to see him. I don't think we'd laid eyes for a whole solid month—they must have kept him working real hard on the farm, we've had a lot to do ourselves—and when he came in through the door I understood I'd been fearful. That he was gone, who knows where. Sent to another town, maybe. Or maybe back with his mama who turned out not to be dead. It was bad of me to be so glad he was still in Greenwich, because I don't believe he likes his place very much and if he weren't an orphan after all that would be wonderful news, but I was glad anyway. I waved hello, just a little with my fingers, but I don't think he saw. He hitched his pants up and sat down without looking. His shirt was old and kind of thin.

I can tell Roy is smart. Not so good at school but smart. Miss Thomas was lecturing to a few of us in her usual way, about long division, and the thing she was explaining she didn't need to explain. Even Maisie had seen it already. I really wanted to get started but I held myself back, kept my hand from my pencil, so as

not to make her angry. I looked over at Roy and this time he did see me. I could tell he was thinking the same.

September 11

Caleb is getting a little strange. Harder to talk to. He still takes good care of me and he's usually polite but when I go up to him, sometimes, he doesn't seem to really see me. I have to speak to get his attention and even then he might not answer. Only every so often but it makes me feel bad.

It isn't just me. It happens with Ma and Pa too. Like he's watching something different, something moving far away.

September 15

After school Roy waited for me. I'm almost certain he did. He was tying his shoe as I came up behind him and then he stood up so fast he almost knocked me on my bottom.

Hi Polly, he said.

My real name's Rebecca, I said. Those were the first words from my mouth, I can't think why. Probably Ma and Pa and Caleb are the only ones who know.

You want to be called that? he asked.

No one asks me what I want.

Polly's fine, I told him. Is Roy OK for you? It's the only name I got, he said, it had better be. Unless you want to call me Mister. We both laughed at that.

The wind had picked up and it was a tiny bit chilly but we were walking very slowly towards the corner. I was dizzy and wanted to run. Where have you been? I asked him. Working hard? I haven't seen you at the pond or playing ball for a long time. And you weren't at the Dana band concert last week.

Yeah, working hard. They run me ragged. Want to get their money's worth, I guess, especially in summer.

Doing what?

Mostly stomping on the silage, he said. Along with my regular chores. They got a silage mill on wheels. Steam powered. Draw it around with a horse. They run the corn through and when it comes out it has to be stomped down in the silo. Or the wagon. They set me doing that a lot.

Sounds hard, I said.

And risky. You can drown in the corn. Fall under a wheel if you're not careful. Nearly lost a leg last month.

Other than that do they treat you OK? He looked at me like I was silly.

Miss Thomas, you shouldn't be bothered about Miss Thomas, I told him. You shouldn't mind it when she's strict. Just that kind of teacher I guess. But he kept looking at me.

No they don't, he said. They make me eat by myself, in the kitchen.

They do? I wonder why. Most state boys are just like family.

But not this one, said Roy. And then walked quickly on ahead.

September 24

A few of the farms have started making their cider. You can smell it. Later on it'll be everywhere but today it came to my nose as I was cutting across the Atkinsons' wood lot. Guess they have some early fruit they have to take care of.

Sometimes I think this should be called the cider valley. Everyone keeps a barrel or two. Drink it fresh, drink it hard, freeze it off and make jack brandy. Or leave it go to vinegar. And feed the pulp to the pigs. Papa says apples are nature's gift to America; in old times they couldn't have got by without them. When he talks that way Mama gets a look on her that I have never figured out.

Last winter Caleb and Daniel snuck into Daniel's daddy's barn and took the plug out of a barrel of hard cider, then stuck a piece of macaroni in and sucked a bunch out between them. Caleb was looking very queasy when he got home. In fact I had to cover for him, tell Ma he was sick to his stomach from slipping on some ice on the slope and having the wind knocked out of him, keep her

occupied and away so she wouldn't smell his breath before he had a chance to wash his mouth out with soap. I even fed the cows for him. That's how come I know what happened. I made him tell me, as well as give me three sticks of chewing gum and a picture of Valentino. That was the price of my silence. And of my not laughing when Mama pulled his chair out for him, at supper time, and asked if he was all right.

October 9

Indian summer, it's called. And I can't imagine why. I'm sure they liked a warm October but of course so do we.

In the orchard this morning I was looking for drops and a breeze blew soft and warm. *Indian summer*, I thought. I straightened up slowly and then took off my jacket, stretched out my arms. The breeze flowed all around and brought faraway places. Greece and China. Timbuktu. Places I will never see. The leaves above me rustled and I wondered where it came from. The soft breeze, I mean. Where it first started out.

There were Indians here once and they felt those breezes too. Waited for them every year. Some Nipmuc girl, same as me, was standing in that spot with her arms held out wide about a thousand years ago. Stopped in what she was doing. Surprised the air was so warm. Wondering about the wind, what she would have that night for supper, when she would see the first snow. And before her were the trees and the rabbits and deer, and the chipmunks, and the otters in the east branch. Forever and ever. All of them here before we came.

But all those Nipmuc are gone and soon the rest of us too. Gone, long gone. The orchard, the henhouse, the pasture long gone. The otters and the chipmunks and the maples. Once it's done we're long gone. Just the fishes and the turtles where Rebecca used to be.

"Let's get out."

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because your family has been here for five generations?"

"Does anyone care?"

"I do. Me. You too I'd hope. But me."

"And the rest of us?"

"The children are happy here."

"What about their futures, David? And ours?"

"What about their home?"

"A home with no future."

"But we've been making a go of it, damn it."

"Only because of your salary."

"I'm the one rides that train to Ludlow every day, Sarah. It's no skin off your nose."

"Working yourself to death."

"You make it sound like something bad."

"I admire all your effort. I really do. But now it's pointless."

"I hate your saying that."

"That's fine. This is silly. It doesn't matter anymore. They're taking our land, so let's get out now."

"It'll be years yet. We can enjoy this place for a long time to come."

"We'll find somewhere else to enjoy."

"Like my mother's house in Lawrence?"

"I mean another farm. A better one."

"I want this one."

"It isn't just the reservoir, David. I've felt it on and off since we came. My grandfather used to talk about the good years, I remember. When the valley was full and lively. But that was a long time ago. And it's a lost cause now, darling. There's really nothing left to take."

"So you're ready to just lie down?"

"David. I'm an Armstrong. I'll survive no matter what."

"An Armstrong, yes. Exactly. This is your own blessed farm you want to give away so easily."

"That's just not true. It was both of ours. But as of last April it isn't anybody's. In fact it doesn't exist at all."

"Is that you, children? Go back to bed."

# Part V

*People still trusted their government then.*

— Terry Campbell  
Belchertown, Massachusetts  
1996

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a single, fluid, wavy line that starts with a horizontal stroke on the left, curves down and then up, and ends with a horizontal stroke on the right.

"Get a good running start."  
"Not sure I want to."  
"Fraidy-cat."  
"I tear my pants my ma'll kill me!"  
"Chicken. Fraidy-chicken."  
"I'm not afraid, I'm just not stupid."  
"Who's stupid?"  
"Anyone who tries to climb that fence, that's who."  
"Not just *tries to*. I already been."  
"What for?"  
"See the dam. Water rising."  
"Big deal."  
"Skeletons floating in the water."  
"You lousy liar."  
"It's true, dumbo. They never dug up all the bodies."  
"Bones don't float."  
"These ones do. They still got rotting clothes and stuff. And lots of hair. Makes 'em float."  
"What a load of manure."  
"Suit yourself. I'll go alone. Maybe this time I'll jump in."  
"What—with the skeletons?"  
"Want to dive down to the houses. The ones they never took apart."  
"Now I know you're stupid, Percy."  
"Better stupid than scared."

1937

Removal of timber from the Swift River valley is indefinitely halted, although not yet complete.

April 9, 1937

Damn it, I didn't get enough for that syrup. Nor put up nearly enough, lazy sluggard that I am. And I think I'm so smart! If I'd worked harder and asked top dollar I could have doubled the take from Sandberg and still kept some for the tourists. As it is I'll hear them asking "Don't you have any syrup?" the entire blessed spring. "It's all gone" I will tell them and they'll come back with "Just the candy? No syrup?" and I'll be hard pressed not to shriek. "It's all gone" I'll say again, "but I've got some nice honey" and they'll look at me and wait.

April 12

If you could walk through the tunnel, from the other direction, you might come out the western end to find a different sort of valley. A valley cast back in time. Before they started the project, before white people arrived, before Miss Polly came of age and grew so weathered and wise. When I was nine or ten years old I ran across the word *pristine* and thought it the most beautiful idea in the world. Once I'd looked it up, of course. I am sure that my own life was in some way *pristine* a very long time ago but now that doesn't apply, to me nor anything around. We've all been touched by human hands. So maybe I'll drive out to Coldbrook tomorrow and sneak down their shaft and walk the dark until I'm

home. Maybe I'll arrive before the Indians, if I'm lucky, and have the whole place to myself.

April 14

Today's anniversary: the death of the Titanic. Exactly twenty-five years. I was a long way from born. Ma was carrying Caleb.

What I can't seem to shake is the thought of the fathers—with their "See you soon, dear" when they knew it was "Goodbye." They knew for sure, some of them did, some of the women as well, but there could be no saying. No "I love you," no "thank you," no "with you I've been blessed"; just light kisses and admonitions to stay calm. How hideous and low. What a fate. Some little girl was six then and she is thirty-one now and every time she hears a word—the very word "father," or "deck" or "voyage," or perhaps the phrase "take care"—she remembers his embrace and his reassuring tones and his wave as they lower the boat into the sea and she feels, to this day, the urge to rise up on her feet and climb the side of the ship to get back to him, back, make him come along too.

April 22

I sold the cow. Faithful Clara. To people who need her more than I do, which is little if at all. Still I'm sad.

April 27

Talk about famous disasters. They're gone now, the peckers, gone at last, but you should see what they did to our valley.

"Another drink, Miss McPhee?"

"Most of my friends call me Polly."

"Does your husband?"

"Don't have one."

"Have a beau?"

"Not at the moment."

"Another Tom Collins for the lady, please, and bring me a gin and tonic."

"It's funny to hear that word again. Beau. We used it quite a bit as children but it's fallen out of favor, don't you think?"

"I'm sorry. I'm feeling awkward. The fact is I'm an admirer—one of your most devoted readers—and it's a little unsettling to find you so attractive, along with your talent."

"Now I'm the one feeling awkward."

"I didn't mean to distress you."

"You meant to flatter, which I don't really mind, especially at my age. And I'm glad you like my work."

"Men must approach you all the time."

"I teach writing classes, Rob. If you're a fan I'm sure you know that. In a small town in Massachusetts, at a college you've possibly heard of. Everyone there is either 30 years younger or married. It's not exactly a gay whirl."

"I hope you're not lonely."

"Oh no. I have friends. And more than enough to do."

"Join me for dinner?"

*R.C. Binstock*

“Why not?”

July 6, 1937

Amelia is lost. I was certain this would happen. I had followed her achievements and over time her intentions were clear. I don't know whether she'd have chosen to work it out just this way—the distance, the mystery, the absence of remains—but I suspect that she would. It's very simple, now, and clean: woman lost in the blue. Sea or sky, it doesn't matter. What does is that she found what she'd been seeking all along.

I'm so proud of Amelia, for her perfect escape. And for all that flying too.

July 12

God bless the chickens. Always the same. They are my only stock left—I'm not inclined to count the bees—and it is very nice to know I can rely on their discretion. They never appeal to me, never ask what's next, never stare with suffering eyes. Just peck at my toes and then the corn once I drop it, lay their eggs and mill about, make a racket and raise a stink. Sooner or later they'll be in the pot—I will not, will not, will not be taking them with me to Orange, I can promise you that—but they are wholly unconcerned. They have no thought for the future and don't ever wonder why.

July 20

The height of summer. So familiar. I could hardly forget. But it stirs in me the need to find a means of expression. It's not enough to just remember. It's not enough to be smug.

What if I were to be shipwrecked in Ceylon or Kamchatka? How on earth would I describe our New England July? Bad enough that words are all I have to reconstruct this glory; worse yet that I'm still baffled by them, still so anxious and inept; and the most awful thing of all is that I don't even try.

See above what I've written. *The height of summer*. *I won't forget*. Fine reading, yes?

A memory's a treasure, sure, but currency it's not.

July 29

I haven't seen Joe in ages. Since last winter, point of fact. I don't even know why. And I bet he wouldn't either, if I asked, which I surely will not do.

It's ridiculous, isn't it? The pleasure and comfort we could have been giving each other, all this time. It makes me very angry. But I have no idea at whom.

August 12

About those empty empty houses: they tell the kids they're full of wildcats. To stop them falling through a floor or getting a rafter on the head. But of course it doesn't work—they just love to sneak in. To them it's rare fun.

They'd run like hell around the yard, round and round, almost endlessly — my sister giggling, the dog barking, the chickens hustling out of their way and then (stupid chickens) walking right back into it. Every so often she'd stop, turn around, face the dog and shout his name. Then she'd spin and start running again, the dog barking wildly and right on her heels. Sometimes I'd see Mama looking from the kitchen window, a smile on her face but a little worry too. Sometimes Polly would catch me watching her and stop just like that, her cheeks red, breathing hard, and go back to her chores or head into the house.

I suppose if there is a heaven, which I'm precious sure there's not, and I get there, which is even more farfetched, the best part of it for me will be watching that damned kid and that damned dog going round and round and round, giggling and barking, loving each other, going round.

I dreamed I met an old gypsy. Her name was Mrs. Boba. She had a brightly painted caravan, all golden and green, and when I told her she laughed.

"You think that's something?" she asked. "You lousy miserable something? You try living like me!"

"But it's my home," I dared to say.

She approached me as a tiger, a saucepan held high. "You stupid English," she said. "You try living like me!"

I was certain she would strike.

But Mrs. Boba dropped her weapon and stared a long while at my face. Then she gestured to her trailer. "Get in girl. Get in. Time to go."

"This is the last of it."

"Yes."

"Our last moment here."

"Yes."

"Let's wait a minute."

"It doesn't matter."

"There's nothing much I want to do, mind. I know it's time to get moving. But I can't."

"Not yet."

"I just can't."

"Soon you will."

"This was our home."

"Yes."

"And now it's nowhere."

"Perhaps that's true."

"All right then. Get in."

"You're sure you're ready?"

"I said get in."