

*Installment 2: from Cabot's children to Melba's slave days.*

III

William Summer Squash and his clan of children reached the Eastern Woodlands, where they were taken in by the Wampanoag chiefdom. Ten years later William begat Cawanegett who would die in a fall at the age of 22, but not before begetting Mutungaggit (his daughter) who would beget Hastonasettumkenit (her daughter) who circa 1601 would beget a roly polly fair-skinned son named Ducksunne. Ducksunne would become a holy man, live an extraordinarily long time and play an integral part in the greatest clash of civilizations in the history of North America.

Ducksunne's story starts with the events leading to his death. The morning of June 1, 1675, the wizened 74-year-old Native was hobbling along the muddy road that led into Neespaugot. He needed a drink. Fifty years before, his people had given the English tips in tilling the soil. In exchange, the Wampanoag had received tips of the rum jug, which the English gladly filled. Ducksunne, like many of his chiefdom, had become an old tippler.

The showers of the night before gleamed on the lush green leaves. The air was sharp with the wax of overturned earth. Many small farms out-skirted the town, with their tame animals tilling ever more land. The entire countryside was nigh unrecognizable to his half-besotted

brain. The forests of his childhood were razed, the meadows fenced, penning fat lazy beasts the Coatmen called cows. He passed his third schoolhouse of the morning. The colonists' "Ye Ould Deluder Satan" law required every 100 dwellings to have a grammar school. Today, the schools were shut up, silent as the Coatman graveyard on the far side of town.

The Coatmen had been in the land now for 55 autumns. They numbered in the hundred thousand. Yet it seemed but yesterday that the first settlers arrived in a lone ship fashioned of many trees, 120 feet long and 45 feet wide, full of woman and children coughing up misery on the lee side. The job of scouting them had fallen to Ducksunne. Though only 21 years old at the time, he was already a *pniese*, a sorcerer, due to his own pale skin and facial hair. His blood ran heavy with Coatman ancestry of his own, from 200 winters before, when the Delaware children turned up at the Wampanoag village. From the time of Ducksunne's birth, the Wampanoag had respected his difference and had attributed special status to it.

After months of observing the strangers, the young and doughty Ducksunne reported back to the tribal council.

"Their women are like the butterfly, there is nothing to them but their motions and the dust on their backs. The layers of their clothing are cut thin as the leaves and cannot keep the winter from their veins. They pray to the sky, never to the earth, and for that the plants avoid them and the Spirit warns the animals of their coming. Their men do not hunt with the bow and arrow, but with burning powder that makes much noise but hits little. They kneel in congregation and pray to a God who does not know them and permits them to die in misery."

Some in the council were for exterminating these stiff-necked people and their evil god. "Remember Patuxet," they warned, speaking of the nearby village that had been wiped out two years before by an invisible evil carried ashore by sick soldiers.

"These Coatmen are not sick," defended Ducksunne. "They are not soldiers either. These are peace-minded souls who do not know how to live in our woods. They live off bread that cracks like bones into their wooden plates. The ice hangs off the frozen ears of their dying children. They need to be shown, like children."

The great sachem of the east, Chief Massasoit, agreed. "We will not harm these people until they give us offense. Like buckskin in water," he told Ducksunne, "stretch my rules a little and help them."

Ducksunne left trapped animals on the fringes of the English settlement, and baskets of berries, the edible kinds, not the ones that gave their children stomach cramps and the runs. Then, one dawn, he stepped among them, patiently chewing on a reed. Their elders, still belting their britches, gawked at him. Soon the entire congregation had gathered round him. His skin color and size – he was taller than most of them – puzzled them.

Ten winters more and those 49 survivors of the boat had become 50,000, many of them riffraff barely controlled by a ruling class of Puritans. The Puritan was a strange being who desired to construct something called a utopia. What Ducksunne understood by this was a world where nothing changed. "The Puritan wants every day to be no different from the one before it," he told Chief Massasoit. "They worship the river which does not move."

"The river which does not move is not a river," answered the Sachem, "it is death."

"They worship what does not move, what does not change. They wake up as they went to bed, praying to find the day exactly as they had left it the night before. They expect to find their harbor crowded with shipping, their town crier making his rounds, their watchman calling out the hour, their Ancient and Honorable Artillery practicing on the Commons. Funerals are an amusement to break up an industrious day. There is a general call for help in seeking a stray cow. The sun sets, the shutters fall with a crack, and the following day they wake in mortal fear that sometime during the night their Satan has changed things around. They persecuted those who would innovate, calling them excitable and ambitious. These people are scorned and driven out."

Ducksunne knew many debates with the Puritan. Each one left him in despair. He began to recognize his folly in thinking he could help them understand the ways of the Wampanoag. Why couldn't these Englishmen hear the whispering stones? Why were they angry when Ducksunne spoke of the spirits of plants? Why did they insist that only a man had a soul and only a Calvinist would get through the eye of a needle into the happy hunting ground?

"If all things had a soul, imagine the chaos!" they argued.

Could they not see that the ways of the Chieftom were the ways of the spirits? Why did they fight the idea that life is the cascade of spirits, it is phantom, it runs like the water and is ever changing?

But such talk only angered the Puritan. "You speak of nature as a morality unto itself, Sunny Duck! This is atheistic. God is the only truth. The law of the jungle is not God's way."

And so Ducksunne despaired. And so Ducksunne drank, for he saw no good solution ahead.

The Puritan Theocracy was powerful. Too powerful to change or uproot. Their twin colonies had taken root, blossomed, and pollinated north and south. Settlements had grown into towns engendering other settlements engendering other towns. The entire spider-leg coastline was now festooned with ports, with Neespaugot a major harbor equal to Boston in size and importance. Two spires rose above its tree line, houses and shops clustered its peninsula and a formidable fortress stood sentinel upon the hill that divided the two bays. Hundreds of roads were flung like netting deep into the black forest. And, with ever increasing numbers, the Natives were chased and heckled like Great Wounded Bear by the White Wind, snagged and dragged towards religion and colony life.

Ducksunne arrived at cobbled Cabot Street. The shutters on all public places hung low as the eyelids of the guilty. The tavern where he had hoped to take refreshment was closed. Then he remembered. It was the day they called the Sabbath. From 6 o'clock Saturday night to Sunday sundown, no travel was allowed, taverns refused all patronage. The constables forbade ninepin games and even two men talking in the street could be arrested. His old mind had never attuned itself to the customs of Puritan Neespaugot. Still, he blamed only himself, for had he but counted the suns.

Ahead, in the middle of the square, three of the king's militia were milling about a young trollop locked into a pillory. The poor woman had been caught out on the Sabbath in her line of work. By the sounds of it, she estimated that a loud voice spoke better in her favor.

"Three heathens! One was a half-breed light as mayweed!"

The louder she bawled, the less her captors seemed to understand, and they made her repeat constantly.

"It was the heathens that slit the census-taker's throat! I saw the whole thing!"

This produced only more incomprehension and consternation on the part of her audience. One militiaman smacked her indefensible bottom with the flat of his musket. "What heathens?"

"One held his arms!" she yelped. "Another his legs and the third, a half-breed, did to him what Canon Fulbert's ruffians did to poor Peter Abelard. They butchered then robbed him. As God is my witness, they was heathens."

In her terror she glimpsed the feeble Ducksunne glued haplessly to her interrogation.

"There he is, governors!" shouted the prostitute. "That's the one, that's the half-breed!"

They ran at Ducksunne. His instinct told him to flee, but his hips and legs felt like lumber. The soldiers knocked the aged Native to the ground and, to preclude any further idea of escape, summarily broke his old hip with the butt of a musket.

Ducksunne and two other unlucky tribesmen were carted out to the North Road for a quick trial and hanging. As the rope was being tightened around his leathery neck, someone in the crowd recognized him.

"Hold on there, governor. Is that not Sunny Duck?"

"And what of it?" asked the executioner.

"By God, he is the savior of the colony."

A restless murmur swept through the crowd. They had all been children once, had grown up with the legend of the beneficent Sunny Duck. A town alderman rose to be heard. "Good brethren, the Bible says an eye for an eye, does it not! This heathen has been condemned for murder. Lest you forget, Sunny Duck is the product of original sin. Look at him! His half-breed features and tipping nature are recrudescence proof that no sin escapes the Almighty. He had his chance many times over to accept the Gospel, but did not. And this is the result. His execution is right, it serves its place in the intricate workings of a moral world. Sin of any kind bequeaths a sinner's fate."

The latch was kicked, the trap door opened, and Ducksunne fell through with an audible crack of spine....

But not *his* spine. His rope broke first, and he hit the ground with a sickening crack of bones. "This old Indian," mumbled the executioner, "is as unlucky as a pair of left boots."

It took five men to transport Ducksunne back down the road and into the tavern where he had been hoping to get a drink. The soldiers laid him out on a table sticky with ale. Then, they took great pains to revive him. A doctor was brought in. He "examined" Ducksunne from a distance, nodded and walked back out of the tavern.

A young woman in a bonnet and dress managed to slip past the soldiers. Before they realized that she was not white, the knife in her hand gleamed like a river trout. She threw herself at Ducksunne's bindings and began a futile attempt to free him. Her tears landed on his chin. "*Aque*, Melba Blue Jay, you are strong of spirit," he said, wishing to embrace his

granddaughter but unable to make his arms work. Neither could he feel his legs. His body was now as broken as his spirit.

She buried her face in his shoulder. “Grandfather, I didn’t protect you.”

Furious at having been fooled by an Indian, the soldiers seized her and pried away her knife. She turned on them defiantly. “He is an Indian Holy Man! You give the Wampanoag the moral authority to commence war!” Her flawless English and gravitas stunned the soldiers. She freed herself and returned to his side. “What should I do, Grandfather?”

“Tell our people not to fight.” Ducksunne was incapable of saying more. He knew that he looked upon his granddaughter for the last time, and his heart was heavy. The soldiers threw her aside and lifted the old man. They carried him back outside and up the street to the gallows. Ducksunne heard Melba Blue Jay beseeching them the whole way. “Please! You call us heathens but no Indian would twice murder an innocent man!”

The executioner, checking the rope’s grip, ordered the men to stand Ducksunne upright until he could get the noose around him. Then he took in the slack and stretched Ducksunne’s paralyzed body upright. “All right, let’s get on with this.”

The trap door sprung again with a whack. “This day,” began one farmer’s journal of 2 June, “an old half-breed died twice in the colony.”

The great and wise Massasoit had been dead now some 13 years, and his son Metacomet was in charge of the Northeastern Nations. “Philip”, as the English pejoratively called him, did not like white men. He was a rye boastful Sachem who justly considered himself the equal to Charles II. After all, both were royalty, even if he was brown and didn't have an army of valets to dress and powder him up like a cake.

Metacomet liked going into Neespaugot to shop, drink, play cards and gamble away land. Gambling land was good fun, for how could he lose or win something that didn't belong to him. Foolish were these white men to believe they could possess the land, the water, and even the sky above.

For their part, the tavern keepers were always delighted to see the sinful Sachem come striding into town like a spunky Corsican. He was good for business. Around a table of whisky bottles and cards, he attracted every card-cheat and land-grabber for miles, who in turn bought the Sachem spirits enough to make him a lousy card hand.

The drunker grew the chief, the easier he was to cheat. The more land the townspeople soaked out of Metacomet, the less they feared and respected him. Three times he suffered the indignity of being dragged before a Coatman court of law and ordered to pay fines of more than 100 pounds. The gallery hurled insults at him.

*Young King Philip  
Ruler of Great Old Greece.  
So long, good King Phil,  
Naked as a beast!*

Their laughter and jeers went off like muskets.

The day after Ducksunne's execution, Metacomet led a large Native war party into Neespaugot. They marched up Cabot Street, a thousand moccasins slapping the cobblestones like falling arrows. At the CourtHouse a wall of drawn muskets gleaming in the noonday light met them. The intense standoff lasted half an hour, until the arrival of the royal governor's lazy minister, a ruddy crass fellow with five chins and no sense of diplomacy, named Sonono.

The Sachem demanded to know why three of his tribesmen were strung-up along the Old North Road.

"They were thieves and murderers," answered Sonono coyly.

Metacomet, tall and endowed with muscle and vigor, took two angry paces towards the unpleasant little minister. The Sachem's chiseled nudity contrasted mightily with the feathery volumes of gowns and crowns of those who sought dominion over him.

"You do not judge my people! You are nothing here!"

Sonono, a dour Englishman who lost his stiffness only while being switched on the bare bottom by the boy who emptied his chamber pot, suggested rather haughtily that "King Philip" take a good look around him.

"Open those Indian eyes of yours at the goings and comings into yonder port. Look at them, all those men and women and their livestock and belongings. Hundreds pour in at each landing of a ship. You Indians really have no say in the matter. This colony belongs to a European king, not a woody chief. Power lies in property, not in feathers and arrows."

From the Native ranks stepped a young woman so European of color and feature that the minister took her for a colonist who had stumbled inadvertently among the savages. An aid put him straight, saying she was the granddaughter of one of the executed criminals, a clever girl from the Praying Village who spoke perfect English and often went dressed as a white woman. She had the Sachem's ear and approached him without fear or deference. Metacomet seemed most eager to hear her speak.

"Sachem, abide by your father's League of Covenant," advised the woman. "Sue them in their court of law."

Metacomet grew angry at this suggestion. "*Megerchid!* Shit! The Covenant works in one direction only! The time for judges, quills and ink is over!"

Undaunted, the female continued to argue with him. "Would you fight the entire Coatman army? Do you have the support of the Abenakis, the Mohawk, the Mohegan, the Pequot?"

The Sachem stood away from the girl and addressed the English. "Your horned beasts trample our corn, your homesteaders shoot at our people for crossing our own land..."

"You gambled away that land," interrupted the minister. "Your father Massasoit..."

A horrified gasp from the Native ranks silenced Sonono. Metacomet grew apoplectic and the girl seized his arm to steady him. "He does not know..." But the chief drew away from her and left the spot, and his army followed. Only the girl remained. The minister seemed confused and looked at the girl for an answer.

"It is the worst of all insults to pronounce the name of a dead Sachem."

“Girl, what is your name?”

“I am called Melba Blue Jay, and my work is done here.”

“Meaning what?”

“You’ve earned your war.”



Della called “King Philip’s War” the most lethal, merciless conflict in all of American history. It left more than half the towns and settlements in New England in ruins and ten of thousands of deaths just on the English side. Death was everywhere, human, livestock and even the dead themselves were dug up and spread far and wide. The English line of habitation had been pushed to the coast.

It was worse for the Natives. The federation of warring Wampanoag, Narragansett, Nipmucks, Pocumtucks and Abenakis had been wiped out, their women and children shot dead in the fields or burned alive by the thousands in their swamps. The few survivors were either hanged and quartered (if they were lucky) or shipped out as slaves to the West Indies.

My aunt saw that cataclysmic event as more than a war, more even than the archetype of all Indian wars to follow. For Della, King Philip’s War was history’s most large-scale allegory, representing the epic struggle between movers and mopers. She said it was a struggle that had begun 13,000 years before, when some early farmer took fear for his possessions and bashed out

the brains of some wayward hunter-gatherer with a crude agricultural tool. She attributed (rather unfairly if you ask me) the role of moper to the colonists, while the Natives played the movers. “Mopers,” she said, “always beat movers.”



The night Neespaugot burned, Ducksunne’s granddaughter carted up devastated Cabot Street. An eerie light shrouded the town from the blaze of timbers entrapped beneath a thick ceiling of smoke. A rain of ash and bits of English clothing and paper from their Bibles fell about her. The stench of gore hung heavy in the air, punctuated by the pounding whoops of celebrating Natives and the hellish caterwauling of dying livestock. The wooden wheels of Melba Blue Jay’s cart gripped the blood-soaked cobblestone in a most sickening sticky manner. Dead English lay everywhere, many without their heads, all of them naked, having had their vestments shorn from their persons with a vengeance matched only by the frenzy with which the Natives had splintered and burned the Englishmen’s houses. As she weaved about the bodies and dismembered limbs, she crossed a befuddled cow warbling along the street, trailing its guts over the cobblestones. Its horns were broken from its head and its eyes were caved in. It had been allowed to live in order to become a walking message of hatred.

Melba Blue Jay was no proponent of this mayhem, though she could translate it. The English had their writing, the Natives did not. So, they wrote their grievances in blood. Your clothing insults us, your houses insult us, your religion insults us, and your beasts of burden insult us. We take your heads so that your souls shall not pass into *Cautantowwit's House*, a place of good weather and good death.

Melba knew that the English would be poor translators of these acts. They would read only barbarity in the message. She had warned Metacomet, "They will come for you and kill you." The Sachem had only laughed. "Let them come, so that I may kill them first."

Up ahead she saw the gallows and its three victims still silhouetted against the lighter sky. Three days, and neither the English nor the Natives had seen fit to take down the bodies. The English had kept them up as a lesson. The marauding Natives had avoided the gallows out of superstition; after dark, the Spirits did not wish to be disturbed. The three bodies went on swinging.

She parked her cart under the scaffolding and cut each man down and his body landed in her cart. Then, she drove the dead men from that place to the forest where she had built a communal barrow. Two of her cousins, both Christian Indians, waited there to help her. They did not approve of her action, for, like her other relations who had converted to Christianity and had gone to live in the Praying Village in the south bay, her cousins were for a Christian burial. "Jesus will not accept him in this way, Melba Blue Jay."

"Our Grandfather was a Person, not a Christian," she reminded them firmly. And she did things her way. First, she de-fleshed her grandfather, then rolled him in mats and skins and put

him in the barrow. Her cousins did likewise with the two strangers. They closed the mound with stones and Melba Blue Jay chanted the songs Ducksunne had taught her when she was a child living between the two cultures, between the Praying Village and the Tribe. When she was done, her cousins asked what she would do. She told them she intended to join the Native federation and fight the Coatmen. Her cousins feared for her life, but she left them anyway, fearing more for their safety than for her own. From this day onward, the life of a Christian Indian would be worth nothing to anyone. The Natives no longer knew them and would not fight for them, and the English would now despise them. "Say goodbye to my mother and sister for me," she said and set out to join Metacomet.

The war went badly for the colonies at first, but the Crown wasn't about to let its investment fall into the hands of savages -- that is to say, the French. England was eventually forced to take the fight seriously. More troops poured in. Still, the outgunned Narragansett Federation might have beaten an army of great firepower (as would happen exactly 100 years later in 1776) save for one fact: it was fighting a two-front war. The English and their Pequot allies in front, and the hated Mohawks and Mohegans to the rear. "Natives," said Aunt Della, "depleted other Natives."

A year and a half later, chased to his last stand, Metacomet faced the Coatmen on a hill sweltering under the August sun. Importunate insects clung in clots to his gory gashes. The Sachem had badly twisted his knee and stood with the aid of a cudgel. Naked but for small breeches and stockings, he raised the last weapon remaining to him -- his fierce regard -- and

trained it on his executioners. “Shoot!” he taunted. But the soldiers did not fire. An interminable inactivity reigned at that moment on Mount Hope.

It was neither the chief’s stature nor his famous black stare that stopped the English troops from firing. Rather, it was the idiot fact that, though they had put bullets in tens of thousands of heathens over the past 14 months, no soldier had yet shot a shorthaired Indian.

“The Coatmen know you in your long hair,” Melba Blue Jay had advised him. “They consider your hair a badge of cruelty and cannibalism. Short hair is your best disguise. It will protect you from the white man’s bullet.”

She was right. No white soldier moved. But an ambitious Christian Indian seized his chance at payoff and sent a ball charged with burning powder into the Sachem’s chest. Metacomet fell dead.

The Coatmen dragged “that doleful great naked dirty beast”, as one soldier called him, down the hill where the commanding officer declared that “Philip is to rot above ground, not one of his bones to be buried”.

Metacomet was beheaded and quartered, his arms and legs were hung in four different trees, a severed hand was given to the Native who’d shot him (who would stick it in a bucket of rum and display it for pennies) and his genitalia were boxed and shipped across the Atlantic to Windsor Castle. The chief’s head was taken on a pole back to Neespaugot and set in the burned-out town square. Fifty years later, Thanksgiving banquets would still be taking place under the man’s skull.

History, said Della, has a sense of irony. Ducksunne had welcomed strangers aboard a ship called the *Mayflower*. Fifty-six years afterwards, his granddaughter and 23 other Natives were shipped out of the colonies on a slave ship christened the *Seaflower*.

The English West Indies were experiencing uprisings of their own and wanted nothing to do with belligerent Native Americans. Port after port turned away the *Seaflower*. Eventually, it was obliged to sail on for Africa, lightening its load in mid-Atlantic by tossing overboard seven Natives, including Metacomet's 10-year-old son, before continuing on to Tangiers. There, a French slaver purchased Melba Blue Jay for four pounds sterling and shipped her back across the Atlantic to French Haiti.

Della reckoned that Melba Blue Jay would have been about 19 years old at this time. In the last light before dusk, when the earth and all things seem luminescent rather than refractive, Melba Blue Jay stood on the Port-au-Prince auction block, filthy, lousy, beaten, scabby but still riveting the marketplace. Tall, raw and sculpted, she was, according to Della, "like some kind of Hollywood movie slave, essentially beautiful and wrapped in a sort of romanticism." Her terra cotta coloring glowed like Italian roof tiles at twilight. Her mass of hair was black as the cats that stalked the Coliseum at night, and her eyes were big as the Coliseum itself.

"Messieurs, Mesdames," yelled the auctioneer over the clamor, "bidding now opens on this superb specimen, this regular flesh-and-blood cenotaph, this living monument to the beauty of a faraway dead people. How many gold Louis do I hear?"

As the bids soared to record levels, the crowd's decorum degenerated. The bidders stepped on each other's feet, elbowing in, pushing, shoving, and battering the block with lewd comments and unabashed displays of poking manhood. Blood rose with the hand. The marketplace became an agora of flush-faced satyrs in doublets.

The merchandising was whittled to the two richest slave owners: Veucq the sugar baron, a short pickled man with a heart condition and sick temperament to match, and the tall syphilitic Jean de Meunier, ex. Parisian pimp turned coffee magnate.

As the number of gold Louis climbed into the thousands, the complexions of both men reddened like hot branding irons. The bidding was becoming ridiculous, so the two men reached an accord. They would split the girl 50-50. The colony lawyer was summoned from the podium to put the appropriate papers in order. Maitre Gras set to work immediately and developed the deed in a quarter of an hour. *The aforementioned parties herein and of their own accord accept Article 47 of the Slave Code stipulating that one Louis will be flipped and consequent winner of said coin toss will own the right, protected under Article 48, of first offspring of each sex, with the second of each going to the loser.*

"To the toss then!" suggested the ex. pimp sportingly.

The sourpuss Veucq won the toss and licked his greedy and rotted gums. Jean de Meunier was not a sore loser. "When shall I get her?"

The contract worked out like this: the pickled Veucq had her Monday through Wednesday; the syphilitic de Meunier Thursday to Saturday. Sundays were to be divided evenly.

By terms of contract Melba Blue Jay was renamed Clarisse by Veucq and Monique by Jean de Meunier, like a dog with two egocentric masters. She resented both of her owners, but in time would acquire a tolerance for the ex. pimp, who treated her like a valued mistress. He would teach her French and introduce her to the philosophies and sciences of the Enlightenment. At his ranch, she slept in Parisian linen.

The other, Veucq, taught her true loathing for the first time in her young life. He stood but bosom high to her even in boots and was an unsavory, foul-mouthed tyrant who ordered his henchman to rip a slave's back to shreds while he casually ate his breakfast. He had few teeth left in his head, so there was a perpetual stench of rotted gums punctuating his speech. The fine clothing he donned on occasion only mocked the unwashed body beneath; he never bathed and left every space he'd occupied reeking of wet chicken. The man, undressed, would lie atop her and breath down her neck, at which times the tips of his toes -- all dead skin and dirty nails -- rubbed the back of her knees. He was a leech she had to bear year after year.

On Veucq's plantation, Melba Blue Jay spent most of her time in the refinery, chopping up and boiling the cane for molasses. When he wanted her, he did not ask or hint. In front of the African slaves, he threw her facedown in the shags and choked her while lifting her skirts. She felt his slimy heat upon her buttocks and cringed in anticipation of brutal penetration. It never

came. Only a sterile dry humping and his hot slobber on the back of her neck. He climbed off strangely mollified then suddenly angrier than before.

The moons rolled down the firmament and back up the opposite side. The seasons passed with an indecent celerity. Melba wondered if she would ever see Neespaugot again. Exile was the heaviest burden to bear. Homesickness seemed as physical a sensation as side cramps. She longed for the eastern woodlands. The Land was mother to the People. Dispossessed of both, Melba felt herself one of the eternally undying who haunt the living world, unable to join *Cautantowwit's House* because her soul had been ripped from her shoulders like a Coatman's head.

If her spiritual life gradually dried, her body remained a succulent. The unhappy woman bore four children, all of them to the unwitting Jean de Meunier. Veucq was impotent and had knowingly bought himself a reproductive investment for half price at the ex. pimp's expense. He put her on guard: "Breathe a word of it to de Meunier, and I'll slit your throat."

"But I'm half his."

"Then I'll kill your whelps."

In accordance with the deed of purchase, Veucq had won the first born of each sex. They were, in order, Therese and Charles, beautiful strong babies both. The duped de Meunier, with his penchant for joke names and bad luck, wound up with Cote-en-Long (Long Rib), so-named because the listless and sickly baby girl preferred lazing on her back to learning to crawl. The youngest child, syphilis-deformed and mentally retarded, he called Nero.

Knowing that Melba preferred de Meunier's plantation, the spiteful Veucq enjoyed sending her off by stripping her suckling children from her breast and tossing them into a basket like stray kittens. "The animals stay!"

"They need my milk!"

"If they die it is no great loss to me."

The African slaves, whipped into Catholicism, tried to give her a Christian hope. "Veucq no healthy man, heaven strike'im dead. The Lord ruin his fields and run him down."

Neither happened. Instead, the tyrant lived on and grew as rich as Croesus. The weak either complied or died.

The first-born, Therese, like her mother, was fair enough to pass for white. As she grew older, it was apparent that she would also be a tall beauty whose fine features would keep her out of the field, to be sucked on like sucrose by some foul-breathed white man. It was only a matter of time. Already the lecher that owned her was launching licentious looks at the 12-year-old.

Therese was a loud playful child, ignorant to her physical precociousness and the attention it drew from behind the mask of shade on the porch. She and her brother Charles would disobey their mother and play in the front field, under the eye of the rum-soused Veucq. A flashed cartwheel of splayed limbs, bare feet and bottom tumbling, tangling in the grass with her brother. Veucq watched, waited and drooled. Melba tore from the main barn and clapped her hands to get them to return to the refinery, away from that porch and its resident evil.

Rockets of thunder rent the heavy Caribbean sky. The bright lamps of an angry god turned the landscape white, the sea and distant islands flared, and the rain crashed down in

buckets on the thatched roofs of the slave huts. Between bolts of lightning, Melba heard the scream. She heard the direction even before the scream itself, as if she had fore-heard it. She robed herself in the coarse sack the tyrant gave his slaves for blankets and raced for the children's hut.

As she came through the threshold, she saw Veucq bent over Therese, his breeches shucked round his ankles like husk, and his filthy hands still locked round her throat. She was dead. Her son was curled up in a corner, hands covering his face, blood dripping through his fingers onto his straw mat.

“That'll teach him to interfere and the little bitch to bite my hand!”

The French colony's sponge of apathy easily managed the crime's puddle. The child's strangulation got soaked up without a trace. The murderer continued to climb shamelessly atop the victim's grieving mother.

## VI

In the last days of the 17th century, Jean de Meunier sat propped up in bed, as people slept in those days. He was dying. His face and arms were eaten away by the tertiary stage of his pox. A silk screen was netted over the bed to keep out the flies and veil his hideous appearance.

Melba Blue Jay fanned at his side, holding a silk cloth steeped in rosewater to her nose. The enslaver had proven to be a decent enough man. On his death, her children Long Rib and

Nero were to go free. What horrified her was that now she would become the property of Veucq alone.

"Do not fret, Monique," he said, breathing laboriously under her fan. "Veucq won't last much longer."

"That's what everyone says, and yet here he is still. Your world will not release him because he is too perfectly suited to it."

"The worm will have the final say."

"Worms! Stupid white man talk! What do I care for worms!"

Jean smiled wanly. "And I tell you he'll have his comeuppance, one way or the other. Maybe it will come in a way known only to him. Not all dogs hear the same whistle."

Melba Blue Jay circled his bed to the other side, behind the flickering candle on the escritoire. She put down the fan and picked up the jug of rosewater. She sprinkled some on her handkerchief, before setting aside the flaps of the silk screen. The man was a horror of suppurating sores; his foul stench rose in a cloud off his wasted flesh and made her gag through her wet mask. But she went about her duty, watering him down to ease his terrible suffering. She closed the netting before importuning insects could get at the pus.

Melba ached with indecision. Time was visibly flowing out with the pus. Did she let the man die ignorant to the fact that Therese had been his daughter?

"Be wise, Monique. Attempt something foolish and Veucq will kill you, now that you'll be his."

"I do not care to live in a world made by and for the Veucqs."

"Then think of your children."

"My children! A slave master telling a slave woman to think of her children! When, moreover, they are *your* children as well!"

"I don't understand."

"Veucq is impotent."

The pestilence-smelling slaveholder leaned forward off his pillow. "All of them are mine?"

"He threatened to kill us if I told you!"

"Nonsense! The legal consequences . . ."

"There are no legal consequences for such as he, you said so yourself!"

Of course she was right. Jean dropped back onto his pillow. His anger subsided. Enough of blame and now to a plan. With a little luck, a wrong might still be set right.

"Help me up. I do not plan to die in bed, Cherie. Nobody cheats me and gets away with it. Quick, run and fetch the lawyer."

It being Friday, Veucq was astonished to see Melba Blue Jay enter his refinery. More surprising, she had come with Maitre Gras and the pimp, all 80 pounds of him, a walking talking putrefaction of pestilence pursued by a procession of assorted insects attracted by the strong odor of puss. The dying man had an unscabbarded rapier cuddled between his wheezing chest and rotted arms.

"Messieurs, what an honor," heckled Veucq.

Jean motioned off Maitre Gras, who paled but deferred with a nod of his duckbilled head. The diseased man leaned on his sword, the blade of which bent like a bow. Veucq, much amused, set down his tools on the bushel of stalks and took the sweat off his brow with his grimy cuff.

"Is this a last confession?"

"Nothing so ceremonious. The simple dispatching of a rat."

"Come come," Veucq pouted sarcastically, "you do not want to deprive so many flies of the few months of puss you have left."

"The only thing the flies shall be deprived of is the spume you leave in dark corners, you impotent pederast."

"Sir, you must die for that injury."

"To kill me in a duel is to forfeit your rights to our mutual slave. That, rat, is the law, as Maitre Gras shall attest."

"How chivalric of you, to choose to die for this Injun whore. Niggers out!"

While his slaves cleared out of the premises, Veucq retrieved his own rapier suspended by a cord from the rafters. Only Charles, now 15 years of age, chose to disobey the master and stand by his mother. "That goes for the both of you!" But Melba held her son fixed to her. Veucq took a step towards them, but the doddering de Meunier headed him off.

"They would not miss your skewering for the world, sir."

"Fine. When I finish my surgery on you, I'll do to both of them what I promised!"

Veucq bounded three angry steps towards Jean, who came off his sword and swiped feebly at the air but missed his target. But instead of finishing the business, Veucq changed directions and made a thrust at the boy. Melba pushed him clear and took the sword in the shoulder. Her sacrifice enraged him and he backhanded her swiftly on the head with the sword's cup-like hilt.

De Meunier recovered and made a stab at Veucq's exposed back, but the blow lacked such strength that the sugar baron was only grazed. Veucq swore, stepped through Jean's defenses, made a perfect lunge, and drove his blade into his chest. The blade appeared behind the wounded man's back, and was immediately withdrawn.

How Jean managed in his sorry condition to keep his feet can only be attributed to that wonderful mystery of human pluck. Mortally wounded, he seemed no more surprised by the hole in his chest than by the warm summer rain that had begun to fall in opaque sheets beyond the barn door. Such had been his physical pain over the past year that he barely felt the blade cleave his flesh. He gathered himself for another go. Veucq assumed the position to finish him off. Charles' creeping approach was drowned out by the clatter of rain against the roof. The cane cutters required two hands to lift. The boy landed the flat end on Veucq's crown.

Melba Blue Jay lay face down over a large sheaf of cane, bleeding but still alive. Jean was sitting against an unbundled stack of sugar stalks, making liquid gasps. A viscous thread of saliva hung off his cheek. The whole front of his shirt was drenched in blood; his boots lay in a pink puddle of rainwater. He called for Maitre Gras.

"I'm ... done for ... that's ... the principal," he gargled softly, struggling with each word. "You are my witness, he has killed me and forfeits his rights to Monique." The lawyer concurred. Jean turned to the boy. "Fetch his knife."

Veucq lay belly-up on discarded panicles and shredded stalks. Charles couldn't move. Even unconscious, Veucq intimidated him.

"Go on, I say ... take the damn thing!"

Charles couldn't bring himself to budge. He was as afraid of de Meunier as Veucq.

"Fool! Where's your sense of revenge! Look at your mother! If that doesn't heat your frozen nerves, lad, you're a pretty worthless specimen and no son of mine."

Charles crawled towards the unconscious Veucq and unloosed the dagger from his girdle.

"Do not kill him," instructed Jean, his sinister grin the vengeful exhibition of a dying man's last pleasure. "He deserves worse. What's done to saints will do for sinners. Just cut where I tell you."