

John Hanson Mitchell

The Bear's Maid

An excerpt from the novel INDIAN SUMMER

Epitaphs:

Tom Dublet, or Tom Doublet, also John Thomas, sometimes Thomas Goodman. In the late eighteenth century, Tom Indian: Born: c 1640 Merrimack River Valley
Died: Littleton, 1724. Burial site unknown.

Mary Louise Dudley: Wife of Parkman Dudley, minister in this town.
Born: Blackwall in Kent, may 12, 1690 d. Lyttleton May 8, 1722.
that She strayed May God Rest her Soul

Here lies the body of Mingo:
Slave of Jeremiah Cogswell. A native of Africa
died 1753, aged about 60.

*Tho born in a land of slavery
He was born free
Tho he lived in a land of liberty
He lived a slave
Till by his honest tho stolen labors
He acquired the source of slavery
Which gave him his freedom
Tho not long before
Death the grand tyrant
Gave him his final emancipation
And set him on a footing with kings
Tho a slave to vice
He practiced these virtues
Without which kings are but slaves*

Bulkeley Emerson.
Born, Concord, December 12, 1802
died Littleton, April 25th, 1849.
Brother of Ralph Waldo
Rest in peace

Chapter One: The Bear's Maid

Journal Entry, June 1956. HRB

There is nothing new in all of this:

"Between the Groaten town line, and Brook Mark span there lies a ridge of waestland where the wild chase is prone to linger as it rages overhead. On the night of December 10, in 1795, Thomas Hartman of Sowe's Hill in Groaten, was crossing said ridge, easterly towards Westford when he heard, in the distance, the sound of a rising storm. Even as he watched, the wild chase went by in the air above him. The din of their passing was deafening, he clapped his hands to his ears and shuddered, but because he did not throw himself upon the ground, he was caught up by them and swept away. When he did not return that night his relatives sent for him, and when they could not locate him, they extended the search west of Groaten, and east all the way to Boston. After three weeks he was presumed dead. All the town mourned; he was in effect a good man, although simple in outlook. Six weeks after, which is to say in late winter, he returned. But he could not say where he had been and after that he no longer wept, nor laughed, nor enjoyed his children. He sat dumbly by the fire, staring at embers."

You would think that the elders of this town, farmers and hunters all, would have noticed that six weeks is the traditional length of the bear's hibernation.

June, 1959

Sometimes on summer nights the smell of the celery fields beyond the barn would fill the air, and we would sit on the front porch watching

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the cars pass on the Great Road, talking about crops and dogs and who was courting who. The air was thick then, and summer had its grip on us, and sometimes the very house would lift from its foundation and float suspended above the green grass, the strawberry patch and the rising ground where we grew corn and beans.

On such a night, Tom Dublet would whistle for me from behind the lilacs that separated the house from the hayfields that ran up to the ridge, and I would announce to the family that I was going up to read in bed. Then I would climb down the trellis. Would fly to the yard, to the lilacs, where he was waiting. Where he is waiting. Where he would wait.

We walked across Scratch Flat through the celery and the cauliflower and past the cultivated land and through the hemlock grove to the place on Beaver Brook where Tom had his cabin and fish weir. You could smell fresh earth and tilled fields, and everywhere the meadow crickets were singing, so loud you could not think straight.

Inside, the smell of woodsmoke, even in summer. He had plastered the walls with mud from the Beaver Brook, and he hung there the antlers and skulls of deer he'd killed. In the corners, his bows and quivers of arrows, and bundles of greenwood and woven vines that he used to make his rabbit snares. He'd gotten a deer the day before and there was a great raw haunch lying by the fire, flies still on it, and over in the corner I saw the head lying on its side, still furred in gray brown

pelage. He had something stewing in an iron pot hung over the fire pit in the back of his cabin. I could see stars though the wattled chimney hole.

"We'll just sing a little," he said.

He was an old man, a Pawtucket, with long grey hair and a hatchet shaped face, skin the color of slippery elm bark. His eyes were black; the whites clear with no red or yellow in them, and he dressed always in loose trousers cinched at the waist with rope pulled so tight it made deep wrinkles on his brown belly. He rarely wore a shirt, I never saw him in shoes, and he made a point of never actually wearing his red waistcoat with the brass buttons that the General Court had awarded him for his work to free the hostages during King Phillip's War. He hung the waistcoat on a peg stuck into the clay between the logs at the back of his cabin. Mary-Louise saw him spit on it once.

He took out his tambourine and his bear mask and laid out in a circle, a white jaw bone, a short staff with a tuft of feathers tied at one end, and a long spearhead with a flute down the middle that once belonged to his father John Thomas Good Man. Slowly, he tied on his mask, and even before he started singing he transformed. But I could see the glint of his black eyes through the holes above the snout, and I knew that somewhere back there, there was a man.

Hummed darkly then. Began rocking, forward and backward,

tapping his tambourine, staring at the coals of the fire. Quiet in the hut, just the two of us, crickets beyond, but then, in the midst of that intimacy, his head suddenly jerked back sharply, as if something had grabbed him by the hair and pulled. His body stiffened and he shifted his singing to a high-pitched nasal whine, like the singing of an old woman. No words, just a series of long whines and calls, "Heeyah, waah, yaaah, haaah, ha ha ha. Heeyah, waah,yaah..."

And then he shifted again: "Onk woh kuikéfukquashh, wosshweemo e cowehwuet wongankitti ut ohkeit --- he was quoting now from John Eliot's *Um Biblum God* probably, although I never knew he kept his faith after the war --- "Um Babylon watase onk neit unnogunnum kuttahhunonathnom wampatum onskum woh Wunnumadi. Lord num Manitou wame nootah ummiflinnieumoh ---"How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" --- Lord num Manitou. Onk woh kuikéfukquashh, wosshweemo e cowehwuet wongankitti ut ohkeit. Lord num Manitou."

Smoke drifting up. Stars in the smoke hole, and he got up and began stamping and turning, his eyes darting here and there into the dark corners --- watching for them --- and I too jumped up and I tucked my skirt into the waistband of my drawers and kicked off my shoes and began stamping around with him as he had taught me, shaking my head so that my hair flew around my shoulders, and in time, THEY ALL CAME:

Bulkeley came first. He was a big man with a shambling gait and

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thick tufted brown hair. He would leave his mouth open most of the time and shout words for no reason, meaningless words.

Tom does not break stride. He sings and he shuffles and bows, and Mingo appears, small, black, well-formed, with sharp, intelligent eyes, like a rabbit. He has on gray trousers and a red kerchief around his neck, knotted at the throat. Shirtless. He smells of apples and wood ash.

Bulkeley never danced with us. He stands by the side of the wall, nodding and stamping from side to side, his hands involuntarily fluttering at his hips, but never danced. Mingo comes into being when he dances. He springs onto the center floor with a greenwood stick and spins in a circle. He leaps. He lands in front of me in a crouch and approaches, rocking and jabbing his spear, and his white teeth gnashing, and all the while old Tom Dublet is whining, with the tambourine going, and the stars and the smoke, and the smell of men, and the musty dirt floor of Tom's cabin and then, of a sudden, at the door, in the half light of the fire, I see myself.

I saw Mary-Louise Dudley.

Journal Entry: December 1966, H R B

*"Mary Louise Dudley, wife of Parkman Dudley, minister in this town
1718 to 1731."*

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In the old burying ground his gravestone is separated from hers, as if in death to maintain that distance which in life he also sought. According to the Annals of the Town of Lyttleton, Mary-Louise Dudley was various, would keep her own counsel, would sit unmoved by her husband's sermons, did not join in the community of the church, was kind to animals, and once, upon learning of the death of a favorite kitten did weep bitterly. Further: was prone to walks. Was seen leaving the homelots, behind the houses near the town center. Was seen (by Hark Cooper, May 18, 1720, which is my birthday incidentally) at the boundaries of the plowlands. She gathered weed stalks there, which she tied together in a bundle and then left by a wall. She was seen in the waestland, beyond the cultivated fields belonging to no man and given over to wild vegetation, the oak, the chestnut, the beech and the maple. Hogs turned out here in autumn to feed on mast. No English man nor woman would venture ther. (save in December when they would round up the hogs for slaughter.)

This much recorded in the Annals:

That she would cross the ford at Beaver Brook and mount the wild ridge above the brook and enter into the waestland.

That she would gather bright stones and birds' eggs in the deep forest on the northwestern slope of the ridge.

Would sing sad songs.

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Was known to speak to birds.

"It was charged, in 1722, that Mary-Louise Dudley did consort with the Black Man in the forest north, northwest of the Cogswell homelot in that place where did grow a dank thicket of hemlock trees,"

But this I believe is apocryphal, having been set down by the male forefathers of this community who, above all, loathed and feared a powerful woman.

That night at Tom Dublet's she dressed in butternut with a white ruffled collar, and she had fixed her honey colored hair with a tortoise shell comb her mother brought over from Kent. She had high cheek bones and eyes the color of the sea in winter and she didn't always come when Tom called although he said she was often there somewhere in the shadows, a haunting, haunted figure.

He untied his bear mask and hung it on the wall. He wrapped each of his ceremonial objects in a deerskin bundle and walked over to the west wall of his cabin and placed them in a niche between the logs. He went about this in a businesslike manner, as if he had been hard at work. Then he stirred the iron pot and dished out the stew he'd made for us, berries, venison, squash, shell beans, and corn from his garden patch. This too he did in an efficient manner, formally and without a smile. Tom was not a friendly person; he wanted us around for some reason,

but not necessarily because he liked us.

Bulkeley grunted and snorted while he fed, and spilled his food so that the juices from the stew ran down his chin and onto his white shirt. Mary-Louise came over and sat next to him. She lifted the hem of her skirt and wiped the corners of his mouth and his chin and he laughed when she did this and lolled his head against her shoulder for a minute.

"Tho' art such a messy boy, my sweet," she said. "I sh'ant sing if you cannot feed yourself properly."

Bulkeley lives on the poor farm on the south side of Scratch Flat. His brother Ralph put him just before their mother died. The one thing in life he loves, other than his own mother, is Mary-Louise. On those nights when she didn't show up he would wander between the cabin and the fish weir pestering Tom. "Where's Mary-Louise, Tom Indian? Want to see Mary-Louise."

He sat up straight, crossed his legs and began drawing circles in the dirt floor. Tom put a log on the fire and stirred it; there was a flare of light and in the gleam I saw dried tears on Mary's cheeks. Tom saw them too.

"He done beat you?" Mingo asked.

She said nothing, but we prodded.

Then she rose and unhooked her bodice, turned to the fire and let fall her dress and hoisted her camisole. All over her back we could see a crisscrossing of mean red welts.

"And him a man of God," Mingo whispered.

"God can roast in hell, the bastard," Bulkeley shouted. He let out a horsey laugh. Then he stood up and started stamping around the cabin chanting over and over again. "God's gone down to Satan's hell."

"Shut up Bulk," I said. "She doesn't like your language."

He sat down hard and scratched out his design in the floor with the palm of his hand. Then he looked up at me. Bulkeley didn't like me. He was indifferent to Mingo and he merely tolerated Tom Indian. He lived for two things, freedom and Mary-Louise.

Ralph Waldo Emerson put this man in hell for that he was a stirrer up of strife. I never could learn what it was that Bulkley would do at the Emerson dinner table that was so offensive to Concord. He shouted inappropriate words, is one phrase that recurs in the few mentions of this man in the various biographies. The Emerson family, if they in fact know, will not talk about him, even today. But he was only mildly troublesome to us.

"He is not a Christian man, thy husband," Tom said to Mary-Louise...

Tom Dublet went over to the wall behind the fire where he kept a large basket. He drew out a leather bag and shook some powder from it into a stone bowl. This he mixed with water and, holding the bowl close to the fire, spun the powder and water into a paste. He didn't say a word as he went about this business, and we all watched silently, except for Bulkley, who was still snickering about his sacrilege and patting the floor. Then Tom came close to Mary-Louise and lifted her camisole. Gently, like a mother with her child, he spread the paste over her back.

Mary-Louise closed her eyes during this procedure, and I saw a shudder run through her, but when she was dressed again she stared at the fire with her wide grey-green eyes and began humming one of her ditties. Then she began to sing. And then she spoke:

I sat at the ford by the stream just below the outholdings of Nehemiah Frost, in the place where the Pawtuckets from the Christian village at Nashoba Plantation had long ago laid stones. I did take off my stockings and cooled my bared feet in the clear water, amidst the blue forget-me-nots, and was contented there and hummed "The Morpeth Rant," and other ditties, and didn't I unwind my hair and feel such pleasures as should be perversity to think of, and when I looked up didn't I see him then, standing alone on the other side of the brook under the oak trees.

He was dressed all in wild skins and green leaves, a fan of grouse feathers at the back of his head, a bear claw necklace around his neck. Around his eyes, he painted black circles and, dashed in red clay on his bare chest, there were lightning bolts.

When I saw him he raised his arm and beckoned. I gathered my skirts, grabbed my shoes and ran from the bank, but I did stop in the cover of an alder thicket above the stream and when I looked back he was still there, the poor dear, under the trees, staring after me like a sad puppy, and there was such pity in his eyes, I say. And then he sang in a slow voice, the sweetest sound ever heard in the New World.

"God deliver me," says I, and didn't I cross over to him.

He led me to the hemlock grove that now stands at the northeast corner of the waestland above Scratch Flat. He sat me down there in that dim light beneath the trees and took out a calumet and filled it with kinnikinnick. He had a flint and steel and he struck fire, and he lit that pipe, and after it was drawing well offered me some. I drew on it, and it was sweet and full and so the two of us, we sat there, crossed legged in that spindly afternoon light, smoking and groping for a common tongue.

This heathen had some English, and I a smattering of Algonquin, and before long we found a common voice. He said he was once a Christian, a member of the congregation at Nashoba Plantation, but

during the war he and his people were taken by the Kentish men at Concord to Deer Isle in Boston Harbor where all but five perished, or so says he. He survived and returned to the Nashoba Plantation after the war. The place was in ruins. The Lawrence brothers from Groaten had taken over the land where the Christian Indian village had been, and they ran him off when he came home. He fled the Plantation to live as his father had lived, by hunting and gathering wild plants, and Nompnekit was his name, and didn't he say that this means, in their language, "Man Born Twice."

I brought him food. I stole cakes and ale and sometimes pork. He taught me herbs, the goldthread and the starflower the cucumber root, and sassafras and sarsaparilla and senachibe and calum.

One day we wandered west by the lake's shore where the wind cuts down, and it was hot, and I undid my collar and let the sweat dry and we found all manner of sweet-growing things and carried them back up the hill on the west side. And when we came to the hemlock grove on the hill above Scratch Flat, just there in that greeny, cool place, Nompnekit stopped dead.

"Pokaunah" he said, "Pokaunah is near, be still."

"I know not what is Pokaunah," I said to him. But such a fright had seized Nompnekit by the throat he could not answer. His eyes bulged and a sweat broke out on his forehead and his arms and legs

went weak and I saw him shudder and shake. In the dense brush beyond the clearing there was a terrible thrashing then, and a huge shaggy head emerged, swaying from side to side, and didn't a full grown bear burst from out the brush and rise upon its hind legs and let out a vasty whoosh. Like that: "Whioosh," As horrid a sound as ever was heard.

"Be still" Nompenekit whispered, "and no harm will come." Its growl was a bellow, a human voice, but deeper, raspier, it was a song of the forest, of trees and bark, and he bared his dingly fangs and swiped the air with his thick paws, and drool did spill forth from its jaws and froth and noise, and a horrible hissing filled the grove and I swear to Jesu the great roiling sky did upwell west of us, and there were storms and cataracts, and didn't the sweet innocent heathen drop to his knees and spin open his satchel. Oh but my fear was such, my head did spin 'round on my neck, and there struck light and all the world caved in on me and I fell back against a hemlock in a faint.

Sir Bear began circling now, thinking his dinner was come. He dropped to all fours, and snapped his frothy jaws, and rose again, and came on, and all the while Nompenekit rummaged frantically, hands all aquiver, searching through his herbs and he spread out before him on the ground a pile of calum tubers and the dried leaves of senachibe and farthingberry and liverwort. And seeing this, Sir Bear did drop down to all fours again and stare, raising and lowering his massy head and snorting air. Warey he came forward and with a piggish snuffling

consumed the roots and leaves. And his head grew droopy and his
langly tongue wound all about and he sat down like man past dinner.

"Tis done", Nompenekit said. "He hath come for you, Mary-Louise
Dudley." Whereupon Nompenekit, late of the Nipmuck Tribe out of
Wankamunkawachuk, west by the place known now as Brookfield,
stepped back behind the trees and disappeared. I did not see that
heathen man again in all the remains of my time.

Well, after that Sir Bear became a kit in the byre. He snuffed and
purred, a welly sound. He nosed me there below my belly and when I
rose and took my way home he followed after to the banks of the brook
and stood alone when I crossed, watching me disappear up the hill past
the alders, the homelots, and on beyond the Frost holdings. I looked
back but once and he was still there, alone.

After that I crossed the brook without Nompenekit. In the grove I
found things: the breastbone of a broad-winged hawk, a little sweet-grass
basket, five bright stones, an eagle's claw, the shells of birds' eggs.
Sometimes Sir Bear appeared and lay his head upon my lap and I sang
ditties to him and twiddled his fur and wove forget-me-not garlands
around his brisly ears. Sometimes he nosed me and sometimes we
walked, like a milkmaid and her dog, across the Scratch Flat
waestground, and sometimes he only left signs that he had been there, in
that place, waiting me.

I used to take my talismans home and I would hide them under the straw in the byre, away from Parkman and Woolly, who was prone to poke about a spread a rumour or two. And on certain days, moved by light, by a cruel spoken word, or a kind one, by memories, I took them out and laid them in a circle round me on the barn floor and I sat cross-legged in front of them singing the same songs I sang to Bear. I thought that if I did this, he should appear, he will appear.

On the 20th of April in 1721, in the late afternoon, I went to the barn while Woolly was in the homelot and Parkman at the church, and no other being, save the oxen was about. I lifted the straw. I drew out my basket, and set it on the threshing floor. Around it I arranged the bright stones, with the egg shells just beneath in a semi-circle. "Sun and moon," I said. "Praise ye the Lord," I said. Below the basket I placed the bones. "All you winds, Praise ye the Lord, praise him and exalt him above all forever," I said. And I laid down the eagle's claw. "Lightnings and clouds, Praise ye the Lord; praise and exalt him for ever." The calum and the senachibe. "You dolphins and water creatures." I said, " All ye fowls of the air, All you beasts wild and tame, all ye cataracts and hurricanoes. Praise ye the Lord, I said. "Bless him and exalt him above all forever."

And a dark shadow came then just in that place and oh didn't I stop my chant and stare singly downward at the place where I had laid out my charms. The light was strong. April light. The barn door faced west, sun streamed over my back, couldn't I feel it for the first time, knowing what was to come then. It was Parkman had come in.

I did not move until I felt his hand upon my shoulder. He lifted me, guiding me upward, and I stood and turned and his fingers there were worse than an eagle's talons and his grimly eyes was greeny with a cold fire.

But then he turned, releasing his grip upon my shoulder and he fell to his knees and I saw tears come up and he grit hard his teeth and shook out his rough head and prayed there to God for my forgiveness. "God spare this transgressed creature," he said aloud, and when he was done he remained kneeling, eyes closed, for a long time, and then he rose up and stamped on my talismans, all in a hot rage, and he tore the basket in a thousand shreds and ground my shells into the threshing floor and crushed the herbs and the eagle's claw. And the fire was so hot in him he could not stop himself and he pushed me to the wall, and shaking were his boney hands, and his lips went thin and I saw those high, hard cheek bones once I loved.

And after that he got the ox goad.

Inside, the four of them around the fire, Mary-Louise leaning sideways on her right arm, Bulkeley and Tom slouched forward towards the embers. Mingo squatting, his arms hooked over his knees. We sat in silence, the fire sputtering, smoke winding upward lazily, and then Mary-Louise began to sing again.

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It was Bear taught her to sing. If anything it was his fault, because he was here first, before Mary-Louise, before Nompenekit, before Tom Dublet. If Parkman Dudley was going to kill anyone for supposed transgressions, he should have killed Bear.

"You have seen this bear?" Tom asked

"He is a love and a tame beast, a puppy."

Tom smiled wickedly at something private. "He's not so tame as you think," he said.

... to be continued