

DELIVERY

He is an old man. His skin has given up its juices to the smokehouse heat of his summer field, the heat from the cabless, blistered tractor lurching over the ruts.

He is an old man whose rheumy eyes now water his hands, clasped as he bends over them, sitting in the rocker by the bed. He watches as his tears trickle into the dry wrinkles like rivulets in the furrows of his land.

He who covers the heavens with clouds supplies the earth with rain and makes the grass to grow.

He is a tired, old man, bending over his clasped hands as he hunkers in the maple rocker by their bed. The corner of the quilt shadows his pant leg, and he reaches to finger the old, soft fabric. He remembers it in its crisp newness.

"Simon, you'll be under that blanket soon enough," the men had teased around the neighbour's table, and he'd blushed as pink as a maiden that they'd caught him gazing at his near-bride, Marta. She'd pricked her finger then, sitting at the quilting frame with the other women while the men finished up dessert. A little spot of red punctuated the patchwork, a precursor to the wedding night.

I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine.

"Let me help you, Marta." He'd reached for this corner of the quilt from the far side of the marriage bed as they shared the task of spreading the linens for the first time. His rough hands, which had so recently and clumsily caressed silken skin, crumpled the fabric as they lofted

the blanket up high over the coil springs and mattress, capturing the mingled scents under the canopy for a moment.

This is what your Redeemer says, the One who formed you in the womb, "I am the Lord, who spread out the earth by myself, who spreads the snow like wool, who covers you with his feathers, with the shadow of his hand and says, 'You are my people.' "

"Why didn't you ever bleach it out," he'd asked her years later, "or replace that patch like you did the worn ones?" Why hadn't she erased that stain, the colour of a rusty tractor seat?

"This is my blood."

And now, sitting on the rocker fondling the corner of the quilt lightly so as not to disturb her, he raises his eyes unto the field outside of the bedroom window. His land, his land. That quarter section of farmland which had provided their sustenance for so long, again has produced the crop. The harvest is done, the seed bringing forth a hundred-fold, the bounty dry and kept within the granaries. Spring after spring had he sown that seed into the soil, beginning early in the morning after Marta had filled him with bacon and eggs and coffee, with generous slices of homemade bread, and jam birthed from the raspberry patch. And summer after summer had he worried for the rains.

"Simon, He has not left Himself without testimony; He has shown His kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their season," would she chide. And as she would faithfully spread that blanket day after day, so would the rain fall, and the harvest come in, year after year.

The rhythm of his memory brings pictures of those first harvests, the long days, the meals she'd bring to him in a basket out in the field, beyond the window, past the clothesline and the rows of caraganna bushes. What a welcome sight, her trudging figure at dusk, basket on her arm and, much later, the child on her hip and wrapped up against the flies. By the time he'd made the round with the binder, and was back to the corner of the field closest to the farmhouse, she'd

have stoked a few bundles together to lean against and spread the crazy quilt, lunch heaped up in their plates.

“Sit, Simon. I’ve brought a wet cloth--it will refresh you.”

“Can’t stop too long, Marta.” The darkness would be encroaching soon, toughening the straw. He winced as he slurped at the steaming coffee, slopping some in his haste. She’d be laundering tomorrow.

All the stains came out, but that one, first spot.

He shifts in the chair, stretching his long, old legs out in front of him and rubbing his neck. The bed’s iron rungs and brass knobs form a cage, or a cradle. It had been his grandparents’ bedstead passed down, finally claimed by him as the older brother when it became unseemly to share it any longer with his sisters. How many illnesses had it ensconced over the decades, how many fevers? When winter blizzards blew outside the window, he could pull the covers up over his shoulder of an early morning, and sleep a little later without guilt. When summer rains fell upon his seed, and thunder rolled, there was no rush to get at his work.

“He who promised is faithful,” Marta would murmur, swaddled under the comforter.

Simon is dirt poor. The son of a farmer, the only grandson of a farmer, his palms are creased from gripping the hard, black steering wheel of the John Deere, his eyes from squinting through prairie heat, squinting into the distance of the unbroken rocky land surrounding his farm. Only that quarter has ever been redeemed as arable, and the closest neighbour is six miles back up a mud road, on a farm as small as his own. Simon is dirt poor, but they’ve always had enough. And when he’d dug in his heels during the ‘thirties, refusing to walk away from his poor dirt farm, she’d encouraged him and strengthened him, but her faith rested not on him.

Rightly so. What had he been able to do, for all his ability, when the child had been lost? The neighbours had come, till late in the night, with torches, and pots of steaming soup to nourish them through the long search. What had he been able to do, then, but beat his way with the men through the tall and dusty autumn grasses, checking in the splintered grain wagon box for a child who'd fallen asleep, perhaps, and kicking at his father's and his grandfather's skeletal harrows, calling her name out into the night? What could he do but wrap his Marta in the cocoon of their quilt as she wept for their loss when the girl was found, finally, at the bottom of the old, dry well?

"He giveth, He taketh," were Marta's muffled words, neither pleading nor questioning as he had done, for her faith rested.

He giveth, He taketh. Birth and death, the bookends of life. As Simon leans forward again into the dying of his wife under their quilt, he recalls that one and only birth, in her maturity just before her womb was closed. The seed had taken root in the secret depths of her body and multiplied, filling her.

"Perhaps today," she'd said, clearing the breakfast dishes while her left hand supported the swollen belly.

How sunken her abdomen now, in comparison, under this wasting disease.

"No, no--go out to your field. I'll hang the blanket when it's time."

When he had finally come out from under the tractor cowling, grease-smearred and sweaty, the counterpane beckoned on the washline in the freshening breeze. He'd thrown his tools onto the newly plowed ground and run, workboots kicking up clods. He'd heard her calling out his name with desperate weariness before he'd opened the wire gate by the caragannas, and he'd pulled the quilt off the line as he'd stumbled by.

She spoke her last, old woman words hours, days ago. “Cover me.”

The pains, then, had been methodical, hard and regular, already just moments apart, and he hadn't left her side to get the neighbour wife before the rain had begun in earnest and the road had become too muddy to navigate. She had writhed in a delirium, gripping the rails of the iron headboard as the contractions intensified in a crescendo. He'd felt helpless, looking down on her. Panting with exertion, bearing down, red-faced and sweating, she had birthed as if alone.

And now, quiet on their bed with him looking on, she is dying as if alone.

Spread your garment over me, since you are my Kinsman-Redeemer.

The baby had been pushed into their time and space so reluctantly, with her feet yet in heaven while her head crowned, in transit between eternity and earth. Simon himself had tenderly drawn her out, blue and slippery wet from between Marta's legs, and had placed her upon the mother's breast. She was delivered of a healthy baby girl.

Now that mother is being drawn back into eternity herself, beneath the shroud that will enfold all peoples. The animation that had inflated the lungs of baby, flooding her with vivid colour, now ebb from Marta's own lungs, Adam's breath withdrawn.

The blanket of His faithfulness delivers her of death.

Simon pulls on the spotted corner of the quilt and covers also himself.