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## Mulberry, Monkey and Weasel

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MULBERRY, MONKEY AND WEASEL  
Jonathan Crimmins

*"Horses died like so many flies on sticky fly paper. The more they struggled the deeper in the mess they were ensnared. Human beings—men and women—suffered likewise." Boston Post: January 16, 1919.*

Four days Burtle of Boston is unfound. Four days from when he unbundled to the sun, settled on this curb. Two rolls and dark meat in a pewter pail at his hip.

Burtle clicks the clip of the pail. Hears the sputter of an open-valve motor. Wheels chirp on tapered-leaf springs. Engine strain rumbles through a cast-iron muffler.

Across the street, coming to thaw: the broker's greasy window. Three gilded globes hang from the awning. Amid mantel clocks and microscopi, beside box and lens and silver-faced plates is a wicker bassinet. Dust alone beds in the white wicker. A child that never came forth. Double vision and apnea ending in eclamptic shivers. His wife flailing to her last shudder. Infant encased. The body of his wife the casket of his baby.

Further back, past andirons and joint-stools, past a hutch with folded silk vandykes, a clutter of egg-spoons, ipecac, a boot-jack and gaiters, past a piccolo and fiddle on a pine chest, there, hang his wife's day-dresses and her summer shawl, pawned for a plot of land and a lamb carved in limestone.

Each day he visits here. Conflating matrimony, memory, and weather. Bay breeze on his ear below cloudless clear sky. Or door-huddled in downpours. The seasons giving way: a union suit beneath trousers, neck wound with a scarf.

This curb is Charter Street below Copp's cemetery on the hill, a block from Commercial and the wharf. Wood-smoke air. Fish, vinegar, rot and brine. Here Boilersuits push past top hats and beards. Clerks in shirtsleeves share cigarettes. Handcarts

creak. Eight notes of the Old North Church ring noon in rounds.

Burtle eats. Thigh meat leaves grease on lip. Across the street, three gilded globes suspended in shadow, together as if in chase, as if mulberry, monkey, and weasel. Behind glass pane, a wicker bassinet, empty as made. Burtle wipes his fingers with a handkerchief. Uncorks a vacuum flask. Drinks cold beer between bites of roll.

Finished, he walks Henschman Street. Crosses to the Bay State freight yard under elevated tracks. Goes below shipping and receiving to the cask basement. Before his death, he will record the mark of two hundred cases.

This day is the fifteenth of nineteen nineteen. Purity Distillery on the Charles. A six-story steel tank holds molasses: two million gallons, fifteen thousand tons. Forty degrees Fahrenheit, this day wakes yeast. Essence turns to ethanol. Fixed volume increases temperature, increases pressure. Spirit growing strong bears on seam. Rivets pop staccato like bullets. Flung steel cleaves the girders of the elevated track. Walls of brick buckle to the explosion, spit window glass in collapse. Molasses, a wave of fifteen feet, floods thirty-five miles per hour. Heaves the firemen's depot from foundation. Some workers are dead, some workers are drowning.

Alone, below shipping and receiving, Burtle hears thunder. Feels the walls shudder then shiver. Crates, stacked beside the cistern, slide, tip. Slats and glass shatter on the stone. Shouts from upstairs. Heels knocking panic. Floorboards creek and groan to make him deaf. Burtle inhales. Draws down on him the firmament of plank and beam. Battered shoulders. Drops to his knees. Ankles pinned. Cracked skull cuts his brain, severs free this thought—Copp's Hill will a hundred years smell sweet.

Four days Burtle of Boston is unfound. Four days from when he unbuttoned the pea coat, crossed it over knee. A rag-work lining his wife double stitched. Twin threads sewn down durable seams. Burtle traces the cuff hem as if her fingers still bobbed there. Still there, wetting the catgut with her lips and tongue, aiming it through the needle's eye. Out on the fire escape

to catch the thin breeze. Burnt bread and fish-fry on the air. Summer heat twice as hot with the added weight. Barefoot with her dress pulled to her thighs. A bed pillow cushions the iron grill. The coat lies open on her thirty-week belly. A long pull between stitch and stitch and she sighs. And Burtle smiles because inside her is a baby. Let it be a girl so that he can see in her image how his own wife grew. Burtle touches the sweat off her cheek. The seasons giving way: sweat to raindrops to frost.

Burtle clicks the clip of the pail. Hears the sputter of an open-valve motor. Across the street, three gilded globes, a pane of glass, a wicker bassinet. Saturday at Houghton & Dutton on Tremont Avenue. His wife drapes three ribbons over her white-gloved wrist. Her fingers follow the flower brocade. Burtle says these are pretty. His wife returns the ribbons to the display. Why will I need pretty things when I have a baby? Up from street level, arm-locked past ash cans and roasters, past a telephone stand and tricorner pokes, past mercerized hose, Georgette waists and felt Juliets to the half-acre of baby shops on the floor below misses. There, his wife orders on account serviettes and safety pins, a muslin swathe, and castile soap. There, she takes a doll from the sulky, wraps it in her summer shawl, rocks it in her arms, kisses the cold head, and lays it in a wicker bassinet.

Eight notes of the Old North Church ring noon in rounds. Burtle walks Henchman Street. Boilersuits outnumber putter collars. Clerks in shirtsleeves share the Herald. Burtle goes below shipping and receiving to the cask basement. Hears a thunder. And the walls shudder then shiver. Crates slide, tip, shatter on the stone. Floorboards creak and groan to make him deaf. Burtle inhales. Draws down on him the firmament of plank and beam. Battered shoulders. Drops to his knees. Ankles pinned. Cracked skull cuts his brain, severs free this thought—Copp's Hill will a hundred years smell sweet.

Four days Burtle of Boston is unfound. Four days from when he unbundled to the sun. Two rolls and dark meat in a pewter pail at his hip. Burtle clicks the clip of the pail. Hears a motor pop and sputter. Across the street, amid mantel clocks

and microscopi, is a wicker bassinet. A child that never came forth. Double vision, apnea, sickness of stomach, and oedema. His wife flailing on the marriage bed. A soundless spasm save the creak and groan of springs. At a lull, the doctor finds a faint pulse. 135 in the minute. Skin a livid hue. He soaks a sponge in ether. Covers her nostrils and her mouth. She rubs violently at her nose. Shoves away a second application until Burtle prevents her by holding her arms. He pins them with his weight. In her hands a clutch of sheets. He squeezes her wrists until they fall slack. Until her head ceases to shiver with fear. Her tongue sadly bitten. Face flecked with spat blood. A last shudder. Infant encased. The body of his wife the casket of his baby.

This curb is Charter Street below Copp's cemetery on the hill. Here, shouts compete with hoof and wheel. Handcarts creak. A two-fingered whistle chirps awake a drowsy box-boy. Across the street, three gilded globes suspended in shadow, together as if in chase, as if mulberry, monkey, and weasel. Sitting vigil, Burtle by the bedside. Burning Camphor and lamp oil. A neighbor and her daughters wipe the skin with alcohol. They dress the body and comb the hair. A spool of thread, a needle for the eyelids. Otherwise she may take someone with her. But Burtle wants them open. The mother and her daughters offer prayers while the youngest tends the stove. Coffee and broth at a boil. Charcoal on the breeze. At night, Burtle stares into the eyes, dry as glass. Lids unblinking. Why do only the old wake from the dead? Bound in nested circles below the lens is his reflection. Iris and pupil and a featureless shadow.

Burtle walks Henchman Street to the yard. Goes below to the cask basement. Hears a thunder. The walls shudder. Slats and glass shatter on the stone. Shouts from upstairs. Heels knocking panic. Floorboards creak and groan to make him deaf. Burtle inhales. Draws down on him the firmament of plank and beam. Cracked skull cuts his brain, severs free this thought—Copp's Hill will a hundred years smell sweet.

Four days Burtle of Boston is unfound. Four days from when settled on this curb. Two rolls and dark meat in a pewter

pail at his hip. Burtle clicks the clip of the pail. Hears the sputter of an open-valve motor, the chirp of tapered-leaf springs.

Each day, he visits here. This curb. Charter Street below Copp's cemetery on the hill. Conflating matrimony, memory, and weather. A sluice of melting snow at his feet. On the air, coal smoke, fish, brine, and rot. A child with a polio limp passes behind. A wagon of news pulled at a lurch. Above, a woman shakes a dust cloud from a rug. Shakes out a moth that catches itself on the air, flutters a gyre, and lands on a dry-barrel hydrant. Each gray wing jointed. Softly furred. Eight notes of the Old North Church ring noon in rounds.

Across the street, three gilded globes suspended in shadow, together as if in chase, as if mulberry, monkey, and weasel. Burtle wipes his fingers with a handkerchief. Uncorks a vacuum flask. Drinks cold beer between bites of roll.

He walks Henchman Street. Crosses to the yard under elevated tracks. Goes below shipping and receiving. Back past casks of butter and cheese, bags of flour and coal, past empty bottles going back like war-boys to the farm, past dry goods refused for illegible papers or overstocked or undersold, there, Burtle matches proofs of receipt to bills of lading. Jots down lot numbers. Surplus beer-barrels on four-by-four pallets. Confusion over whether to buy or sell. 35 of 36 for a dry nation. Last night, drunk to see Young McGovern fight. Tobacco spat upon the ground. Boots stomping fury on the bleachers. Arms folded, Burtle watches two boxers circle in a square ring. Soundless punches landed to a roar. The bout ends with Young McGovern dying. Laid on the judges' table. Beside him, a doctor and his kit, a ring girl, a bookie, and a grocer. Burtle sees the boxers face. Eyes already locked. At home, Burtle lifts his bedding from the floor. He dresses the naked mattress, vacant since her due. On the linens, he shakes a snow of talcum powder. Covers himself in her quilt. It takes a miracle not to die alone. Turning curled to his side, he sleeps in the talc scent.

This day is the fifteenth of nineteen nineteen. Purity Distillery on the Charles. A six-story steel tank holds molasses:

two million gallons, fifteen thousand tons. Forty degrees Fahrenheit, essence turns to ethanol. Spirit growing strong bears on seam. Rivets pop staccato like bullets. Flung steel cleaves the girders of the elevated track. Walls of brick buckle to the explosion, spit window glass in collapse. Molasses, a wave of fifteen feet, floods thirty-five miles per hour. Heaves the depot from foundation. Some workers are dead, some workers are drowning.

Alone, below shipping and receiving, Burtle hears thunder. Feels the walls shudder then shiver. Crates, stacked beside the cistern, slide, tip. Slats and glass shatter. Shouts from upstairs. Heels knocking panic. Floorboards creak and groan and sag between the beams. Molasses drips from every gap. Hot dark cables pouring on the stone. A rain of black beads. Burtle inhales. Bathes his nostrils and his mouth. A plum-mash odor burnt bitter. He wipes the syrup from his face. A scalded smear over eyelid and cheek and lip. Boot-deep and drenched. Walls black. Everything lost to the pitch downpour. Light only a dim amber. A caramelized darkness. Now voiceless now blind, Burtle gasps. Draws down on him the firmament of plank and beam. Battered shoulders. Drops to his knees. Ankles pinned. Cracked skull cuts his brain, severs free this thought—Copp's Hill will a hundred years smell sweet. Four days Burtle of Boston is unfound.