This garden is my kind of mirror. May I breathe and unbutton. Become it.

Joshua Hebburn

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This Story Isn’t About That Stone

MURDERS OFTEN HAPPEN IN THE MOST VARIED OF PLACES—a harvested field near a
garden, a mountain chosen as an altar, a riverbank touched by muddy water. It’s
a skittling array. Mary was murdered on the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal towpath.
When it was fully operational its primary use was for transporting coal from
the Allegheny Mountains, but it boasted this wonderful towpath, a wide space
stretching back from the edge of the canal like a nice smile. Here on the towpath,
Mary might well be the lady ghost often reported on the two-mile level at Catoctin
(between locks 28 and 29).

This towpath was, more than anything else, lonely. Lonely of the day; lonely of
the night. And all around the new chill of October, just misty enough to stay afloat.
When that goes, the spring birds will begin to speak, and another kind of lonely will
nest. Lonely, too, is Mary. Witnesses say she is always searching as she walks over
the waste weir, down the towpath, and to the river. It is also said that she is the
scorned wife of a Civil War soldier who drowned on his way to the Battle of Ball’s
Bluff, sinking with his fellow soldiers after their boat capsized somewhere near
the 33 mile mark. When she learned of her husband’s death Mary stabbed herself
repeatedly with a rock found along the towpath. As for what may have been the
murder weapon, one group even claims to possess the supposed rock.

The actual item is a ragged cone of limestone kept safe in a glass case with
no other objects. The museum is operated by the Vermont-based group Afterlife
Paranormal Society and this group makes sure every tour member understands
that the rock was altered so that it ended in a sharp tip, but it’s also understood
that this was done centuries and centuries ago and not by Mary or anyone born
after the Bronze Age.

This story isn’t about that stone, though. It’s about murder and about Mary.
Or, to be more accurate, it’s about Mary’s ghost.

Her ghost is bound to the towpath and, as established, this can be lonely. But
it can also be boring. Most nights she wanders back and forth mostly in search
of people who might happen to see her. This is a rare event. Most of the time
she doesn’t even do her slow walk, that kind of glide a ghost is expected to do,
the floating effect. Instead, she trudges. If you looked up the word trudge in the
dictionary, there’d be a grainy shot of Mary, shoulders slumped, head down, one
leg barely lifted from the ground, the other stuck solidly onto the ground like a tree
stump. In fact, set the dictionary aside; if you google famous ghost photographs
you’ll find this picture. It’s the only one ever captured of her. Mostly people figure
it’s a fake. Too good to be real. Too sad. There is also speculation that open stab
wounds can be made out along her abdomen if the picture is held in good light.

That damned stone. It does linger.

There’s a picture of the stone dagger, too. On this group’s website, the Afterlife
Paranormal Society. The picture is the hook; they hope it will encourage visitors to
their tiny museum. What none of them know, these group members, is that the stone
is nothing, a myth, a detail added by some lazy county worker trying to impress
a few high school kids who came to the towpath on a dare. The stone, though
as real as anything else and held in that high-grade case like a true artifact, the
stone is not the murder weapon. The stone, at best, is a distraction. A distraction
from what is truly unclear, but there is a lot of attention afforded this little piece
of limestone. Even when attempting to leave it out of a story altogether, there it is.
And there it must again be set down. This story has nothing to do with that stone,
or any stone, or any other item or person not Mary. Do not let this stone make
you forget about that image of Mary slumping along the towpath. Already her
image is mostly forgotten. All that’s remembered is something about loneliness,
about boredom, about a Civil War soldier, about murder, about that stone that is
important because of something that happened on the two-mile level at Catoctin
(between locks 28 and 29).

Love Story

THE CERTIFIED SERVICE TECHNICIAN FOUND HIMSELF
cryptographically bound to a woman
in the elevator at the Masonic temple.
She was horribly pregnant and looking
for the little girls’ room,
as she put it.
He could offer just the usual tools:
voltmeter, socket wrench, various terminal brushes.
His name was Phil, and his beard suggested
he had fought unsuccessfully in the Civil War.
He was partially paralyzed
by a fear of fucking up
and part just lazy,
She took scissors from her purse
and began to cut her hair. She felt like a city
after a siege. Phil fell to his knees,
collecting clumps in his hand.
Her hair was red, sort of brassy,
lke something you’d rent a hotel room for,
maybe make a weekend of it.

God, here he was, following in love again.
Are we going up? she asked.
He nodded. Like unencumbered souls, he said.
She frowned and put the scissors away.
I like opera, he announced. It’s okay if you don’t.
She felt the baby move, a swimmer in dark water.
Instinctively, she raised her hand
and placed it like a shield across her body.