

KATERI TEKAKWITHA

—Unto thee O Lord I commendeth my soule.

KATERI: The moaning was my first memory. I think it was them—my mother and father. They died in the smallpox epidemic with my infant brother. I was five years old. Black birds gathered waiting for our death. I felt the birds peck my face. In my fever dream, I was floating in a stream. A Spirit lowered its basket to gather water. I was in the water that spilled into the basket. For a while, I was inside God. I floated like a crow.

My mother was Algonquin. My father, a Mohawk chief. I was born in a village called Ossernenon on the south bank of the Mohawk River. My mother was a Christian. My father was not.

The smallpox left its encampment. My parents and brother were gone, though I still had relatives. Children laughed when I passed. Boys turned away from my face. I am not a saint. I am a girl seeking sanctuary. I am scarred. I feel the pits on my face with my fingers. My eyesight is bad—I can look into the woods and see snow that is not

there. The shapes of the trees are blurred. This toxic God. This Fire who burns away everything.

I see lions when I sleep. I did not know what a lion was until I saw one in a book in the mission. They have eaten Christians. They are magnificent in their roaring. Jesus is a lion. I often see him with a mane of light.

Smallpox is a crow. Its black wings like the night. Its beak eats my face. If black were an object, it would be water. The way it shapes the rocks in its path.

My name, Tekakwitha, means the one-who-walks-groping-her-way. Or moving-all-things-before-her. It means one-who-puts-things-in-order. Or one-who-bumps-into-things. It is a name that can go several ways. It can have several meanings. But they all have to do with seeing what is before me. Smallpox nearly took my eyesight. I trip my way through the village. Especially in bright light. I see snow—I have said that. But it repeats itself also.

I hardly remember the earth before it blurred.

Is it the same for all who hear the Lord's voice? Mine came with smallpox. The fever of fire. My mother heard the Jesuit's words. She knew the wings. She was given as a wife to a chief who did not believe. She kept her belief. It was a story she carried. A direction she followed. A map she kept through this crow-dark woods.

She taught me faith in Jesus. She belonged to the Maker the Jesuits called God. He sent his son, Jesus, to become a crow on the cross. He became darkness for us. I made crosses with sticks and left them in the woods—tying them

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at the cross-arms with animal hair or sinew. I tell the rabbits and muskrats about Jesus. Suffering is for a benefit—We come to knowledge of You, O Lord. The animals listen.

My chest is burning. I am nearly blind in the sun. I am pocked.

Lead us through this wilderness of crows. I cry out to you—You are my way. Under your wings I make my refuge until these calamities pass—Psalm 57:1–2. I am drawn to that Psalm. It is a tree standing by itself. It is a copse. It is the voices of the forest shouting.

My mother was an Algonquin Christian of the Weskarini or turtle band. She was taken prisoner by the Mohawk—married to the chief of a tribe different than hers. I do not think she minded being with my father. She seemed happy. But I was young when she died. It might have been different than I knew. My father died in the epidemic with her. Also my brother.

Then my uncle, Iowerano, was chief. I was adopted by his wife, Karitha, and his sister, Aronsen. The women were Christians also.

I was scarred with smallpox, yet I made ribbons from strips of eel skin and painted them red. I tied them in my hair.

I picked corn with my uncle's wife and sister, sometimes holding one hand over my eyes when the light of the sun hurt them. I listened to the forest. The noise of birds as they called to one another. I listened to the wind through the leaves, the water in the rivulets and the river. It was sound I saw.

DIANE GLANCY

I carried small bundles of firewood from the forest with the tumpline—the burden strap on my head—I wove the strap with threads from bark strips, threaded and woven together until the stay was strong enough to haul the load of twigs.

I carried water in a small bark bucket. I pounded corn. I could not do the work of other girls and women. I trembled. I sweated. I felt the smallpox again. Or the remains of it. I lay shivering on my mat in the dark of the longhouse until I could get up again.

Anastasia Tegahatsiongo and Enit stayed with me. They were older *sisters*, friends. Anastasia was a widow. Enit knew she would marry Onas. She talked of him as we worked. I did not think I would ever talk of marriage. I beaded with them, feeling my way with the bone needle and sinew. I remembered the patterns of the beads with my fingers. I felt I could see when I beaded. We had as many beads as the stars.

We made baskets, boxes, buckets, and large bark casks rimmed with hickory splints to store corn, berries, beans.

We treated the wounded when the Machicans attacked our men who were hunting. Often, not many were left alive. We listened to their moans. I think sometimes the spirits suffocated them, helping them leave their wounds in this world. Once, in the dark, I put my hand on something wet and sticky. I felt it again and knew it was hair. It was the scalp of someone dying, not fully severed from his head.

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We wove belts to trade for thimbles, glass beads, iron awls, pewter spoons, bells, muskets, lead shots, knives, and nails.

It was the thimbles and glass beads I wanted. The thimbles more than the glass beads.

The smallpox continued. It moved among tribes. We heard of it from a distance. We saw it in our own village. It began with fatigue. Someone could not climb a tree for bird eggs. Then there was nothing they wanted to do. Or could do. Then fever. Headache. Backache. Vomiting. Red spots appeared on the tongue like berries. Then the spots moved to the mouth and throat. The spots turned to blisters. The blisters covered the face. The arms. Legs. Palms of hands. Soles of feet. They were under the eyelids. Joints swelled. There was bleeding. Terrible dreams. Delirium. Pustules crusted over the whole body. Death.

Now I wear a blanket over my head to hide my eyes from the light. But mostly I wear it to cover my pocked face.

I am not able to help those who are sick with smallpox. I am not yet strong enough to turn them on their mats. But I can wipe their sores. Sit beside them. Fan them. The forest holds us in its teeth.

The forest is a lion.

After a few years, the tribe moved upstream, to a hill above the north bank of the Mohawk River to get away from the

place of the moaning disease that killed my parents and brother. I hear the forest moan also. I think sometimes it has the disease. I hold the leaves with my fingers. They feel pocked. Maybe the forest suffers what we suffer. Maybe it becomes like us. It is marked like we are marked. It feels what we feel. We are one with it.

I held the hands of Karitha and Aronsen, the wife and sister of my uncle, Lowerano, the chief, as we descended the hill from the old village. They helped me step into the canoe that would take us across the Mohawk River.

We climbed the hill on the other side of the water with our bundles. The sachems blessed the place of the new village. We built longhouses and plant crops. We named the new village Caughnawaga. We marked hiding places in the woods in case of attack.

Sometimes I tremble in the forest. It is the aftermath of the disease. Why do some of us stay on earth, while some of us sit in heaven where the falling stars whiz past?

Sometimes I wake sweating. I wake from the forest dreams when the evil one lurks. I see the trees move where he passes. I hear his roar that lifts through the trees. He is not a lion, but he thinks he is. I often think how the forest is like our Christ. It is stronger than the evil that passes.

I hurt my foot when I tripped over a stump at the edge of the forest. I had a bundle of twigs in my bundle strap. I fell and turned my ankle. My twigs scattered. When I got up, I could not stand. I could not walk. I crawled back to the vil-

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lage. For a long time, I lay on my mat. When I could get up, I limped. I am nearly blind. The light is sharp in my eyes. Sometimes the air swirls before my eyes. I watch it turn over. My face is scarred with smallpox. Yet there is a ribbon of red eel skin in my hair.

There is a commotion outside the longhouse.

I hear the voice of Onas, whom Enit thinks she will marry. He is warning us—Run to the woods. What is happening? I cannot see. I do not know anything until it is upon me. Who is coming? The Machicans? Our enemy tribe? No, this time it is the French soldiers. Often we fear them.

I hear them coming, rattling their guns over the land. I run with others into the woods, Anastasia and Enit now holding my hands, pulling me along because I cannot see the way in my fear. We hide in places the soldiers do not know. We hear shots from their guns. Enit cries out for Onas. Anastasia tells her to be quiet. We hear the crackle of fire. The smell of smoke. I grow dizzy—trees lean over—the sky is slanted. I hear the moan of the flames in our crops. I hear the cries of the corn and beans as they burn.

When Onas calls, Enit runs to him, leaving a hollow place at my side. Maybe the Maker was there, and I just could not feel him. I returned with Anastasia to the village in rubble. The blur I see is the smoke still rising from the ruins of the bark longhouses. The crow wings I see are our burned fields.

The soldiers have destroyed our new village on the north bank of the Mohawk. They have burned all of the crops we planted. The new longhouses we built. Everything is burned. Our woven mats. Our moose-hair and quill work. Our burden straps. Our fish weirs for catching eel. The bow loom to weave wampum belts.

Later, we walk through the ashes. We find the melted glass beads and thimbles. I feel them with my feet. I keep a charred thimble warped from its shape.

Because there are no crops, we are hungry that winter. Anastasia, Enit, and I put on our snowshoes and go into the woods with our digging sticks. We gather roots. We boil bark. We pound acorns mixed with a few dried berries. Once, there was an animal to eat, half dead itself before we killed it. Sometimes there was nothing.

It was in the winter that Enit married Onas Sangorkaskan. My Uncle Iowerano spoke the ceremony. A wooden bench was placed in the center of the longhouse where Enit and Onas sat, each holding their wedding basket they would exchange. I heard my uncle's voice to Enit and her family. What is her name? What clan? Do you accept your daughter's choice? Will you prepare food? Then he directed questions to Onas. Will you provide food? Afterward they exchanged the wampum.

But even when Enit married, we still had little to eat. The hunters returned discouraged. I think it was shame they felt. We had known hunger, but this hunger seemed

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more severe. We were up against something new. There was a shift in the land. Its voice was troubled. We heard it in the trees. We heard it in the night, the underside of day, when the hunters and night stalkers were out. We used to hear the larger animals that killed the smaller ones. Now it was the cries of the stalked we heard. We felt their fear. The night was embroidered with worms, bugs, burrowers. It was stained with blood. The overside was day. But the trouble of the night stayed with us.

Priests came to the village, but left. Were they the ones that had converted my mother? They sounded like her—they told stories I had heard from her. There was the same feeling—the same spirit. We had seen the traders and trappers. Our dreams were a village where they passed. Now we heard about the settlers. They came from other lands. They came to live where we did. Why had this happened? Why had they left their land and walked across the water in a boat? But did Indian tribes not migrate and drive out other tribes?

Karitha, my uncle's wife, and Aronsen, his sister, grieved.

We will be given to the crows, they said.

They have already taken us with their disease, Anastasia said.

We had not seen this coming. Yes, maybe there had been prophecy, Aronsen remembered. We just did not listen. We were the makers of what came to us—Before the smallpox that was stronger than us. Before the white men came.

They will not leave us alone, Karitha said.

Maybe they will pass around us and leave us as we are, Enit hoped.

No, they would not leave us standing—These settlers with their need to conform us to them—These men who followed us from the overside until they moved in our nightmares.

The old ones had seemed quiet before the smallpox came. Aronsen tried to remember. She was a girl. She did not pay attention. She thought about the warriors. Who she would marry. Who would provide for her. How many children she would have. She thought about her beading. She thought about the bark baskets she was learning to make. She thought about the ribbons in her hair.

I thought about ribbons too. I thought about the feel of beads in my hands. I could feel the patterns with my fingers, though I could not see them clearly. I could feel the thread pulled through the hide. The years were a bark basket we all made. But the years made us bark baskets. We had been filled with something larger than us. We had been overcome. We just did not know it yet. Had the elders seen it and not told us? Had they tried to tell us and we had not listened? Or had we not understood their words?

I felt dark shadows beyond us move. I left the group of women and went farther into the woods to be alone, bumping into trees, feeling my way with a stick. I stayed in the blind trees. What was this horror I felt?—This horror I could almost see. The Maker would protect us from what-

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ever would happen. He would not allow anything else to come. I remembered the smallpox epidemic I lived through. I was hauled into death, but pulled back out. I do not know why. Maybe I was set apart for the Lord. No one else would have me.

Was it the darkness beyond the grave I felt? Was it the darkness of the sachem's words I could give up for the assurance of God?

We planted new fields and rebuilt on the sand flats, and named the new village Caughnawaga after the old village. We placed cut tree trunks upright in a wide circle and built our longhouses inside the walls.

I fell over a log as I tried to help. Afterward, my foot throbbed. For several days, I hobbled with a stick. For several more days I lay on my mat in the new longhouse that smelled of the forest. But soon the air was greenish, underwater-like, from the smoke of new cooking fires.

Do you want to ride to the border with me? It was a voice I was sure I heard. What was it? This forest moan. This garish haze. Our longhouses and the walls of our village had once been trees. Now they were broken. But I had broken apart also. I could comfort the forest voices that also had been broken to make our village. I am water. I cannot tell you how. Little feathers are falling. There are whirls of air.

The Jesuits arrived at Caughnawaga, our village, after a treaty with the French colonial government. My uncle tolerated

them. They did not carry guns. I had seen them pass through our village; now they stayed here.

I looked at the priests. Their blurred images were like dark spots before me. Who were these black figures who had preached their religion to my mother and aunts? These men dressed as crows without wings. No, they have wings. They unfold from the Book they carry. They were the ones my mother had talked about.

I was afraid, then I was not afraid. Fathers Fremin, Bruyas, and Pierron built a bark church and named it St. Peter's Mission. For days, I heard the pounding and the noise. I saw the little point of the cross they placed on the roof above the door. I saw the strike of sun on—what was it? Metal, Onas said.

What is that clang?

A bell, Anastasia said. That is what they call it.

The bark church was small and drafty. Whenever I was there, I thought of a fish-trap poorly made.

Now there was commotion again. The women cried out in terror. I tripped over a rolled mat and was nearly trampled. We thought the French soldiers were back. Onas was gone in an instant. Our warriors went after—who was there this time?

The Machicans, Enit said. I could hardly hear her above the noise. It was our enemy tribe. They had sneaked up, trying to attack before we knew they were there. But our warriors sprang after them, wanting to protect the new crops

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and village. They went after them with revenge they would have placed on the French soldiers.

When the warriors returned, they brought the Machican captives to torture. I would not watch them, though they were Machicans who attacked and tortured us. Sometimes the Machicans died without crying out. Other times they went crazy with pain. Sometimes I was relieved I did not have clear sight. I had seen smallpox. I had seen the Torturer. That was enough.

FATHER PIERRON: St. Peter's Mission, Caughnawaga, in the New World. I witnessed the torture of Machican captives. I cannot bring myself to write about the particulars. But I can say the Mohawks torture their captives to the point of death, but stop short of it. They want their captives alive to torture in the same way the next day and the next. They work to prolong the torture.

I sat with the captives at night. The Mohawks did not stop me. I nursed the wounded. I wrapped their wounds. I prayed for them. I sang a Gregorian chant for them. They asked me to continue singing. The pain seemed to lessen. Or their moaning did at any rate. I told them about God. I offered them heaven. They accepted my prayers. God received them into his kingdom through Christ. I prayed for the Mohawks, even when I gagged on my prayers.

KATERI: I was on my mat in the longhouse when one of the crows entered. He was a new priest—Father James de

Lamberville, he said, who had joined the others. I do not think he expected to find anyone. I think he was curious about our houses. Everyone else was in the fields. He looked in and found me. He started telling me about Christ. My mother had been a Christian, but my father, who was dead, and my uncle, who was now chief, were not. He was difficult to understand, but sometimes he talked with his hands, and I knew what he was saying. I told him I would like to be baptized as my mother had been, but I knew my uncle did not want it. Father de Lamberville asked me to start coming to St. Peter's chapel to pray with him.

At first, I came and went to the church of St. Peter's for prayer. Who noticed me with smallpox on my face? Usually everyone turned away. I hid my visits from my uncle. My aunts had been baptized. When they knew where I was, they made no objection.

I listened to the Book Father de Lamberville read because of the animals—the squirrels that made their nests in trees. The desert owl. The vulture, cormorant, eagle, moose, deer, rabbit, caribou, ox, gazelle, roe, locust, leech, fish, beaver, muskrat, mosquito, gnat.

Where is the porcupine who gives us our quills for sewing? I ask. And what is a camel?

He is like a lion—but his legs are taller, his face narrower. He has a hump on his back. He does not eat flesh.

I make these little birds of reference.

I knew them in the wilderness and in the land of drought. I am like a lion; like a leopard by the way. I will

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meet them like a bear that is bereaved of her cubs. I will tear the fat of their hearts and will devour them like a lion—Hosea 13:5–8.

I knew the animals, but what was drought? How would I know it when the woods dripped with rain? When I lived by a river? I saw the Fathers tripping over themselves to read to us. I saw they did not know what we did not know. How could we understand the place that gave the scriptures with its world across the sea? I heard Anastasia and Enit ask, Why did they make it so fearful?

It had been downhill since the other men came from their lands, the blackrobes clattering with them. Smallpox was not the only disease. The spotted leopard the priest read about had other children. It was not his fault. He did not know he brought disease. It came with him silently. Invisibly. Like the wind. Like spirits in the forest. Like beasts that took our children. Like wind. As for the priests—it was their mission, their work, their vision. How long has it been since your last confession?

I waited for the priest to read again. A multitude of camels will cover you—Isaiah 60:6. I waited for him to read about the trees. I will set in the desert the fir tree, and the pine, and the box tree together—Isaiah 41:19. The Lord God wrote the trees of the forest into his words. His writing was like beading. I felt the red berries, the gnarls of roots like scalps.

I know the trees of the forest. I hear their voices when I walk. I know the forest floor. The pine-needle covering. The

net of webs and nests in trees. The thick boughs over me. I think sometimes God is a tree. He is many trees. He hides the animals. He speaks to me. I think it is God. HE is a mystery. HE is the only thing I want. I feel drawn to HIM more all the time. My unworthiness is ever before me. I fall on my knees before HIM. I want to beat myself because of my unworthiness.

Birds spring from the grasses when I walk in the field. I find a matted place where a rabbit had nested. Overhead, I hear the scorn of a crow.

The priests continued to read scripture. At first, my hearing has smallpox. I hear only about the animals and trees. The bulls and goats. The badger and ants. Every beast of the forest is mine. I know the fowls of the mountains and the wild beasts of the field—Psalm 50:10–11.

The trees sang their song. They wrapped their branches around me. I became a bough of leaves on their trunk. I sang like the trees sang. *Abhhhhssss. Abhhhhssss.* Like that. They sounded like the river where the water is rapid. *Abhhhhssss. Abhhhhssss.* They sounded like that—

I cannot see the particulars of the leaves, but the overall blaze of yellow leaves when they turn before winter. Then I see the gnarl of bare trees barely visible without their leaves. I can hear the rustling of the women walking to the fields. The hunters returning from the woods.

The Machicans came near our village again. They killed several of our hunters and scalped a woman. I held her head on my lap until she died. Father Bruyas sprinkled her fore-

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head with his holy water. She passed into the next world with the red sun going down through the trees.

Afterward, I washed my sticky hands and dress in the river.

In the long, harsh, blessed winters, Fathers Fremin, Pierron, Bruyas, and de Lamberville read to us. Often Fremin and Pierron traveled to other villages and settlements.

He destroyed the sycamores with frost—Psalm 78:47. But it was only the leaves that had fallen from the trees in our forest.

In the snow, Anastasia, Enit, and I walked into the woods in our snowshoes, shawls, and burden straps. We gathered our fagots, our bundles of twigs for fuel.

I thought of Kisisok?e, the sun woman in my mother's Algonquin tribe. I would have prayed to her in the cold, but my mother would have told me to put those old beliefs away.

My feet walk among the stumps of oak when they are felled—Isaiah 6:13. I am like a green fir tree—Hosea 14:8.

These scriptures are falling stars. They come in sheets of light. Red wings of flames fling inward to the dark. His bread is thrown to us, crumbling in the Milky Way.

When Father James de Lamberville came into the long-house, I had told him I wanted to be baptized. I knew my uncle was against the Christians. Often he spoke against them. Often Iowerano was mad at his wife and sister

because of their prayers. I wanted to please my uncle, though I knew my mother was a Christian also. She had been baptized by missionaries. She told me about going into the water. I was five when she died. How could I remember her story? How did she tell me in a way I remembered? It was when she bathed me—I remember she said there was a holy bath—I felt her hands on my head. They felt like water. I think it was my first memory. How many times did she tell me before I remembered?

I took religious instruction from the Jesuits. Sometimes they themselves were sick, but not with smallpox. I learned about Matins. Vespers. Their masses. Their liturgies. Their smells. Their prayers. Their cawings. I saw their cross with Christ upon it, pocked with holes from thorns in his forehead, pocked with holes from nails in his hands and feet. He had known smallpox. I listened to the priests read scriptures. I always waited for the passages about the animals and the trees. Especially the trees. It was what I heard in the forest.

This silence. This excitement.

There was no writing in Mohawk. I could not read English. I did not know French. But Father de Lamberville knew enough Algonquin that I could understand what he said, maybe some of what he said.

It was a voice I had known anyway.

It was more than language sometimes. It was light. In God's light I saw light. Some of the priest's words I also came to know.

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These are Notes he keeps under his crow wings. The Priest's Journey—he calls them. That is why the sleeves on his robe are shiny, even more so in the rain and snow. That is why the light rubs off from them. That is why my fingers shine. I have touched his sleeves. I follow his path of writing.

FATHER JAMES DE LAMBERVILLE: In the Year of our Lord 1674, at the Mohawk village of Caughnawaga in the New World—I walked into one of their lodges—a dark longhouse. The air burned my eyes. It was filled with the smoke of their cooking fires. How did they breathe? I thought the longhouse would be empty. Everyone was in the fields. But there was a girl on a mat in a state of weakness. As I neared, I saw the mound of her face—small, brown, and pox-bitten. I drew back from the sight of her. When I recovered myself, I talked to her about coming to church.

I sat in the bark church thinking how to speak to them—the Indians like stories. They are used to listening. I would read the Bible as if telling a story. The Jesuits read to us in the refectory when I was a student. I liked the readings. With the pock-marked girl, I read scripture about the animals and trees. I knew the forest was important to them. I tried to reach them by what they understood.

I eat this book—Ezekiel 3:1. I memorize. As they walk, I wind a rope around their feet to remind them we all are bound to the Lord. I try to teach them how they trip up themselves in the face of the Lord when they follow their

own ways. The girl trips anyway. Her name means she-who-walks-searching-in-front-of-her. She does not always see what is there. How do I tell the Indians my visions? I was in my house when I saw a hand stretched toward me. In it was a scroll—Ezekiel 2:9.

If you say to the wicked, you shall surely die, and you give him no warning, to save his life, that same wicked man will die in his iniquity; but his blood will be on your hands. If you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, he will die in his iniquity, but you have delivered your soul—Ezekiel 3:18–19.

It is my job to tell them. It is my job to convert the heathen. I have been sent to the Indians—impudent, rebellious, stiff hearted. Those are the prophet Ezekiel's words in the Old Testament.

In eight months at St. Peter's Mission, I baptized only fifty-three—

Postscript to Father de Lamberville, by FATHER PIERRON: Yes, infants and dying children. Sick ones out of their head. The Machicans they captured were tortured. I slap my hands together. My fingers are eaten with cold. My hands squeak like birds. My fingers crack as bird claws. In the cold, the cracks bleed. Is this my stigmata?

FR. P.: STAY OUT OF MY NOTES—FR. L.

FATHER JAMES DE LAMBERVILLE: Often the others were gone. Father Fremin to the Iroquois. Father Bruyas to