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Night Flyer



HARRIET TUBMAN
AND THE FAITH DREAMS
OF A FREE PEOPLE

TIYA MILES

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THE FLIGHT

I'll fly away, oh, Glory
I'll fly away.

—“I’LL FLY AWAY,” TRADITIONAL SPIRITUAL

I dream in bird clan
A language that ties me
To what is and what was.

—CIRCE STURM, “FREEDOM MOST RANKLES,”
SAY, LISTEN: WRITING AS CARE, 2023

There is nothing like the beautiful free forest.

—EDMONIA LEWIS, AFRO-OJIBWE SCULPTOR,
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Harriet Tubman took wing. At the time of her permanent escape in the autumn of 1849, she had lived around twenty-seven years as the claimed property of others. But freeing herself meant losing the people and places she loved, and perhaps left her wondering why her god would exact such a price. According to her as-told-to biographers, Harriet communicated her intentions to family members before she acted. She is described as wearing a sunbonnet, traversing the grounds of Thompson's plantation, and singing these words loud enough to ring across the acreage: "When that old chariot comes, I'm going to leave you; I'm bound for the promised land."

What did Harriet Tubman's soaring voice sound like? This is difficult for us to know. She spoke in a regional Black

accent that biographers in her time failed to render respectfully and accurately on the page. Sarah Bradford wrote that Tubman sang an old hymn, which she had used as a message song during an escape, in a “sweet and simple Methodist air.” Bradford said, in describing another Tubman song of this type, “the air sung to these words was so wild, so full of plaintive minor strains, and unexpected quavers” that Bradford “would defy any white person to learn it.”¹ From these imperfect descriptions, we might glean that Tubman possessed a striking vocal range and an enthralling singing voice that could reproduce traditional Anglo Methodist sounds as well as improvisational tones influenced by her African diasporic roots. What was strange and foreign to Bradford’s ear would have been familiar to enslaved Black people across the South in their small churches and forested “shout” circles. Harriet must have had a melodious voice, given her apparent love of song and repeated practice of the form. She must have had a forceful voice that captivated and carried. When she sang the words “I’m sorry I’m going to leave you, Farewell, oh Farewell; But I’ll meet you in the morning . . . On the other side of Jordan, Bound for the promised land,” as she moved outside the captive spaces of her relatives, she must have pierced their listening hearts.

Harriet’s goodbye song about the promised land, like her recurring dream of flying toward the borderline, reflected

her persistent awareness of geography. She intended to traverse a boundary, to cross to an “other” side. And this “other” space was both physical and allegorical. She was headed to the American North and to the biblical wilderness of old. Hers was to be a physical and spiritual journey. This new place had been “promised” to her by God just as a land of freedom had been promised to the Israelites by Jehovah. Aspirational and hopeful, this melody was also a dirge full of regret and melancholy. Through the lyrics, Harriet apologized. Family was one of her two core values. The other was following what she perceived as the voice of God. No longer traveling with her brothers, she had to leave all her relatives behind as she embarked on this long walk into mystery. Her husband, John, had been against this course of action. Her mother, Rit, her father, Ben, her siblings, cousins, nieces, nephews, friends who acted like kin, and even her oxen would all remain on this side of the border, a virtual hellscape.

This was the personal and spiritual wilderness Harriet had to navigate even as she maneuvered through the physical woodlands of eastern Maryland. She made this leap with precious little information, “with almost no knowledge (of) the north, having only heard of Pennsylvania And New Jersey,” Emma Telford would recount.² But although she trudged through the trees in isolation that long first night,

Harriet was not alone in spirit. The remembered voices of her brothers from the last time she trod this trail may have reverberated in the stillness around her. The protection of her personal god must have enveloped her. The shedding pines and oak trees surely stood with her. The wild plants would have nourished her. The North Star, she would later proclaim, ably guided her. And the plans she had laid to get this far on an unpredictable, dangerous quest included human helpers, too, some positively identified and some still unknown because of the clandestine nature of an effective freedom network.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, 150 years after Tubman's escape, the Underground Railroad—or the secret web of activists pledged to aid freedom seekers—surged in public popularity. Historic homes, churches, and barns across the Northeast and Midwest announced their status as Underground Railroad stops or stations. Books detailing the brave actions and intricate hidden connections of stationmasters and conductors appeared on bookshop and library shelves. Public panels featured descendants of those who had helped and those who had run away. Even the Home and Garden Television channel (HGTV) departed from its typical design-oriented programming to produce a show titled *Homes of the Underground Railroad* during Black History Month in 2002. Partly a result of this surge of interest in an antebellum

social movement, and partly responsible for it, was the widespread dissemination of the idea, now discredited in academic circles, that enslaved people had designed quilts with coded messages keyed to escape plans. In *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (1999), authors Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard delineated the symbolism of quilt patterns once used to guide fugitives, according to the oral account of an African American woman basket maker in Charleston.³ The presentation of secret knowledge hidden within quilt square diagrams captured the imaginations of readers, inspiring themed quilt pattern books, elementary school lesson plans, and colorful posters featuring the special patterns.⁴ Run-away slaves, quilts, and a secret code was an intoxicating combination for public audiences who were fascinated by code breaking and adventure, the quilt historian Teri Klassen has explained.⁵

But those who embrace the inspiring idea of the handmade quilt serving as a tool of Black liberation need not fully give up on the notion. An account of Harriet Tubman's story that hews closely to existing evidence still bears witness to the role of the quilt in the quest for freedom. Although academic historians agree that no firm evidence exists to corroborate the existence of a widespread secret quilt code, the argument took hold.⁶ Even today, references to the code

regularly surface. Recent forums—a 2022 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, panel on the quilt exhibition *Fabric of a Nation*, a discussion of the difficulty of escape on the now shuttered Black News Channel in 2022, and an essay on Harriet Tubman posted to Medium in 2020—have all referenced the secret quilt code as common knowledge.⁷

Harriet Tubman was a skilled quilter, as were many Black Southern women in the early and mid-nineteenth century. And a quilt would turn out to be one of her most crucial resources in the fall of 1849. As she stole away from Thompson's grounds, traveling mostly by night, she turned to people in the countryside who could offer her a place to hide, share provisions, or provide information. The first person to help, as far as the historical record reveals, was a white woman in the area who may have been a Quaker. Harriet disclosed her intentions and need of assistance to this woman, offering her a hand-pieced quilt in return. The woman, in turn, gave Harriet a valuable bit of intelligence. "Harriet had a bed quilt which she highly prized, a quilt she had pieced together," said Helen Tatlock, who knew Tubman later in New York.⁸ "She gave this bed quilt to the white woman . . . The white woman gave her a paper with two names upon it, and directions how she might get to the first house."⁹

Just as Harriet's work in the woods revealed her outdoor

skills, this story about a crucial exchange shows that she practiced the craft of quilt-making and took pride in her handiwork. Harriet might not have wished to part with her "prized" quilt made of textures and colors we can see only in our imagination. Nevertheless, her ownership of the one-of-a-kind bed covering gave her leverage. She must have learned a memorable lesson in this moment: self-emancipation would have to be funded. In a manner less elaborate than the quilt-code notion would indicate, but far more instructive and replicable, Harriet used a textile to jump-start her solo journey. And according to one of her associates, Harriet worked quilts by hand while hiding in the woods during her subsequent rescue missions: "By day they lay in the woods; then she pulled out her patchwork, and sewed together little bits, perhaps not more than [sic] inch square, which were afterwards made into comforters for the fugitives in Canada."¹⁰ The art and craft of quilt-making that channeled Black women's creative expression and provided enslaved and refugee families with cover and comfort also provided Black women with a trade good, a material form of currency, which underwrote the project of emancipation.¹¹

With the information gained through this trade, Harriet found the safe house, the first in a series that would carry her across Maryland's countryside. Her exact route and helpers are unknown to this day. Tubman kept them safe and secret.

She probably made her way at first to a long-standing Quaker settlement in Caroline County, which was also home to a Black community. She may have been aided by the Levertons, a Quaker family in a neighboring area whom historians have documented as playing an active part in the secret network to aid fugitives in Maryland.¹²

Scholars speculate that Harriet likely followed a trail that many other fugitives from slavery had taken along the Choptank River (named for a local Indigenous nation), heading northeast toward the distant state border. In this way, she was again acting in a manner that fit within a larger, collective experience of enslaved people in the Upper South region of eastern Maryland. A contemporary biographer of Tubman, Catherine Clinton, sketched out that riverine route as one “which reaches far inland, cutting a swath across the verdant Delmarva peninsula (shared by western Delaware, eastern Maryland, and a small offshore slice of Virginia at the southern most point).” Another present-day biographer, Kate Larson, has detailed Tubman’s most likely route as running from Preston to Sandtown to Camden to Dover, to Odessa to New Castle to Wilmington, and finally to Chester and Philadelphia. Harriet traveled mostly by night to avoid detection, knowing the horsemen of her visions must be in pursuit, entrusting her safety to individuals who could betray her at any moment, and relying on her past experience

in wild and cultivated nature. “She later confided that she had observed that all streams she knew ran north to south,” Clinton has noted. “So Tubman might have used the direction of flowing water as a guide during her first foray.”¹³

Harriet believed that God guided and shielded her, a view she shared with other women of her faith tradition. Just as certainly, she was behaving in ways her family and local community members would have recognized and understood. Her father had taught her the ways of the forest. Her mother had fled to the woods to save her brother from sale. Hundreds of others in Maryland had attempted to flee chattel bondage over land and waterways in the year 1850 alone.¹⁴ Harriet Tubman was a member of a regional and racial culture, not a lone ranger or solitary hero of the deep woods like the mythological figure, usually male, who pervades American and British lore.

The character Robin Hood epitomizes this traditional male Western hero. Robin Hood famously used the English forest as cover while stealing from the rich and giving to the poor in stories set in medieval times. Robin Hood’s cultural mystique derives from fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, when these oral stories centering him were first written down. The fictionalized Robin Hood represented a class of English noblemen pushed off their lands after William the Conqueror’s Norman Conquest in 1066. These no-

bles turned to the forest, where they “continued to resist the invaders through guerilla warfare,” the literature scholar Robert Pogue Harrison has explained. Their “reckless raids and reprisals . . . became the matter of legends and popular ballads, giving birth to a fabulous figure who would continue to fascinate the popular imagination for centuries to come: that of the heroic outlaw fighting the forces of injustice from his lair in the forest.”¹⁵ The Robin Hood character was beloved for his willingness to dwell beyond the bounds of settled society to make a political staging ground of the forest.

Black, female, family- and community-oriented, without any claim to noble birth—and a breathing, feeling person who surely cried and bled in those woods—Harriet Tubman was no Robin Hood. So who was her archetypal antecedent? What if we were to see Tubman’s affect and actions as rooted in a tradition of the female fugitive passed down in story and art? This tradition, and the changeable figure at its center, is long-lived in the imaginations of Blacks in bondage and their descendants. The trope was perhaps most memorably expressed by the writer Alice Walker when she offered the following example to define her new term *womanism* in the 1980s: “Traditionally capable, as in: ‘Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.’ Reply: ‘It wouldn’t be the first time.’”¹⁶

Harriet Tubman was one of these traditionally capable

daughters who represented a spirit of undaunted humanity. And beyond her Southern American roots, she stood in an even longer line of brave captive women dating back to ancient times. Did Harriet think of herself as a narrative descendant of Hagar, a biblical figure highlighted in Black Christian thought across generations? Hagar was sexually enslaved by Abraham, who could not bear children with his



Hagar. Edmonia Lewis sculpted this biblically inspired work out of white marble in 1875. The overturned jar at Hagar’s feet is often interpreted as symbolizing the challenge of providing for her child while enslaved and outcast.

Smithsonian Institution, open access.

wife Sarah; she was then exiled into the wilderness after Sarah finally conceived. Wandering the open land with her child, Ishmael, son of Abraham, Hagar had to depend on God to survive. "God gave her [Hagar] a new vision to see survival resources where she had not seen them before," theologian Delores Williams has written. In the late nineteenth century, the Afro-Ojibwe sculptor Edmonia Lewis reflected this resonant cultural motif in her choice of subject matter, chiseling a statue of Hagar in marble that won her wide acclaim.¹⁷

Harriet, like Hagar, made her way through the wilderness, perhaps under the watchful eye of the Hebrews' God. The journey of nearly 150 miles would have taken approximately forty-nine hours on foot, without the conveniences of modern roads or the reassurances of drawn maps. Harriet surely felt heavy while placing one heel in front of the other, as if she were "draggin[g] the moon like a shackle."¹⁸ But the woods, which changed their trees like dresses as Harriet trudged northward, were with her on this path into darkness. Oaks and chestnuts shedding their colors intermixed with the pines as she trudged through leaves and over rocks of the piedmont hills, finally reaching that geographical borderline long featured in her dreams.¹⁹ When Harriet stepped or crawled onto the free soil of Pennsylvania after one to two weeks of grueling travel, she rejoiced in her spirit. And per-

haps the spirits of the trees sang a song of gladness with her. According to Sarah Bradford's account, Harriet described her overwhelming feelings of relief and joy in language that reflected her love of the natural *and* supernatural worlds. "I looked at my hands . . . to see if I was the same person now I was free. There was such a glory over everything, the sun came like gold through the trees, over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven."²⁰

This expression of the sublime, a sense of awestruck intimacy with the divinity of life refracted through natural beauty and captured in words, is attributed to Tubman in the same cultural moment—the mid-nineteenth century—when literary giants like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau formed a philosophical and literary movement of spiritual naturalism that embraced the same mood. Tubman was a philosopher, too, interpreting her surroundings and striving to make meaning of what she observed and experienced. But for her, this transcendent moment was fleeting, immediately dissolving into despair. Her status as a Black captive woman born to an enslaved family compromised her experience of transcendence. "I had crossed the line of which I had so long been dreaming. I was free; but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom, I was a stranger in a strange land, and my home after all was down in the old cabin quarter, with the old folks, and my brothers

and sisters; I was free, and they should be free,” Harriet said.²¹ Her recurring dream of the borderline had been realized in its deeper symbolic meanings. Just as her dream had foretold in its earliest iterations, she had come crashing down to earth. If slavery had been hell, she would now dwell in emotional purgatory, forbidden peace while her relatives suffered and the question still burned inside her: Would they ever be saved?

Somewhere on the slopes of southern Pennsylvania, Harriet Tubman was in crisis. She had found the promised land by the time morning dawned, but she was destined to enter it without the companionship of those she loved. Harriet Jacobs, who escaped her abusive owner in North Carolina in the 1840s, described her feelings upon reaching Philadelphia with another bondswoman: “Before us lay the city of strangers. We looked at each other, and the eyes of both were moistened with tears. We had escaped from slavery, and we supposed ourselves to be safe from the hunters. But we were alone in the world, and we had left dear ties behind us; ties cruelly sundered by the demon Slavery.”²² Harriet Tubman was similarly bereft. She felt achingly lonely, and certainly afraid—but that is not all. She felt aggrieved by a society and circumstance that would have her freed while her loved ones remained enchained by the demon. Her personal bereave-

ment became a political realization about the unfair nature of power.

As we would expect, having followed Tubman from her childhood yearnings to her adulthood stirrings, she turned to God in her desolation, begging him to hear her appeal. “I would make a home for them in the North, and the Lord helping me, I would bring them all there. Oh, how I prayed then, lying all alone on the cold, damp ground; ‘Oh, dear Lord . . . I haven’t got no friend but you. Come to my help, Lord, for I’m in trouble!’”²³ Harriet believed what her cultural contemporary the preacher Elizabeth had learned as an enslaved child: there was no one to look to but God. On freedom’s border, Harriet made a pact with herself and with a deity: she would become her own answer to her second existential question. There *would be* deliverance for her people. With God’s aid, it was she who would rescue them. This was an oath drawn not in blood but in the rocky piedmont soil—the very ground that held her body, smelling of sweat and sweet decay like the cast-off leaves of autumn trees—as she whispered her petition. Nature bore witness to this epiphany wrapped inside an appeal, the moment when Harriet Tubman determined she would cross back into hell, “breath weak an[d] bone sore,” to set her people free.²⁴

Harriet rose from the ground, pulling the weight of sur-

vivor's guilt over her shoulders like a shawl. With this invisible burden dragging her down through the last, long miles, she finally made it to Philadelphia, where she knew not a single soul. Studded with densely packed, architecturally grand buildings and a large, bustling population, Philadelphia was the destination of many fugitives seeking safe harbor. The city had been the home of Quaker critics of the slave trade since the mid-1700s and a hotbed of abolitionist activity since the 1830s. Black and white activists operated in tandem from the city center, forming the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society and organizing the Philadelphia Vigilant Committee to watch the streets for freedom seekers in need as well as for slave hunters on the prowl.²⁵ Black freedom activists Robert Purvis and William Still (born of formerly enslaved parents) were based in the city. The white Quaker activist Thomas Garrett moved between this urban hub and his home and shop in Delaware, where he and his wife, Rachel Mendenhall Garrett, housed runaways and provided them with clothing, shoes, food, and other supplies.²⁶

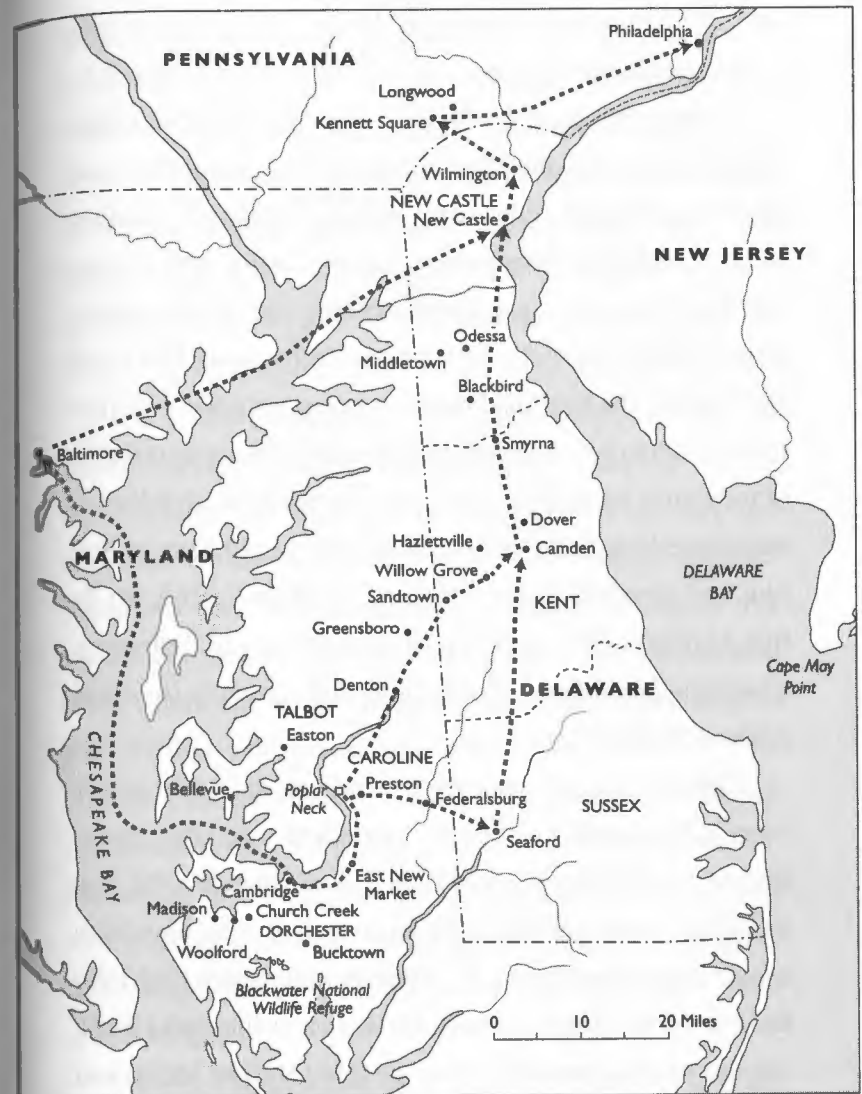
But Harriet Tubman did not immediately find this circle of support. She was alone when she entered the gritty streets of the city, more bewildering to her, a rural newcomer, than the forested wilderness from which the term *bewildered* is derived. After days or weeks in the city, she may have met other Black women who offered aid, counsel, and company.

She managed to secure temporary work, "in hotels, in club houses, and afterwards at Cape May," a seaside resort town in nearby New Jersey, Sarah Bradford related.²⁷ Every day, Harriet must have felt the tenuousness and urgency of her situation. She had endured a terrifying trek on top of a traumatic childhood. She was in a big, new, disorienting place where she could not read street signs or newspapers. She suffered from headaches and seizures. But Harriet was not focused on her own emotional recovery or physical comfort. She had a mission that extended beyond herself. She aimed to help her relatives, and she knew from experience that escape from a Southern state even as far north as Maryland required resources, information, courage, and sacrifice. After two years spent "working in Philadelphia and carefully hoarding her money," reported Ednah Cheney, Harriet "hired a room, furnished it as well as she could, bought a nice suit of men's clothes, and went back to Maryland for her husband."²⁸

But Ednah Cheney left something out, as Tubman's early biographers often did, or else Cheney was unaware of the first feat in what would become nearly a decade of astounding rescues that fellow activists would call "trips of mercy."²⁹ Harriet had maintained close personal connections with residents in Baltimore, and she heard through the grapevine that a young relation was in trouble. Before Harriet went back for her husband, she attempted to save her niece Kes-

siah, who was once again targeted by Eliza Brodess for the auction block. In December of 1850, news of the impending sale had traveled to Harriet by way of community connections reaching from rural Maryland to the urban zones of Baltimore and Philadelphia.³⁰ Fearing for Kessiah, Harriet sprang into action.

Kessiah then acted on a plan developed by her inventive aunt, making her way to Baltimore with children in tow, with the aid of her husband, a sailor. Kessiah rendezvoused with Harriet, who hid the family among associates in the city before guiding them to Philadelphia. It had required temerity and teamwork to bring this niece, the daughter of a sold-away sister, out of slavery. In the act of helping her niece, Harriet risked exposing herself in a worsening political environment. In September of 1850, the passage of the enhanced federal Fugitive Slave Law heightened the danger for every runaway who had escaped or planned to run to the North. They would now be subject to recapture by Northern state officials and citizens alike. In this frenzied period of intense fear when people who had formerly freed themselves began to uproot from Northern cities and head to Canada, Harriet went south, straight into the red zone. A few months after helping Kessiah, Harriet traveled to Baltimore again to aid in the escapes of her brother Moses (whom her mother, a role model, had once hidden in the woods) and two other



Harriet Tubman's southern Underground Railroad routes to Philadelphia.

Courtesy of Bill Nelson of Bill Nelson Maps and Kate Larson.

men. Only then, in the fall of 1851, two years after her own escape, did she make a move to reunite with her husband.³¹

Harriet still battled with chronic pain, sudden seizures, and disruptive visions. With limited energy, resources, and stamina, she had to choose each move she made with caution and care. Familial love and a triage mentality, which organized action in accordance with urgency, trumped romantic attachment in Harriet's decision-making process. But when she decided the time had come to bring her spouse (a free man) north to live with her, she was taking her greatest risk of recapture up to that point. She did not have an advance understanding with John Tubman. She would have to find him and convince him to leave all he knew behind. To do this, Harriet would have to push past the city of Baltimore, where she could more readily hide, and return to the rural Eastern Shore of her roots.

She must have been gravely afraid as she retraced her steps to the Land of Egypt where rewards had been promised to anyone who captured her.³² And when she did find John, fear was soon flooded by an onrush of other emotions: misery, envy, resentment. For Harriet would learn that John had remarried in her absence, starting a new life with a Black woman who had possessed the one thing Harriet had lacked as a young person: freedom. It must have been a crushing

blow, realizing someone she cared for enough to risk liberty had not cared enough in return to remain loyal to their relationship. "At first her grief and anger were excessive," Cheney wrote of Tubman. "She said 'she did not care what [master] did to her . . . she was determined to see her old man once more' . . . but finally she thought . . . 'if he could do without her, she could do without him,' and so 'he dropped out of her heart.'" ³³

It is difficult to believe that Harriet could so quickly rebound from the pain of this betrayal and the knowledge that her marriage was dead. Surely, she mourned her first love and whatever dream of a life with John Tubman she had harbored over the lonely months of their separation. Surely, too, she bore a heart wound as she backed away from the meeting place where she spoke—heatedly, desperately, tearfully?—with the man whose name she had once proudly taken. Nevertheless, she chose to pivot, accepting the loss of a marriage and focusing on what this transformed moment called for. She would not waste this costly voyage. She determined what must be done next. She regrouped, gathered a party of those more willing than her spouse, and led them to freedom in Philadelphia.

Harriet Tubman had wanted to stay married to John Tubman. That much is clear from her actions. But in losing

this man, and whatever hope she may have placed in raising children with him in the future, she gained fresh possibilities. If she had lived with a husband in the same household or had young ones to care for in what would turn out to be a critical decade, the 1850s, when the nation was hurtling toward heated debate about the expansion of slavery that would soon culminate in civil war, Harriet's future would have unfolded differently. She might have been overtaken by domestic and parental duties, affording her less time and energy to attend to the work of rescue. Her singleness in this period, then, was essential to her autonomy, her flexibility, and her increased tolerance for risk. And Tubman shared singleness with other women of her faith culture who found that they had to first challenge male authority in their homes and churches before stepping out to preach God's word.

Elizabeth, who was "strengthened by the Lord's power, to go on to the fulfillment of His work" in midlife, had never married, according to her memoir, which meant she was always free from the demands and encumbrances of wedlock and domestic life. Jarena Lee's evangelical work flourished only after the death of her husband. In her memoir, Jarena calls this death "the greatest affliction of all" but also attributes it to "his [God's] hand." After her husband's passing, Jarena became a widow, "with no other dependence than the promise of Him," as she cared for two small children. She

wrote that God "raised [her] up friends" to support her. And only after the loss of her husband did Jarena experience a significant life turn, with her "call to preach renewed."³⁴

Zilpha Elaw also suffered the death of her spouse, in 1823, writing that "God was [her] strong tower and [her] refuge in the day of distress." Financially devastated due to the loss of her husband's income, Zilpha placed her daughter and herself in household servant positions, struggling for two years until she prayed for a "token" from God to affirm her "call to the ministry." Perceiving that this requested sign had been bestowed, she left her daughter in the care of "a dear relative" and relocated to Philadelphia to "commence" her "Master's business." She traveled alone from Pennsylvania to New York and preached there for seven months while "the Lord rendered [her] ministry a blessing to many souls." In 1828, Zilpha traveled south to preach, "regardless," writes the literary scholar William Andrews, "of the very real danger of being arrested or kidnapped and sold as a slave." Toward the end of her career, in 1840, Zilpha Elaw spent five years ministering in London and various English towns, "exhibiting," she wrote, "as did the bride of Solomon, comeliness with blackness." In other words, Black was beautiful in the scripture as Zilpha interpreted it. From beginning to end in her spiritual memoir, Zilpha Elaw articulated a race and gender analysis that exposed the degree of hardship she

faced due to her identity, as well as her ultimate triumph as a Black woman under God's sponsorship.³⁵

Julia Foote's break from the husband who deemed her "crazy" was more radical than that of the other evangelizing women described here. When her husband ordered her to cease her fervent religious expressions, threatening to return her to her parents, he was met with flagrant disobedience. Julia increased her spiritual activities, alienating her spouse in what became an emotional and physical, if not legal, separation. She attended an African Methodist Episcopal Conference in Philadelphia on her own, and there found community with three other women who felt called to preach but were stymied by male leadership. Julia rented space to hold prayer meetings in the city and then went west. In the 1840s she preached in upstate New York, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Columbus, and Cleveland, pausing to care for her ailing father in between. In 1850 she preached across the Ohio countryside, in Detroit, and over the border in Canada. Julia urged other women to follow their hearts, saying: "Sisters, shall not you and I unite with the heavenly host in the grand chorus? If so, you will not let what man may say or do, keep you from doing the will of the Lord or using the gifts you have for the good of others. How much easier to bear the reproach of men than to live at a distance from God."³⁶

As widows, singles through separation, or never married "spinsters," these Black holy women could make decisions with greater independence from human male authority—Black or white. They could travel, speak their minds, lead prayers, and offer exhortations, pursuing what they all described as a divine calling. Freed from wedlock though not by choice, Harriet Tubman used her unexpected autonomy to fulfill what she conceived as her purpose. She, too, had heard God's voice and felt called to evangelize. Hers was a message of freedom, at once religious, social, and political—embedded in and expressed through her rescue work. In the early 1850s, when Julia Foote was preaching the gospel in the Midwest and Upper Canada (today's Ontario), defying her husband in the process, Harriet Tubman was preaching the gospel in the Southern woods and salted swamps, having left her first marriage behind in the dust of memory.

Harriet's message was not precisely the same as other Black holy women of her time who focused primarily on spiritual liberation, nor was it one that she had simply received from God whole cloth. Instead, Harriet's creed of holistic freedom was one that she had negotiated, or co-created through communion, with this god of her belief. She had formed a compact with God that grew stronger and more refined as she matured. The first draft of this compact seems

to have been forged when she prayed for her owner to die and then begged forgiveness when he did, asking God to cleanse her soul. Then she learned not only that God sided with the oppressed but also that God would respond when she spoke to him, and so she must calibrate her petitions. Harriet's divine compact had solidified at the inaugural crossing of the northern border where she informed her deity that she intended to rescue others with his help.

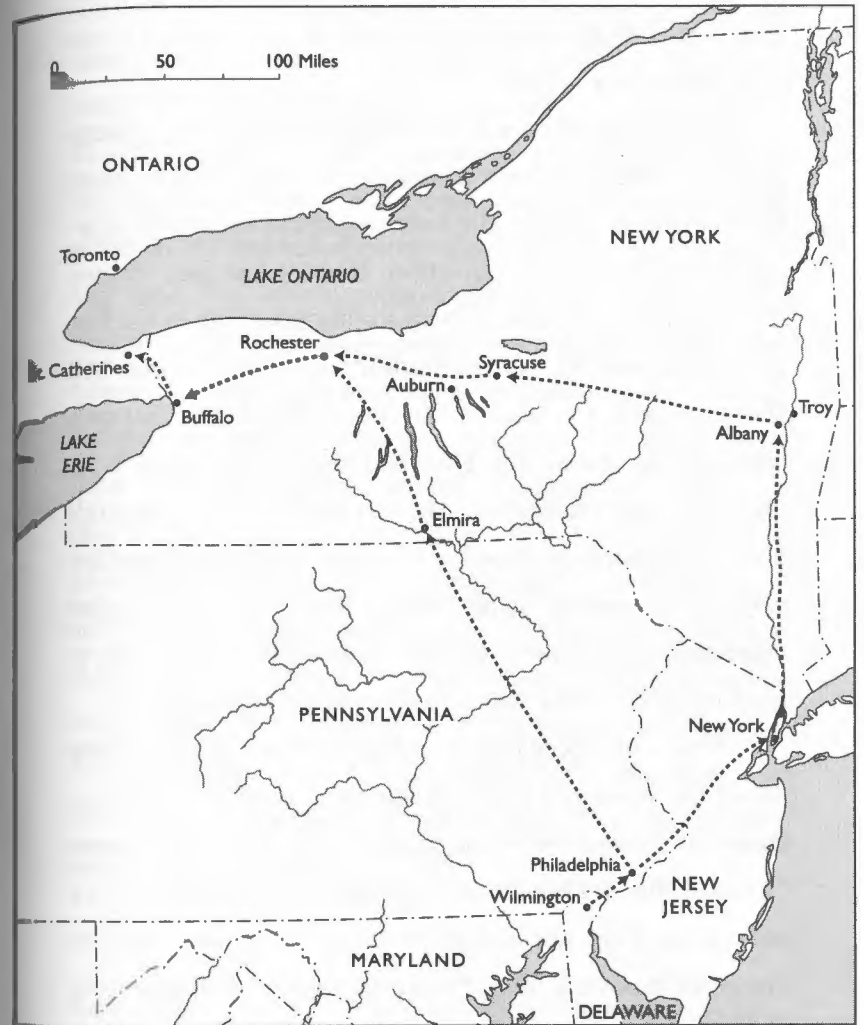
Harriet believed God championed freedom. She had seen evidence of it. But she also urged him to support her as she broadened this vision beyond her own welfare. Her mission was not to liberate herself alone, or even to save individual souls or individual bodies from sin like other Black holy women were passionately doing, but instead to release a composite body, those whom she called "her people," from the evil grasp of the demon Slavery. "I have heard their groans and sighs, and seen their tears, and I would give every drop of blood in my veins to free them," she said.³⁷ Saving others was Harriet Tubman's grand idea, grounded in her own experience and her understanding of God's stance as revealed in the Old Testament stories, the death of her owner, and the success of her escape. She laid this freedom mission at the feet of her god, following and leading him at the same time.

Beginning with the redemption of her niece, Harriet

Tubman launched a series of incredible rescues. In the mid-1850s, as her liberation mission concretized and she found through experience that God was holding up his end, she acted with greater confidence, believing she understood the duties of each party in the compact. She would do God's will in freeing the people, and God would be there to guide and protect her. She developed a general route, "by way of Poplar Neck, Cambridge, where her father and mother were, and Baltimore, where her cousin Tom was," Tubman would later tell late-nineteenth-century Underground Railroad historian Wilbur Siebert. And she had by then joined the tight-knit network of regional activists, relying on Thomas Garrett (in Wilmington, Delaware) for material aid and on William Still (in Philadelphia) for critical information and communications. She gained renown among her colleagues as a "sister of humanity," and a "shrewd and fearless agent" who "well understood the entire route from that part of the country to Canada." Even as, by 1857, Thomas Garrett wrote, "I think there will be more danger at present than heretofore," Harriet Tubman pressed her purpose. She forged ahead with "utter disregard of consequences," as William Still put it. Sarah Bradford reported about Tubman's risky missions and near-miss escapes from recapture: "But these sudden deliverances never seemed to strike her as at all strange or

mysterious; her prayer was the prayer of faith, and she *expected an answer.*"³⁸

Harriet's radical acts of rescue under the wing of divine providence were forms of preaching. She taught as she did, setting an example of faith and follow-through for others around her. She also used direct speech to exhort her listeners—freedom seekers—toward a clearer and deeper understanding of her religious message. Her songs (mostly hymns) and sayings (often repeated) functioned as micro sermons or homilies. As she accompanied people fortunate enough to leave their captors, she sang to pass on information, to soothe nerves, and to share her liberation ethos. In one example, when she sought to lift the flagging spirits of a fugitive named Joe who was terrified that he would be caught and returned to bondage, Harriet preached: "The Lord had been with them in six troubles, and he would not desert them in the seventh." And when Harriet, Joe, and a tired band of runaways stood before a bridge in Niagara, New York, which they still had to cross before reaching Canada, she led a song that conveyed her religious belief: "Oh righteous Father, wilt thou not pity me, and help me on to Canada, where all the slaves are free." Once the danger had passed and the party stood on Canadian soil, Joe responded with a song of his own: "Glory to God and Jesus too, One more soul got safe; Oh, go and carry the news, One more soul got safe."³⁹ This



Harriet Tubman's northern Underground Railroad routes from Philadelphia to St. Catharines, Canada.

Courtesy of Bill Nelson of Bill Nelson Maps and Kate Larson.

call and response between Harriet and one of her “passengers,” set to rhythm before a group of self-emancipators, was a church service in transit.

In another instance when Harriet was guiding “a large party,” including infants drugged with laudanum to quiet their crying, she would also turn to a hymn to convey information and religious conviction. Harriet had just thrown their pursuers off track and was hiding her group in the forest as darkness fell. Writes Bradford about this rescue: “All the others were on the alert, each one hidden behind his own tree, and silent as death. They had been long without food, and were nearly famished.” Harriet left the group to search for nourishment, equipped as a forager who had learned the ways of the woods from her father and perhaps others in her community. Upon her return hours later, she sang a song to alert her party that it was safe to come out of hiding.

What must these frightened people have felt when they heard her voice rise through the trees, barely making out these words over the sound of their own rough heartbeats: “Around Him are ten thousand angels, Always ready to obey command; They are always hovering round you, Till you reach the heavenly land.”⁴⁰ Harriet told them angels were near and they were safe in the hands of God. Harriet—a small, dark woman who might collapse at any moment—told these people remarkable things that belied perceptual real-

ity. And despite the inconclusive nature of the message, the desolation of their location, and the evident physical ailments of their guide, they must have believed her, or wanted to. Although Harriet “half of her time . . . had the appearance of sleep, sit[ting] down by the road-side and go[ing] fast asleep when on her errands of mercy through the South,” William Still said, “her followers generally had full faith in her.”⁴¹ And this stands to reason, for did not the very contrast between messenger and message prove God’s power? Harriet Tubman as God’s avenger bore certain similarities to the Bible stories the fugitives would have known well—of Moses cast away as a babe on the Nile in a basket, of Jesus born to an unwed teen beneath a star in a manger. Harriet’s apparent weaknesses thrummed in tune with narrative chords of the Bible. So perhaps these were not weaknesses at all, her companions may have supposed, but rather, signs of holiness—or chosen-ness. After all, God could uplift the weak and imbue them with secret strengths, and often did the very same in the scriptures.

Early biographies of Tubman, as well as testimonials by people who knew her (and even the 2019 Hollywood biopic, *Harriet*), depict these years of the 1850s as a montage of near miracles. It is hard to resist this impulse and difficult to

believe all that Harriet Tubman accomplished as the captain of her own freedom enterprise. Against all odds and in the face of recapture, resale, torture, and death, she rescued approximately seventy individuals from captivity, multiplied by the number of children they would birth and raise in freedom. This meant traveling north to south then back again time after time, when each trip presented a threat to her life and the lives of her companions. As a female who outpaced



Harriet Tubman around midlife, wearing a long skirt and delicate blouse with ruffles on the sleeves and cuff. Photo by Benjamin F. Powelson in his studio in Auburn, New York, circa 1867–69. “Harriet Tubman” is handwritten across the bottom of the photograph.

Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, public domain.

every single male conductor working on the Underground Railroad by leaps and bounds, she confronted the particularly grave danger of sexualized bodily harm. How could Harriet accept this risk once, twice, a dozen times? Who among us could imagine making such a perilous choice?⁴²

Fortified in both mind and spirit by the conviction that moral duty superseded personal safety, Harriet Tubman applied practical knowledge to her missions. She had learned effective techniques from her own escape. She knew that season, weather, time of day, resources (financial and material), information, and networks of support were crucial to outcomes. Based on this experiential knowledge, she began a pattern of traveling south in cool weather—fall, winter, or early spring before the thaw—and returning north with groups seeking freedom. In the warmer months, she undertook paid domestic work to earn money for the cold-weather operations. After the implementation of the draconian Fugitive Slave Law, she began guiding travelers from Maryland directly to Ontario. “I wouldn’t trust Uncle Sam with my people no longer,” she said. “I brought them all clear off to Canada.”⁴³

The parties Tubman guided were large and small. She seems to have sheltered a group of eleven in the New York home of Frederick Douglass, a fellow abolitionist who had freed himself from bondage in Maryland. In 1858, Douglass

wrote in a letter to antislavery advocates, withholding names for the sake of security: "One coloured woman, who escaped from Slavery eight years ago, has made several returns at great risk, and has brought out, since obtaining her freedom, fifty others from the house of bondage." As individuals got word of others' plans to escape with Tubman, they sometimes broke out on their own to join in. "Every time she went," Ednah Cheney wrote, "the dangers increased."⁴⁴

Within a few years of her escape and as she successfully aided others, Harriet caught the attention of abolitionist activists in Philadelphia. It was only at this point, after she had undertaken and funded perhaps a handful of solo trips working with Baltimore contacts, that she was able to gather financial resources from other sources beyond her own domestic labor. Thomas Garrett, upon learning of her exploits from Philadelphia colleagues, befriended Tubman and began to collect funds for her missions. Each time she stopped by his place in Delaware, she retrieved a new pair of shoes, basic but essential items for her endeavors.⁴⁵

But Harriet had not yet rescued all her family members, so she kept on going back. In 1854, after sensing that her brothers were in trouble, she dictated brilliantly coded letters to them through a free Black associate. She orchestrated an escape for three of them, Ben, Robert, and Henry, arriving at her old stomping grounds on Christmas Eve, "a Satur-

day, the perfect timing for an escape," the historian Kate Larson has said, as enslavers often allowed Black workers more flexibility of movement during the holidays.⁴⁶ All four siblings (and Jane, Ben's fiancée, who had just escaped a violent owner, disguised as a man) stopped by their parents' cabin in Poplar Neck near the Choptank River before departing. They kept out of view of their mother, Rit, while catching the attention of their father, Ben. A clever man, Ben Ross blindfolded himself so he could swear to anyone who might later interrogate him that he had not "seen" his children. He gave them food and allowed them to hide in his corncrib, then walked arm in arm with them, eyes still covered, until they parted ways.⁴⁷

Harriet was gaining a reputation for bravery, reliability, and perhaps for revealing a glint of God's favor. "By reason of her frequent visits there, always carrying away some of the oppressed, she got among her people the name of 'Moses,' which she still retains," Sarah Bradford proclaimed.⁴⁸ But even as Harriet was earning that byname and the mystique that clouds our view of her now, she did face failure. She tried but did not succeed in bringing her sister (probably Rachel) and her sister's children out of slavery during the Christmas rescue of 1854.⁴⁹ The haunting scene in her memory of sisters sold away would never fade. Neither the ones who had been lost nor the lone sister still on the Eastern Shore would

be redeemed by “Moses,” their wrongs avenged and their honor restored.

In 1857, Harriet returned to Maryland for the parents who had trained her so well for survival. Although Ben and Rit were both free by then—Ben through his owner’s will and Rit through Ben’s purchase of her—they remained under threat as long as they lived in the South. Ben had become active on the Underground Railroad, and he was targeted for arrest after helping someone escape. He could be jailed, beaten, or worse. Harriet, a “conductor” then in that same loose network of operators, was determined to bring him out. She arrived, as was her custom, in the dark, equipped with the tools necessary to transport her elderly parents. Did Ben Ross proudly think “Like father like daughter” when he saw the makeshift wooden conveyance, a rudimentary wagon, that she had procured to ease their travel? Did he think of the times he had taught her to move heavy logs out of the woods? Did Rit Green find that Harriet had packed pieced quilts into the vehicle, sewn by her own hand with skills learned at Rit’s knee in childhood?

Harriet established a household for her parents in St. Catharines, Ontario, a town that would become a second home to her in this period. And although that first winter was hard on her parents, who missed the temperate Southern climate, Harriet had no regrets. “Now I’ve been free,”

she said in an interview in Canada a year before bringing her parents there, “I know what a dreadful condition slavery is. I have seen hundreds of escaped slaves, but I never saw one who was willing to go back and be a slave.”⁵⁰

Maryland enslavers and slave hunters placed bounties on Harriet’s head. The first advertisement for her recapture, before she had become infamous for aiding others in their escapes, offered a reward of \$50 or \$100, depending on whether she was caught inside or outside of Maryland. By the end of the 1850s, she had undertaken nearly thirteen trips in all and freed seventy to eighty people, undercutting the property values of enslavers like the Brodesses and the Thompsons.⁵¹ Nineteenth-century primary accounts and early-twentieth-century commentary give different figures for the bounty, which may have been exaggerated. Sarah Bradford mentions \$12,000 (without documentation), and W. E. B. Du Bois claimed \$10,000 (perhaps drawing from Bradford).⁵² Whatever the exact figure, Harriet was a wanted woman. But “[f]earlessly she went on,” Sarah Bradford opined, “trusting in the Lord.” Bradford offered a statement of Tubman’s logic in her rendition of Tubman’s words: “There’s *two* things I’ve got a *right* to, and these are, Death or Liberty—one or the other I mean to have. No one will take me back alive; I shall fight for my liberty, and when the time has come for me to go, the Lord will let them kill me.”⁵³

Bradford summarized this statement as “a simple creed.” We can instead see it is a complex philosophy emerging from Tubman’s religious belief, moral reasoning, and lived experience.

Harriet believed she had divinely endowed rights, even as a Black-slave-woman, a recombinant mix of the lowest categories in American, and indeed global, society. Her understanding of these rights was rooted in her religious faith in which God championed liberation and was no respecter of persons. It was also based (if Bradford’s quotation fairly approximates Tubman’s words) in the language of natural rights (now understood as human rights) embedded in the founding documents of the United States. The will of God, as well as the letter of the moral law guiding the nation into which she was born a chattel-child, authorized her action. There were no higher powers in this land, and Harriet Tubman knew it. With God on her side, in a country that espoused self-evident truths of human worth as endowed by God, she believed she would prevail. And she did.

Harriet trusted that God was with her, personally and politically. This is a through line across her life story. From a young age, through ritual and repetition within a shared religious frame, Harriet had come to feel God was real, present, and responsive. She was in the habit of walking and talking with this invisible being. Her comrade Thomas Gar-

rett wrote in a testimonial: “She has frequently told me that she talked with God, and he talked with her every day of her life, and she has declared to me that she felt no more fear of being arrested by her former master, or any other person, when in his immediate neighborhood, than she did in the State of New York, or Canada, for she said she never ventured only where God sent her, and her faith in a Supreme Power truly was great.”⁵⁴ People who conversed with Harriet said she credited God as her key informant and the impetus behind her decisions, often saying “The Lord told me.” Once Thomas Garrett pressed Harriet on an occasion when she had come to visit, saying God told her Garrett had money for her next rescue. He asked whether “God never deceived her?” because he had received no such funds. Tubman proclaimed, “No!” And according to Garrett, the mystery cash soon arrived.⁵⁵ In 1860, when Garrett worried in a letter to William Still about Tubman’s latest trip with two families, he commented: “I shall be very uneasy about them until I hear they are safe. There is much more risk on the road . . . yet, as it is Harriet who seems to have had a special angel to guard her on her journey of mercy, I have hope.”⁵⁶

Harriet’s faith in her compact with God, poetically reflected in her movement name, Moses, permeates nineteenth-century accounts of her life. Years after her breathtaking rescues, Harriet described numerous occasions when she

was nearly discovered, and her fellow travelers almost recaptured. Once while traveling through a Maryland village, she saw a man who had previously rented her. She quickly devised a ruse to hide in plain sight. Not for the first time in her life, she relied on farm animals for cover. In the village market, she bought two chickens and a bonnet. She placed the hat on her head to shadow her features and tied the legs of the chickens together. When she saw this former “master” approaching, she untied the birds and “pinched them poor chickens until they squawked and fluttered like they were going to get away from me.” As she stooped over to gather her fowls as if in a panic, she watched the man walk past her “never susp[ecting] that it was Mrs. Harriet he wanted so bad that was right there under his eyes.” On another occasion, while on a train, she saw a former “master,” grabbed a discarded newspaper, and held it in front of her face. She knew that he knew she “couldn’t read” and therefore would not suspect her.⁵⁷

During a trip launched to help an enslaved woman named Tilly escape to join with her fiancé, who had self-emancipated to Canada, Harriet traveled south to Baltimore. Harriet located Tilly in accordance with the plan orchestrated with the fiancé. But without free papers for the young woman (Harriet herself had counterfeit papers produced in advance by a Philadelphia steamboat captain), the pair would be sus-

pect if they attempted to go north by boat. Harriet convinced a captain in Baltimore to manufacture a travel pass or certificate for Tilly. The women then steamed in a southerly direction to avoid suspicion, with the intention of circling back the next day. Harriet talked their way into a hotel room and meal for the night in the town of Seaford, Delaware, south of Baltimore, but morning brought fresh danger. A slave dealer noticed the two Black women traveling alone and threatened to arrest them. Tilly’s panic mounted during this risk-filled delay, which increased their degree of exposure. Harriet’s response was to make an appeal to her god, praying then as she most likely had throughout the night. “Having no other help,” Sarah Bradford wrote, Harriet prayed: “Oh, Lord! You’ve been with me in six troubles, don’t *desert* me in the seventh!” As Tilly’s fear visibly spiked, Harriet repeated the line. “You’ve been with me in six troubles!” She flashed Tilly’s travel pass in lieu of free papers and, with that move, secured their safe passage. They were able to board a ship and steam away unmolested.⁵⁸

In another *deus ex machina* story from the early accounts, Harriet was leading a group when she suddenly changed course after receiving a message from God. The sun had risen while the group trudged onward. In daylight, they were more vulnerable to exposure. Bradford recounted that Harriet “stood one moment in the street, and in that moment she had

flashed a message quicker than that of the telegraph to her unseen Protector, and the answer came as quickly; in a suggestion to her of an almost forgotten place of refuge." Harriet remembered that outside of town lay a swampy island. She led the group there and "waded into the swamp, carrying in a basket two well-drugged babies (these were a pair of little twins)." The party remained hidden for hours, suffering from cold, damp, and hunger. "Harriet's faith never wavered, her silent prayer still ascended, and she confidently expected help," Bradford reported. Just after dusk, a Quaker approached the edge of the swamp and whispered the location of his wagon.⁵⁹

In yet another example of a seemingly inexplicable series of events, Emma Telford recounts an incident originally described by Thomas Garrett. Here, Harriet was leading "a large party of men" alongside a "deep stream" when she "stopped short saying, 'Children, we must stop here and cross this here river.'" The men hesitated, frightened by the rushing water. Harriet, in her Moses-parting-the-Red-Sea moment that has gone down in history, waded into the water. "It was cold, in the month of March, but Harriet having confidence in her guide went into the water, it came up to her arm pits; the men refused to follow till they saw her safe on the opposite shore," Garrett related. "They then followed, and if I mistake not she had soon to wade a second stream!"⁶⁰

In Sarah Bradford's chronicle of this event, Harriet had "received one of her sudden intimations that danger was ahead." She quotes Tubman as saying: "The water never came above my chin; when we thought we were all going under, it became shallower and shallower, and we came out safe on the other side."⁶¹

Harriet Tubman attributed moments like these to divine intervention. They were cases of "the Lord sav[ing]" her, she said.⁶² She told Bradford and others who expressed surprise at these feats: "It wasn't me, it was the Lord! Just so long as he wanted to use me, he would take care of me, and when he didn't want me no longer, I was ready to go; I always told him, I'm going to hold steady on to you, and you've got to see me through."⁶³ According to Emma Telford, Tubman "always escaped by her quick wit or as she calls it 'warnings from heaven.'" These warnings seem to have been intuitions, flickers of awareness, or quicksilver syntheses of subconscious observations that Harriet experienced as God-given. "When danger is near . . . [it] appears like my heart goes flutter, Flutter! And then they may say 'peace, peace! As much as they like, I know it's going to be war!'" Harriet said, as quoted by Telford.⁶⁴

Harriet may have believed she possessed what Telford called "the gift of foresight." Apparently, Harriet told others that this was so. It is also certainly true that she was taking

in her surrounds, calling to mind things she knew, and thinking about those data points. In the rising river story, she would certainly have used her five senses to gauge that waterway, perhaps considering the water level and speed of flow, and only then deciding that wading in was relatively safe. She could have run this analysis while in the midst of praying, as prayer was, as we have touched on previously, a form of thought as well as a spiritual practice. In the incident with Tilly, Harriet may have been evaluating the facial expressions and body language of the clerk, processing how he might behave and calculating how she might respond even as she stared at the water and prayed that God would save them. On the sunlit road when she suddenly changed course, she may have heard hunters on their heels without realizing the sensory source of the input, tapped into her mental map of the area, and recalled the location of the swamp island. The retrieval of this place memory might have been spurred by the reflective mental work of praying. While it can hardly be argued that Harriet conjured the Quaker wagon-owner with the powers of her mind, it is likely that her knowledge of local geography, rational evaluation of risks, and application of a strong skill set placed her and the people she guided within reach of his aid. Harriet may have operated with God's help, but she also helped God along with the talents she brought to bear.

Whatever the source of her special knowledge, supernatural, natural, or some inexpressible combination of both, Harriet's awareness of what was occurring in real time around her and also of what might happen next based on human nature and environmental context seems even now preternatural, or beyond the normal course of things. She had a gift for scanning natural and social environments, projecting and assessing potential scenarios, calculating risk, and forming blisteringly quick plans that she then carried out with staggering confidence. Emma Telford was convinced of Harriet Tubman's unusual abilities: "Many and wonderful indeed are the instances known personally to the writer where Harriet [sic] predictions' [sic] of impending danger or her forecast of other events concerning which she could have had no possible information have been literally fulfilled."⁶⁵

Minty Ross had once been a powerless girl whose family members disappeared around her. Harriet Tubman was now an empowered woman concocting her own disappearing acts. The source of her power was fervent belief yoked to knowledge. Wrote Sarah Bradford about the havoc Harriet wreaked on the Eastern Shore: "The mysterious woman appeared—the woman on whom no one could lay his finger—and men, women, and children began to disappear from the plantations . . . before their masters were awake to the fact,

the party of fugitives, following their intrepid leader, were far on their way towards liberty.”⁶⁶

To *Tubman’s Way*, outlined in the introduction of this book as a path of spiritual, political, philosophical, and ecological belief, we can now add *Tubman’s Tool Kit*. Harriet relied on God first and foremost. But she also needed concrete things in the material world to advance her mission: reliable information, social connections, money and materials, practical skills, geographical awareness, and environmental consciousness. She preferred to move in winter months, “when the nights are long and dark, and people who have homes stay in them,” Ednah Cheney said. “She resorted to various devices,” Cheney continued. “She had confidential friends all along the road. She would hire a man to follow the one who put up the notices [for escaped slaves], and take them down as soon as his back was turned. She crossed creeks on railroad bridges by night, she hid her company in the woods while she herself not being advertised went into the towns in search of information. If met on the road, her face was always to the south . . . She would get into the cars near her pursuers, and manage to hear their plans.”⁶⁷

Harriet’s feats inspire awe, but there is always a cost to heroism. She believed in her system, her tools, and her god so much that she wagered well-being. She routinely ran the risk of hurting herself and others, and sometimes risk led to

mishap and hardship. She directed mothers to drug their babies with an opium-based substance that could have caused overdose and death. She carried a revolver and did not hesitate to use it to threaten already traumatized people. Runaways who grew afraid and tried to turn back might face the barrel of her gun or the weapons of men she directed. Bradford summarized: “Sometimes members of her party would become exhausted, foot-sore, and bleeding, and declare they could not go on, they must stay where they dropped down, and die; others would think a voluntary return to slavery better than being overtaken and carried back, and would insist upon returning; then there was no remedy but force.”⁶⁸ Harriet was willing to take a life, even one she was trying to save, rather than risk exposure of the whole group should a returnee betray them.

And she was just as harsh and unforgiving toward herself. She ran her body into the ground, working relentlessly to earn funds for the missions, taking on hundred-plus-mile journeys on foot, by rail, and by boat. She exposed herself to dangerous weather—beating rain and pelting snow. She submerged herself in chilled waters and submitted herself to cold winds. After that especially difficult trip when Harriet waded through waterways in the chill of March, she re-emerged from the field with a raging toothache, an infection, surely, that she had suffered for days. And this pain would

have been borne amid, or on top of, or behind—depending on how she experienced the sensation of chronic pain—her spontaneous headaches and seizures. Thomas Garrett saw her after this ordeal and described her condition. Harriet had found the fugitive group a place to stay overnight “in the cabin of colored people, who took them all in, put them to bed, and dried their clothes.” This generous host family would also have been in need since poverty was the norm for Black households. Harriet intended, as was her custom, to offer a material trade for the help. But, Garrett related, “Harriet had run out of money, and gave them some of her underclothing to pay for their kindness. When she called on me two days after, she was so hoarse she could hardly speak, and was also suffering with violent toothache.”⁶⁹ Garrett continued with his chronicle of this rescue, pointing out the “strange part of the story,” being that the owners of the fugitive men had been posting advertisements for their capture at the closest rail station, near enough to catch them had Harriet not veered into the stream. But we should pause a beat earlier, where we sense the price Harriet paid as she carried on without a warm layer of undergarments, having lost her voice due to sickness, and enduring invisible pain.

If Harriet found an evergreen tree to lean against on one of these final trips, sheltering there through a winter storm, as the story goes, she had become that tree by the time she

was a veteran rescuer. The tree was a mirror of herself. Harriet’s strength of body and mind, her vibrancy of spirit and faith, had formed a sturdy shelter for others, which meant it was she who bore the brunt of many storms, physically, psychologically, and emotionally. In the Bible, we might recall, Moses paid a high price for his burden of leadership over the long run. He disappointed God, who loved him nonetheless, and died with only a glimpse of the promised land. Harriet Tubman seems to have felt that her life was also dispensable. She was a willing martyr. “When the time has come for me to go, the Lord will let them kill me,” she said.

CHAPTER 5: THE FLIGHT

1. Bradford, *Scenes* (1869), 22, 24. Bradford, *Harriet* (1886), 37.
2. Telford, "Harriet: Modern Moses," 8.
3. Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).
4. Teri Klassen, "Representations of African American Quiltmaking: From Omission to High Art," *Journal of American Folklore* 122, no. 485 (Summer 2009): 319.
5. Klassen, "Representations of African American Quiltmaking," 297–334, 318, 319.
6. Klassen, "Representations of African American Quiltmaking," 318, 319. Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 83, 84.
7. *Fabric of a Nation* exhibition, MFA Boston, <https://www.mfa.org/exhibition/fabric-of-a-nation>. Lisa Betty, "General Harriet Tubman (1820–1913): Healing Historical Exploitation," *Medium*, July 24, 2020, <https://lbetty1.medium.com/general-harriet-tubman-1820-1913-healing-historical-exploitation-5e301a96b053>.
8. Clinton, *Harriet Tubman*, 35. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 80. Humez, *Harriet Tubman*, 16–18.
9. Clinton, *Harriet Tubman*, 35.
10. Cheney, "Moses," 137.
11. For more on textiles as goods that women on the margins of society could use for exchange and trade as currency, see Laura F. Edwards, *Only the Clothes on Her Back: Clothing and the Hidden History of Power in the 19th-Century United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).
12. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 81–83. Clinton, *Harriet Tubman*, 35–36.
13. Clinton, *Harriet Tubman*, 37. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 80–84. Kate Larson email to Tiya Miles, July 16, 2023.
14. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 85.
15. Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 76–77.

16. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi.
17. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 2, 3, 5, 121. *How Edmonia Lewis Became an Artist* (Albany ca. 1870), Houghton Library, Harvard University, <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/slavery-abolition-emanicipation-and-freedom/catalog/74-990057789120203941>. "Edmonia Lewis, the Colored Sculptor at Chicago," *New York Times*, September 11, 1870.
18. Distance and time calculated with Google Maps. Quraysh Ali Lansana, *They Shall Run: Harriet Tubman Poems* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2004), 14.
19. Maryland State Wildlife Action Plan, 12.
20. Bradford, *Harriet* (1886), 30.
21. Bradford, *Harriet* (1886), 31–32.
22. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, 158.
23. Bradford, *Harriet* (1886), 32.
24. Lansana, *They Shall Run*, 38.
25. Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 20–22, 238, 387.
26. Bradford, *Harriet* (1886), 44–45.
27. Bradford, *Scenes* (1869), 22.
28. Cheney, "Moses," 136.
29. Still, *Underground Railroad*, 884.
30. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 91.
31. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 89–90. Kessiah was the daughter of Linah, one of Tubman's two sisters sold by Brodess. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 32, 76.
32. Horton, *Harriet Tubman*, 24.
33. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 90. Clinton, *Harriet Tubman*, 82. Cheney, "Moses," 136.
34. Old Elizabeth, *Memoir*, 16. Lee, *Life and Religious Experience*, 41–42.
35. Elaw, *Memoirs of the Life*, 84–86, 90, 51. Andrews, "Introduction," *Sisters of the Spirit*, 8.
36. Andrews, "Introduction," *Sisters of the Spirit*, 9, 10. Foote, *A Brand Plucked*, 227.
37. Bradford, *Scenes* (1869), 23.
38. Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Routes, Siebert Papers,

- Ohio Historical Society, <https://ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/siebert/id/26822>. Still, *Underground Railroad*, 405, 487. Bradford, *Harriet* (1886), 57. Kate Larson notes that the “cousin Tom” mentioned in this quotation from Siebert’s records was Tubman’s brother-in-law, Tom Tubman, who lived in Baltimore. Kate Larson email to Tiya Miles, July 16, 2023.
39. Bradford, *Harriet* (1886), 47, 50, 51.
40. Bradford, *Harriet* (1886), 36.
41. Still, *Underground Railroad*, 487.
42. Horton, *Harriet Tubman*, 27. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, xvii. Clinton, *Harriet Tubman*, 73. Due to gaps in the historical record, it is impossible to precisely count the number of men, women, and children Tubman rescued. While Bradford claimed as many as 300, Thomas Garrett posited 60 to 80 (Bradford, *Scenes* (1869), 31). Twenty-first-century historians who have examined extant accounts of the escapes estimate between 60 and 80 people directly aided through Tubman’s physical guidance and around 50 to 60 people indirectly aided through information Tubman shared (Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 100; Horton, *Harriet Tubman*, 27). The exhibit at the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park Visitor Center in Maryland includes a three-part panel titled “We are free because of Harriet Tubman,” which lists each person saved by Tubman by name if that detail is known, describes unnamed people she aided, and notes people who were able to escape based on information she shared. This number does not include those rescued (around 700 to 750, firsthand accounts vary) during the Combahee River Raid of the Civil War.
43. Bradford, *Scenes* (1869), 24.
44. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 96. Douglass quoted in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, vol. 2, *Pre-Civil War Decade* (New York: International Publishers, 1950), 46–47; also see Humez, *Harriet Tubman*, 30, 418. Cheney, “Moses,” 136.
45. Telford, “Harriet: Modern Moses,” 8.
46. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 111.
47. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 113. Still, *Underground Railroad*, 405.
48. Bradford, *Harriet* (1886), 114.
49. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 125–26.

50. Drew, *Fugitive Slaves in Canada*, 30.
51. Runaway advertisement for Tubman and brothers, *Cambridge Democrat*, Cambridge, MD, October 3, 1849. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 100.
52. Bradford, *Scenes* (1869), 22. Du Bois, *John Brown*, 249–50. For a discussion of the reward issue, see Horton, *Harriet Tubman*, 24; Larson’s view is that the reward amounts in the high thousands in the early record are unsubstantiated and may have been invented by the authors; Kate Larson email to Tiya Miles, July 16, 2023.
53. Bradford, *Scenes* (1869), 22.
54. Thomas Garrett reprinted in Bradford, *Scenes* (1869), 31.
55. Bradford, *Harriet* (1886), 81, 86.
56. Still, *Underground Railroad*, 884.
57. Telford, “Harriet: Modern Moses,” 10, 11.
58. Bradford, *Harriet* (1886), 59–60. This account of Tilly’s rescue differs in early sources, with Sarah Bradford offering a more dramatic chronicle than Thomas Garrett, both of whom heard the story from Tubman herself. My summary follows Kate Larson’s lead in privileging Garrett’s account and toning down the sensationalism and drama evident in Bradford’s. Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*, 131–33. Kate Larson email to Tiya Miles, July 16, 2023. Larson reads Tubman’s numerical reference to seven as indicating that this was Tubman’s seventh trip. This is sound reasoning, but I have chosen to abstract and enlarge Tubman’s “seventh trouble” phrasing in this book for greater symbolic application to repeated crises.
59. Bradford, *Harriet* (1886), 55–56.
60. Telford, “Harriet: Modern Moses,” 12.
61. Bradford, *Harriet* (1886), 73–74.
62. Telford, “Harriet: Modern Moses,” 11.
63. Bradford, *Harriet* (1886), 61.
64. Telford, “Harriet: Modern Moses,” 9.
65. Telford, “Harriet: Modern Moses,” 10.
66. Bradford, *Harriet* (1886), 41–42.
67. Cheney, “Moses,” 137.
68. Bradford, *Scenes* (1869), 23. Kellie Carter Jackson, *Force and Freedom: Black Abolitionists and the Politics of Violence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 8.
69. Garrett reprinted in Bradford, *Scenes* (1869), 31.