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Preface

THE STORM

The trees themselves, as in winters past, will survive
their burdening,

broken thrive. And am I less to You,

my God, than they?

—ROBERT HAYDEN, "ICE STORM"

The storm was coming. She sensed its approach in the shift of the wind, the click-clack of branches, and the eddies of sea-moistened air. She craned her neck to view the sky, dark through a scaffold of winter-tree canopy. Wrapping her arms across her chest, she pulled her woolen shawl close, then knuckled one hand to her heart and curled the other around her revolver. Ever watchful of nature's signs, the woman waited. When the skies did part and the snow bore down in glassy shards, whiting out the silent scene of coastal forest, she may have felt the instinctual fear that all humans know in moments of heightened realization of their vulnerability to the elements. She might have trembled at the thought of what could befall her during the night—cold, hunger, even a kidnapping. Did she long to shut her eyes and

pretend all was safety and sunshine around her? Did she want to turn and flee as splinters of wind-sharpened snow sped and spun? Did she ever ponder giving in, giving up? Most of us would. But that was not how Harriet Tubman's singular mind worked. Where others saw shut doors and unscalable brick walls, she dreamed into being tunnels and ladders. Submission to re-enslavement was not an option. And she did not face that storm alone.

On the December night in 1860 when Harriet Tubman found herself trapped by winter weather, she was making one of her final trips through the woods of Maryland's coastal plain to rescue stolen souls.[1] Their lives had been taken from them by a class of racial elites who feasted on the flesh of vulnerable people, turning the muscles of their victims' bodies, the children of their wombs, and the knowledge in their heads into long-term capital and short-term comfort. But these Black captives did not appear at the designated meeting place that night. So Harriet waited. Petite with a slender build and still limber in her late thirties, she pressed her back against the bark of a thick tree. This might have been a loblolly pine, the species that coated the old-growth forests along the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay. A companion to the stranded woman who stood barely five feet tall, that evergreen would have cast a net of protective crystalline needles.

Harriet's business in the woods was dangerous and secret. No detailed record was kept of her thwarted mission that night, but according to a supporter of the Underground Railroad who spoke to Tubman's first and only official biographer, Harriet Tubman told the snowstorm story to "a warm-hearted, impulsive woman, who was engaged heart and hand in the Anti-Slavery cause." The story comes to us twice removed from Tubman's own lips, across a distance that exists in all published accounts of her life. Tubman told this listener that "for some unexplained reason" the people she was there to aid "did not come." As Tubman waited, "night came on and with it a blinding snowstorm and a raging wind. She protected herself behind a tree . . . and remained all night alone exposed to the fury of that storm."[2] Tubman took shelter against the tree's trunk, shivering through the evening as other warm-blooded creatures, like fox squirrels and snow geese, skittered, burrowed, or folded frigid, ice-tipped wings. What was it like to tuck into the dark depth of the winter woods? What was Tubman thinking as she shrunk beneath the branch-umbrella, listening for animal sounds behind the screech of the wind? Was she worrying about the fugitives who had not come yet, fearing the hunters trailing them and the trackers always searching for her? Was she turning over in her mind the cascade of events that had led her here to a test of her mettle and the silent company of this tree?

Less than a decade before, Harriet Tubman had herself been enslaved. But she had refused to die in her spirit for the benefit of the flesh market. She had found a life purpose anchored in her religious faith. For she believed it was God's intention that all people should live in freedom, and she ardently felt enlisted in this higher cause. "God's time is always near," she told a Northern friend in a dictated letter, "God set the North Star in the heavens; He gave me the strength in my limbs; He meant I should be free."[3] Harriet Tubman had come to believe that the God of her faith had not only ordained her liberation but also provided aid toward this end in the form of a lodestar and strong body. But Tubman (known in her childhood as Minty) had not come by this liberation theology easily or immediately. Her notion was radical in the mainstream society of her time that conceived of a God of social order and racial hierarchy. Her countercultural belief in a God of freedom stemmed from her lived experience, moral intuition, critical inquiry, cultural learning, religious feeling, and environmental surroundings. Through her openness to sources of knowledge that we might view as extraordinary today and her conviction that, with God's guidance, she had the power to alter outcomes, Harriet Tubman became formidable.

So when that "warm-hearted" woman who listened to

the snowstorm tale reacted this way: "Why, Harriet! . . . didn't you almost feel when you were lying alone, as if there was *no God?*"—she was fundamentally misunderstanding Harriet Tubman. For Harriet insisted she was not alone. God *was* with her. And it was in perilous places like this forest that she felt his presence most profoundly. "I just asked Jesus to take care of me," Harriet explained to the questioner, proclaiming that divine intervention had protected her from freezing that night.[4] Others who had braved the cold in search of freedom had not been so lucky. One "poor traveler" on the Underground Railroad in wintertime had been "severely frost-bitten" and died of lockjaw, the Black activist William Still recorded in his notes on the clandestine network around the year 1857. William Still noted in this same passage that the white activist Thomas Garrett had recently inquired about Harriet Tubman, worrying that she may have taken ill after an autumn rescue mission.[5] But Harriet had survived this scare in 1857, just as she had survived the storm in 1860. "'The Lord will provide' was her motto, and He never failed her," Harriet's colleague and first biographer wrote.[6]

Over the course of her long life, Harriet Tubman continuously professed this fundamental article of personal faith: God would take care. And just as God cared for her, she

would spend a lifetime caring for others, trekking through the dark nights to deliver them from the evil that was slavery and creating sanctuary spaces in the North to receive them after hard journeys. By midlife, Tubman behaved much like the evergreen tree that had shielded her from the snowstorm in 1860, a partner of God on the earth who carried out an ethic of care with the aid of human and nonhuman allies.

It is apt that Harriet Tubman earned the byname Moses during her years as a freedom fighter. She sang songs with the lyrics "Moses go down in Egypt, Till ol[d] Pharo let me go" and sought to follow the God of the Christian Bible, even though she had never been taught how to read it in a land where it was illegal for slaves to learn the techniques of written word literacy.[7] She related to this biblical God intimately and imaginatively through prayer, dreams, aural inputs, visions, and the spoken or preached word. And Harriet Tubman's expansive yet specific version of the freedom-loving Judeo-Christian deity was not unique. She conceptualized God's personality in a manner commonly shared by the broader community of Black enslaved people. Theirs was a god of liberation as seen in the spectacular deliverance of the Jewish people from Egypt in the Old Testament stories. Black women in particular saw this god (gendered masculine in their time) as a caretaker as well as a liberator—fully

present during their struggles, wholly invested in their survival, desiring their good quality of life, and inspiring hope for their future. This Black women's God of freedom and care was fiery and feeling, full of Old Testament Jehovah-style justice and New Testament Jesus-filled grace. He welcomed the rituals of Protestants and Catholics and recognized the echoes of West African faith practices. And his traits and deeds throughout time were captured in an "oral text" that enslaved African Americans shaped together "by extracting from the Bible or adding to biblical content those phrases, stories, biblical personalities and moral prescriptions relevant to the character of their life situation and pertinent to the aspirations of the slave community," the theologian Delores Williams has explained. "Passed down to black people through sermons, song, and public instructions," as the ethicist Renita Weems has put it, the enslaved community's Bible was spoken and heard more than read.[8]

Harriet Tubman lived her life based on this shared religious faith carried on the tongues of enslaved people. She knew the God of the oppressed both as an individual and as a member of a faith culture. And if we are to come closer to knowing *her*, we must recognize the centrality of her faith in the context of her vulnerability and in the development of her rebellious, antiestablishment character. Amid her ex-

treme and continuous exposure to harm, Tubman felt, as the Harvard Divinity School scholar and associate dean Melissa Bartholomew has said about Black women believers writ large: "the safest place to be is in the will of God."[9]

Seeing Harriet Tubman as a faith-full woman first means revising some of the ways we have preferred to see her in histories and popular depictions: as a solitary figure, as a superhero, as a superhuman wielder of mysterious powers—a composite set of characteristics that reached a campy apotheosis in the comic representation of Harriet Tubman as a literal demon slayer.[10] While it is right that her roles as a heroic Underground Railroad conductor and a Civil War scout have been emphasized in books, films, and media (and, in the era before the culture-war campaign to scrub the history of slavery in some states, on grade school bulletin boards across the country), these representations veer toward superhuman portrayals that risk perpetuating a reductive image of Tubman expressed by some abolitionists, Northern neighbors, and academics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the Tubman who was impenetrably strange, with peculiarities and powers that are difficult to fathom or replicate. Intentionally or not, some of these observers portrayed Tubman as a racialized exotic, close to what we would now call the "magical Negro" trope. The antislavery advo-

cate Franklin Sanborn said of Tubman, "There is a whole region of the marvelous in her nature, which at times has manifested itself remarkably . . . She is a negro of pure, or almost pure blood . . ."[11] Thomas Garrett, a key supporter of Tubman's work and a committed Christian and abolitionist himself, described her as a "noble woman, but a *black one*, in whose veins flows not one drop of Caucasian blood" and spoke of her "power of divination."[12] Helen Tatlock, an associate in New York, said of Tubman: "Harriet, when I knew her in her matriarchal phase, was a magnificent looking woman, true African, with a broad nose, very black, and of medium height."[13] And Sarah Bradford, the author of two as-told-to biographies that indelibly colored Tubman's image in print, at times adopted a tongue-in-cheek tone at Tubman's expense, writing that regarding Harriet "there seems but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous" and asserting that she was not "claiming any of [her] dear old friend Harriet's prophetic vision."[14] As Harriet Tubman's first biographer, Sarah Bradford conversed with Tubman often, published remembrances that would yield funds for Tubman's mortgage and the support of people living under Tubman's roof, brought her supplies, and lent her money. But Bradford also demeaned Tubman as a hyperracial oddity, describing her as "the black woman from the Southern states only two removes

from an African savage!"[15] Even W. E. B. Du Bois, an intellectual heavyweight who was, unlike the commentators above, African American himself, highlighted characteristics that rendered Tubman as an exotic, calling her "a full blooded African," and a "dark ghost," who exhibited "wild, half-mystic ways with dreams, Rhapsodies, and trances."[16]

The notion of a magical Tubman (minus the negative racialism and colorism) has its appeal even now, perhaps because in hindsight we know the evil that she was up against, and we desperately want to see her equipped to win her war against brazen inhumanity. But this quixotic picture painted by others also positions Harriet Tubman outside her family and community, outside a collective African American women's history, and beyond our reach as a potential, if imperfect, exemplar of how to resist oppressive systems and build supportive, life-sustaining communities. If we are to take serious stock of Harriet Tubman's journey on earth, we should strive to do so on her own cultural terms, seeing her "prophecies" and bold gambits to free others not as outlandish, bizarre, quaint, or innately racial, but as part of a religious worldview that foregrounded spiritual empowerment.

While Harriet Tubman did claim to know things that had not yet come to pass and did accomplish great feats of daring at her own personal risk, she acted out of a logic that made sense to her and would have made sense to other mem-

bers of her Black female faith culture. The features of her character that some commentators saw as idiosyncratic were instead influenced by her multifaceted faith tradition, which combined Christian conviction with enslaved people's quest for justice, a belief in second sight, and the use of natural protections (like charmed roots and pouches of dirt and other sacred materials) based in West African, Native American, and Southern folk thought. Tubman's effectiveness in the material realm stemmed from her faith in a spiritual realm; it flowed from her mind, body, *and* spirit in communion with human and nonhuman beings. Attempting to grasp Tubman as a real person who lived and made difficult choices means studying her beliefs and ideas in cultural context. And as it turns out, Tubman was not only a practiced master of survival strategy but also a keen analyst of the natural and social worlds around her.

Harriet Tubman was one of a kind—singularly special *and* part of a cultural collective. Unique in nature and nurture in the way that every person is, she also shared a broader experience with captive Black women of the nineteenth century. While we cannot plumb the depths of her personality, due to the passage of time and limitations of the historical method, we can glean from extant sources that Tubman persistently demonstrated spiritual attunement, fluid intelligence, relational loyalty, emotional yearning, material longing, and

aesthetic enjoyment—complex and at times competing characteristics filtered through her life experiences of love, loss, suffering, and illness. Harriet Tubman adored her parents. Harriet Tubman felt pain. She had a playful sense of humor. She loved fresh fruit and was particular about her clothing style.[17] She was also, in the words of the contemporary historian and biographer Deirdre Cooper Owens, "fragile and in need of gentle care."[18] And every time she entered the woods to rescue someone else from slavery, Tubman did so as a real woman who felt that God held her hand. Picturing her huddled beneath a tree during a cold December night, determined to stand firm despite not knowing what would happen next, and recognizing that she acted out of a complex worldview held in common with other Black women and enslaved people, resizes Tubman the cultural icon to human scale and expands our faith in the human capacity to collectively weather life's storms.

There is a version of Harriet Tubman that we love to love—the woman, in the words of a great-grandniece of Tubman, Judith Bryant, "slogging through swamps at night, and all." But as Bryant wisely said, this "mythic" legend collapses into a "mini story . . . this little story of courage," due to reduction and repetition. "Yeah she did all that, but to me there's a bigger significance of what that really means in

today's world," Bryant said.[19] By turning Tubman into a superhero with vague "woo-woo" powers, we diminish her in memory and reduce our capacity to learn from her life. This simplistic superwoman-of-the-swamps myth obfuscates at least two critical elements of Harriet Tubman's character: who she was on the inside and how she saved lives. Peeling back the layers of myth, to the best of our ability, begins to reveal her values and methods. What principles did Tubman live by? And what tactics did she swear by? This book explores both questions with an emphasis on two themes central to Tubman's worldview: spirituality (her belief in God, heaven, and unseen powers) and ecology (her belief in the integrity and import of relationships among all natural beings). These twin tenets of belief converged in Tubman's life to shape a practice of being in the world best captured by the term luminous pragmatism.[20]

Before I started on this quest to trace the lifeline of Harriet Tubman, I, too, had fallen for the static image of Tubman as superwoman. Her bravery, though laudable, seemed to come prepackaged in a box of stock stories and folksy sayings. I realize now, and with chagrin, that she had become a stock figure in my imagination, a known hero in the cast of characters that we might call the abolitionist avengers. But as I paused in the moments and places where Harriet herself

stopped to plan and to pray, I began to see more clearly the woman behind the cardboard cutout. She was startlingly spiritual and eerily smart. She saw more than she let on and knew more than we have recognized. By the time I made my way to her burial plot at the end of my research journey, I felt I was in the presence of a guru for her time and ours.

I see compelling reasons for retelling Tubman's story now, in the 2020s, and for suggesting that her life narrative, in many ways familiar, still holds surprises for us. When Judith Bryant did an interview for a Maryland State Parks oral history project in 2011, she stressed that "we seem to be . . . losing our coherence in this country," and that as an antidote to dissolution, we should "look again at all of our heroes." It is stating the obvious to note that the national status quo has deteriorated dramatically since Bryant made this comment. Still, Tubman's era—the nineteenth century—was worse. She matured into her calling as an unfree Black woman during a period of racial brutality, masculinist primacy, chaotic change, political splintering, and impending civil war. Yet during that time of crisis, "she got things done," as Bryant crisply put it. Harriet Tubman was heroic, but she was not a superhero beyond the reach of our understanding, identification, and compassion. We need not hold her at so great a distance that she becomes a blur. "She's over there. But she

Harriet Tubman holding a rifle and wearing a striped skirt and jacket, with a satchel over her shoulder. The setting is a Civil War encampment, circa 1863–68. Frontispiece of Sarah H. Bradford's *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, 1869.

Courtesy of Harvard University Fine Arts Library. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, open access.

ought to be here. And we ought to be here with her," Bryant concluded.[21]

A flesh-and-blood woman of her antebellum age, Harriet Tubman lived a perilous life with profound lessons for ours. Tubman was no nihilist. She believed in the possibility

of brighter futures, and she acted on those visions. She put faith in God, had faith in nature, and kept faith with all sorts of people. Even so, she made grave mistakes and suffered real harms while gathering over ninety years of wisdom. If we are now living in "the time of the seventh trouble," as Tubman might well have deemed it, what route would she advise us to take through this wilderness?